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Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting A-level Religious Studies. The St Mary's and St Giles' Centre

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Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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Contents

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Aliens: Ecclesiology and 1 Peter

John Holdsworth

1981 saw the beginnings of a new direction in the study of 1 Peter, which hitherto had appeared to have reached an impasse. Sociological studies by Elliott and Goppelt have charted a new way forward that has helped to highlight the theology of 1 Peter, and particularly its ecclesiology, and which have helped redefine ecclesiological study. This has also provided new hermeneutical possibility.

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC Unit 6: Textual Studies (New Testament); Theme 3: New Testament Literature – The Letters (1 Peter), section c.
AQA 3.2.2B (Christianity): Section A (Expressions of Religious Identity).

Reaching the impasse

For most of the twentieth century, the study of 1 Peter was dominated by critical questions rather than theological ones. Those questions persisted because there seemed to be no consensus among scholars about how to answer them. The traditional categories of critical introduction were all disputed. There was disagreement about the date of writing, the place of origin of the writing, the identity of the author or indeed whether it was pseudonymous, and the form of the writing. Was it a letter or a liturgy? Was it a unity or had two documents been tagged together, and if so why? Noting that two dominant themes in 1 Peter appeared to be baptism and suffering: was this a document about suffering with incidental references to worship; or was it rather a document about worship with incidental references to suffering?

Well might a centenary survey of NT scholarship claim: 'In a very real sense the little Epistle called 1 Peter is the storm centre of New Testament studies' (Neill, 1966, p. 343). Noting that two recent authoritative works had dated the work at AD 65 and 112 respectively, the author continued, 'Now if two scholars can arrive at such widely divergent

results, both on the basis of theoretically scientific methods, something must have gone seriously wrong somewhere' (Neill, 1966, p. 344).

Ecclesiology without context

What had actually gone wrong was that something was missing from the questions that were being asked, and perhaps they were being asked from a perspective that did not connect with theological discussion. On the face of it, 1 Peter seems to have something important to say about the nature of the Christian community, but if the dominant scholarly discussion cannot locate that community in time or context, and cannot agree about the motivation behind the letter, then it is difficult to begin theological enquiry other than by disregarding context completely and simply reading the theology of the letter in terms of its literary relationships, and deriving a 'spiritual' message from it, unrelated to any specific situation. If ecclesiology were to progress, if the concept of church were to be understood and articulated from a theological perspective, something had to change.

In fact, ecclesiology in the twentieth century was itself reaching the end of a blind alley. It had become more of a historical form of enquiry, concerned with order, and liturgical and ministerial development, rather than with theology proper. A 1961 study of New Testament ecclesiology illustrates the point well (Schweizer, 1961, pp. 110-112). It devotes a little over two pages to 1 Peter and the discussion is almost entirely about what 'the tradition' there has in common with, or owes to, Paul. The remainder consists of a brief study of the mention of elders (5:1, 5). What was missing was the important matter of a church's self-understanding: the way it described itself and connected itself to both its context and the traditions that parented it. In Schweizer's study there is no concession to context as theologically formative.

A home for the homeless

A completely new approach was introduced by J. H. Elliott in 1981. In *A home for the homeless*, he subjected two aspects of 1 Peter to sociological scrutiny, with what he called 'sociological imagination' (Elliott, 2005 [1981], p. 5). The first was the description of the addressees as *paroikia* (the Greek word from which the English word, 'parish', derives) and *parepidemoi* (1:1, 2:11), often translated as 'aliens and exiles'; and the second was the several terms related to the Greek word *oikos*, meaning house or household (2:5, 4:17, 2:5, 2:18, 3:7, 4:10), both of which are characteristic of 1 Peter.

Elliott expressed disapproval of studies that failed to take seriously the normal application of those terms in ordinary life in Asia Minor. He noted how some studies had translated the terms *paroikia* and *parepidemoi*, according to preconceptions with no linguistic basis, to mean 'pilgrims'; or had added words not included in the Greek, such as 'on this earth' (pp. 41, 42). He asked for the actual situation of the addressees to be taken seriously, and for translations of the text without such partisan interpretation. He was sceptical of what he called spiritualizing tendencies, which described the addressees as aliens on this earth from a heavenly home to which they were making eventual pilgrimage (as, for example, in Hebrews 11:16). He argued, rather, that '1 Peter is a letter addressed to resident aliens and visiting strangers who, since their conversion to Christianity still find themselves estranged from any place of belonging. They are still displaced *paroikoi* seeking an *oikos*'

(Elliott, 2005, p. 49). In fact, his argument states rather more than that: these aliens, by becoming Christians risk even further alienation. So, what did that mean?

He demonstrated that *paroikia* was a technical term for a particular class of people in the Roman Empire, best described as 'resident aliens'. In other words, had they had passports, this is what the letter's addressees would have had stamped in them. This was their status in society. Elliott's sociological study located these people (*paroikia*) as of mixed origins and occupations who shared a sense of being regarded as foreign, often with suspicion and sometimes with outright hostility (pp. 78-83). They were likely to have a sense of vulnerability, alienation and marginalisation (pp. 102-105). He argued that this must have had a bearing on the reason why they joined the church in the first place: a religious group to which they had no traditional or ethnic connection. Sociological study must offer clues as to what the church really was for them. He found an answer in the *oikos* group of words, which he demonstrated had an unusual accumulation in 1 Peter (see above). Within the categories of his sociological study, he was able to describe the church in 1 Peter as, technically, a 'conversionist sect' (p. 75) and used the disciplines of sociology to further explore the properties of such groups. From that study, it was clear that sects offer: a place of belonging, a place of identity, a place to build self-esteem, and a place from which to engage the non-church community in either apologetic or polemic terms, evidence for which can readily be found throughout 1 Peter. Noting that some sects retreated from the world, as in Qumran, whilst others engaged with it, he argued that 1 Peter was world-engaging.

Household codes and church structure

So what the author of 1 Peter has to say in the so-called household codes or station codes (2:13–3:12, and perhaps 5:1-7) can be read in terms of how the church should operate and begin to describe its order as a result of its self-understanding. 'Household' is a rich metaphor for the 1 Peter church (4:17). There is critical debate about whether the codes are for internal or external use. Are they meant to commend Christians to a suspicious world and society; or are they ways of describing the internal ordering of the church using the household as a new and creative model of church? Elliott argues primarily for the latter, and although the codes may have a different function in other New Testament contexts (for example. Colossians 3:18-25, Ephesians 5:22–6:9), that critics should not take a 'one size fits all' approach to exegesis. 1 Peter's setting is specific.

Goppelt: Christians in their setting

Study of 1 Peter since 1980 has had to take account of this work, and also that of Leonhard Goppelt, published in Germany in 1979 and translated into English in 1993, which also concentrates on the nature of the Christian community in Asia Minor in its setting. (See, for example: Achtemeier, 1996; Perkins, 1995; Brown, 1984; Boring, 1999, Chester and Martin, 1994). For Goppelt, the dominant theme of the book is 'the existence of Christians in a non-Christian society; and overcoming that society by being prepared to bear oppression' (Goppelt, 1993, p. 19). Contrary to earlier studies, persecution is regarded as a secondary issue. The theological intention is paramount. 'The letter does not look on the situation of the Christians from the perspective of its environment

as “persecution”, but from the perspective of Christ as “discipleship”’ (p. 38). He takes seriously the designation of the addressees as diaspora (1:1). They are a scattered people, some temporarily (*parepidemoi*) and some more permanently (*paroikia*). They have neither the rights of citizens nor those of guests (p. 64).

The large number of family and household designations in the letter (see above) is clue to the self-understanding of a church which feels united with Christ, the head of the household, in his suffering, noting that at 2:4 the Greek verb denoting Christ’s rejection is a present participle (*apodedokkimasmenon*): Christ’s suffering continues in their rejection as *paroikia* (p. 137). This ‘church’ sees itself not as an institution in the old sense, but rather as family (1:3, 1:14, 1:17, 1:22f, 2:2, 2:4, 2:10, 2:17, 2:18–3:9, 4:8-10, 4:14, 4:17, 5:13). There are several Greek terms with the inclusive *sym* prefix, such as the description of the author at 5:1 as *sym-presbyteros*, i.e. fellow-elder. The church is *adelphotis* (2:17 and 5:9), literally a ‘brotherhood’ (though usually translated in modern English versions, ‘fellow Christians’).

The imperative, ‘allow yourselves to come’, (*proserchomai*, 2:4, 6), Goppelt notes, is used in the Synoptic Gospels, especially Matthew, to denote a joining with Jesus (p. 139). His view is that the outlook of the letter is positive and apologetic towards the world. He believes that 1 Peter ‘produces something new’ by being a sect that, in contrast to that of Qumran, is world-orientated, but has in common with that of Qumran an eschatological understanding of the need for holiness (Goppelt, 1993, p. 154).

New ecclesiological thinking

In these terms, both baptism and suffering have a key place in the ecclesiology of 1 Peter. Unlike other contemporary religions, Christianity’s claim is not that their God is greater than others, or more successful, or more likely to ward off famine and disaster or to bring fertility and health. It is that the meaning of life is to be found somehow in suffering, and uniquely in the suffering of Jesus, a real person with whom adherents could identify and could ‘join’. And the suffering of this real person also has cosmic significance in a God who can go to Hell and back (3:18, 19) and has prepared an inheritance for his followers in heaven (1:4, 5:4). This is often described, therefore, as an eschatological community.

Baptism, in 1 Peter, as admission to this household, is related to its social functions. It is a statement of intent, an intentional identification with Christ, demanding transformation of life to rehearse Christ-like behaviour. It is a statement of identity and belonging, it is a means of community cohesion and solidarity. At a very practical level, it is an acceptance of the risk of further social harassment or even violence. It is taking up a cross. Questions about forms of ministry and its exercise in practice need to take seriously the household metaphor.

Ecclesiology has come to be seen not so much in terms of a developing church structure as in developing church understanding. Interest in worship is not so much in terms of an argument about the development of forms of liturgy, but rather in terms of its function. Ecclesiology is much more related to Christology and who Jesus is for the community, rather than determining

the literary traditions that can be traced in the text. Study of recent trends in ecclesiology in 1 Peter are hence not only throwing new light on 1 Peter but also helping to redefine the critical approaches to ecclesiology itself and contributing to new hermeneutic possibilities. Older scholarship spoke from a situation of much greater settledness than society is now accustomed to. Christians are now far more likely to be diaspora: scattered, either temporarily or permanently. There are real possibilities of connections with recent sociological studies (such as Goodhart, 2017, for example, examining the difference between what he calls 'somewheres', and those who are 'anywheres'). The theological ideas around exile, transience, cultural diversity and strangerhood are also far more likely to strike a chord, and thereby bring 1 Peter once again into a place of prominence.

Glossary

apologetic writing or *discourse* seeks to commend that which is described, as opposed to *polemic*, which seeks to refute the truth claims of what is attacked.

ecclesiology: the theological enquiry about the nature of the church. Traditionally, this was approached by means of practical evidence of order, liturgy and ministry. This article suggests a development that privileges a church's self-understanding in its context.

eschatological: literally, belonging to the end of the age. In a New Testament context that is sometimes its plain meaning. When applied to a community it refers to one which lives the 'already' in the 'not yet'.

hermeneutics is the study of how a text is interpreted and published.

world-oriented, world-engaged: Christian communities can exist within the ordinary social world, or alternatively they can withdraw from it. If they exist within the world they can choose either to engage with the world or to regard it with hostility.

Discussion points

1. Do you think that churches are best described by (a) definitions; (b) images, pictures and symbols; (c) observable phenomena such as liturgies or patterns of ministry; or (d) using sociological categories? What does each of these methods add?
2. Do you think that 1 Peter really is basically a spiritual message, and that the use of terms like *paroikia* is just a coincidence?
3. What do you think is suggested by referring to the church as a household?

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The Nativity and Crucifixion in Christian Art: Encounter, Interpretation and Devotion

Bridget Nichols

The article discusses the role of Christian art in forming Christian identity and devotional patterns, focusing on the birth of Christ and his crucifixion.

Specification link:
EDEXCEL Paper 4, Option 4B: Christianity; 3.2 The diversity of practice in creative expressions of religious identity (a) The depiction of the Nativity and the crucifixion in Christian art and its interpretations and role in Christian devotion.

Introduction

Christ's nativity and crucifixion are key events in the story of Christian salvation and enjoy a privileged status in the development of Christology. Christians profess in the creeds, their founding statements of belief, that Christ was born as a human being, that he was judged before Pilate and put to death on the cross, and that he rose again from the dead.

The birth and death of Christ are not only articles of faith, however. They are also probably the most powerfully affective elements of the Christian story.

Artists who have taken them as their subject have evoked the deeply human emotions of love, adoration, wonder, grief, horror and revulsion. They have captured the best and worst aspects of humanity, sometimes clothing their characters in the costume of the artist's time and compelling viewers to identify with the scene and action. Some of the works we consider were produced in a Christian age and would have been widely intelligible. They are now often inaccessible to viewers who might appreciate their technique and beauty, but fail to recognise the subject. We will also look briefly at some works produced much nearer to the present, in an era sometimes regarded as post-Christian. Such works, too, can often present a powerful commentary on history and society, and new challenges to communities of faith.

What do we expect from Christian art?

Twenty-first-century people live in a highly visual culture, where the moving image on the screens of multiple digital devices engages a large proportion of their work and leisure time. Yet they are not inattentive to works of art, and special exhibitions mounted by major galleries draw enormous crowds. One of the great surprises of the last 20 years was the success of an exhibition at the National Gallery in London in 2000 called 'Seeing Salvation' (Finaldi, 2000; MacGregor & Langmuir, 2000). Unprecedented numbers of visitors passed through the doors, of whom only a proportion would have been equipped to decode the biblical themes and imagery, and the complex of theological symbolism representing the response to the Christian story over centuries (Jensen, 2004, pp. ix, 1-6).

Many of the works of art on display would have seemed out of context to their producers, and their original audiences. Religious art was found in churches, and in a confidently Christian Western society that flourished into the eighteenth century, the churches were the place where people encountered it. Although the post-Reformation Protestant tradition moved away from the visual riches of late medieval religion, the Roman Catholic Church continued to be a patron of the arts.

In our own time, churches of all traditions have renewed their interest in and support for the arts, but the relationship between artists and communities able to commission new work has changed. The work produced is often abstract, and while it might claim a spiritual dimension, it may not make an explicit Christian statement or commitment.

Approaching Christian art: From observation to devotion

Christian art draws on a rich array of sources and employs an intricate symbolic language. The subject matter of some of the work produced between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries will be intelligible to modern viewers who are familiar with the Bible. Its reference to parts of the Apocryphal New Testament and to motifs from the medieval and early modern devotional traditions, however, will be obscure. Few people have read the Apocryphal Gospel (Protoevangelion) of James, which introduces extra features and characters into the story of Christ's birth, including midwives. Fewer still will be aware of the visions of the Swedish mystic, Bridget of Sweden, or the devotion to the five wounds of Christ (Murray & Murray, 2004). We cannot assume that a work will reveal itself to us simply through looking, and it is worth spending time with a splendid range of writing about Christian art to learn the language that informs seeing (Drury, 1999, pp. xii-xiii). In what follows, I will comment on a few examples of representations of the Nativity and the Crucifixion. These discussions are intended to draw attention to features that might aid the reader in looking at a much wider range of work.

The Nativity

Nativity scenes have some stock characters: Joseph, Mary and the infant are always present, often with angels. The ox and ass were there from an early stage, inspired by Isaiah 1:3. Shepherds and magi/kings begin to appear as the theme of adoration is developed. Sometimes they arrive at the same time, conflating the accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Additional figures, like

midwives, have apocryphal and legendary origins.

In the fifteenth-century French relief sculpture below, the artist has created a complex symbolic field while also achieving a touching domestic scene. Angels attend to the baby in his wicker basket in the upper register, while shepherds look on over a woven fence. The baby reaches up, as if to touch the nose of the ox behind him. Below, Mary kneels, gazing up at her child in adoration. Meanwhile, Joseph is warming the baby's clothes at the fire. The only sombre elements in this scene are the cradle between Mary and Joseph, which closely resembles a sarcophagus, and the visible part of Joseph's stool, shaped like a rough cross. Yet even a tomb can be hopeful. The angels perched on its edge will find their counterparts on the morning of the Resurrection. This is clearly a work made for devotion. It is difficult for a modern viewer to experience it in the same way as a late medieval French peasant, but the dominant tones of tenderness, worship and family love, coupled with the easy commerce between the inhabitants of heaven and ordinary human beings, say much about what a claim as apparently simple as 'we love Jesus' might look like in terms of practical devotion. An image like this

Nativity ca. 1450 Circle of Antoine Le Moiturier French, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Yorkhttps://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/463755 (public domain)

makes it possible to imagine a love of God which grows and matures, in step with the growing child.

Pointing towards what is to come is a frequent feature of Christian art. Some works, especially those influenced by the icon tradition, show the baby swaddled like a corpse, and in a coffin-like manger. The thirteenth-century Italian painter, Guido da Siena chooses this idiom (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guido_Da_Siena_-_Nativity_-_WGA10980.jpg). The cross beam of the stable, or a tree in the background, might resemble the cross. The live lambs brought by the shepherds remind us of the Lamb of God. Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) adds an apple tree, both symbol of the Fall and promise that in Christ the Fall is reversed. He is the second Adam. And the medieval world would see Mary as the second Eve (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrea_Mantegna_-_The_Adoration_of_the_Shepherds_-_WGA13945.jpg)

Christian art is not afraid to introduce contemporary reference. These works were frequently commissioned by donors as an act of piety. A condition of the brief would have been to include the donors kneeling in prayer, usually in the lower left and right areas of the scene. They might also have requested that their favourite saints be included, e.g. Catherine of Alexandria and Barbara. Figures in the tableau might be depicted in the costume of the artist's own era.

A particularly significant development in painting the Nativity is in the intensity of light radiating from the infant. Art historians note the popularity of the published visions of the fourteenth-century mystic, St Bridget of Sweden. In one of these visions, the Virgin kneels before the child, who glows with a brilliant light. There are clear echoes

of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-14; 8:12). This is tenderly captured by Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1557), in his depiction of Mary and Joseph gazing at the radiant infant on the ground between them (https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.431.html). The seventeenth-century Italian painter, Guido Reni, gives the scene a dramatic quality in his 'Adoration of the Shepherds', now in the collection of the National Gallery in London (https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/guido-reni-the-adoration-of-the-shepherds). Here, the shepherds join the scene, their intent faces bringing a quality of humanity and realism to piety and devotion. Behind them are some local women, a couple of pipers, and some less distinct figures in the open space beyond the stable. This is a painting that invites its viewers to become part of the adoration of Christ.

The Flemish painter, Peter Paul Rubens, a contemporary of Reni's, also treated the subject of adoration, this time through the experience of the magi. Originally painted for a convent in Louvain in Belgium in the early 1630s, it now hangs in the chapel of King's College in Cambridge.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoration_of_the_Magi_(Rubens,_Cambridge

Here, a transverse shaft of light draws attention to Mary and the child, who meets the gaze of the oldest of the kings as he offers gold. The smile of the old man adds a spontaneous quality to an otherwise formal setting. Joseph is an indistinct figure to their right. Mary is dressed in the costume of a Dutch woman of the time, while the exotic visitors wear rich fabrics in styles that suggest their arrival from different parts of the world.

The second king offers frankincense in a boat-shaped vessel that echoes the 'boat' used for incense in church services, and reinforces the idea that he has travelled a great distance. The third king alerts us to some ethnic diversity in merchant society, and his headdress suggests that he belongs to the Islamic world. Their shadowy escort of soldiers reminds us of what is to come.

The Crucifixion

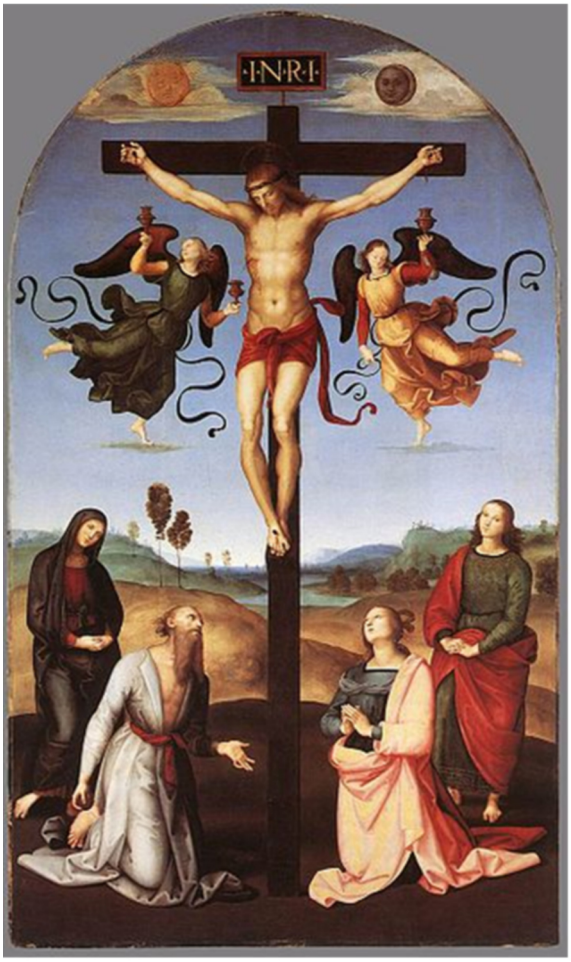
Artists have approached the Crucifixion in innumerable ways. This reflects theological interpretation (in Eastern and Western Christianity), patterns of spirituality and devotion, the demands of commissions, and the nature of humanity represented in the dying Christ and in the people assembled round the cross. It was not a theme that Christians depicted until the third or fourth century (Jensen, 2007, p. 54) and interpretations range from the early stylised and static forms, to the empathetic suffering humanity of Christ caught by some Renaissance painters; the physical distortion of the dying thieves of Antonella da Messina (1430-1479) (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Antonello_da_Messina_027.jpg); the mysticism of the Van Eyck altarpiece in

Ghent (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_van_Eyck_-_The_Ghent_Altarpiece_-_Adoration_of_the_Lamb_(detail)_-_WGA07654.jpg) or Dali's 'Christ of St John of the Cross' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross); the savagery of some post-war treatments, such as Graham Sutherland's crucifixion paintings (https://www.artuk.org/discover/artworks/crucifixion-70519#); and the abstraction of recent works, such as Geoffrey Clarke's sculpture on the chapel of the University of Chichester (https://www.artway.eu/userfiles/images/Chichester%20chapel.JPG).

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Accademia_-_Crucifixion_by_Tintoretto.jpg

The Venetian painter, Tintoretto (died 1594) presents a scene of frenetic activity. A man on a ladder has perhaps just finished nailing Jesus to the cross. The two thieves are writhing and one is trying to loosen his ropes. At the foot of the cross, women attend to Mary, who has fainted. The figure to their left, holding the end of a white cloth, might be the disciple John. In the lower right corner, men throw dice, though not explicitly for possession of Jesus' garments. Soldiers in sixteenth-century costume wheel their horses and foot soldiers carry flags. The artist has painted a battle scene, but not an earthly battle. As the spindly olive tree in the foreground reminds us, the eternal peace of a world reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Christ will be the final consequence of this chaos.

Raphael (1483-1520), imagines the crucifixion very differently.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raffaello_Sanzio_-_Crucifixion_(Citt%C3%A0_di_Castello_Altarpiece)_-_WGA18608.jpg

There is a serenity about this Jesus. He is the finally victorious Christ of John's Gospel, who has said, 'It is finished' (John 19:30). The work is part of an altarpiece, commissioned by a wool merchant and banker for a burial chapel dedicated to St Jerome. This explains the presence of Jerome kneeling to the left, balanced by Mary Magdalene kneeling on the right. Mary the mother of Jesus and John the beloved disciple stand behind them. The hands of the figures in

the scene express a variety of emotions. Mary Magdalene prays; Jerome appears to exhort; Mary's hands seem calmly folded; John interlaces his fingers, possibly as a sign of distress. Above them, two angels with chalices catch the blood spurting from Christ's wounds. This is the blood shed for the life of the world, and the vessels remind us that every eucharist recalls and gives thanks for that self-offering. Theological interpretations of the eucharist differ, but the artist's commitment to a highly realised and transformative presence in the elements of bread and wine, body and blood, is evident in this image. On either side of the inscription on the cross (INRI: *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* – 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews') are the sun and moon. The sun's eyes are shut, while the moon smiles peacefully. We wait for the morning of the Resurrection, when Christ will rise like the sun to reign forever.

Conclusions

The enormous range, wealth and diversity of Christian art makes any generalisations unwise. What our conversation with just four works of art has tried to do is to show how interactive these apparently static scenes are. They open up a world in which we are invited to enter into the devotional world of Christians of a much earlier era. In learning to 'read' them, we discover something of how their creators, purchasers and viewers drew on Scripture and other devotional sources. We sense, also, the powerful human engagement with the characters of the Nativity and Crucifixion stories. Finally, we must ask ourselves how and why these images puzzle us, touch us and move us, and how persistence in learning their symbolic language might enrich both personal devotion and a larger understanding of Christian identity.

Glossary

Christology: the doctrine of the person (nature) of Christ.

Links

https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/about-us/contact-us (National Gallery London: Use search terms: 'Adoration of the Kings'; 'Adoration of the Shepherds'; 'Crucifixion')

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pass/hd_pass.htm (Jean Sorabella (2008), Metropolitan Museum, NY – Essay on the Crucifixion and Passion in Italian Painting)

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/birt/hd_birt.htm (Jean Sorabella (2008), Metropolitan Museum NY – Essay on the Nativity in Italian Painting)

https://guides.lib.monash.edu/c.php?g=594405&p=4122046 (Guide to locating works of art in the public domain, Monash University)

Discussion points

1. Now that you have been introduced to these works of art, try to recall how you might have responded to them if you had not had any guiding notes.
2. What characteristics of each of the works would you define as distinctively Christian? (Your answer to this question might include both cultural and spiritual dimensions.)
3. How do you think the cultural and the spiritual interact with each other in the present time?

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Mind, Brain and the Unifying Soul

Mark Graves

The article presents an overview of the historical development of the concept of the soul in Western philosophy and theology, and in the context of current scientific perspective.

Specification links:
AQA Component 1: Philosophy of religion and ethics; Section A: Philosophy of religion; Self and life after death. Component 2: Study of religion and dialogues; Section A: Study of religion – 2B Christianity; Self, death and the afterlife.
EDEXCEL Paper 1: Philosophy of Religion; 6.1: Views about life after death across a range of religious traditions.
OCR Philosophy of religion: 1. Philosophical Language and Thought; soul, mind and body; the nature of the soul, mind and body.

The early history of the soul

When people talk about the soul, they often mean different things. Historically, it may refer to the spiritual element of a person, a principle of bodily life, a person's mind, the seat of emotions and feelings, a person's will or the whole being of a person.

In the Hebrew Bible, one of the words often translated as soul is nephesh, such as in Gen 2:7, when God breathed into the dust of the ground and created a living soul. Nephesh also means the neck or throat of a body, so one can understand soul as a living, breathing thing. Although Christians sometimes consider the soul as something separate from the body, the idea of separating the body and soul primarily came after the biblical texts. The biblical scholar, Joel Green, explains that one can better think of humans becoming a soul rather than receiving or having a soul. To understand what 'becoming a soul' might mean, it is first helpful to understand how Christians came to think of 'having' a soul.

As philosophers and theologians tried to

understand the soul, they were heavily influenced by two historical approaches. For the Greek philosopher Plato (429-347 BCE), what one views as reality is only a partial glimpse of a more fundamental, spiritual realm. When one examines a tree, for example, what one sees is like a shadow of the tree, for the real essence of the tree exists in a separate realm. For Plato's student Aristotle (384-322 BCE), both the physical tree and its essence exist in the same realm of reality (this one).

Debates about whether reality exists as one realm (monism) or two realms (dualism) have continued to the present time, although the theories of what exist in the realm(s) has shifted over time.

Plato and Aristotle understood that things in the world (including people) have an essence that make something what it is. These distinct things (like trees, animals and people) are different substances, and for Aristotle, a substance requires both the potential for existence (which he called primary matter) and an essence specifying how something is to exist (called substantial form). The essence could not be removed from a substance (like a person) for that substance would then no longer exist.

Dualistic views

Dualistic views developed and became more sophisticated over the following centuries. Plotinus (c. 205-270 CE) made a particularly influential contribution to what is now called Neoplatonism by apparently drawing upon monotheism to identify a transcendent 'One' beyond all categories of being. However, instead of a Creator God, as in Christianity and Judaism, Plotinus' One emanated a procession of constructs (like rays of the sun) that eventually, through a complex process, led to the procession of human souls.

As the important Christian bishop and theologian, Augustine (354-430), tried to understand and explain Christianity, he appreciatively drew on Neoplatonic developments to explain the soul (or inner self). This was originally created by God but corrupted in the Fall in the Garden of Eden, and was totally dependent upon grace to enable one to choose salvation and an eventual return to God. Augustine argued that since all truth comes from the Holy Spirit, then non-Christians might also have access to truth. However, the clarity gained in being able to explain souls also caused many later Christians to interpret the Bible through a dualistic lens.

A further Christian development of Neoplatonism occurred in the work of an unknown writer now called pseudo-Dionysius (c. 480-530), who described a heavenly hierarchical organization through which a soul progressed. For pseudo-Dionysius, the soul proceeds through the emanations (as Plotinus thought) but also in some way remains with God. Because of that remaining connection, the soul desires to return to and reunite with God. Pseudo-Dionysius characterized this process of return in three stages:

1. purification, where anything unlike God is removed;
2. illumination, where the soul is filled with Divine Light; and
3. perfection, where anything separating the person from God is removed.

His understanding that the soul attempts to reunite with God through these stages heavily influenced Christian spirituality, with subtle and significant differences between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox perspectives on perfection and sanctification.

Monistic views

The monistic understanding of the soul built on Aristotle. The Persian philosopher, Ibn-Sīnā? (980-1037 CE; Latin: Avicenna), elucidated Aristotle's thought as separate from later Platonic developments. Ibn-Sīnā's translations and commentaries on Aristotle were brought to Europe during the Crusades, and Thomas Aquinas (1224-74) used them to help reconcile biblical and Neoplatonic philosophical perspectives, especially those of Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius. Aquinas used Aristotle's understanding of substances in nature to characterize the soul as the 'form of the body'. In other words, the soul is the essence of the person. At death, the essence of the person would continue and redefine a different body in a different realm; but the soul is not a different, separate substance that could 'leave' the body, as the dualists believed.

Aquinas synthesized Christian and other ancient sources to characterize the human soul more precisely and described it in terms of three powers.

- The vegetative powers (shared with plants) that enable growth and reproduction.
- The sensate powers (shared with animals), including the external senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, and the internal senses that develop one's knowledge of objects from one's perceptions.
- The rational powers of humans, which consist of the intellect and will. The intellect processes one's multisensory awareness of an object to identify the 'universal' associated with the object, and the will guides the intellect.

In the medieval worldview of Thomas Aquinas, substances, including people, other animals and plants, are defined by their unchanging essences. Although the substance may grow and change over time, the medieval essence captures the fixed, unchanging aspect that makes something what it is. In a modern scientific worldview, however, not only do individual plants and animals change over time, but their essence as a particular species also evolves. Furthermore, even the evolutionary platform of plants and animals encapsulated in their DNA changes, and ultimately depends upon the development of elements such as nitrogen and oxygen in stellar fusion. While modern science has developed theories about what distinguishes various plants and animals using empirical evidence, medieval thinkers used rational thought to try to understand those essences. Because they did not know that everything in the universe changes over the course of billions of years, they presumed that the essence or substantial form never changed.

One challenge to understanding the soul is that the ancient and medieval assumption of unchanging essences is inconsistent with what we now know about the natural world. Although one can usually ignore the stellar development and eventual decay of elements while studying biological evolution, and we typically ignore human evolution when studying church history, such simplifications of the natural and social sciences necessarily limit the full and complete understanding of a person that medieval scholars had hoped to obtain.

Scientists currently develop concepts, models and theories to describe the essence of plants and animals from a variety of perspectives. So, one could meaningfully describe the vegetative and sensate powers of the human soul from a modern perspective. However, a major purpose of the rational soul (and the

intellect) is to ascertain the universal essence within the phenomena one senses. If there are no universals, then it becomes unclear what the rational powers of the soul do. Is there a modern correlate to what medieval scholars meant by the human ability to 'know' something? Specifically, is there a way one ascertains the essence of things one senses? A related theological question arises when one considers the metaphorical sense in which God 'knows' a person as a human being. Does God know the essence of a person as a universal (as in the medieval knowing of a substantial form), or is God's knowing more like how a contemporary person understands the essence of a person or thing in the midst of a continuously changing universe? The historical development of mind-body dualism further complicates matters.

The modern history of mind and brain

As part of the shift to a modern worldview, René Descartes (1596-1650) challenged the medieval monistic account of the soul and argued that the person consists of two substances. So, he created a new type of dualism. On this view, the material substance (*res extensa*) incorporated the physical and biological aspects of the body, while the mental substance (*res cogitans*) consisted of what Aquinas had considered a person's rational powers. Descartes further argued that the rational powers of the soul exist as the human mind.

As a contemporary of Galileo (1564-1642), Descartes' separation of the person into distinct substances for mind and body attempted to avoid theological controversy by reserving human rationality for the church and freeing scientists to study the material body. In addition, however, because those substances must interact for humans to perceive and act rationally, and because a person only has one soul, Descartes proposed that the substances interact through the pineal gland in the brain.

Descartes chose the pineal gland because he thought it was the only singular part of the brain as the remaining parts he knew were double, due to the brain's bilaterally symmetric anatomy. Others fairly quickly dismissed his speculations about the pineal gland as the 'principal seat of the soul', as the pineal gland was not as centrally located in the brain as Descartes thought nor as independent a structure. Nevertheless, his ideas on a mental substance were embraced, leaving open the question of how substances in the two realms might interact. Explaining the interaction is an issue because one typically experiences one's being as acting in a unitary way while the body has multiple, complex parts.

By the nineteenth century, scientists studying the brain thought it consisted of a net-like arrangement of nerve fibres called the *reticulum*. This network of fibres carried a hypothesized fluid to move signals between the brain, muscles and other parts of the body. Although scientists did not understand how the soul interacted with the reticulum, the reticulum was perceived as a singular, though complex, structure with which a single soul might interact.

In the 1880s, Camillo Golgi, having discovered a process for making the microscopic structure of the brain tissue visible, discovered cells with small threads (called dendrites) within what had appeared as a connected tangle of nerve fibres. Santiago Ramon y Cajal shared the 1906 Nobel Prize with Golgi for concluding that the nerves were individual cells (called neurons) which connect with each other but are not fused together (there is always a gap between them, called a synapse). These findings

generated controversy as scientists and others questioned how unitary human experience could arise from individual cells and how a singular soul could interact with a complex collection of individual cells.

Neuroscientists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries discovered many ways in which mental processing and many other functions originally ascribed to the soul depend heavily upon the entire brain. Some aspects of mental processing, such as vision or motor control, appear to be localized to specific regions of the brain. Conversely, other neuroscientific research emphasised the global, distributed nature of mental processing, which requires numerous brain regions to function interactively, such as for rational decision-making. How does one characterise the sum total of that mental processing (the mind) and how does it relate to the body and soul?

The unifying soul

Although Descartes had assumed that the pineal gland was more centrally located within the brain than it was, scientists did discover an unpaired anatomical feature of the brain, called the *corpus callosum*. The human brain has two symmetric hemispheres, and the corpus callosum connects the left and right hemisphere to each other. In the 1950s and 1960s, the neuroscientist Roger Sperry studied the separate functions of the two hemispheres in humans and animals when the corpus callosum was surgically severed (often as a treatment for severe epilepsy in humans). Sperry won the 1981 Nobel Prize for discovering how specific aspects of mental processing, such as language, are specialized to each hemisphere.

In one experiment, Sperry used a device to show an object to the left visual field of participants whose corpus callosum had been severed and a different object to the person's right side. When the participants closed their eyes and Sperry asked them to use their left hand to draw what they saw, they drew the object seen with their left visual field. When Sperry asked them to describe verbally what they saw, however, they would describe the object seen to their right. Because the right hemisphere of the brain processes both the left visual field and the movements and sensations of the left hand, and the left hemisphere processes the right side of a person's environment, Sperry concluded that language processing used to describe objects occurs in the left hemisphere. Later, Sperry's student Michael Gazzaniga discovered a young split-brain person with a surgically severed corpus collosum who developed sufficient language capacities in the right hemisphere to spell out responses using Scrabble letters with his left hand. When they asked the child's left hemisphere what he wanted to be when he grew up, he consistently responded he wanted to be a draftsman. However, when they used an experimental setup to pose a question only to the right hemisphere and asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he responded 'a racing car driver'.

Experiments such as these led Sperry, Gazzaniga and others to conclude that each hemisphere has separate perceptions, feelings and other mental processing, essentially constituting two separate minds. Although it is very controversial to speak of two minds in one person, the experiments do demonstrate that the unifying sensation of one's individual existence appears to depend upon the structure of the brain, including the presence of the corpus collosum and other connective structures, and is not necessarily imposed by the

human soul. Nevertheless, one would still want to refer to someone without a functioning corpus callosum as a whole person, and the term 'soul' can capture the essence of a person beyond their mental processing.

Drawing on the monistic understanding of the soul as the form of the body, one may revisit the biblical perspective of a person becoming a soul and reinterpret the soul as unifying the aspects of what a person becomes. Instead of a dualistic soul existing separately from the person as a kind of universal idea that proceeded from God, the monistic soul unifies the physical, biological, mental and social dimensions of a person unto a unified whole. Although some physical and biological properties are generally beyond a person's power to change them, one can still define certain essential aspects of oneself through one's decisions and responses to the world, including one's moral behaviour and spiritual commitments.

The unification of these essential aspects of a person's existence may form the essence of the person, which God can now and in the future continue to know as one's soul.

Glossary

substance: that of which a thing consists.

universal: what particular similar things have in common.

Links

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Hendrik Lorenz on 'Ancient theories of soul')

https://www.iep.utm.edu/universa/ (The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Mary MacLeod on 'Universals')

Discussion points

1. Although modern cosmology and evolution have undermined most medieval assumptions of universals, something like universals still occur with numbers, geometric shapes and mathematical formulas. Do numbers really exist, are they just a convenient linguistic construct or does the human mind create them as the person experiences the world? Each position has strengths and weaknesses. Consider, for example, did humans create the number 'two', or did it exist before humans?

2. As a modern worldview does not seem to support the emanation of a soul (or essence) from a pre-existing realm, how would one define the essence of another person or thing? If the universe is continually changing, does that preclude something having an essence or does it just make it harder to define?

3a. If we update a medieval understanding of soul as the essence of a person, what would the rational powers of the human soul ascertain about another person? When one 'knows' another person, what is it one knows? How does one get to a place where one believes one knows another person? Are there deeper aspects of another person, or oneself, that no one seems to know?

3b. How might a revised understanding of human 'knowing' change a religious metaphorical understanding of how God knows a person? Is there an essence of a person that a Divine Mind might know? What might that look like over a person's entire life?

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Implicit Religion: A New Approach to the Study of Religion?

Francis Stewart

The article argues that one change brought to the study of religion by the development and ultimate failure of the secularisation thesis was a new approach that sought to answer the question, 'What is secular religion?' This approach was Implicit Religion, whose origin, nature and significance are discussed here.

Specification link:
OCR (H573/03) 2c. Developments in Christian thought, 6. Challenges: The Challenge of Secularism.

Introduction: Background context

The rise of secularism began in the 1960s in Europe, the UK and a little later the USA. Each region had, and has, its own distinct form and trajectory driven by cultural factors and global events. Overall, secularism was based on the premise that religion, in its organised, institutional, traditional format, had become so irrelevant to how we organise and run society that it was retreating from the public sphere and would soon either die out entirely, or become a private thing that was unable to influence wider society. This view was strongly pushed by scholars such as Peter Berger (1929-2017) in his 1967 book, *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*; Thomas Luckmann (1927-2016) in his 1966 book, *The social construction of reality* and Bryan Wilson (1926-2004) in his 1966 book, *Religion in secular society*.

This was a generation of scholars born in the interregnum years of two world wars They were the inheritors of a trend of thinking about religion in decline following Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God (1882) and were greatly influenced by the thinking of Weber, Durkheim and Marx – each of whom considers religion in a pattern of growth and decline. They are also a group of scholars coming into strong careers at a time of massive social change. The 1960s saw the emergence of the teenager as a sociological category and an economic market; and it saw a marked increase in the push for basic human rights for women, for African Americans (USA) and for Roman Catholics (Northern Ireland). Sexual emancipation seemed in sight for women with the new availability of the birth control pill. But this was also the time of

the Vietnam War, the Six-Day war in Israel and Palestine, and the beginnings of the Cold War. Ideas about society never emerge in isolation but in tandem with previous thinking and social events, and the secularisation thesis has to be understood in this broader context.

The secularisation thesis was a popular one, and remains so in some areas of study; but by the end of the 1960s it was already being critiqued as significantly flawed. Often these systemic critiques sought to point out the ideological roots of the thesis. It is grounded in an understanding of religion of the Enlightenment era (17th–19th centuries) as bound to powerful institutions that were often working to support regimes that oppressed ordinary people and citizens. Those who critiqued the secularisation thesis on these grounds, such as David Martin in *The religious and the secular* (1969) and Andrew Greeley in *Unsecular Man: The Persistence of religion* (1972), pointed to the changing role of religious institutions and the changing shape of society more broadly. Increasingly, the exceptionalism of the USA, where religion remains very potent and powerful in areas such as education, politics, legislation and healthcare, has become a repeated argument against the secularisation theory.

Ultimately, the secularisation theory has not gone away; it remains an important part of religious studies and especially the sociology of religion. Some of those who supported and promoted it most vehemently have since changed their perspectives (as all good scholars should, when presented with compelling evidence). Most notable of these is Peter Berger, who later came to argue that the world has not been secularised. Instead, he argued, it had remained religious, and in some areas has grown in its religiosity or religious fervour despite the secularising influence of modernisation, which has ultimately led to counter-secularising efforts. Consequently, he concludes, 'secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness' (Berger, 1999, p. 3).

While this was occurring in the 1960s, and significantly influenced by it, a PhD student – Edward Bailey – asked, if we are becoming more secular then what is 'secular religion'? This became his PhD thesis, and a lifelong study and devotion to a new approach in the sociology of religion which ultimately came to be called 'Implicit Religion'. Today Implicit Religion has two annual conferences, an academic journal, a research centre at Bishop Grosseteste University and a lecturer post at Cambridge University.

Implicit Religion: What is it?

Bailey was interested in how people develop true/authentic selves and meaningful lives and how they undertake decision making when their focus or commitment lie in areas of what is called the secular rather than the religious. (These designations are often arbitrary and problematic, as we shall consider in the next section.)

It is important to be clear as to what Implicit Religion is not, as well as what it is; often if you cannot articulate the first, it is difficult to fully understand the second. Implicit Religion does not attempt to assert that something is 'merely appearing' to be religious but is really 'secular', nor does it insist that something could be termed 'religious' by scholars regardless of what the participants themselves think. Instead, it focuses on the ways in which people are expressing markers of faith, of belief or of ritual, either towards or within parts of their everyday lives. To give some examples, and as a means of demonstrating how it differs from spirituality, people's behaviour while partaking in a sporting

event (Cipriani, 2012) or listening to a live jazz performance (Donovan, 2014) may be perceived as their Implicit Religion; as may the ways in which Christmas is both remembered and demarcated politically within communities (Deacy, 2018; Warburg, 2017) or the pilgrimages that devoted Elvis fans make to Graceland (King and Stewart, 2016; Porter, 2009).

In order to draw out and examine these areas best, Bailey developed three analytical tools that focus on human behaviours rather than dogma, creed or truth claims.

- Commitment(s) – that to which the person, group or community is committed, to the level of being willing to make sacrifices in some respect for it.
- Integrating Foci – the aspects, rituals or material artefacts of the wider aspects of the commitment that enables the individual to bring the various aspects of their lives and/or identities into a coherent, meaningful whole.
- Intensive Concerns with Extensive Effects – the issues or causes that arise from the commitment that the individual or community is willing repeatedly to act upon, even at great cost to themselves.

Using these tools typically results in one of two approaches to the community or individuals being examined. The first is that comparative markers for the study of religion can be better understood and elucidated. For example, King and Stewart examined Elvis fandom and punk rock fandom and found that:

> Elvis and 'his religion' could be viewed as what is often represented as a traditional 'Catholic' tradition with pilgrimages, flowers, candles, prayers and miracles (including resurrection). Ethics and charity work are undertaken as emulation or invocation of Elvis rather than a morally driven action or compulsion. Concurrently, punk music (in its various forms) could be viewed as what is traditionally represented as 'Protestant' with its stringent self-reliance, rejection of hierarchy and questioning of authority, its crucial importance on questioning, action and a black and white view of the world. Ethics form a key part of punk and are driven by strong morality and a desire to wrest change. (2016, p. 94)

The second approach uses tools of Implicit Religion to peel back layers of meaning and purpose within the community being studied without seeking to directly compare it to more traditional studies of religion, but rather, sometimes, to reveal how a direct comparison can be misleading or disingenuous. For example, Stewart (2016) applied the framework of Implicit Religion to her ethnographic study of animal rights activists within anarcho-punk communities to reveal the importance of an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) approach to freedom, rather than a quasi-religious view of animals as had been argued by others (Jacobson, 2014; Lowe 2001; Jamison, Wenk and Parker, 2000). Drawing on an empirical approach, Francis (2013) used the tools to explore the connection between suicidal ideation and a religious approach. Through a questionnaire answered by over 25,000 13- to 15-year-olds in the UK, he discovered that holding an implicit religion such as a belief, but not attending a place of worship, does not result in lower levels of suicidal ideation compared to other peers, which contrasted strongly with the previously-held hypothesis.

What Implicit Religion is pointing to is that culture, religion, society and its attendant expressions (popular culture) are not static or fixed, they do not simply

exist because they exist. Rather they are all construction and therefore rather continually evolve, adapt and renegotiate themselves. Consequently, how we understand those varying elements of organisation, structure and expression must equally continue to develop and Implicit Religion is one such important step in the methodology of doing just that.

Implicit Religion: Why does it matter?

> The decade of the 1960s saw itself as a hinge between two worlds, which we have subsequently learned to call 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. Naturally, there is room for journalistic and scholarly debate regarding their characteristics, causes and core (and exact title) but few dispute that a change of culture, of greater significance than the changes in the decades immediately before and after, took place in the Western world then . . . One of the signs that an age was ending was the fascination, on the part of religious people, with secularization. . . . How to understand the new situation is not immediately obvious. That we need to understand it, both for practical purposes and in order to understand ourselves, is clear. That, with the odd exceptions ('swan songs'), the secularization thesis arouses little overt controversy at present suggests that this is a good moment to articulate a new model which may find widespread agreement. (Bailey, 2001, pp. 1-3)

A key part of understanding the 'new situation' is a recognition that the terms and concepts 'religion' and 'secular' are not ahistorical or neutral. Rather, they were developed through centuries of empire building, colonial rule and imperial control. They are, or have become, key features of attempts to dominate, diminish and destroy through prejudice, poverty and slavery, whole cultures and countries of people. In addition, the concepts of 'religion' and 'secular' are further problematised because of the assumptions of individuals, groups, scholars and traditions that what they mean when they use the terms 'religion' and 'secular' is the same thing that others mean, that these terms are somehow universal, when they are not (Fitzgerald, 2007). This matters because those assumptions are often weaponised for political reasons to assert that those who follow religious traditions are inferior in reason and thus more prone to violence, while allowing violence committed in the name of the state to go relatively unchecked as it is assumed to be secular and therefore borne of reason alone (Cavanaugh, 2009).

The articulation of a new model is precisely what Bailey set out to create, and what he termed Implicit Religion. The search for meaning in life was not, at the hinge of modernism and postmodernism, limited in scope to traditional religious institutions and practices. People were seeking and eventually created new ways of finding meaning for themselves, of understanding the world, of making commitments and allowing them to influence their attitudes and behaviours.

This is why Implicit Religion matters, because it takes seriously the meaning making, identity creation and modes of being that people are developing for themselves that might otherwise go unnoticed. Taking them seriously enables us as scholars of religion to address our inherent biases, to take seriously the myriad of experiences that people have as they move through life and engage in human behaviours, and, finally, to ask questions such as, whether religious ethics are really just human values? What lies at the core of secularism? What role does secularism have in shaping our culture?

Links

www.implicitreligion.co.uk (The Edward Bailey Centre)

https://journals.equinoxpub.com/IR (The journal, *Implicit Religion*)

https://classicalideaspodcast.libsyn.com/ep-57-dr-francis-stewart-on-the-religious-surrogacy-of-straight-edge-punk (Podcast: Francis Stewart on Straight Edge Punk as a surrogate of religion)

Discussion points

1. What is Implicit Religion and why did it develop?
2. What can Implicit Religion offer scholars of religion that is new and different? Why does that matter?
3. If you study something through the lens of Implicit Religion, what would you focus on and why?
4. What is secularism? What lies at its core?
5. What role does secularism play in shaping our culture?
6. Are religious ethics really just human values?

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The Ineffable Mystery of God?

Jeff Astley

The article explores the concepts of God's ineffability, transcendence and mystery, with particular reference to religious experience and religious language.

Specification links:
AQA 3.1 Component 1: Philosophy of religion and ethics; 3.1.1 Section A: Philosophy of religion; Religious language: the Via Negativa. 3.2 Component 2: Study of religion and dialogues; 3.2.2 2B Christianity; Section A: Christianity; God, Christian Monotheism: transcendent and unknowable.
EDEXCEL Paper 1: Philosophy of Religion; Topic 2 The nature and influence of religious experience; 2.1, a) ineffability. Topic 4 Religious language; 4.1 Analogy and Symbol a) Analogy: via negativa.
OCR Philosophy of religion (H573/01): 5.Religious Language: Negative, Analogical or Symbolic; the apophatic way – the via negativa.
WJEC/CBAC Unit 2: Section B - An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion; Theme 4: Religious Experience (part 1) Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief; B. Mystical experience.

Transcendence

In monotheism, the 'Supreme Being' or 'Creator Spirit' designated by the title 'God' possesses a nature, character and activities that are radically different from those of human beings, let alone more lowly 'creatures' (in the original sense of 'something created'). This difference or 'otherness' of God is often labelled God's *transcendence*, as God transcends ('goes beyond' or 'surpasses') both:

- the limits of human experience, language and knowledge, and
- the limitations of the created (and especially the material, spatio-temporal) universe.

God's distinctiveness is displayed in God's unlimited (= 'infinite') nature, particularly as the uncreated 'Unmoved Mover', whose existence (unlike that of every creature) is not dependent on any other.[1] In Christianity, this *metaphysical or ontological sense of transcendence*

[1] This is God's *aseity*. God's being exists *a se*, from and of itself alone, and is not derived from outside God.

was well captured by Søren Kierkegaard in terms of 'the infinite qualitative distinction' (or 'difference') between God and ourselves, and was expressed by Karl Barth's dictum that 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth'. God's unlimited *moral transcendence* is portrayed in God's perfect goodness, love and justice.

If God is so different from us in nature and activity, it is only to be expected that God will show *epistemological transcendence* also: that is, that God will transcend human knowledge and experience, and may therefore be said to be 'incomprehensible'. God's transcendence will also be reflected in the language used to represent God, and particularly in the doctrine of God's ineffability.

Religious experience and religious language

As a consequence of God's transcendence, the nature of religious experience itself, as well as its supposed object, transcends human language: straining the descriptive resources of anyone who attempts to give an account of them. Even subjective religious emotions, for example the soul's 'longing' and 'yearning' for God, 'far outpass the power of human telling' (as the medieval hymn, 'Come Down, O Love Divine', puts it). Both religious experience and religious feeling 'go beyond' description.

It is especially in mystical and numinous experience, however, that both religious experience and its object are routinely described as too great, too extreme, too 'awe-ful' or too sacred to be adequately expressed in words. They are therefore both commonly represented as 'inexpressible', 'unsayable', incommunicable', 'indescribable', 'unutterable' or 'ineffable' (from the Latin *effari*, 'to utter'; the English adjective 'effable' – 'describable in words' – is rarely used nowadays).

Rudolf Otto writes of the *numinous experience* as something that 'may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of – whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures'. Otto characterises the 'Wholly Other' object of such an experience, the *numen*, using the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum*, so as to express the daunting, overpowering majesty, awe-fulness and energy of that which is 'beyond our apprehension and comprehension' (Otto, 1925, pp. 12, 13, 25, 28).

William James records ineffability as one of the distinctive marks of what he broadly terms the *mystical experience*. As 'no adequate report of its contents can be given in words', James writes, mysticism 'defies expression'. At one point, he describes this position as being similar to that faced in communicating with those who lack 'the heart or ear' for music, or for being in love, when one tries to get them to comprehend those experiences (James, 1960, lectures XVI-XVII, p. 367).

Ineffability may refer to the experience itself or to its object, and is frequently applied to both. Even if the religious experiencer does encounter God/the divine/Ultimate Reality, many argue that what she or he comes to know in this way must be strictly incommunicable, as its content surpasses human thought. In particular, whatever a mystic puts into words is 'at best a translation, a paraphrase, of what he has seen'. As mystics move into what is called the cloud of unknowing, language fails them: 'the last trace of thought or of humanly exercised love ceases and the ineffable

enters in' (Knowles, 1979, pp. 73, 99). Thus, the sixteenth-century mystic, John of the Cross, writes of the mystical experience:

> It is like one who sees something never seen before, whereof he has not even seen the like; although he might understand its nature and have experience of it, he would be unable to give it a name, or say what it is, however much he tried to do so, and this in spite of its being a thing which he had perceived with the senses. How much less, then, could he describe a thing that has not entered through the senses! (John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, bk. II, ch. XVII, §3; *ET* 2003, p. 88)

The sixth-century Denys (or 'Pseudo-Dionysius') was an influence on many later mystics. He denied that God could be perceived by the physical senses but only by 'supercosmic eyes', and insisted that all affirmations fall short of describing God in words or symbols. ('Everything may be ascribed to Him [God] at one and the same time, and yet he is none of these things.') For Denys, the ultimate reality 'transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of His simple and absolute nature – free from all limitation and beyond them all' (*Mystical theology*, ch. V, *ET* 1920, p. 201). 'God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of His incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility' (*Celestial hierarchy*, 141A, *ET* 1987, p. 150).

Denys's *theology of negation* (his *apophatic theology*)[2] describes the soul ascending and passing beyond knowledge and perception into God's darkness and being reduced to 'complete speechlessness' as, in utter submission and ecstasy, it unites with 'God who is completely unknowable'. Then the soul 'knows by not knowing in a manner that transcends understanding' (*Mystical theology*, 1.3, *ET* 1981, p. 173).

Apophasis asserts that God is 'a most incomprehensible absolute mystery' about which we can only say what it is not. God is not, in fact, any of the things he is called. Denys distinguished this from *affirmative or cataphatic theology*, which uses positive names for God, such as 'Life' and 'Being'. But the 'true initiate', he claims, renounces 'all the apprehensions of his understanding', rejecting all knowledge about God, who is 'wholly Unknowable'. 'It is not soul, or mind, . . . nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It' (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical theology*, chs 1, 5; *ET* 1940, pp. 194, 200-201).

Walter Stace and, more recently, Robert Forman have suggested that ineffability applies to an experience while it is being experienced. On Forman's 'forgetting model', as the mystic is engaged in meditative procedures that decrease her or his cognitive activity, 'language, all language, is forgotten' during that mystical experience. Thus, 'any language used to describe or report on that experience is not language which was employed in the primary event' (Forman, 1990, p. 41).

Qualifying ineffability?

Much of the defence of ineffability seems to assume what has been called *definitional ineffability*, 'which holds that since the "object" [or content] of religion (and presumably of religious experience) is infinite . . . and since what is infinite is not definable, nothing can be said about this "object"' (Yandell, 1975, p. 167). If this is what ineffable means, however,

[2] The Greek word, *apophasis*, literally means 'saying no' or 'saying negatively', but it 'can also convey the meaning of "revelation"' (Coakley, 2009, p. 281, n. 3).

there is a logical problem with the application of the term, whether to a religious experience or to its object: as it would seem to create a contradiction in terms. As Augustine put it, 'if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which is called ineffable' (On *Christian doctrine*, bk. I, ch. 6; *ET* 1958, pp. 10-11). Even the 'infinite unsaying' (denying) of claims about God, which is achieved by stripping all human or finite images from language about God, is not wholly non-descriptive. For to say what God is not does seem to say something literal about God.[3]

Hence, neither God/the Absolute/ Brahman, nor any experience of this reality, is normally said to be *totally* indescribable. Total mystery would be beyond all words, and therefore all theology. It would result in a total form of agnosticism, of not knowing anything about the nature of religious experience or of its object. Instead, we may wish to retain the word 'ineffable' but to think in terms of degrees of 'effability' (as we speak of degrees of closeness, or aptness, of different analogies to something) – with 'totally ineffable' lying at (or beyond?) one end or limit of a scale, marking what would be beyond all description.

Some philosophers have identified, by contrast, a second-order status for the language of ineffability, as merely telling us how to use and interpret the language of the mystics and other religious experiencers (cf. Gellman, 2005, p. 143). For example:

- Wayne Proudfoot (1985, p. 127) argues that ineffability language is used as a *grammatical rule*, a 'criterion for the identification of an experience as mystical'. In this role it tells us only that the experience can never be captured ('wholly captured', perhaps?) in words, and so *creates a sense of mystery* in the hearer or reader.

- Richard Gale submits that the term is merely an *honorific title* marking 'the inestimable significance and value' which the experience has for the mystic, for which language is 'a very poor substitute' (Gale, 1960, p. 474).

- Ninian Smart reminds us that the language of ineffability/ indescribability is not unique to religious experience and should not be taken in any absolute way. Rather, it has the function of a '*special sort of intensifier*' that expresses the inadequacy of our descriptive language, as well as marking a superlative description – as with the more everyday phrase, 'I simply cannot say how grateful I am' (Smart, in Katz, 1978, pp. 17–20).

- Others have also argued that the term marks out the language used to report on the object of a religious experience as being *non-cognitive*: in the sense of not fact-asserting or fact-denying, not descriptive. 'To say of an experience that it is ineffable is not a statement of the impossibility of expressing it, but a way of expressing it, to wit, a way of saying that it is non-linguistic' (Short, 1995, p. 667).

While most religious language users recognise that there is an ultimate mystery in the nature of God/Ultimate Reality, something that could be fully captured by no human descriptions, they

[3] 'Negative statements are clearly literal. There is no trace of metaphor in saying "God is immaterial, atemporal . . . "' (Alston, 2005, p. 238).

do this without giving up the task of theology altogether by appealing to God's total ineffability – preferring what has been called a 'limited and provisional ineffability' (Kwan, 2011, p. 55). Therefore, most theologians and reflective religious writers steer rather clear of the 'negative way', preferring to tread a more 'affirmative' or 'positive' path, by rejecting total silence or complete negation in favour of:

(a) *either* using human words such as 'wise' or 'exists' literally but analogically of God;
(b) *or* using them figuratively, especially metaphorically, 'speaking about one thing in terms that are seen to be suggestive of another' (Soskice, 1985, p. 15): in which case God is declared to be – 'but not literally' – a father, mother, king, shepherd or friend; even a lion, a fortress or a rock.

God's mystery

Nevertheless, it may be argued that the more strongly we are convinced of the 'mysterious, infinite, and transcendent character of God', the more likely we are to treat any words about this God as being 'so inadequate to be worthless – or even blasphemous' (Wiles, 1976, p. 58). As another theologian has put it, 'because God is ultimate, . . . he falls outside the categories which are used to classify things and events in the world . . . When we use words to talk about God, we are not describing but pointing; not grasping but intimating' (Norris, 1979, pp. 51–52). As we have seen, mystery is in part a recognition of God's transcendence; and God as 'other' is often metaphorically portrayed, in spatial metaphors, as 'outside', 'above' or 'beyond' all creation – as 'far off' or 'most high' (see Psalms 97:9; 113:4-6). That language almost seems to be a form of linguistic pointing.

Augustine himself famously claimed that even the one who has most to say about God is, in effect, dumb; and that doctrines and creeds can do no more than 'fence a mystery'. Is silence, then, the correct response to God's mystery? Well, none of the theologians cited in this section thought so, even though they agreed that human language is bound to seem inadequate coinage for descriptions and interpretations of the divine/Ultimate Reality. Immanuel Kant once rebuked those who sought entirely to give up on the world of the senses on the grounds that the senses limit our understanding, by comparing them with a dove that imagines its flight would be easier in empty space. For humans, we might say, there is no alternative to using the language of the senses as a medium for expressing what is beyond them.

One may argue, further, that if all those who claim to have had any experience of God, or of any other transcendent reality, were to adopt the policy of silence, other people would not benefit from their experience. For that to happen, there must be communication, and that requires the medium of language. Many of those who have known the most extreme forms of religious experience have felt that they had to say *something*, rather than choosing inarticulate silence as their sole response.

Mystery is not just a matter of theology and descriptive language, however, or even of religious experience. It is also a deeply-felt aspect of much religious devotion. Within Judaism and (especially) Islam, belief in the supreme otherness of God has led to a resistance to pictorial representations of the divine. And Christianity has also sometimes had rather a rocky relationship with imagery. Eastern Orthodox iconography, for example, suffered two periods of 'iconoclasm' ('the smashing of images'); and much of the statuary, murals and

stained glass in the church buildings of Western Christianity suffered at the hands of radical Protestants like the Puritans. This opposition to (what was interpreted as) idolatry was clearly a practical expression of a fundamental commitment to God's mystery, which was most sharply vented with regard to worship and piety.

William Wainwright is right, therefore, to distinguish between two different senses of mystery (Wainwright, 2009, pp. 94-95).

- Epistemological mysteries concerning God are 'a function of the relation between God's nature or being . . . and the limitations of created intellects'. We do not have the adequate concepts. Discussion concerning these mysteries is 'at home' in philosophical theology, Wainwright argues.
- Ontological mysteries, however, are 'an intrinsic aspect of God's own being' and 'no concepts can fully express them'. These mysteries are most at home in worship and adoration: that is to say, within the practice of religion. And they are best – although imperfectly – expressed 'by symbols, poetry, and, perhaps ultimately, by the silence of mystical prayer'.

Glossary

affirmative, positive way: this is 'cataphatic' theology's way of talking about God using qualities derived from God's creation (especially humans) as pointers to God's perfection.

analogy: likeness or similarity-with-difference; in Aquinas and Thomism, a way of talking about God using language literally but with a stretched meaning, for God is really 'wise' or 'good' but in a way that is appropriate to God's transcendent nature.

apophaticism and apophatic theology: (especially characteristic of Eastern Christianity) a way of approaching God and of talking about God in which one strips away sensory imagery and words, and human passions, sin and ignorance, in order to encounter the Transcendent in divine darkness beyond concepts, illuminated by divine love.

ineffable: used of something that is inexpressible, a mystery that is too extreme, great or holy to be put into words.

negative way or *way of negation* (*via negativa* or *via negationis*): although sometimes used as widely as *apophaticism*, these terms usually label only a way of talking of God/the Ultimate that stresses the limitations of human language by saying what God is not: e.g. immortal (not mortal), infinite (not finite), eternal (not in time).

transcendence: difference, otherness.

Links

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/, § 2.4, 3.1 (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Jerome Gellman on 'Mysticism')

http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk/resources/challengingreligiousissues/Issue%203_ChallengingReligiousIssues.pdf (*CRI*, Jeff Astley on 'Describing God')

http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk/resources/challengingreligiousissues/Issue%2012%20Challenging%20Religious%20Issues%20English.pdf (*CRI*, Jeff Astley on 'Rudolf Otto on religious experience')

Discussion points

1. 'If that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which is called ineffable' (Augustine). Discuss.
2. Thomas Aquinas gave up writing his massive treatise, the *Summa Theologiae*, after having received a profound religious experience during Mass. 'All I have written', he confessed, now 'seems like straw'. Does this mean that none of his theological writings can tell us anything about God?
3. In what ways may God be said to be 'transcendent' and 'a mystery', and why?
4. Is the divine 'wholly other', as Otto held?

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Made in the Image of God: Experiences of a Woman with Disability in Nigeria

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This article discusses the Christian affirmation that humanity (with or without disabilities) is made in the image of God. For persons with disabilities (PWDs), this assertion is assuring and could provide a basis for society's collective journey towards equality, dignity and justice for all persons.

Specification links:
AQA A level Component 2: Study of Religion and Dialogues; 3:2.2, 2B Christianity: Good Conduct and Key Moral Principles; Sanctify of Life, and the Concept of the Sanctify of life. Christianity and the Challenge of Secularisation; Emphasis on social relevance of Christianity including liberationist approaches as supporting the poor and defending the oppressed.
EDEXCEL Paper 2: Religion and Ethics. 1. Significant Concepts in issues or debates in religion and ethics. 1.2 Equality (a) Ethical and religious concepts of equality, including the issues of gender or race or disability and the work of one significant figure in campaigns for equality in the chosen area …. With reference to the ideas of Joni Eareckson Tada.
OCR H573/01: 2c Content of Philosophy of Religion. 3. God and the World: Religious Experience, the nature and influence of religious experience.
WJEC GCE AS/A LEVEL in Religious Studies; A Level Unit 3: A Study of Religion - Option A: A Study of Christianity; Knowledge and Understanding of Religious Beliefs; c. The relationship between religion and society: religion, equality, and discrimination.

Introduction

> Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . .' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26a-27, NRSV)

The Christian affirmation that humankind is created in the image of God is not merely a doctrinal reference, but an assertion aimed at promoting equality, justice and dignity for all persons. For persons with disabilities (PWDs), it assures that all life, with or without disability, is valuable because all are made in the image of God. This position provides a credible response to the various forms of discrimination that PWDs face within social and religious spaces.

In many contexts, discrimination is often targeted at what is assumed to be 'different' and the inability of the society adequately to respond to what it considers to be 'different' (Fritzson, 2012). Among many African communities, discrimination is often informed by religious and cultural stereotypes; and disability is commonly considered to be the consequence of some wrongdoing against the gods or ancestors, so such PWDs are often considered as unclean. Consequently, PWDs are usually excluded, whether this exclusion manifests in the form of being removed from sight (institutionised/house bound) or denied active participation in the life of the community. When PWDs try to rise above this discrimination, they may be celebrated for accomplishing so much despite their disabilities, as though they were never considered capable of achieving much in the first instance.

Drawing on the work of Joni Eareckson Tada, an American disability activist, this article focuses on the perspectives and lived experiences of Fiona Effiong, a Nigerian woman who lost the use of both legs as a result of a car accident. Both women express how their understanding of being made in the image of God helps them cope with the struggles of disability and inequality. The article examines how appropriating the image of God to 'self' allows for an affirmation of humanity's essential being. It argues that disability should not minimise the essence of a person. On the contrary, the assertion that all are made in the image of God could enhance the journey towards equality and justice for all.

Understanding the context

Fiona was a 24-year-old university student when she was involved in the accident. She remembers her back hitting the tarred road hard as she bounced on the sharp edge of the gutter. She remembers feeling numb and wondering why she could not move. After several hospital visits and surgery, she was told she was paraplegic, a form of paralysis that substantially impedes the function of her body from the waist down.

Fiona was born into a Christian family in south-south Nigeria, one of the six geo-political zones of the country. With Nigeria's over 180 million people, it 'is the most populous country in Africa, the eighth most populous in the world in which majority of the population is black'. Nigeria enjoys 'multifaceted cultural and religious loyalties, ethnic plurality and linguistic differences as well as diverse historical experiences' (Obinna, 2013, p. 29). Within south-south Nigeria, the majority of the population are Christians, while a small proportion practise indigenous African religion, Islam or other religions. Fiona is one of the 15% of Nigeria's population who live with various types of disabilities. Despite its rich resources of oil and gas, Nigeria's infrastructure lacks provision of medical care, social and educational facilities. Fiona was therefore unable to access adequate rehabilitative health services or education. Following the failure of Western medicine to provide a 'cure' for her paralysis, Fiona's family took her to several faith-healing services, miracle schools and prayer ministries, but without obtaining any physical remedy.

Although Nigeria has a well-documented policy on disability inclusion, there seems to be a lack of the necessary political actions to meet the needs of PWDs or to ensure the actualisation of those needs in public and private domains (Ajayi, et al., 2020). Fiona's car accident and her inability to access adequate medication treatment meant that her life, as she knew it, with access to education, religious spaces, healthcare and social spheres, was over. At the prayer meetings, she was asked to confess her sins and to have faith in Jesus Christ so as to receive healing. The support from her immediate family could not protect her from the stigma that society's views of disability brought on her.

Her disability had made her feel different because the society seems to have been normalised to treat PWDs as different in a not-so-good way (Cromwell, 2019, p. 8). She claims a feeling of having lost her identity as a person and was now defined by her paraplegic condition. This way of describing or defining people by their disabilities denies their worth, belittles their capacities and can be seen as a form of social abuse (Fubara-Manuel, 2014, pp. 56-60). Fiona says she had to lean inward into herself to find her essence within the ethos of her religious belief so as to cope with the challenges of discrimination in everyday life.

Disability and the image of God

When Fiona asserts that amidst the challenges of her disability the knowledge of her being made in God's image was not tainted or tarnished, she makes no allusions to any theological or scholarly reflection. As a Christian, Fiona affirms that 'because she carries the "image and likeness" of God, there is something of God dwelling inside her'. This is what theologians call 'the *imago Dei* or the image of God in man; something of essential significance that separates humans from other beings' (Beates, 2012, p. 26). A study by the World Council of Churches (WCC) on the significance of the human being recognises that all persons share immeasurable worth 'whatever their physical or mental condition', because humanity is created in the image of God (World Council of Churches, 2005).

For Fiona, it was the self-appropriation of God's image that made her feel worthy because God's essence lives in her. And here the Nigerian-African spirituality is brought to the fore in its provision of private and corporate spaces for people to negotiate, live out and reaffirm their identities with or without disabilities. Religion for persons like Fiona is not just an opium of the people, as Karl Marx stated, it is the basis for the poor and oppressed to navigate the realities of their struggles within and without the church.

To mark the 2019 National Sanctity of Life Day in America, Tada and Nick Vujicic, the founder of Life without Limps, broadcast an interview. When asked how she is able to cope with her disability, especially when moving from being an active athletic to a quadriplegic (paralysed from the shoulders down) at the age of 17, Tada replies:

> I have to remember in whose image I am made. I am made in the image of God. My body may be broken, but oh my goodness, I am a God reflector. I mirror an amazing God who was pleased to make me in his image and that to me is awesome.

Tada's appropriation of her image as reflecting that of God does not appear to be a theological argument but one that, she claims, comes from her relationship

with God in Christ Jesus. Earlier in 1990, she had written:

> Our message to people is the good news that Jesus Christ died for their sins, was raised from the dead, and that as reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. (Tada, 1990, pp. 20-23)

Tada asserts that this liberating gift does not necessarily refer to physical healing, as that is only within God's sovereignty to give; she writes that her disability takes her 'mind off of temporary enticements and forces me to think about God (Colossians 3:2)'. Instead, by liberating gift she refers to the feeling of 'worth and dignity' that 'only in Christ can a disabled person experience and be viewed' (Tada, 1990, pp. 20-23). This idea of worthiness has been expressed by many PWDs as arising mainly from a relationship with Jesus Christ who allows an understanding of the essence of being made in the image of God (Cromwell, 2019, p. 16). In her 1976 biography, *Joni, An Unforgettable Story*, Tada narrates her struggles with sudden disability but also states how re-establishing her relationship with Jesus Christ and reclaiming her identity in God's image enables her to flourish. Scholars, with or without physical disabilities have been grappling with what it means to have the image and likeness of God and what nature of God is being mirrored in humanity. Others have wondered if 'likeness' involved physical appearance (Jenson, 2016, pp. 64-71; Cromwell, 2019, pp. 8-10; Beates, 2012, p. 27). These questions are not within the purview of this article, especially as neither Tada nor Fiona attended to them as a scholarly exercise. Some have attempted to attribute the image of God to the ability to act creatively or to understand rationally, but this view is problematic as it excludes persons for whom reason is absent, such as children and persons with intellectual disabilities or diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's (Cromwell, 2019, p. 9; Jenson, 2016, pp. 64-71).

On the other hand, in asserting that they are made by God, PWDs have used Psalm 139:13-14 to allude to the beauty of their physical form irrespective of the deformity of their 'broken bodies'.

> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

For a society where stigma is linked to 'bodily imperfections', and in which negative words have often been used to describe disability, Fiona says that the challenge to own one's worthiness has to be drawn from a 'deeper understanding' that 'all' are made in the image of God, equating equality of creation to *all humans*. Disability, Fiona adds, does not erode this equality granted at creation – no matter the physical form. Many minority groups have argued their case for equality based on this understanding. Race equality activists, like Martin Luther King Jnr, spoke of the 'inherent dignity' of all 'individuals, as children of God', because we are all created in the image of God and therefore deserving of 'just and fair treatment' (Wills, 2009, p. 4). Mercy Oduyoye, an African feminist theologian, points out that 'just and loving human relations can survive only when the equal value of all persons is upheld', and where the Christian principle of *imago Dei* is operative (Oduyoye, 1995, pp. 479-489).

When God created humanity in God's image, God made a statement by his act that humanity is created for a relationship of equals, to be fundamentally dependent on one another (Fritzson, 1998). Any form of exclusion or stigmatisation robs PWDs of their sense of belonging to community and active participation in their society. In the same way, discrimination whether on account of race, gender or any form of difference robs people of their dignity and worth. In all cases, the clamour is for a communal approach in which all persons are seen as having worth due to the equality of creation (Beates, 2012, pp. 130-131).

As stated earlier, discrimination is an act of injustice that renders people powerless. It denies one dignity and removes the possibility of living life to a person's full capacity, whatever the extent of that capacity. Often stigma fuels discrimination even where the basis of such stigma is outdated or based on a misinterpretation of biblical texts. For Fiona and Joni, drawing on their essential worth as created in God's image enables a self-image that allows them to challenge exclusive tendencies and to advocate for inclusion into communal enriching spaces. While they may not engage with scholarly or theological arguments in asserting their positions, they both demonstrate how their affirmation of personal spiritual relationships make coping with their disabilities possible. As this shows, a renewed understanding that all humanity is made in God's image and likeness could enhance our collective journey towards a just communal and peaceful co-existence.

Links

https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2003/a-church-of-all-and-for-all (World Council of Churches 'A Church of All and for All', responding to issues of disability in the church)

https://www.joniandfriends.org/sanctity-of-life-sunday/ (Joni Tada interviews Nick Vujicic and Katherine Wolf on the sanctify of life for persons with disabilities)

https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/v-theological-anthropology/christian-perspectives-on-theological-anthropology (World Council of Churches, 'Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology')

Discussion points

1. What do you understand by the Christian affirmation that all human beings are created in the image of God?
2. How and to what extent could the understanding that humanity is made in the image of God enhance the quest for equality, justice and dignity for all?

3. Considering the Nigerian and American contexts of this article, how would you explain the similarities and dissimilarities between Fiona and Joni's experiences?
4. In what ways could your community promote an inclusive society for all, especially for persons with disability?
5. Is it acceptable to discuss the welfare of persons with disability without involving them in the discussions?

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World Council of Churches. (2005). Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology. (See under Links, above.)

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