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Challenging Religious Issues

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

Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

Issue 1 Spring 2013

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Challenging Religious Issues
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Evolution and Creation

Jeff Astley

The article describes two elements in the doctrine of creation, arguing that continuous creation is compatible with any scientific theory. The claims of evolution are described, along with the theological responses of deism, evolutionary theism, intelligent design and creationism. Criticisms of intelligent design are noted.

Specification link: WJEC RS3 PHIL: Studies in Philosophy of Religion (A2), 3. Is religious faith compatible with scientific evidence?

Creation

The doctrine of creation asserts that all matter, energy and the laws of their interaction were once brought into being by God, long ago. But a doctrine that restricts creation to a past event ('making-creation') is a radical form of deism: 'an understanding of God as an absentee landlord . . . [or] retired potentate', who made the world but does not sustain it (McGrath, 2001, p. 184). More significant is the idea of 'preserving-creation', which implies that without God everything would be reduced again to nothing: 'the world exists just so long as God wills it to, since its existence depends on his will as on its cause' (Aquinas, 1967, vol. 8, pp. 69–71).

This second aspect of creation is sometimes called 'continuous (or continuing) creation'. Unlike the now-defunct 'steady state' theory of Fred Hoyle, which was a *scientific* cosmological theory, this religious and metaphysical view does not imply a series of separate new acts of bringing-into-existence. Rather, it refers to 'the incessant act by which [God] preserves the world in existence' (Mascall, 1956, p. 132). (If God exists 'outside time' this is a *timeless* act from God's standpoint.) It implies that all realities other than God are and always will be dependent on God for their continued existence.

The universe is not to be thought of, therefore, as analogous to a mechanical clock which can continue without its clockmaker (as in deism). It is more like an electric clock that needs continued contact with its power source; or a baby kept in existence within its mother's womb, as in the image of God as a pregnant female who 'creates a world

that is, in principle and in origin, other than him/herself, but creates it, the world, within him/herself' (Peacocke, 1979, 2004, p. 142).

If the doctrine of creation speaks of the continuing dependence of Nature on God, rather than just its ultimate origin (and is not another, competing scientific explanation even there), it can accommodate almost any science. When science proposes an account of the development of the physical universe or of biological life, the believer may always agree but add 'and God sustains all this'.

Evolutionary claims

The evolutionary perspective is key to all aspects of the life sciences today. Theodosius Dobzhansky claimed that nothing in biology makes sense 'except in the light of evolution'. Biologists widely endorse the proposal by Charles Darwin and Alfred R. Wallace that the natural selection of chance variations is the main process that explains the adaptation of living things to their environments.

The evidence for evolution includes the sequence of fossilised remains, including 'missing links', discovered within geological strata; together with comparative studies of the similarities of present-day living things to one another in their early development, anatomy and biochemistry (DNA), and the pattern of their geographical distribution. This evidence is best explained by the idea of their 'descent with modification' from common ancestors in a single, great 'tree of life' (Darwin's terms), rather than by the account in Genesis 1 of quite separate special creations of the different 'kinds' of creatures, and especially of human beings. The vast age of the earth and of life makes massive but gradual evolutionary changes possible.

Theological responses

Evolutionary theism (theistic evolution)

This is the view of most mainstream Christians and academic theologians that evolution is the way God makes new types of living thing 'through evolution', having designed the processes of Nature – including mutation and natural selection – so that God 'makes things make themselves'.

The account may take different forms. *Theism* goes beyond the extreme *deistic* view that God's role is limited to initiating a creation that eventually gives rise to evolving living things, by claiming that God both originates and continues to uphold the evolutionary process.

Many theists understand Nature to have an open structure that also allows the creator to influence, in a way that is undetectable to science, the largely unpredictable or even wholly indeterminate events that lead to genetic mutation (perhaps at the subatomic level) and/or the selection pressures exerted by the environment. On this view, God does not intervene in creation by suspending his own laws, but *providentially* steers the course of evolution in one way rather than another – but always within the range of natural outcomes that are possible within Nature (like a rower steering her boat close to one bank rather than the other, but still within the confines of the river's banks). Thus Robert Russell argues that adaptations are partly explained by God's non-interventionist activity influencing genetic mutation at the level of quantum indeterminacy.

Others, however, assert that (in addition to God's initial and sustaining creative acts, and God's providential activity) God may also intervene in evolution, performing *miracles* that are

outside the limits of the laws of Nature (like a rower dragging her boat out of the river and across dry land). For example, God might have introduced entirely new elements within the evolution of human beings.

Arthur Peacocke, however, denies *any* 'kind of special guidance . . . whereby God pushes or pulls evolution in a direction it would not otherwise have taken by its own natural processes and propensities' (Peacocke, 2001, p. 75).

Creationism

Creationists reject, either wholly or in large part, the claim that all living things have evolved from earlier forms of life. They are most concerned with creation in terms of origins, and retain the biblical account of a special creation (at least of the different 'kinds' of creatures and of human beings, as in Genesis 1:11-12, 20-27).

'Creation science' claims scientific grounds for challenging evolution, but scientists themselves dismiss this literature as ideology and polemic rather than scientific argument. Creationism is most common among those who view their Scriptures as wholly inerrant (without error).

The most extreme creationists reject all evolution as an unproven, and sometimes as a disproved hypothesis. Others only reject claims about the 'macroevolution' of all life from a common ancestor and especially between biblical 'kinds' of living things (for example, reptiles evolving into birds), while allowing that small-scale 'microevolution' may take place (for example, the evolution of bacteria resistant to antibiotics, as susceptible varieties are killed off before they can multiply, while resistant strains breed unhindered).

'*Young-earth' creationists* hold that the earth is only 6,000 to 10,000 (rather than 4.5 billion) years old. On this view, fossils of extinct species are mainly explained as victims of the worldwide biblical flood, which they date about 4,000 years ago. *'Old-earth' creationists*, by contrast, acknowledge the findings of modern geology but retain a revised account of the Genesis story of special creation. Some propose a long 'gap' (unrecorded period) within the biblical creation sequence; others adopt the 'day-age system' of interpreting the days of creation as geological (or astronomical) ages.

Intelligent design (ID)

Although frequently described as 'creationist' or 'neocreationist', the exponents of this more moderate position often accept that evolution (sometimes even human evolution) does take place, parts of it by means of natural selection. They insist, however, that the intervention of conscious design is required because natural processes cannot be the complete explanation of all the adaptations of living things.

Michael Behe argues that many organic phenomena show *irreducible complexity*. As these biochemical mechanisms or 'molecular machines' are made up of interacting components each of which is needed for the functioning of the whole, their complexity is impossible to explain by its being gradually built up over generations through a series of successive slight modifications. The argument is that the structure or process will only work (and therefore be selected for) when *all* its parts are in place: otherwise it would be like a mousetrap that lacks a hammer or spring. Behe's examples of such systems include the whip-like flagellum of bacteria and the blood clotting 'cascade'.

Critics respond that 'no Darwinian would deny that in organisms there are parts which, if removed, would lead at once to the malfunctioning . . . of the systems in which they occur. The point is . . . whether [the parts] could have been put in place by natural selection' (Ruse, 2003, p. 320). Further, the bacterial flagellum can in some cases lose parts and still function, and the blood-clotting cascade in dolphins still works though it lacks one of the standard components. Complex mechanisms in living things normally evolve by amending simpler mechanisms that either function less efficiently, or already perform a different useful function.

William Dembski applies to biology the probability criterion used by forensic scientists and archaeologists to identify intelligently caused objects and events. According to Dembski, the probability of assembling an irreducibly complex system is a function of the probability of each of its components not only arising by chance, but also being located in the same region of the cell by chance and being assembled in the right order by chance. On these assumptions, the evolution of even simple cell structures is just too unlikely. But evolutionary theory also involves the *anti-chance* element of natural selection, and assumes a *cumulative* process in which the results of one selection process forms the basis of the next, rather than 'single-step selection (in which each new "try" is a fresh one)' (Dawkins, 1988, 1991, p. 49).

ID is dismissed by almost all biologists. It insists that every unexplained gap in evolutionary biology must be explained by a supernatural, or at least a non-natural, cause. But science must always continue to search for *natural* explanations; and 'God does not compel the belief of sceptics by leaving puzzles in creation which science can't solve' (George Murphy, quoted in Dembski and Ruse, 2004, p. 186).

Glossary

DNA is deoxyribose nucleic acid. Certain sequences of 'base pairs' of DNA produce a particular inherited effect, according to the rules of the *genetic code:* the association between triplets of bases in DNA and particular amino acids that make up proteins. This sequence constitutes a *gene*, which is the unit of inheritance.

Evolution denotes changes in populations of living things down the generations.

Mutation is an inherited change (variation) in genetic material, often as a result of (random) errors introduced when DNA copies itself.

Natural selection is the inevitable result of over breeding where resources are limited. Competition for food, territory, etc., leads to a struggle for existence in which those best adapted to the prevailing conditions are on average likely to survive longer and produce more offspring. Natural selection only occurs when a population contains variations that are inherited.

Quantum indeterminacy is the view that events at the subatomic level are not wholly determined by prior natural events.

Sexual selection is a secondary mechanism of evolution, in which individuals with certain features are selected by access to (and often choice by) members of the other sex. It explains phenomena such as the peacock's dazzling but cumbersome tail.

Links

http://campaigndirector.moodia.com/Client/Theos/Files/RescuingDarwin.pdf N., & Alexander, D., *Rescuing Darwin*, 2009)

http://www.arn.org/authors/behe.html (Michael Behe)

http://www.arn.org/authors/dembski.html (William Dembski)

http://www.icr.org/ ('Institute for Creation Research' – promoting scientific young earth creationism)

http://www.talkorigins.org/ ('The Talk Origins Archive' – scientific responses to creationism/ID)

http://www.counterbalance.net/evolution/index-frame.html ('Counterbalance Foundation' – some more basic accounts of the debate)

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/about/sitemap.html ('Public Broadcasting Service' website)

Discussion points

1. 'Strictly speaking, evolution has nothing to do with "creation" itself . . They are talking about different sides of the same reality' (Moltmann, 1985, p. 196). To what extent is this true?
2. Can God be justified in leaving evolution to chance mutations and natural selection?
3. Is intelligent design science or theology?

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Researching Religious Experience in China: The Alister Hardy Project

Leslie J. Francis

This article describes the vision of Sir Alister Hardy in setting up the Religious Experience Research Unit (later the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre), and the issues surrounding the extension of the research to China and the claims made for it.

Specification link: WJEC RS1/2 PHIL: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS), 4. An introduction to religious experience: Mysticism.

Sir Alister Hardy

Sir Alister Hardy set going a very important tradition in the scientific investigation of religious experience, initially through his own writings and subsequently through the legacy of the Religious Experience Research Unit that he created in Oxford in 1969. The Unit was subsequently re-named the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre. Hardy's own work in the field is perhaps best known through his books: *The Divine Flame* (1966), *The Biology of God* (1975) and *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (1979). The early work of the Religious Experience Research Centre was well displayed by the pioneering work of Edward Robinson in studies like: *The Original Vision* (1977), *This Time-Bound Ladder* (1977) and *Living the Questions* (1978).

Alister Hardy had trained as a zoologist and had served as Professor of Zoology at the University of Oxford. His academic career had been devoted to a careful examination of the habits of marine animals. He well understood the scientific merit in the collection and organisation of specimens in the world of the natural sciences. His inspiration was to transfer this methodology to the sphere of the spiritual sciences in the field of religious experience. The Alister Hardy archive of religious experiences had its origin in an invitation published in the British press. Hardy's now classic question simply asked:

> Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?

Accounts of religious experiences flowed in, in response to Hardy's original

invitation, and have continued to do so ever since. The archive has been carefully stored and managed (initially at Manchester College, Oxford, then at Westminster College, Oxford, and later at the University of Wales, Lampeter). Here is a rich resource that has allowed and continues to allow detailed examinations of focused themes, as illustrated by Mark Fox's studies: *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience* (2003), and *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Lightforms* (2008).

One of the initial strengths of the Alister Hardy archive is that the main body of specimens was assembled from a defined and homogeneous context, namely Britain. At the same time there is a significant weakness in the sense that this very strength also limits the generalisability of the findings. It is for this reason that the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre has been determined to extend St Alister Hardy's vision more widely afield.

The importance and implications of extending research into religious experience in this way was underlined in 1990 by Robert Runcie, when as Archbishop of Canterbury he launched an appeal for the Research Centre. He said:

> If it can be shown that there is a 'common core' or 'ultimate sameness' to all religious experience, irrespective of creed, race or society, this could have profound implications for the evolution of common understanding across many of the current barriers which divide people in the world.

This search for a 'common core' or 'ultimate sameness' of religious experience may turn out to be both illusory and unhelpful, but it does set us thinking in the right direction. A more realistic scientific quest (and one endorsed by the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre) is to examine and to chart the *varieties of religious and spiritual experience*.

Why China?

The study of religious experience in contemporary China provides a powerful environment in which to test the ubiquity of religious experience and to test for common core components of such experience. Historically the religious culture of China had been shared by three major traditions: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism which have become intertwined, at least since the Tang dynasty (618-906 CE), and are now found alongside traditional folk religion. At points China has also been influenced by Christianity and Islam. Not only has the historic approach to religion been very different in China, since 1949 China has been an officially atheist country. If religious experience can be found anywhere, surely an atheist country must be the least likely environment.

There are three reasons, therefore, for giving serious attention to the research conducted by the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (supported with significant funding by the Templeton Foundation) and reported by Xinzhong Yao and Paul Badham (2007) in their book, *Religious Experience in Contemporary China*. The first reason is to examine how they went about their research, and the kind of difficulties they faced in studying religious experience in a context that may not be familiar with talking about religion. The second reason is to examine the kind of evidence that their research uncovered. The third reason is to examine whether this specific study offers any more

general insights into the nature and meaning of religious experience.

Researching religious experience in China.

The first key issue faced by the research group concerned the problem of language. Translated into Chinese, the term 'religious experience' gains little recognition outside Christian or academic circles. However, failure to recognise the language does not imply absence of the range of experiences to which that language applies. Indeed experiences that we might interpret or classify as being of a religious nature have been a clear part of historic Chinese culture, where scholars and writers have referred to the importance and to the effects of 'seeing', 'feeling', 'knowing', 'hearing' or 'dreaming' of a power that transcended themselves.

Consequently questions needed to be framed in ways that Chinese people can recognise, and yet remain consistent with Hardy's view that religious experience is associated with awareness of 'a power or presence different from everyday self.' For this reason the first year of the four-year China project concentrated on indigenising the questionnaire and testing responses to different ways of posing questions. The complexity of what was being undertaken is illustrated by the fact that the survey instrument went through nine editions before the final version was agreed.

The second lesson learned from the time spent carefully developing and testing the research method concerned the importance of conducting the research by means of long in-depth interviews conducted by trained research assistants. Once the questions and the methodology had been refined, the interviews were conducted in ten sites in Eastern, Central and Western parts of China. No fewer than 110 assistants recruited at Renmin University in China conducted 3,196 interviews completing a detailed 24-page questionnaire in Chinese.

Finding religious experience in China

Two headline findings emerged from the interviews. The first headline finding is this: if self-assigned religious affiliation is taken as a marker of religiosity, the Chinese emerge as an irreligious people. The second headline finding is somewhat different: if we listen to their religious experience and to their religious practices, the Chinese appear to be far from an irreligious people. For example, while only 4% of the Han Chinese would describe themselves as Buddhists, 27% had prayed to the Buddha or to one of the Bodhisattvas in the past year, and 18% acknowledged the influence or control of the Buddha or one of the Bodhisattvas in their lives. While only 5% said that they believed in reincarnation, when speaking about their own experience 51% of the Han Chinese felt that their spouse, their relatives and their friends all resulted from what they had done in a previous life.

Only 9% of the Han Chinese describe themselves as religious. However, speaking about their own experience:

- 29% say that they feel comforted or empowered through prayer and worship;
- 46% believe that they have been influenced or controlled by the God of Fortune;
- 44% agree that life and death depend on the Will of Heaven;

- 41% agree that we must do our best to glorify God/Lord of Heaven/Buddha/our ancestors.

It was, however, the Chinese version of the classic Alister Hardy question that generated the most interesting and most revealing findings. In the Chinese survey the question took the following form:

> Some people have experienced that they were once and/or are frequently influenced by a kind of power that ordinary people cannot control or explain clearly. Have you ever had such an experience?

An experience of this nature was in fact reported by 57% of those who participated in the study.

Yao and Badham (2007, pp. 32-33) argue that in a Han Chinese context, religious experience is typically reflected in six main categories, which they characterise as follows:

- experiencing the influence or control of a spiritual being or power;
- experiencing a new understanding that has caused a change to the way of life;
- having a dream that is extraordinary but is believed to be true;
- having a mysterious feeling such as hearing, seeing, smelling or being touched;
- having a visionary experience either alone or together with others;
- experiencing union with the universe, in which one has forgotten the existence of one's self and become one body with the universe.

Not all of the reported experiences fitted these six main categories, however, leading Yao and Badham (2007, p. 33) to define a seventh category as follows:

- others, as a broad category for all that are not or cannot be included in the other six.

Nature and meaning of religious experience

Yao and Badham's study of *Religious Experience in Contemporary China* is part of a significant scientific endeavour, inspired by Sir Alister Hardy, to collect, analyse and interpret accounts of religious and spiritual experiences across the globe. Much of this research has been carried out in the tradition of the zoologist whose concern is to map the *varieties* and characteristics of the specimens observed. Such research provides the essential platform on which scientific enquiry can be based and on which knowledge can be built.

At the same time, however, caution has to be exercised concerning the kind of claims that can be formulated on the basis of these kinds of data. Do *accounts* of religious experience really allow anything to be said about the *truth claims* made by religious traditions, or even about the purposes that such experiences play in human life? Reflecting on these wider issues in a paper that draws not only on the China project but also on similar projects conducted in Turkey, Tamilnadu and Taiwan, Professor Paul Badham (2011) makes two interesting claims.

Badham's first claim is:

> What these various figures suggest is that a capacity for religious experience is part of humankind's evolutionary heritage and represents

> a common human response to transcendent reality. As such the experiences are likely to be broadly similar across different cultures. (p. 26)

Two aspects of this first claim are worth further interrogation. What is meant by 'evolutionary heritage'? Is there any real evidence that the capacity for religious experience carries evolutionary advantage (as the notion suggests)? And what is meant by 'broadly similar', and how has this been established?

Badham's second claim is:

> One cannot pass from seeing a commonality in experience to asserting a commonality in belief. To claim that the ultimate reality is a personal deity is to assert something different from the claim that the ultimate reality is an impersonal force . . . I suggest that to take seriously the reality of human religious experience rules out any exclusivist claim on behalf of any one religion. (p. 20)

Two aspects of this second claim are worth further interrogation. What kind of intellectual activity is involved in moving from the description of religious experience, to ascribing the observed experience to the activity of a personal deity or of an impersonal force? Does the careful scientific examination of religious experience really rule out any exclusivist claim on behalf of any one religion?

The Hardy research tradition is concerned primarily with the collection, description, and organisation of the varieties of religious experiences. There are other research traditions concerned with the social scientific study of religious experience, drawing on sociological and psychological methods, that set out to ask other kinds of questions concerning the correlates, causes and consequences of religious experience. These perspectives are discussed, for example, by Miles (2007). Different traditions make different contributions to knowledge.

Postscript

Much nearer to home the St Mary's Centre has been researching religious and spiritual experience among young people. If you would like to contribute to our growing archive we would really like to hear from you. All contributions are anonymous and completely confidential. To find out more please go to http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk/research/Onlinesurveys.html.

Glossary

Exclusivism is the claim that only one particular religion or belief system is true (or leads to salvation).

Discussion points

1. Have *you* ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?
2. What would you say counts as a 'religious experience'?
3. What is meant by the search for the 'common core' of religious experience?
4. Does the scientific investigation of religious experience really allow anything to be said about the truth claims of religion?
5. Does the scientific investigation of religious experience rule out any exclusivist claim made by any one religion?

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Christian Sexual Ethics: Homosexuality and Marriage

Stephen Parker

This article explores some reasons for opposition to same-gender marriage on the part of some Christians, how such Christians frame their ethic and on what this ethic is based. Finally, it describes an alternative Christian ethical perspective in the views of the Anglican cleric, Jeffrey John.

Specification link: WJEC RS1/2 ETH: Introduction to Religion and Ethics (AS), 4. Applied ethics.

Christian sexual ethics and understandings of marriage are currently a particularly contentious area. Campaigns for same-sex marriage, an extension of the arrangements for the Civil-Partnership Act of 2004, have caused consternation amongst some Christians, who see this as potentially undermining the traditional understanding of what marriage is. In this liberalising context, Christian opposition to what seems to be a more tolerant and progressive situation seems outmoded, even bigoted. Indeed, such opposition seem barely intelligible, and to fly in the face of the idea that Christianity is a religion of love.

What are the reasons for this principled opposition to same-gender marriage on the part of some Christians? How do such Christians frame their ethic, and on what is this ethic based?

The Bible and homosexuality

Christians understand the Bible to be the word of God, though theologically this means different things to different Christians. For some Christians (who may be described as Evangelical) the revelation to be found in the Bible is readable as directly applicable to the present: the Bible is read normatively as having authority to guide Christians' spiritual and moral lives. That is not to say that these Christians take biblical texts out of their context or historical setting, just that these external factors are less important than the personal encounter between the text and the reader. Generally, these Christians hold the view that same-sex relationship are immoral because their reading of the Bible is that it is strictly opposed to such relationships. The biblical texts which are

read and cited as relevant in framing an opposition to same-gender sex are these: Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. (It is probably worth finding a Bible and reading these texts at this point.)

For other Christians, in contrast – and this cuts across Christian denominational lines – the Bible is read differently because the idea that it is the word of God is understood differently. For these Christians (who might describe themselves as 'radical' or 'liberal', but at any rate as less conservative than those described above), the humanness of the Bible is heightened in significance. The Bible, they would argue, is a plethora of historical documents and different kinds of literature, which at certain points in Jewish and Christian history were amassed into a single volume of books. They would assert that reading the Bible is immensely more complex than any *prima facie* reading does justice to. If one reads the Bible devotionally, in the way described above, one must do so cautiously, not forgetting its contingent qualities: the historical and social context in which it was written, the political purposes it served and the editorial processes engaged in, in putting it together. Reading the Bible, they would argue, is a communal activity, one done best in a critical way in the context of the church, taking into account academic scholarship.

How biblical texts are read differently by Christians

Genesis 1:26-28

The creation narrative has it that God created 'man' and 'woman' as separate but complementary beings. For many Christians this indicates that what God intended was physical, sexual complementarity and that traditional marriage was God's means of doing so from the beginning. The obvious physical gender differences between human beings prescribes what is normative. Simply put, having sex with someone of the same gender is unnatural (in opposition to what God intended) and is therefore immoral. Some Christians use this text as the basis for a natural law ethic: same-sex relationships are against God's design for us. Crucially, it is this view that underpins opposition to the notion of same-sex marriage in favour of a traditional view of marriage as life-long and monogamous.

An alternative reading:

Some Christians assert that, in reality, the creation narrative does not represent things as they really are in their diversity. In fact many human beings are born with a sense of sexual attraction to individuals of the same gender: sexuality is much more complex than the binary opposition that physical gender differences represent. Moreover, the creation narrative is not meant to be read in a literalistic way (e.g. the universe did not instantaneously come into being over a period of six days); rather the story is expressive of the ultimate origins of the universe in God. Just as the details of the story, such as the order in which events of creation occurred, are not to be read as factual, so the whole creation narrative is ultimately metaphorical and therefore cannot be taken to be ethically prescriptive.

Genesis 19

This text is read by some Christians as God's judgement on the homosexual lifestyle of the men of Sodom (hence the pejorative term 'sodomy'), who demanded that visitors to the town be given to them so that they might be

'known'. God judges Sodom and Gomorrah for this homosexual violation of visitors. God's judgement is generalised to condemn all same-sex relationships as immoral.

An alternative reading:
Other biblical texts disagree as to what Sodom's sin was. For example, Ezekiel 16:49 seems to suggest that it was as much due to the injustice that existed in the town as it was to any isolated act of gang-rape. However, even if it were the case that such acts of violation resulted in God's judgement, can such acts be equated with loving consensual sex?

Leviticus 18 and 20
It is these two texts that are most often cited in relation to the immorality of same-gender sex. At face value they seem clearly to be condemnatory of homosexual sex. Indeed, some Christians would argue, this is precisely what they are condemning.

An alternative reading:
These texts are drawn from what is called the Holiness Code. It is this legal and moral framework which helped to distinguish Israel from its neighbours in the ancient world, condemning homosexuality alongside trimming one's beard, eating shellfish and using a variety of yarns when making clothes. Is such a code therefore useful to us in prescribing sexual morality today? If so, then why focus moral judgement only on this element of the code and not the others? In the view of many Christians this text is irrelevant to framing a sexual ethic in the twenty-first century. It would be inconsistent to use this text and not the other elements of the Holiness Code if this were to be the basis of a Christian moral view on the matter.

Romans 1:26-27
This text echoes the creation narrative above, but it goes further in suggesting that those who engage in homosexual practices are giving up natural (heterosexual) behaviour in favour of unnatural passions. Homosexuality is depicted here as being part of the 'fall' – the wilfulness and sinfulness that comes into existence after Adam and Eve's first sin.

An alternative reading:
An assumption is made in this reading that anyone who seeks intercourse with someone of the same sex is freely and deliberately giving up heterosexual relations in favour of homosexual. The text starts with the presupposition that heterosexuality is the norm, and has no conception that individuals may be born with an alternative sexual orientation.

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10
Each of these texts condemns those who practise homosexuality, categorising them with other sinners living outside of the Kingdom (the Christian way). Again these texts seem to be unambiguous in declaring homosexuality to be immoral and therefore as immoral for all time.

An alternative reading:
However, what is it that is being condemned here? Some scholars argue that the kind of sexual acts under condemnation are those engaged in in the context of idolatry: that of older men having sex with those employed for the purpose as temple prostitutes. What stands under moral condemnation here is not consensual and loving same-sex relationships, but rather the purchase of sex in order to please the gods.

In light of these alternative ways of reading these biblical texts, the mixed

views of Christians on the morality of same-sex relationships becomes clear. However, where Christians hold to a liberal view on same-sex relationships that appears to deviate from a straightforward reading of the Bible, an accusation of relativism may be made. If a reading of the biblical texts is open to qualification in this way, can there then be a Christian sexual ethic and, if so, what can this be based upon? Can same-sex marriage be ethical from a Christian moral point of view?

Jeffrey John's *Permanent, Faithful and Stable*

Jeffrey John is an Anglican cleric who has been open about his homosexuality. John hit the news in 2003 when he refused an invitation to become a bishop in the Church of England because of the church's negative reaction to the announcement that an openly gay man was to be promoted to such a senior role. Long before this, John had argued that a particular style of sexual relationship, one characterised by permanence, faithfulness and stability, is moral in the Christian sense, regardless of sexual orientation. John's argument is that there are no grounds for differentiating the morality of homosexual relationships from heterosexual ones. The Bible does not condemn homosexuality *per se*, rather it condemns (homo)sexual acts which are coercive, violent, abusive and casual. Moreover, the Bible has no sense of human sexuality as it is now commonly understood: that is, as a diverse range or spectrum of orientations. Because of this, the Bible needs to be read in a judicious way, rather than slavishly applied to questions of sexual morality.

John argues that contemporary society has become increasingly tolerant and accepting of homosexuality, often in the face of opposition from the church. For John the moves towards same-sex marriage in Britain is emblematic of the normalising of homosexual relationships so that, rather than being driven underground, such relationships can be lived out in a public way fostering the 'permanence' that marks the Christian ideal. Marriage provides a ritual context in which relationships can be celebrated and publicly affirmed before God, something which lesbian and gay Christians have thus far been unable to do.

Moral sexual relationships are characterised by faithfulness, John argues. Marriage offers a context for such monogamous relationships; without such a social framework, promiscuity and impermanence are encouraged. The permanence of the marital context provides emotional and material security, which is good for the individuals concerned. Same-sex marriage provides a similar context of stability for same-sex relationships as for heterosexual relationships. By instituting and legalising same-sex marriage in the UK, homosexuality is taken out of the 'immoral' category and properly normalised.

For too long, John argues, homosexuality has been deemed immoral on the basis of its social and religious unacceptability, causing untold anxiety, blighting countless individuals' lives. Such intolerance of homosexuality, based largely on an erroneous reading of the Bible, has been backed by the church, leaving a stain on its history.

Conclusion

Opinions on the matter of same-sex marriage threaten to divide irreparably the Anglican Communion (the world-wide family of Anglican churches). The situation is complicated by the contrasting views of Christians across the world, which are variously tolerant or intolerant of homosexuality. Jeffrey John's revisionist reading of the Bible, and his argument that moral sexual relationships stem from the social structures that are created for them, offers an alternative perspective that appeals to some Christians.

Discussion points

1. Which do you find most convincing: the straightforward readings of the biblical text or their alternatives, and why?
2. What are the wider dangers for Christians in reading the Bible in a morally relativistic way?
3. Is the church's attitude to homosexuality driven by changing social attitudes towards it, or is the church taking the lead in changing attitudes?
4. Does Jeffrey John's argument, that sexual morality is fostered by external social factors rather than internal motives, hold water?

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The Growth of Neo-Pentecostalism in Britain: A Critique of Secularisation

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This article describes a theory of secularisation that outlines the way religion has weakened in industrialised societies. After showing in general terms how the theory has been criticised, the article provides an example of a religious movement that has grown despite decline elsewhere.

Specification link: WJEC RS1/2 CS: Introduction to Religion in Contemporary Society (AS), 3. Religion and community.

Secularisation

Sociological theories describe societies. One of the best-known sociological theories is concerned with secularisation. This theory addresses reasons for changes to the scope, importance, function and popularity of religion. The theory usually draws upon religious statistics of church attendance, baptism, religious marriage, religious funerals and religious beliefs and explains why, in many Western societies, most of these indices of religion have declined over recent centuries. In its general form the theory states that, starting from a high point either in the Middle Ages when the church dominated Europe or in Victorian times when, in Britain, about half the population would be in church on any given Sunday, religious belief and practice have declined and, as a consequence, the impact of religion within public life has diminished. Religion's retreat is brought about by industrialisation, urbanisation, the spread of bureaucracy, the rise of individualism, the successes of science and the entire gamut of cultural and intellectual processes that began with the French or Industrial Revolutions. 'The basic proposition is that modernisation creates problems for religion' (Bruce, 2002, p. 2).

The theory notes that religion was once an all-encompassing theoretical system that was expressed by powerful institutions. Its theology not only explained why the world worked as it did but also why society was arranged as it was. Harvests were good or bad depending upon the will of God, Divine Providence explained why some people were rich and others were poor or some were ill and others were well. The church, seen as a powerful multi-layered

institution, supported and endorsed the government of the day and reached out through schools and hospitals to the whole of society. But, as rationality was diffused by secular education and the authority of scientific explanation spread, religion's intellectual power and social role were challenged. There were fewer and fewer mysteries for it to explain. In the 19th century in what is called the West, as people moved from their settled villages into the teeming new cities of the Industrial Revolution, the ancient communal agricultural rhythm was forgotten in the noisy environment of the factory. The priest was replaced by the scientist, the social worker and the therapist. The certainties of religion were replaced by the certainties of science and technology. A secular rationalistic bureaucracy trapped citizens in an 'iron cage' (Weber, 1904-5, 2003, p. 183: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/). History appeared to be moving in an irreversible direction that would push religion off the public stage and make it a minority interest confined to private life. In effect, 'secularization has resulted in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality . . . [that] has its correlate on the social-structural level' (Berger, 1969, 1990 p. 128).

Debates about secularisation

'When I initiated the critique of the concept of secularisation in 1965, I suggested that it had roots in rationalist and historicist ideology which needed to be exposed' (Martin, 2005, p. 141). David Martin understood secularisation theory to be a persuasive interpretation of religious data that rested on philosophical presuppositions that were predisposed to read the evidence in particular ways. Rationalism sees all knowledge as derived from reason and therefore questions the value of knowledge that claims to come from faith or intuition. Historicism sees history as being driven by laws of social development that make the future predetermined.

Max Weber, who had contrasted legal-rational authority with the charismatic authority of founders of new religious movements, agreed with Ernst Troeltsch in making distinctions between churches, denominations and sects. Churches are inclusive, open to culture and society and do not make excessive demands on their members; sects are exclusive, intense, demanding but compensate by offering greater religious certainty; denominations are at a mid-point between churches and sects and are notable for their willingness to accept the validity of other religious groups (e.g. Methodists will accept Baptists). Clearly, social change will impact differently on the three categories of religious group, with churches being most influenced by society and sects being least influenced.

While secularisation theory appeared to explain the decline of religion in Europe, it appeared to fail to explain what was happening to religion in the USA. After all, the USA is as modern and industrial as Europe and yet its religious indices are much higher. Debates between sociologists attempted to reconcile differences on either side of the Atlantic. Perhaps religion was declining in Europe because of its linkage with government – the so-called 'establishment' of religion – whereas in the USA a free-market for religion had always existed and there had never been any constitutional connection between government and church. Some sociologists argued for the inevitable decay of religion while others saw the

historical process as moving backwards and forwards with religious revivals alternating with periods of decline. Some saw religious decline in Europe as a result of wider changes in the function of voluntary associations. Others noted that religion might be 'moving sideways' into spirituality and that, for example, the death of Princess Diana provoked public displays of religious ritual through the leaving of flowers at sites all over the country and the televising of her formal Christian funeral (Davie, 2000, p. 109). *Public* displays of this kind are evidence that British society has not been completely secularised.

Neo-Pentecostalism

At the start of the 20th century there was a widespread longing for the renewal of Christianity, and this was most obviously seen in the UK by the Welsh revival of 1904-5 when about 100,000 people either renewed their religious commitments or joined churches and chapels for the first time. Out of this desire for renewal came a series of new denominations that emphasised the work of the Holy Spirit as described in the New Testament and which began on the Day of Pentecost. These churches were called 'Pentecostal' and allowed and encouraged speaking with tongues, miracles, healing and other similar phenomena.

During the 1920s and 1930s these churches gradually grew in Britain until there were about 1,000 congregations, some of which had been founded through large public evangelistic meetings where those who were ill received prayer. The churches continued into the 1950s. Their orientation at the start was sectarian but they gradually adopted a more denominational attitude and began to relate to other Christian groups.

In the 1960s the charismatic movement began. This was a spontaneous movement that saw Pentecostal phenomena like miracles and speaking with tongues occurring in the mainstream churches. Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and others welcomed a spiritual renewal that brought with it an emphasis on the reality and presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the 1970s the most radical people in the charismatic movement, as well as some Pentecostals, combined to form new churches or house churches or, as they were later called, 'apostolic networks' whose leaders showed many of the characteristics of charismatic leadership first identified by Weber (Walker, 1998; Kay, 2007). As a result there were now three parallel streams: Pentecostal, charismatic and neo-Pentecostal. Pentecostals were organised into denominational patterns with superintendents, conferences and other legal ties. Charismatics remained within their denominational structures although they would typically come together for summer conferences like those held under the auspices of Spring Harvest. Neo-Pentecostals were more loosely organised into networks under apostolic leaders whose authority was derived from their charismatic ministries rather than from the office they held.

Neo-Pentecostalism and secularisation

Bruce (2002) and Berger (1970) both acknowledge that the theory of secularisation allows for the emergence of new religious groups within a predominantly secular society. Berger, for instance, noted that 86 per cent of

Americans believe in God so that, with the support of like-minded religious people, he understands how new forms of religion might come into existence and thrive despite a generally adverse climate (p. 39). We can identify three ways Pentecostals resisted secularising trends: by holiness teaching, by emphasis on the Holy Spirit and by fostering the emotional aspects of religion.

Pentecostals in Britain in the 1920s observed holiness rules that kept them out of mainstream public life: they did not read novels, go to the cinema, drink alcohol, watch football matches or in other ways participate in irreligious culture. Even in their evangelism they consciously stood against modern ideas and, when their ministers needed training, set up their own seminaries. In this way they protected themselves from worldviews hostile to their own.

But Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals have this in common, that they welcome the activities of the Holy Spirit. Even in a scientific age, widespread belief in ghosts, spirits and horoscopes show that ordinary people are open to inexplicable phenomena. We could say that (neo-) Pentecostalism tapped into this sub-culture but it did so by reference to the spiritual experiences described in the New Testament. Their teaching on the Holy Spirit brought the world of the Bible and today's world into close coordination so that each was relevant to the other. In metaphorical terms the 'iron cage of rationality' could not contain the ancient wind of the Holy Spirit.

It is also arguable that mainstream religion in fine stone buildings with the old-fashioned language of the prayer book and the ordered pattern of the liturgy can be too cerebral to engage the emotional aspect of people's lives. Here (neo-) Pentecostalism with its acceptance of the joy and excitement of miracles appeals to the heart and completely sidesteps the intellectual pressures of secularisation. At the same time its emphasis on healing makes it a holistic religion, one of the body as well as the mind.

When the (neo-) Pentecostal movement is examined outside the confines of the UK, it is evident that it has spread to every continent. Its appeal has been translated into every culture, whether to the struggling post-colonial countries of Africa or to the immensely rich skyscrapers of Hong Kong. It is a form of Christianity that underlines the importance of religious experience and in this way it transcends rational categories, but it does so in line with the 'subjective turn' of post-modern culture which has made personal experience one of the great marks of authenticity.

From a theological perspective, a belief in the Holy Spirit provides a way of thinking about God's action in the world. Believers who pray and anticipate miracles find what they are looking for by the agency of God who intervenes in the world. And how might a God intervene, so Pentecostals would ask, except by the Holy Spirit? In this way mystery and miracle are reintroduced to the world even while scientific knowledge expands. The interventionist God who was expelled from 19th century culture by technology and the Industrial Revolution finds a way back through the Holy Spirit's engagement with the post-modern condition. Indeed, on a global scale, it has been argued that Pentecostalism is a 'harbinger of modernity' (Martin, 2005, p. 141). Its churches signal the coming of technology and informal education to West Africa or parts of Southeast Asia and Latin America with the result that

Pentecostal Christianity is understood to be a progressive religion helping to encourage democracy, egalitarianism and new ways of thinking about the future. Rather than seeing religion as being in terminal decline, (neo-) Pentecostalism sees the world transformed by a vibrant church.

Links

http://www.springharvest.org (Spring Harvest, attended by charismatic churches)

http://newfrontierstogether.org (neo-Pentecostal group also called an apostolic network)

http://www.new-wine.org (attended by charismatic churches)

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/ (discussion of Max Weber)

http://www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=31 (a challenge to secularisation)

http://www.elim.org.uk (Pentecostal denomination in the UK)

http://pentecostalpioneers.org/GeorgeJeffreys.html (information on George Jeffreys, one of the mid-century Pentecostal evangelists and founder of many congregations)

Discussion points

1. Can religion help to modernise society? Or is it always against social change?
2. To what extent is the theory of secularisation challenged by new religious growth?
3. Can sociological theories predict the future with any accuracy?

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