

What's Special about Religious Identity?

Talk at Worthing Unitarians, 16th September 2012

From the moment a creature with a developed nervous system is born or hatched, it seeks to understand its environment and to adapt to it. For example, it needs to know what its mother looks, smells and sounds like, and if it moves away from her, how to find its way back.

It needs to know what its mother and other members of the species will tolerate, and what is forbidden. It discovers through experiment how it can find pleasure and what results in pain. In all of these ways it develops a sense of who it is, and what power it has. We can call this sense its *identity*.

Identity becomes infinitely more complex in the human species. For our young there is not just the discovery of their natural position in an environment created by the process of evolution. They need to establish the nature of the culture into which they're born and learn how to conform to its requirements (or exceptionally, how to opt out).

But what is culture? We could paraphrase that famous remark by Jesus and say: 'where two or three have gathered together in the interests of security, culture is there in their midst.'

Cultures are collective, rather than individual, attempts to make sense of the world and to control it. They try to ensure a sense of security in an insecure world.

So, for example, a football team supporters' club creates a sense of camaraderie, a mythology of the team's history, the opportunity for social interaction and so on. These make its members feel that they have a place in the order of things; it brings a degree of predictability where there was less before.

The development of the human brain has outstripped all other species in its capacity to reflect on the ultimate reality of our existence. This is a double edged sword. On the one hand it is the stimulus to religion, art, literature, music. On the other it lies behind mental disorder, depression, schizophrenia and suicide.

Culture is the product of this uneasy human condition. Typically it develops illusions of superiority and invincibility, and these may be its eventual downfall. All cultures, but especially political ones can become victims of their own self-deception. By creating a sense of invincibility they ignore the realities creeping up on them and make rash decisions which undermine them.

Notice the use of that word 'they'. We live today in a society which promotes the idea that only the individual really counts. Talking about all of the people of a culture as one organism has become politically incorrect.

But it is the general which matters about a culture. The reason that a culture can act collectively is because 'in general' its members share certain characteristics and a way of looking at things.

So, what *is* special about religious identity? One could answer: 'Not much.' Belonging to a religious culture such as Christianity or Islam (and it's those two religions I'm going to talk about most), is also about a world view, and also about security.

Moreover, non-religious and religious identities are often inextricably entangled. The British state is still officially Christian and almost all Muslim states acknowledge Islam in their constitutions.

But for the purposes of this talk I want to attempt the impossible and extract religious identity from its secular surroundings. I suspect we will then discover that there *is* something distinctive about this form of identity.

There is a reality which must have hit home from the dawn of *homo sapiens*, which is that no amount of gathering into groups and forming of secular cultures provided sufficient physical and emotional security. People therefore turned to supernatural powers to protect them.

Now here comes the tricky bit for me, and perhaps also for you. I don't believe in supernatural powers. And so the question arises for me as to what is happening when someone says 'Jesus is the son of God' or 'God is great' or 'Kali is the goddess of time and change.'

I see it in this rather biological way. Our bodies are programmed to react to fear in a number of ways such as increased heart rate, hyper-reactivity and sweating. But if these reactions are caused by awareness of the ultimate realities of life such as death, meaninglessness, aloneness, freedom and responsibility for our own actions, then there is no possible physical resolution to release the tension which results.

Faced with the prospect of crippling existential anxiety (or *angst* as it's often called) humans invent religious mythologies which are stories about the ultimate realities of life. Contrary to a widespread view, these are not necessarily denials of them.

When people are afraid, imagining Jesus watching over them may put the fear 'out there' where it is manageable. It is the internalisation of these very particular myths about the human condition, rather than about the state or Arsenal football club, which distinguishes religious identity, and which makes it so indispensable to religious adherents.

But I would go further and say that such myths are probably indispensable to all of us, even if we don't recognise them as religious. The widespread rejection of religious mythology in our society has led, on the one hand, to increasing mental instability and, on the other to the formation of what I'll call pseudo-religions.

New forms of identity have centred around a veritable cauldron of 'isms' such as nationalism, socialism, Zionism, fascism, liberalism, atheism, feminism, gay liberationism, environmentalism, humanism and multiculturalism.

You may see the agenda of some of these 'isms' as desirable and some as detestable according to your point of view. That is not the issue here, but rather the way in which these ideologies tend to promise heaven on earth, with the consequence that people adhere to them 'religiously,' identifying with the causes they espouse as if they were God-given. If their belief is questioned these 'believers' are liable to become enraged and use a whole new vocabulary of censure to put doubters in their place.

But actually, at the risk of defining terms for my own convenience, real religion is not essentially like this. An interesting aspect, which is rarely noticed by literalists who criticise religion, is the use by religious people of the words 'belief' and 'faith', rather than 'knowledge'. These imply uncertainty and doubt, together with a willingness to suspend disbelief.

Religious identity is, then, based upon shared stories which are metaphors about the ultimate realities of life, not denials of them. But religion is not the only source of such metaphors; art is full of them, which is why artistic creativity in Christianity and Islam was historically sponsored and controlled by religious authorities.

However, once art detached itself from religious mythology it gradually lost its way. Its roots still nourished it during the romantic period, but I'm inclined to think that after that art (in all its manifestations) has become either increasingly obscure or mundane.

When I was seventeen I abandoned my faith on the basis that it was unreasonable to believe the things I was told in church. Soon after I discovered existentialism. Stripping away the abstruse writings of Heidegger and Sartre I found a crystal clear, inspiring and adequate philosophy of life, a distillation of the beliefs of Christianity without the mythology.

However, such non-religious visions always fail to retain their crystal clear nature. It seems as if the truths revealed in them are too blinding for ordinary mortals. And so, for example, existential terms like angst, authenticity and false consciousness have lost their brilliance by becoming part of ordinary educated discourse. As a result existentialism, after only a century and a half, is already on the way out.

How different is the case with religious mythology. Think about the passion story of Jesus Christ. That has survived for two millennia, and it may even now not be quite spent. Perhaps it is the imagery of religious mythology which ensures its endurance. These are less subject to erosion than mere ideas.

It was my own recognition that philosophy seemed wanting which a couple of years ago brought me back to religion. All my adult life I had been an agnostic, and yet I had never quite managed to square this with the way I was profoundly moved by the passion music of

Johann Sebastian Bach. If Bach could be so inspired by the Christian story, I argued to myself, perhaps I shouldn't have been so hasty in dismissing it.

Ironically I chose perhaps the least mythologically inclined religious organisation as my re-entry point. What I like about Unitarianism, however, is its respect for all spiritual paths and its openness to the challenge of creating new religious mythologies in our sceptical age.

I want in conclusion to speak about the relevance of what I've been saying to the recent anti-Western unrest in the Middle East and beyond.

If I am right about religious identity being special, so special, indeed, that in the West secular identities have come to imitate its specialness, we are in a better position to comprehend the developing confrontation between Islam and the West.

Both Islam and the West see themselves as the bearers of universal truth. But those truths are not the same.

Western identity, as Richard Dawkins recently said, is becoming defined by the proclamation of an expanding list of supposedly universal and progressive rights, deriving from various ideologies, some of which clearly run counter to the religious beliefs of at least a billion Muslims.

The Western attitude towards Islam tends to be that it is a backward religion needing reform, if not abolition, to bring its adherents into line with modernity. Nick Cohen and Salman Rushdie, speaking yesterday morning on the Today programme, typify this approach.

Muslims, on the other hand, tend to see the West as decadent, but also fear, with some reason, its economic and military superiority. Moreover they worry that their young will be seduced by Western ways. They are therefore constantly on their guard against further encroachments on Muslim lands, on their way of life and especially on their beliefs. When you think about it, that's not so difficult to understand.

If we go down the road of condemning Muslims for what they believe we will fuel the already smouldering inferno between the Muslim East and the relatively secular West. There are those in the West who have little interest in universal human rights, but who are quite happy to use them as bellows to inflame that potential holocaust.

There is little likelihood that Muslims are about to revise their beliefs, or even drop them, in order to conform with what the West thinks. On the contrary, many will fight to the death to preserve them. This is not, after all, so surprising, since we expect *our* soldiers to do the same to defend *our* beliefs.

We need a much gentler and less ideologically-based approach to Islam. What makes us so sure we've got it all right? Let us accept that each religious cultural group will work out its

own way, and let us respect that rather than trying to impose on them fallible notions of universal human rights which run contrary to their beliefs.

If you disagree, I ask you to consider the alternatives.

Post-Script 17th September

I heard Tony Blair on the Today programme (BBC Radio 4) talking about the protest riots in the Muslim world this morning. In his view the Muslim assertion that they are oppressed by the West is untrue. The problem is one of extremism and an unwillingness by some Muslims to join the modern world.

My thought was: Well he would say that, wouldn't he? His relationship with Lord Levy, and his collaboration with the Israelis would, of course, lead him to conclude, for example, that there was nothing essentially unjust or anti-Muslim about the foundation of the Jewish state.

But then another thought occurred to me. I asked my listeners yesterday to consider the alternatives. Western strategic thinking, represented by people like Blair, is the main alternative, but the case is rarely put in a straightforward way (a) because it conflicts with what we say we believe, and (b) because to say openly would provoke a massive backlash in the Muslim world.

A certain Lt Col. Matthew Dooley, an ex-instructor at the Pentagon, had no time for such evasion. He taught a course in which he advocated all-out war on Islam. 'It is [...] time for the United States to make our true intentions clear. This barbaric ideology will no longer be tolerated. Islam must change or we will facilitate its self-destruction.' His methods were to include the starvation of the population of Saudi Arabia and the bombing of Mecca and Medina.

I think we need to consider Dooley's proposition, rather than dismiss it as if it had nothing to do with us. The Roman Empire is generally considered 'a good thing.' It brought civilisation to most of the known world, and though we may feel some patriotic sympathy for Boadicea, we don't generally see the Roman occupation as malign. Why then should we be so moralistic about the American empire, or for that matter, about the British one?

In the case of the British Empire I suspect there's a degree of making a virtue of necessity. At the end of the World War II we were economically incapable of sustaining the empire, that is of deploying sufficient forces to ensure that British rule was not challenged. There is also, I further suspect, a 'bonfire mentality' in declining powers. When on the up, the citizens of an imperial power find ample outlet for their energies in building the empire. When on the down, they can only draw satisfaction, and a degree of power, by putting all the old imperial rhetoric on the bonfire.

We are told that American power is on the wane. The US is, however, still the strongest military power on earth. If it is true that it is at least under threat, then that is all the more

reason for its government to stamp out any resistance wherever it might come from. Hence Iraq and Afghanistan. Some would say hence its support for Israel, though I think that is a rather different case.

But let's pose the question. What's wrong with a Pax Americana?

The first answer might be that it isn't particularly peaceful. But in answer it could be said that without American power there would be much more war in the world, not less.

A more substantial objection, in particular to an anti-Muslim agenda, is its impossibility. Muslims are far too numerous (perhaps as many as two billion) to be beaten, cajoled and persuaded to abandon their beliefs. Attempting to suppress Islam in this way would result in horrible world-wide conflict.

But there is a third reason why I would oppose, even if it were possible, a Dooley-type agenda (or anything remotely approaching it), is the advantage to the whole planet of diversity. We in the West tend to be quite convinced that we've found the right way. But are we right? And if not, in all respects, is it not beneficial to have other societies trying other ways?

Personally I'm not at all convinced that we in the West are wise in our pursuit of ever greater liberalism. I suspect much of the liberal agenda conflicts with our fundamental and unchanging human nature. Until we are able to change that, I think we should be more cautious about, for example, changing institutions such as marriage. I therefore welcome the fact that Islam represents to us another way of thinking about the human condition.