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Challenging Religious Issues

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on Atonement:
Experience, Story, Theory?

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on Religion and Popular
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'Impersonating Beyoncé is
Not Your Destiny, Child':
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on the Soul

Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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Challenging Religious Issues is a free, open access on-line journal designed to support teachers and students engaged in A-level Religious Studies. *Challenging Religious Issues* is designed to bring recent and relevant scholarship and research from the University into the A-level classroom. Three issues are published each year, and each issue contains four original articles. If there are any topics you would like to see included in the journal, please contact us.

Atonement: Experience, Story, Theory?

Jeff Astley

The article explores the status of Christian accounts of atonement, including reference to issues of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'.

Specification links:

EDEXCEL Religious Studies – Developments, Christianity, 2 Selected concepts and texts: Beliefs about atonement and salvation.

EDUQAS A Study of Christianity, Theme 2c: Atonement.

WJEC/CBAC Introduction to the Study of Christianity, Theme 2c: Atonement.

Beginning with experience

In the Greek New Testament, *sozo* ('I save') and *soteria* ('salvation') have a range of both secular and theological meanings similar to English, referring to rescue from danger, being 'made whole' and physical or mental healings, as well as spiritual redemption. The need for salvation suggests that there is something amiss with human life: some disability, inadequacy or restraint from which we need to be healed or released; or some stain or contamination from which we need to be cleansed. This human experience is salvation's starting point when it becomes associated with the experience of God's free, forgiving love and aid (what Christians call 'grace'),

and the resulting sense of being pardoned, accepted and restored to a right relationship with God. *Atonement* (literally, 'at-one-ment'; 'making at one') is the word employed in William Tyndale's first English translation of the NT for this 'reconciliation'.

Salvation is 'about us'; but it is also 'about God'. Christian theology regards our role as the *subjective* human appropriation of an *objective* divine act. In and through Christ, God takes the initiative to change the human situation, by offering acceptance and healing. Yet people must still receive them, respond to them and embrace them in a subjective response.

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Salvation is objectively accomplished in Christ; the world has been transformed, ... and yet these very acts of God in Christ awaken and call forth faith that opens one's life to the new creation that Christ makes possible. (McIntosh, 2008, p. 77)

In addition to this distinction between (a) God's act and the human response, the contrasting language of objective and subjective is also applied to: (b) a past event, over against the present experience (of salvation); and (c) a change in God, by contrast with a change in human attitudes and emotions. In the case of the different understandings of atonement, these distinctions are matters of degree, with some theories being regarded as *more* subjective or objective than others. While theologians often stress one element at the expense of the other, many insist on holding the two emphases together – although 'no understanding of the atoning work of Christ is going to integrate subjective and objective dimensions in a completely satisfactory way' (Fiddes, 2007, pp. 179-180).

From what do humans need to be saved? The Bible identifies sin as a major problem. Theology treats sin not only as a human act, but also as a *state* of the human heart and will ('sinfulness', 'disobedience', 'going astray', 'rebellion') and of being separated from God, as well as a label for anything that causes these situations. Traditionally, the sin of Adam (Hebrew for 'man') came to be thought of as a revolt, in which he 'puts himself ... behind the back of God's grace' (Barth, 1966, p. 117). It is also frequently interpreted as his turning 'in *pride* toward himself. He became ... incurved back in upon himself, instead of bending toward God'. The result is *guilt*,

for which forgiveness is required that must be met by faith and repentance (a 'change of mind' and a 'return' to God). For some, however, human guilt is replaced by *shame*: 'a profound sense of unworthiness' and emptiness, and the denial that God can possibly believe in us (Inbody, 2005, pp. 172, 183).

These are not the only things, however, from which humans may need to be saved.

According to the Bible . . . there are other issues such as bondage, exile, blindness, infirmity, hard-heartedness, and so forth. For these, forgiveness is not the answer. People in bondage need liberation from the Pharaohs who rule their lives, people in exile need to leave Babylon and return home, people who are blind need to see, people who are sick or wounded need healing, people who are outcasts need community. (Borg, 2011, pp. 145-146)

Stories and models

All the Gospels contain extensive narratives of Jesus' crucifixion. This historical event is as objective as anything could be, but these accounts are also infused with theological interpretation. In Mark, for example, as Jesus 'gave a loud cry and breathed his last', two other events are recorded that express the deeper meaning of this death: the curtain of the temple is torn in two, and the centurion in charge exclaims that this man is truly 'God's Son' (Mark 15:37-39). The tearing of the curtain reveals that 'the execution of Jesus means that access to the presence of God is now open' – quite apart from any temple or any Jewish priesthood. And the centurion's cry means that 'Jesus, executed by the [Roman] empire, is the Son of God. Thus

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the emperor [who claimed this title for himself] was not' (Borg and Crossan, 2008, pp. 150-151).

These theological themes, along with many others, came to be expressed in another form of narrative, which was more of a *cosmic story* than an historical account. Stephen Sykes argued that such stories, including the story of the incarnation as well as the atonement, are 'irreplaceable and necessarily temporal and sequential'. The stories have 'doctrinal implications', but their meaning 'cannot be rendered otherwise than by the narration' because they uniquely (and truthfully) identify the nature of God's love (Sykes, 1979, pp. 116, 122). The cosmic 'story of our redemption' includes but goes beyond the story of the crucifixion, to include 'God's action in Jesus' and Jesus as 'the agent of our liberation', drawing on images which are themselves 'implicit narratives' (Sykes, 1997, pp. 16, 18-25).

The rich variety of NT stories, images and allusions includes the description of Christians as receiving 'adoption as children' – and therefore as heirs – instead of remaining as slaves (Galatians 4:4-7), having been 'bought with a price' (1 Corinthians 6:20) and thus freed and 'redeemed' (literally 'bought back'). In Mark 10:45, Jesus speaks of giving his own life 'as a ransom for many'. (The 'for' is literally 'instead of' in Greek, but some understand it in the sense of 'for the good of'.) Scripture provides equally striking accounts of Jesus's death and resurrection as a cosmic victory, not just over his human enemies but also against the supernatural forces of sin and death, the demonic force of legalism and corrupt angelic powers standing behind nations, which all enslave people (1 Corinthians 2:6-8; 2 Corinthians 4:4;

Galatians 4:3; Ephesians 2:1-2; Colossians 1:15-20, 2:13-15). Christians may enter into Christ's victory by putting themselves under the protection of this conquering hero, receiving the benefits of his conquest.

Sacrificial language is also applied to Christ. In the Letter to the Hebrews, the author argues that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' under the Jewish law, and that Christ finally 'appeared once for all ... to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself' (9:22, 26). Paul explicitly describes Christ as having been put forward by God 'as a sacrifice of atonement [or 'a place of atonement'] by his blood, effective through faith' (Romans 3:25; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 John 2:1-2, 4:10). This is an *expiation* for human sin – a 'covering', 'putting away' or 'wiping' of it.¹ The ancient idea of sacrifice always implied that the victim is offered as a gift to God, in some sense for and on behalf of the worshippers. The idea of an 'inclusive representative' complements this theme; and the anointed king and future Messiah were regarded as representatives of the people of Israel, as was Isaiah's 'suffering servant' (Isaiah 52:13–53:12) and the 'one like a son of man' in Daniel 7:13-14. Jesus was seen as fulfilling this role not just for Israel but for the church, for which he gave up his life.

These metaphors and narratives of salvation were made more suitable for the purposes of theological explanation by being developed into a range of more stable, systematic and long-lasting *models*.²

¹'Propitiation' denotes appeasing an angry deity; whereas the object of 'expiation' is sin, not God.

²A model is a half-way point on the road from a *metaphor* to an abstract, technical *concept*.

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These were incorporated into conceptual *theories* about how the death of Christ could bring about atonement with God. They include viewing the death of Jesus as:

- a *victory* over the hostile powers from which humanity needs to be liberated;
- a *sacrifice* offered on our behalf, to purge our guilt, by a Christ who came to be thought of both as victim and as the one who sacrifices the victim, offering himself (in union with us) to himself (in union with God);
- a *ransom* payment to the devil, or even as a deception of the devil;
- a *satisfaction* for the outrage and offence caused to God's majesty by human sin: one that 'none but God can make' yet 'none but man ought to do', according to Anselm (*Cur Deus Homo?*, book two, 6);
- a vindication of the divine law, by the *penal substitution* of Christ who bears the punishment due to sinners (an act which is thought of as either limited to the elect alone or, in principle, as extended universally);
- a *supreme moral example*: on the cross, 'the ultimate sign of man's hatred', the love of God is displayed as accepting humankind in its 'most extreme sinfulness and bitter enmity' –both motivating and empowering us to emulate [= match by imitation] such love (Lampe, 1966, p. 190).

Unfortunately, there is a tendency for the constructions that employ these models to take on a life of their own, in which abstract discussion of (often impersonal) heavenly transactions can lose their ties to historical events and the vivid metaphors of the NT. A further danger is that each model or theory could only ever reflect *part* of the

experience, images, narratives and metaphors of the many-sided reality of Christian salvation. But 'to select a particular metaphor from among those available ... and to develop it in isolation from or at the expense of others, is to risk a partial and inadequate grasp on the reality of redemption' (Hart, 1997, p. 190).

Perhaps this is why no one model or theory of the atonement has ever been declared a 'dogma': that is, a doctrine ('teaching') that is regarded as divinely revealed and hence binding on the whole church. Instead of struggling to perfect and defend any one overarching theoretical perspective, the atonement may be better described in a 'multi-model discourse' that uses several metaphorical images. After all, theories of atonement 'give the answers they give because of the questions they ask' (Wright, 2007, p. 211). And the differences across this range of understandings of atonement may also appeal to different people's different experiences of God's salvation, and their different perceptions of what it is from which *they* need to be saved.

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Links

<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/atonementmorris2.html> (Leon Morris)

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/#Atonement>
(Michael J. Murray and Michael Rea, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Discussion points

1. Trace the pathway from experience through narrative to model for one theory of the atonement. What is lost and what gained by this development?
2. Discuss, with reference to any two theories of atonement, Maurice Wiles's claim that 'the story of the passion retains its appeal' but 'any doctrine of the passion is more likely to appal'.
3. In your view, which are the most and the least 'objective' of the theories of atonement, and why?
4. How might a contemporary Christian defend the idea of the death of Christ as *either* a victory *or* a sacrifice?

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Religion and Popular Culture

Clive Marsh

Helping students to understand how religion 'and' popular culture relate raises vexing questions from the start. The 'and' implies they are separate, as if popular culture has no religion within it, and that religion is somehow detached from culture. So, it may be assumed that popular culture is 'secular' or (even worse) neutral with regard to religion or values. From another angle, popular culture may appear more interesting (or more entertaining) than religion – especially for non-religious students. Or it may be deemed distracting or dangerous to religious students, or to students from religious families who are wrestling with the tension, and sheer difference, between 'life at home' and 'life in school/college'. In this article I offer simple reflections and suggestions for addressing such issues, being convinced that it is crucially important for students to be looking carefully at the relationship – fruitful and constructive as well as tense and sometimes problematic – between these two 'worlds'.

Specification links:

AQA AS Unit E: Religion, Art and the Media; Topics 3 and 4.

Religion in popular culture: From Coronation Street to The Big Bang Theory

Much of the image of religion in British popular culture has come through the portrayal of Christian priests/ministers, or of extreme or quirky characters (sometimes a mixture of all elements). Whether in comedy (*Dad's Army*, *Vicar of Dibley*, *Father Ted*, *Rev*) or drama (Revd Paul Coates in *Broadchurch*, Father James in the 2014 film *Calvary* or Father Michael in the TV series *Broken*), the clerical characters are often eccentric,

sinister, ambiguous or troubled. Whilst often ultimately good characters, the troubling elements are dominant. Rarely are they straightforward or uncomplicated. Granted that routine dullness does not make for good drama or gripping TV this does create a difficulty. Whilst there is an occasional portrayal of humdrum ministry and its crucial everyday significance – Mark Williams' 'Reverend Alan' in *Anita and Me*, for example – these are relatively rare. Religion (and at present I am referring just to Christianity, as the numerically dominant religion in the UK)

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thus becomes a figure of fun, or is identified as a source of great angst. This is nowhere more starkly apparent than in films such as *The Magdalene Sisters* or *Philomena*, in which the church is directly presented as a source or associate of abusive behaviour.

Portraying good priests with troubled pasts or present lives is at least a way of arguing that contemporary drama presents real human beings as religious leaders. Beyond priestly figures, though, Christian figures are few and far between in fictional drama. This makes the character of Dot Cotton in *EastEnders* (BBC) all the more striking. Again, it is a case of a religious figure as psychologically unusual. She is a chain-smoking, gossiping, Bible-quoting figure who, whilst authentically human, raises questions for the viewer about how different elements of her practice hang together.

Beyond Christianity, British UK popular culture has been more sluggish at offering religious characters for viewers to relate to. *Citizen Khan* continues the comedy theme, providing opportunity for Islam to appear in the midst of ordinary life, though with generous helpings of racial stereotyping in the process. *Bodyguard* ended up playing with familiar tropes, trading off the distortion of religious conviction into promotion of terrorism even whilst it sought to subvert the notion of subservient women in offering a 'strong' female character: though a highly qualified engineer, the strong character was a (failed) suicide bomber who then continued to build bombs. In stark contrast to this portrayal of Islam, yet similarly contentious, has been a recent *Coronation Street* storyline portraying a lesbian Muslim. This could be regarded as unduly provocative or sensationalist, or a courageous piece of

programming to bring into the open an important discussion of relevance to one of the major religious communities in the UK.

A major problem with all such popular cultural portrayals – positive or negative, and of whatever faith tradition – is that there is often too little time to see how the religiosity of characters fits into daily life. *Rev* and *Broken* offer perhaps the best challenges to that conclusion. Though focused on priestly life, they do at least get inside, and under the skin of, the demands of ministry in the context of everyday urban living.

Educationally, though, there would be value in exploring what the advantages and disadvantages are of examining religion and religious practice through scrutiny of portrayals of its leaders. This could in turn invite discussion of how leadership in religion is viewed, at present, and whether or not it is regarded as a noble or attractive profession. (Does becoming a rabbi, a minister/pastor/priest, or an imam feature in careers talks?)

On the other side of the Atlantic, a quite different sort of comedy programme (due to end after its 12th season in 2019) offers an alternative take on the role of religion in daily life. Scarcely a key feature of the series, the religious backgrounds of some of the lead characters of *The Big Bang Theory* are nevertheless worth noting. Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg) wrestles with his Jewishness, yet respectfully so. The Hinduism of Rajesh Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar) is never sharply distinguished from his Indian roots, yet this in itself reflects a challenge to Western ways, where religious affiliation may be seen more as a rational choice than part of one's ethnic identity. Mary Cooper (Laurie Metcalf), mother of the quirky, often difficult, and forthrightly atheist Sheldon Cooper (Jim

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Parsons), embodies Texan Christian evangelicalism. Sheldon pokes fun at his mother's 'simple faith' and yet alongside enjoying his witty insults, the comedy also manages to retain a respect for his mother's faith and the elements of practical wisdom it incorporates.

The educational usefulness of the series is less the prominence of religion than the fact that strands of different religious backgrounds and practice are interwoven with aspects of daily life. The 12th episode from Series 8, 'The Space Probe Disintegration', for example, finds Howard and Rajesh in discussion about the purpose of going to the temple for prayer. Religion *in* popular culture often, then, fails to provide easy avenues to see religion as something normal, or everyday, though the examples where this does occur are worth noting and working with. Otherwise, the more eccentric, extreme or problematic aspects of religion are more likely to appear.

Popular culture as religion: Experiencing music

Popular culture can be seen to relate to religion in other, more indirect ways, however. The question whether forms of popular culture are in practice *replacing* religion in Western culture has been around for some time. It can perhaps best be explored through the ways in which popular music, and the practices associated with it, is actually functioning across Western culture (Cavicchi, 1999).

Vaughan S. Roberts and I have explored all this in some detail (Marsh & Roberts, 2013). We sought to show how attention to embodiment, experiences of transcendence, a sense of community and ritualised behaviour all occur around the practice of listening to music. They may not occur in particularly organised or structured ways, and need much more

exploration to discern whether the four elements really do act as a religion for committed music-users. But, at the very least, the four elements shape living, and start to look like a set of practices which make up a type of spirituality. Whether or not students self-identify as 'religious' it is possible to enable them to explore how their music-listening habits take shape, and how these inform their decision-making (ethics), their inner life (spiritual development), their management of their moods (emotional intelligence) and their developing relationships (sociality). In addition, music may assist their encountering an 'Other' dimension to human life, through aesthetic experience (a 'sense of transcendence').

None of these practices or experiences may be labelled as religious by those who follow and enjoy them. For religious students they could, however, overlap with their explicitly religious belief and practice. Such features of music-use may thus function as 'religion-like' in their form or content and enable students – whether religious or not – to gain an experiential insight into what religion is 'like' and how it 'works'.

If, of course, music does not work for individual students as an example of where popular culture might be working in a 'religion-like' way, then the question arises whether there are other equivalents (sport – playing or watching, gym and fitness activity, comics and comic novels, video-gaming, cinema-going).

Religion's absence: How to respond?

One of the trickiest aspects of exploration of 'religion and popular culture' is the tendency of the already-religious to want to see 'religious', 'theological' or 'spiritual' material everywhere. In Christian circles, popular cultural materials (songs, clips

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from TV shows or films) are used as illustrations of theological ideas or beliefs. ('Doesn't this remind you of the Christian belief in x or y ...?'). This may or may not be accurate in individual cases but is often not the most straightforward way to 'use' popular cultural material. Indeed 'use' is itself a telling term. It implies that a religious tradition poaches material for its own purposes without respecting either what the creator of the artistic/cultural work may have intended (if that can be identified), or what the 'text' (film, song, programme) offers as a whole. The works themselves may, in other words, resist what religious people would like them to say.

That said, popular culture is often so cautious about being explicitly religious that it often squeezes religion out of where it might normally appear. In soaps or other dramas, therefore, there may be plenty of situations and storylines where one might expect, or could easily imagine, religious people being present within them, offering religious/theological interpretations of the issue at stake. Yet these are simply not present. Ordinary religious believers are notable by their absence across the arts and popular culture in general.

Whilst it could be argued (negatively) that this is because religion is such an extraordinary thing to hold on to in the civilised, technocratic, reason-oriented West, such a view would be disparaging to religious students and would, in fact, now be out of step with the majority of the world's population, most of whom profess some kind of religious belief. The view from 'beyond religion' (of all kinds) could, of course, be right. But it would be too premature a judgement. In the meantime, Eurocentric, Northern Hemisphere-dominated, Westernised approaches to daily life that imply or

assume a preference for the absence of religion, as if this is the most sensible approach to living, need examining in other ways. Any TV drama or film then (e.g., historical, crime, action, romantic, war), which presents a plot or life situation within which it would be possible to argue that religious characters (of any religious tradition) *could* be, or have been, present, becomes a way of addressing the topic of 'popular culture and religion'. What would religious characters have done? What view would they have taken? Why have they not been included?

Discussion with students could admittedly focus too heavily only on ethical questions. This would have the drawback of implying that religions primarily exist to steer people's ethical views. It would be important for tutors/teachers to draw out in practical ways the way in which religions 'work' to shape their adherents' views and approaches to life, not merely through providing 'propositions to live by', but by shaping character, providing a community to belong to, and cultivating meditative/reflective practices and a 'way of being' in the world.

Concluding comment

These three ways into the topic of 'popular culture and, as and without religion' provide, then, different avenues along which to look at where religion does and does not appear in Western citizens' daily lives. As such, they are ways of examining how secular society actually takes shape, and the responsibilities that all citizens have – be they religious or not – to look at where and how religion appears, and whether daily life, and its artistic and cultural life in particular, is or is not acknowledging the explicit religiosity within it.

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Links

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/nov/08/religion-television-rev-father-ted> (Guardian article by Mark Lawson)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/0/22337834> (Paul Kerensa [Christian] and Mitch Benn [Atheist] in conversation about religion and humour)

<https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/drawn-to-the-gods-religion-comedy-and-animated-television-programs/> (transcript of 2017 interview with David Feltmate, author of a study of religion in *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*)

Discussion points

1. To what extent can religions laugh at themselves?
2. How immersed should religious people be in the broader artistic and cultural society of which they are a part? Why?
3. How do you assess the portrayal of explicitly religious characters in TV, radio and film drama known to you? On what basis are you making your judgements?

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'Impersonating Beyoncé is Not Your Destiny, Child': Reflections on Feminist Theology

Hayley Matthews

The article explores the range of Christian theological positions on gender.

Specification links:

AQA Christianity, God: Gender specific language about God, Christian feminist perspectives; Christianity, gender and sexuality.

EDEXCEL Foundations/Christianity: Christian doctrine of God; Investigation/Ethics: Equality and the modern world.

OCR 2c Developments in Religious Thought: Feminist approaches; 5 Society: Gender and Society; Gender and theology.

WJEC/CBAC (=EDUCAS) Unit 3: A Study of Religion - Option A: A Study of Christianity, Theme 3: Significant social developments in religious thought, C. The relationship between religion and society: religion, equality and discrimination.

Feminist theology and the changing role of men and women.

OCR Religion and ethics Topic 4. Ethical Language: Meta-ethics.

Introduction

In a world where RuPaul sets the gold standard for women's make-up, as drag Queens outdress the best of us, womanhood is modelled on outrageously lavish parodies of femininity to a bar still set by men. Teenage women wear eyelashes that could sweep the hallowed halls of Buckingham Palace where the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, Queen Elizabeth II, has, in complete contrast, lived through seismic changes in gendered leadership with a

quiet, understated dignity. Consequently, young women find the pathway to womanhood filled with extremes: as suffragettes and majorettes compete with athletes and astronauts to tempt them towards a woman's right to do and be whatever they choose.

For Christian women, the struggle to selfhood is more difficult still. The longest serving female bishop in the Church of England is still only in her fourth year of service as a bishop. However, the Roman Catholic Church has decreed

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that women are *essentially* unable to become priests. Feminist theologians have sought to challenge such inherited patriarchal theology since the 1960s, yet are often compared unfavourably as their burgeoning thought is contrasted with centuries of deeply explored, long held doctrine and 'his' story. In this article, we shall explore the range of theological positions on gender.

Traditional Catholic understanding

The inherited Roman Catholic position which underpins much Christian thought is outlined in detail in *Mulieris dignitatem* (Pope John Paul II, 1988). This is a detailed document that provides a scriptural interpretation of women and men as created 'equal but different', that is, of equal worth (equality) but with different roles (complementarianism).

This theological perspective divides masculinity and femininity into two differentiated biological positions that neither overlap nor allow for exceptions. In other words, a man ought not to have 'female' traits and vice versa. Adherents of complementarian theology suggest that this dichotomous understanding of gender is predicated and ratified by physical procreation: women can bear children whereas men cannot.

Thus, women are physically ordained to be childbearers and homemakers, in what is sometimes referred to as 'the natural order'. Meanwhile, men, free of such physical obligations, are to lead the church (and society) and also the home, which may seem odd given the woman's God-given role as childbearer and homemaker. St Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:12 are used to back up this position, in a manner that Sarah Schneider describes as 'proof-texting' patriarchy (Schneiders, 1982): 'But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise

authority over a man, but to remain quiet'.

This position places a special emphasis on the human female's singular ability to nurture a child *in utero*. But in describing Mary (using the ancient term) as *theotokos* ('God-bearer'), Pope John Paul II paradoxically inverts the apparent subjugation of women from human leadership to being active participants of salvific import; Jesus was incarnate of a woman without whose 'yes' there would be no Christ. Mary's role was not that of a bystander (like the shepherds) or of those sent to worship (the wise men) – or, indeed, like Joseph: the one individual who remained quiet throughout Christ's bursting in upon humanity in the form of a tiny human child. Instead, all that is described as women's 'complementarity' is turned on its head through her assent, her intimate conversation with a messenger of God (the Angel Gabriel) and her ongoing role in bringing the Christ-Child to the fulness of maturity – placed in the hands of a woman who is 'highly favoured' (Luke 1:28).

Furthermore, in carrying the Christ *in utero*, Mary carries the Christ within her – she was physically and spiritually united with God in a way that no other human being has been. Consequently, Mary's role as Mother of God has enabled women's role in procreation to become deified. Indeed, for some, Mary herself has become deified by the unique physical union she experienced whilst pregnant with Jesus. (Pope John Paul II described it as a 'supernatural elevation to union with God'.)

In reversing the curse of Eve, however, Mary (as the heavenly prototype of women) becomes a female archetype based on motherhood *alone*. And this has proved to be limiting for womankind, as male theologians have made the

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possibility that a woman might carry a child into their sole purpose. Thus, the Pope concluded that Mary 'signifies the fullness of the perfection of "what is characteristic of woman", of "what is feminine" ... [she is] the archetype, of the personal dignity of women' (Pope John Paul II, 1988, II, 5).

Feminist critiques

Modern society in the West would struggle with that concept, when most biological mothers return to work within the first year of their child's birth and some fathers prioritise childcare over income generation (Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2015). Parenting and bread-winning are now shared pursuits, although women still carry the burden (60%) of unpaid domestic work in the home (ONS, 2016).

In contrast, feminist theologians such as Mary Daly (1928-2010) and Rosemary Ruether (b. 1936) use an altogether different hermeneutic with which to understand and translate the Scriptures, which – though relatively recent compared to inherited androcentric theology – offers a challenging insight. For example, Daly warns against simply swapping male pronouns for female ones, lest we simply reconstruct God in the same static, gender-binary, exclusive mirror image (Daly, 1973).

The heart of the debate over feminist theology lies in its appeal to the feminist consciousness as its highest authority ... feminist theologians run the risk of merely replacing an old ideology with a new one. (Miller and Grenz, 1998, p. 175)

Yet Daly moves beyond 'renaming' or even 're-gendering' God and instead

asks 'Why indeed must "God" be a noun? Why not a verb – the most active and dynamic of all.' She talks of feminism being a living act of liberation and risk-taking; of taking the risk to be oneself irrespective of the female 'role' into which one has been cast, writing 'it is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God.' (Daly, 1973, p. 33.).

Taken to its conclusion, Daly advocates doing away with a Paternal, God-Like figure as an object of worship, connecting instead with the rhythm of being, evident throughout creation and humankind, which she found particularly in the liberation of women. Daly described the anger of oppressed women as divine judgement, claiming that feminist rage is the wrath of God speaking Godself forth in a surge of being. The unfolding of God is therefore creative energy, producing an event in which women are participating in their own liberation. We are not waiting to be rescued by a Prince-Christ, we are joining with Divine, liberating Spirit and freeing ourselves. God is Be-ing and in be-ing ourselves we participate in God's self with the same unity that Mary experienced as the God-bearer.

Rosemary Ruether takes a different perspective. Naming the divine as God/dess, Ruether inverts patriarchy, reclaiming androcentric language and the Judeo-Christian tradition in a systematic way. Although subscribing to God as 'Ground of All-Being' (like Daly, she owes much to Tillich's theology), Ruether reimagines God as the cosmic womb which generates all life. She argues for a feminist Christology, recognising Jesus as ground-breaking in terms of gender relations, social justice and religious practice:

If dominating and destructive relations

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to the earth are interrelated with gender, class, and racial domination, then a healed relation to the earth cannot come about simply through technological 'fixes'. It demands a social reordering to bring about just and loving interrelationship between men and women, between races and nations, between groups presently stratified into social classes, manifest in great disparities of access to the means of life. In short, it demands that we must speak of eco-justice, and not simply of domination of the earth as though that happened unrelated to social domination. (Ruether, 1994, p. 3)

Ruether focused on the Wisdom tradition, or *Sophia*, as the femininity of God; with Christ himself incarnating that Wisdom, thus embodying both male and female, whilst fully God and fully human. Ruether systematically inverts the inherited patriarchal traditions; whereas Daly moves beyond them into a cosmological reimagining of the divine that bears little if any relation to inherited Judeo-Christian theologies. For some women, this has been truly liberating; while others feel it discards Christianity as we know it altogether.

Conclusion

Whilst many Christians still adhere to an androcentric interpretation of the scriptures, other theologians and churchgoers are revisiting the Christian teaching they have inherited. Returning to the scriptures with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', armed with concordances and commentaries from a wide variety of traditions,¹ this practice echoes Paul Ricoeur, who wrote, 'hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor,

vow of obedience' (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 27).

This rigour, and the willingness to read beneath the text, is enabling women's voices with women's interpretative skills and a woman's experience of the world to interrogate the texts in new ways. Women are comparing their own many and varied experiences of a relationship with God, the church and/or the Christian faith both to one another and to inherited doctrinal tenets. Gendered discourses are no longer accepted as *proscriptive* but understood as *descriptive* language with socio-historical specificity.

Additionally, societal changes continue to challenge 'biblically' gendered norms as women are self-actualising through a wide range of academic, professional, sporting, vocational and artistic endeavours as well as – for some – becoming wives and/or mothers. Advances in reproductive medicine make the biblical imperative of a woman's body for procreation a moot point, when surrogacy, adoption and blended families have changed forever the way that families can be understood. Indeed, some men and women opt for voluntary medical sterility as they do not wish to procreate at all, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual couples are legally able to marry and adopt children.

Do we still inhabit a world where the model for a Christian marriage argues for the obedience of a wife to her husband on the premise that he loves her as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:21-33)?

The conditional nature of this instruction has often been misused to justify the domination of women by their husbands – which, of course, is inherently wrong. The question is, how do Christian women and men now negotiate their relationships

¹ For example, there are almost twenty recognised forms of feminism now, and queer theology brings an entirely new dimension to scriptural exegesis.

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and marriages in such a changed landscape? Can the Christian tradition offer any wisdom or insight to the range of contemporary marriages we see today, or should it be recognised as 'outgrown'? Should scriptural norms for male and female relations be upheld as an ideal, and what might that mean for single sex relationships? And is motherhood the highest of all callings for a woman: in essence, the very reason for her being? If so, how do we live out that Christian calling in a world where motherhood is both undervalued and unpaid?

Finally, the most important question of all is this: how did *Jesus* treat women – was it a challenge to the religious law of his time? Why was he entrusted to the womb of a woman, and why was his resurrection woman-witnessed? Why do you think that after Christ's ascension women were so quickly silenced from 'His-story'?

Glossary

androcentric theology is theology that originates from and focuses on men.

complementarianism: the theological concept that although women and men are equal in stature and worth, they are not the same but complement one another.

gendered discourse: a line of thinking that is inherently biased towards specific gender roles and/or gendered constructs of power that remain unexamined and treated as norms.

hermeneutic: knowledge that arises from interrogating a text (particularly biblical texts). For example, what was written immediately before or after it? Are there any linguistic phrases that carried unique cultural meaning that affect our interpretation of it?

hermeneutics of suspicion:

knowledge that arises from a 'suspicious' interrogation of the text e.g. did the author really write this? Why was it written? For whom? What did they hope to achieve by it?

patriarchy is a system of male governance/primacy.

queer theology is theology arising from theologians within or sympathetic to the LGBT community who interpret the scriptural texts from their lived experience as/of LGBT persons of faith.

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Links

<https://www.movement.org.uk/resource/introduction-feminist-theology>

<https://www.movement.org.uk/resources/womanist-theology-summary>

(Summaries of Feminist and Womanist Theology)

<http://susannahcornwall.blogspot.com/>

(Susannah Cornwall)

<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/love-and-sexuality/index.cfm>

(Love and Sexuality, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Discussion points

1. Which form of feminist theology can you best relate to, Daly's or Reuther's?
2. Why do you think Jesus' radical treatment of women did not become part of the early church's theology and doctrine?
3. How might Christians integrate theology with current equal marriage legislation?
4. How should the church respond to LGBTIQ couples?

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Richard Swinburne on the Soul

Jeff Astley

The article summarises Swinburne's defence of substance dualism, and his account of life after death and personal identity.

Specification links:

AQA AS 3.1.1.a Philosophy of religion, Self, death and the afterlife.

EDEXCEL AS 2 B: The Study of Philosophy of Religion, 5 Contrasting standpoints on the relationship between mind and body.

EDEXCEL A2 3 A: Philosophy of religion, 2 A study of selected problems in the philosophy of religion: Beliefs about life after death: ... immortality of the soul.

OCR Philosophy of Religion: 1. Philosophical Language and Thought, Soul, mind and body.

Richard Swinburne (born 1934) is a British philosopher who (very unusually these days) defends a dualism of body and soul (mind).

Dualism and other -isms

Swinburne accepts 'substance dualism', the view that a human being, or any non-human 'person', is a substance (that is, a particular, individual thing that exist all-at-once and 'has' properties). Each person itself consists of *two substances*:

(a) a material body, which occupies space;

(b) an immaterial soul (or mind), which does not occupy space.

While (a) has physical properties that are publicly observable, (b) has mental properties to which only one subject has 'privileged access'. In this life, the functioning of (b) requires the functioning of (a), and the occurrence of brain events is highly correlated with the occurrence of mental events (in the sense that they regularly occur at the same time or one after the other).

Logically, however, there is no contradiction in supposing 'the soul to

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continue to exist without its present body or indeed any body at all’.

This form of dualism holds that human beings are *in essence* mental substances. This is because, although they are currently comprised of two parts, a substantial soul that bears pure mental properties and events, and a substantial body that bears physical properties and events, the soul is their *essential* part and the body is a non-essential part. Swinburne further argues ‘that each of us has a [unique] “thisness” which makes him or her that person, . . . other than any thisness possessed by the matter of their brains; and that being that person is compatible with having any particular mental properties or physical properties (and so body) at all’ (Swinburne, 2013, p. 151).

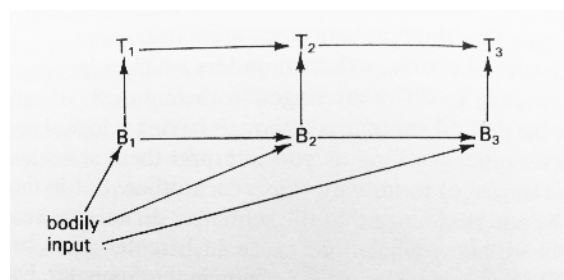
Thoughts are themselves *efficacious* (they produce effects), and lead not only to brain changes and consequent behaviour but also to other thoughts. But:

mental properties are different properties from physical properties; and even if there is one-many correlation between mental events and brain-events, physics and chemistry cannot explain why there are these correlations rather than those correlations, and that is because mental properties fall outside the subject matter of physics and chemistry. (Swinburne, 1986, p. 186)

Nor is it likely that such a scientific theory could be devised, because variations in brain-events are so different from variations in mental events. ‘Mere correlation does not explain’ (and is not the same as ‘causation’). We also do not know what it is about the brain that keeps the soul functioning.

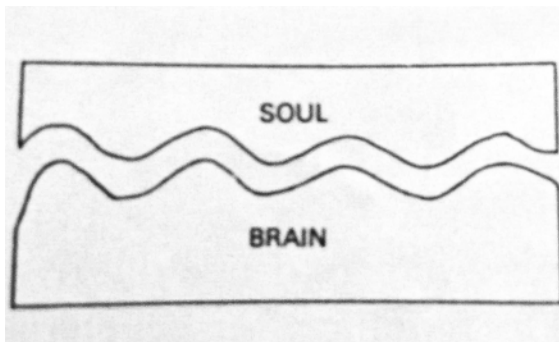
Swinburne calls his view ‘soft dualism’ (1986, p. 10) because the soul normally requires a body and is not naturally immortal (as Descartes assumed). The form of dualism Swinburne is arguing for is *interactionism*, in which the mental and physical interact in both directions; he therefore rejects the idea that the physical affects the mental, but not vice versa (that is, *epiphenomenalism*, for which the mind has no independent causal power). If our sensations did not cause our beliefs about them, we would have no grounds for believing that they exist – yet ‘it is as evident as anything can be that I have sensations’. Thoughts must also be efficacious if our beliefs about them are to be *justified*, and if we can state them (a bodily event). To be justified, a *belief that requires reasons for its justification* cannot be held ‘in place’ just by physical events in the brain. It also requires among its causes ‘states possessing intrinsic meaning’ – that is, other beliefs that we accept as reasons for the belief (p. 290).

Swinburne accepts that simple laws of thought (rational connections between thoughts) operate and these are likely to be autonomous. Brain processes may be *necessary*, but they are not *sufficient* to produce such a succession of thoughts. In the diagram below (from 1986, p. 84), thoughts (Ts) are causally influenced not only by brain events (Bs) but also by other thoughts.



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The soul has a continuing structure of beliefs and desires (events with intrinsic meaning) distinct from any brain structure. So it is not like a soft cushion on a hard seat, whose shape is entirely determined by the shape of the seat. Rather 'its shape [= the soul's beliefs and desires] in some parts is determined by its shape in other parts, and its shape to some extent determines that of the brain [= the brain's electrochemical network]' (1986, p. 291).



Swinburne also rejects both *behaviourism* (the view that my having a 'mental event' is just my behaving in a certain way) and the *mind-brain identity theory* (for which mental events are really brain events), on the grounds that mental events (sensations, thoughts, desires, etc.) are not reducible either to public behaviour or to physical events.

The future of the soul

Swinburne addresses three sorts of argument that have been claimed to show that the soul can function without the brain.

(a) Arguments from *parapsychology* (such as alleged evidence of reincarnation, Spiritualism and near-death experiences). All the evidence here is either uncheckable, explainable by other theories, or irrelevant.

(b) Arguments from philosophical considerations about the *nature of the soul* (e.g., that its natural immortality is guaranteed because it has no parts into which it might break up). All such arguments are fallacious. Souls are not naturally immortal.

(c) Arguments from *metaphysical theory*: e.g., theism holds that an omnipotent God has the power to give life after death to souls and intends such a future for them. Swinburne argues:

if I am right in my claim that we cannot show that the soul has a nature such that it survives 'under its own steam', and that we cannot show that it has a nature such that it cannot survive without its sustaining brain, the only kind of argument that can be given is an argument which goes beyond nature. (1986, p. 309)

This would not involve God in violating natural laws, for 'there are no natural laws which dictate what will happen to the soul after death'. *The soul is like a light bulb*, and the brain is like an electric light socket: the former functions when 'plugged in' to the latter. It involves no contradiction, however, to suppose that God could 'move a soul from one body and plug it into another' (permitting reincarnation or resurrection), or could even get the soul to function without plugging it into any brain at all. Yet human embodiedness is 'their normal and divinely intended state', which suggests a 'general resurrection of souls with new bodies in some other world' (1986, pp. 310-311). Nevertheless:

Whether or not it is physically or practically possible for the present body of any human to be destroyed and yet for their soul to continue to

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exist, my claim is that it is compatible with what we essentially are that any human should continue to exist without their present body or any body at all; and so each of us is essentially a pure mental substance . . . [However, this] substance dualism is a doctrine about what is necessary for our existence, not what makes for a full and worthwhile life. (Swinburne, 2013, p. 2)

The brain transplant dilemma

Swinburne underscores the plausibility of his claims about dualism by various brain transplant thought experiments (1986, pp. 9-10, 147-151; 1994, pp. 19-21; 2013, pp. 151-157).

If the brain of a person, *p*, is divided into its two hemispheres, and each of these hemispheres is transplanted into the emptied skull of another body, then (if the transplant survives and takes over the roles of the other hemisphere):

the transplant will have created two persons, both with *p*'s apparent memories and character. But they cannot both be *p*. For if they were, they would both be the same person as each other, and clearly they are not – they have now distinct mental lives. The operation would therefore create at least one new person – we may have our views about which (if either) resultant person *p* is, but we could be wrong. And that is my basic point – however much we knew in such a situation about what happens to the parts of a person's body, we would not know for certain what happens to the person. (1986, pp. 148-149)

Although we know what has happened to *p*'s brain, this does not tell us what has happened to *p*: thus, 'mere knowledge of what happens to bodies [even brains]

does not tell you what happens to persons' (1994, p. 19). Therefore, persons are not the same as their bodies. Laws of nature organise bodies, but 'it needs either God or chance to allocate bodies to persons'.

Personal identity

As the brain transplant dilemma shows, while the identity of inanimate objects is divisible, it is 'hard to give any sense' to the notion of there being 'a half-way between one having future experiences which some person has, and one not having them', and therefore to the notion that persons (their personal identity) are divisible (1986, p. 150). That any resultant person has qualitatively the same memory and character as I have is no guarantee that he *is* me – in whole or in part. Hence, in another thought experiment, Swinburne asserts:

My desire for happiness in the world to come is not in the least satisfied by the knowledge that archangels normally produce a duplicate of each dead person (with his apparent memories and character). To satisfy my desire, I want something more – that I enjoy what that future person enjoys and so I be he. (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984, p. 135)

The *definition of personal identity* is the sameness of a person over time. You are the same person as the one in all those photos of babies, toddlers, 9-year-olds, etc. that your parents still treasure. Swinburne encourages us to distinguish between (a) what *makes* a person the same person (despite all the obvious changes throughout our lives), and (b) how we or others *know* that this is the same person (Swinburne, 1977, pp. 119-120). In his view, 'the identity of persons

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at different times is constituted by the identity of their souls'. Same soul = same person. And this identity is itself experienceable (by us) in the continuity of our mental events: 'the subject's awareness is an awareness of himself as the common subject of various sensations (and other mental events)'. And that is something that 'knowledge of brains and their states and knowledge of which experiences were occurring would be insufficient to tell you' (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984, pp. 42-46, 49).

But what about the *evidence for personal identity*? Claims about personal identity are often treated as verifiable by evidential criteria. Swinburne's view of these is as follows (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984, pp. 49-66; Swinburne, 1986, ch. 9).

- (a) *The brain continuity criterion* is secondary – its authority depends on the fact that the brain's continuity normally guarantees continuity of apparent memory and character. (*Bodily continuity* is good evidence for brain continuity; but *similarity of appearance* provides weaker evidence for this.)
- (b) *Continuity of apparent personal memory* (memory of one's own deeds and experiences) is primary, the ultimate authority: 'a person ought to be judged to be (i.e. to have the same soul as) whom he remembers himself to have been'. The reason for this is that reliance on personal memory is a special application of Swinburne's 'principle of credulity', which he claims to be a basic principle of rationality: that in the absence of counter-evidence things are probably as they seem to be. (However, apparent memory claims are frequently publicly checked against physical evidence of a

person's presence at the time and place reported in their memory claim.)
(c) *Continuity of character* (having the same central beliefs, desires, reactions, etc.) is a lesser criterion, which may be added to criterion (b).

It appears that – as souls are not naturally immortal – to be the same person in an afterlife as you are now, God would have to continue to sustain or re-create your soul. But for you to *know* that you were the same person, God would have to continue to sustain or re-create your personal memories (and, maybe, character). If you were given an afterlife body, others could know that you were the same person if this body were sufficiently similar to the one you had in your earthly life, and if you communicated to them your memories and expressed your character through it (if you remained without a body, they could presumably only know these things through some form of telepathy).

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Links

(Interviews with Swinburne)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRqfg1j9oBY> (How Does Personal Identity Persist Through Time?)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWVO4j5xsRQ> (Does Brain Science Disprove the Soul?)

Discussion points

1. What evidence or arguments might challenge Swinburne's substance dualism?
2. How might one criticise Swinburne's conclusions from the brain transplant thought experiments?
3. If human beings do *not* possess souls, how could personal identity in an afterlife be both (a) understood and (b) known to oneself and others?

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