

Christian Theology and Other Faiths

ROWAN WILLIAMS

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Imagine you're looking up some statistics about an African country – population, main exports, ethnic groupings and so on; there'll probably be an entry for 'religions', and it may read like this – 'Muslims 40%, Christians 38%, Hindus 3%, traditional religions 19%'. It looks very straightforward, rather like a run-down of political allegiances or tribal distribution. It is one defining activity or characteristic among others. But one thing I want to suggest in this lecture is that it's the sort of formula that can suggest significant misunderstanding, a misunderstanding that affects both popular thinking and public policy in our own country; and I think we need a bit of theology to help us to a more sensible position.

So what's actually wrong with this breakdown of religious loyalties? The problem is roughly this. We westerners tend to think that a 'religion' is a distinct system of ideas, beliefs that connect the world as we see it with a whole lot of non-visible powers or realities, which have to be paid attention to, worshipped or at least negotiated with, in order to have the maximum security in life. Religions express themselves in beliefs but also in distinctive practices like periods of self-denial, meetings for ritual actions and festivals. So far so good, in one sense. The dangerous assumption follows, though, that the world as we see it is pretty clear; we can agree about it – whereas the powers that religion tries to connect with are invisible, so that we can't expect to agree about them. What they have in common is claims that can't be proved by appealing to the world as we all see it. So a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Ghanaian or Papuan villager performing rituals handed down from time immemorial are all performing variations of the same thing; and that same thing is always set over against the obvious, 'public', shared world of what we can see. Life divides between things that are common to everyone and things that are unclear and therefore don't belong in the public and everyday. What 'religion' you belong to is simply a matter of which set of beliefs you happen to entertain in that bit of your life which is left over for this kind of thing.

But when we try to talk with the Muslim or the villager in particular, things get to look more complicated. The villager will undoubtedly say that performing rituals is as routine and necessary and uncontroversial a thing as milking cows; indeed, it may well be that the way you milk cows is dictated by rituals that seem to the outsider to have not very much to do with cows as we see them. Dylan Thomas memorably quotes in the preface to his *Collected Poems* the Welsh shepherd who was asked why he still performed rituals in fairy rings to protect his sheep; he replied (doubtless with scorn for the silliness of the question), 'I'd be a damn fool if I didn't'. There just isn't an ordinary world from which this villager takes time off to practice his 'traditional religion'. The same with the Muslim, in a more sophisticated way: the ordinary day you have to get through is marked in time intervals every bit as natural or obvious as the hours

of the clock to us, the intervals between the five prayer times. There isn't a neutral time that needs interrupting to do religious things: the ordinary is the religious.

And just to take one more example of possible confusion: Buddhists have festivals and temples and statues, so they are obviously people who do this religious thing. But what are the invisible forces they deal with? For the strictest southern Buddhist at least, though in one sense for all Buddhists, the invisible forces are inside us; doing 'religious' things is not a matter of how to negotiate with an invisible world outside us at all, but of learning an all-inclusive set of mental habits that gradually changes the way you relate to this world and frees you from inner suffering and frustration.

So my imaginary African country can't after all be split up into four neat segments of religious belief, four varieties of one thing, that thing being a set of more or less chosen beliefs about invisible states of affairs alongside the ordinary world. What we have instead is rather a variety of styles of living, each of which has a very different account of the world as a whole, life as a whole. And although this may be rather obvious when you think about it, it does have some far-reaching consequences. Think for a moment about the old Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant – one grasps its tail and says, 'It's a rope', one grasps its leg and says 'It's a tree', and so on. This is often used as a way of saying that we can never really tell the truth in religious matters, we all see things only from a limited perspective and so on. But we are missing the point; someone knows it's an elephant, and the force of the metaphor is not so much that no-one can know what the invisible sacred reality is actually like as that we are all painfully capable of reaching for the easiest language, the language that fits our own individual experience, when speaking of God, and fail to compare notes with each other or to submit what we say to an acknowledgement that the scale of what we're talking about should teach us some caution. The one thing the parable isn't really about is a distinction between what everyone can see and what some people unreasonably argue about.

Now this is where theology begins to come into the picture. The model that draws all those very different kinds of life together as varieties of one thing called religion assumes, as I've said, that there is an open space in which people can meet when they're not being religious. When public policy documents talk about involving faith communities in this or that piece of social regeneration, the assumption is likewise that these particular special interest groups can all be harnessed to doing useful work in the open public space, where their disagreements can be buried for a while; they can be persuaded to co-operate in working with what everybody sees, what no-one argues over. I'm not denying that there is something in this, and I'll come back to it later. But theology, the religious use of the mind, whether Christian or not, is going to start from somewhere else.

Religious language talks about the entire environment in terms of its relation with the holy. As Wittgenstein said, it is more like talking about colour – something that affects everything (literally) in sight – than talking about an item in a list of things. Theology, the work of religious intellect, tries to work out what

the implications are of seeing everything in relation to a holy reality that is never absent. It is not about advice as to what we should do when in the territory marked off as religious, where we do business with invisible rather than visible things; it is about what lives should look like when they find their meaning as a whole in relation to holy reality. To put it a bit differently, theology tries to make connections between the stories told about the holy or the fundamentally real and the words and actions people use in order to let those stories take hold of their lives and give them shape in every detail and aspect.

I know the difficulties in using ‘theology’ to describe certain Muslim or Jewish, let alone Buddhist intellectual activities; the word feels most at home in a Christian context. But every tradition of faith has a tradition of reflecting on the normal words and acts that make up a life of faith. Jews, Christians and Muslims all connect this with reflection on holy books, sorting out the consistency of passages that don’t immediately seem consistent, settling what are agreed to be the implications of a story or a formula or a rule. Buddhists likewise use a set of holy texts, but, in some Buddhist traditions at least, are interested in working out the implications for how we think about knowledge and language of the basic instructions given to help us purge our minds of greed and fantasy. So I recognise that in implying that ‘theology’ can cover all of this, I may be pushing things rather; but my basic point is that all religious practices go along with habits of disciplined thinking, exploring interrelated ideas or metaphors, making connections and searching for consistencies. Even where practice is what we unhelpfully call ‘primitive’, reflection goes on, sometimes in the generation of new stories; mythology often reflects ways of solving problems or suggesting connections by storytelling. If in Greek myth Athena springs fully-armed from the head of Zeus, this encodes a recognition that wisdom or the sense of order is completely contained in and intimately related to the source of creative power; and that is a ‘theological’ point. Ultimate power can’t be stupid; wisdom can’t be just a lucky human guess.

So as reflection matures and more connections are made, what comes to light is a map of how things are on which people attempt to ‘plot’ human behaviour. And what this means is that disagreements between religious traditions are very significantly disagreements about the kind of universe we inhabit, what that universe makes possible for human beings; and what is the most truthful or adequate or even sane way of behaving in the universe. The passion in religious disagreement comes not simply from abstract differences as to how the holy is to be talked about, but from differences as to how human life is to be lived so as to be in fullest accord with ‘the grain of the universe’. A different view on this means a life lived less fully in accord with truth, and so a life deprived of significant happiness. Inevitably, then, the disagreements are profound; to the extent that a religious tradition has the generous belief that it is given something of health-giving relevance for all human beings, it will be strong in its arguments with other traditions.

This may at first sound an unwelcome approach. But I think it is of enormous importance to see why religious disagreement is serious, and why it can’t be

reduced to that realm of essentially private difference, outside the clear light of neutral day, where modern secular society is comfortable leaving it. And what I am going to try and argue is that once we are clearer about the nature and scope of religious disagreement, we are actually more rather than less likely to develop a respectful and collaborative practice in inter-faith relations.

This has something to do with the fact that when we see our differences as theological in the sense I've outlined, as differences about what a fully meaningful, sane or truth-revealing life looks like in the light of convictions about the universe itself and its source, we begin to see that not all religious claims are answers to the same questions. If, say, Islam and Christianity were two sets of solutions to one problem, their relation would be one of simple rivalry, systematic mutual exclusion. But in fact the two faiths work with importantly different accounts of creation and humanity. It will not do to say either that they are essentially the same or that they are utterly incompatible. What needs to be avoided is, for example, a Christian approach which says simply that Islam is a failed solution to the question satisfactorily answered by Christianity.

The difficulties of such an approach appear most clearly when we look at Christian-Jewish relations. The appalling history here is in large part the result of a Christian claim to be the correct answer to a question wrongly answered by Jewish faith and practice – 'Who is the Messiah?' As a great deal of modern scholarship makes clear, the greater part of Jewish reflection, 'theology' if you will, for two thousand years has not begun from any such question. For the Jew to be told that in Christian eyes he or she has wrongly answered a question either not asked or asked in a wholly different context is in effect for the Jew to be told that there is no fundamental difference between them and the Christian; the Christian way of talking has included the Jew, quite irrespective of what the Jew is actually saying.

Similarly with Islam, where the Christian may sometimes feel a bit like the Jew in the preceding paragraph. In the light of the witness of Muhammad as the seal of prophetic revelation, all previous history, including that of Jesus, comes together in a single pattern. If the question is 'What is the climax of prophecy, where in divine word and human example is the will of God most completely made known?' the Muslim naturally answers in terms of the Qur'an and the Prophet; the Christian has to struggle to explain that the unique relation of Jesus to God and the incorporation of Christian believers into that relation are beliefs that connect with different questions and need a different narrative structure. A conversation some years ago with an articulate and evangelistic Muslim taxi driver has left a deep impression on me in this regard: it was very clear to him that the mere fact of Islam having appeared later than Christianity provided a powerful case for Christians to change their frame of reference. It should be obvious that here at last was the hitherto unrevealed end of the story. To be a Christian was to leave the theatre at the interval.

So quite a bit of interreligious encounter, historically and at the casual level, tends to settle for this basic idea, that the representative of another faith is really, as it were, speaking the same language but making appalling mistakes

which render proper communication in the language impossible. I could multiply examples, but let me just mention in passing the implication, for a Westerner, of calling Buddhism ‘atheistic’; the same kind of problem. A properly theological approach, I’m suggesting, is one in which we first try to clarify what question it is to which my own religious language seeks to give answers, and so to engage with other traditions in relation to what their fundamental questions are. And when we come to consider the truth of religious statements, at least we shan’t be trapped into seeing this as a process of comparing a series of answers in a kind of examination.

But what does this say about religious truth? There is no vantage point above all traditions and theologies from which some completely detached person can decide; no board of examiners. But this also means that there is no perspective from which someone can say, ‘These are all different ways of looking at the same material’. If I am a person of faith, a person whose life is lived in a comprehensive relationship with what I understand to be the source and context of all life, I cannot appeal to someone out there in the neutral public world to provide me with credentials. So I don’t think that religious relativism or pluralism will do, as this seems always to presuppose the detached observer (the one who sees the whole elephant); but neither can we expect to find a tribunal to assess right and wrong answers.

Yet our traditions claim to be true, and, just as importantly, to be about how lives are to be led that are in accord with how the universe is; they are about happiness as well as truth, or rather, they are about truthfulness as the condition of happiness and happiness as the fruit of truthfulness. They do not simply claim to give a correct description of the world in relation to holy reality, they sketch in greater or lesser detail how that relation is to be made specific in daily practice, so that each human life is shaped into an appropriate response. Such response may be characterised as covenantal obedience, self-sacrifice, self-dissolution or whatever else, depending on the basic story told about the universe and its source. But how do we get to assessments of truth from such a perspective?

The question is raised in its most sensitive and painful form by the phenomenon of conversion. Very often, when people move from one religious tradition to another, when they recognise a fuller or more final truth in another language and practice of faith, it’s because of a sense that the universe portrayed in this other tradition is a more full or resourceful environment, or that the humanity imagined here is one with greater possibilities and beauties. But this only happens when someone begins to experience the world differently – not simply when a new set of ideas is presented. Sharing a different sort of life makes all of us wonder about the questions and answers we have taken for granted; they may seem misconceived or even subtly oppressive. A different tradition is attractive when it makes you think that this is the all-important question you’ve never asked, so that this kind of life now appears as transparent to a greater truth. It isn’t that a person suddenly sees the right answer to a question that has previously been wrongly answered, but that the new world exposes a whole frame of reference as somehow inadequate.

And change from one tradition to another is painful for your former fellow-believers precisely because there is an implied judgement on a whole life, a whole language. Its positive effect, though, ought always to be a deeper self-critical understanding of why someone might find this tradition too limiting to inhabit, an urgency about exploring the resources given. The point I am moving to, however, is that the ‘contest’ over religious truth happens most effectively and authentically when a real sharing of worlds is possible. And that in turn happens only when we do not live in a social order that totally controls the possibilities of experiencing the Other. To this extent, the modern revolt against theocracy, against the religious control of social options, is justified. But I think that the implication is actually the opposite of what is usually thought. We’re used, as I said at the beginning of this lecture, to thinking of the modern social space as one in which it’s impossible to have any very meaningful talk about religious truth because there is a neutral public arena in which truth can be argued about and a private area of commitment to unprovable beliefs. But in fact a non-theocratic society allows real contention about religious truth by the mere fact of giving space for different experiences and constructions of the universe to engage with each other, to be themselves.

This is the practical outworking of my earlier point that when we see our differences as theological we may have better and more collaborative relations. If religious faith is not just a set of private beliefs about supernatural things but a comprehensive ground for reflection on how the world and human life hang together, then to establish the truth of any set of religious claims must be a form of showing that this sort of religious language rather than another has the resource to hold together the greatest spread of human experience. There can be no final and unanswerable mode of establishing this by argument. We can only ask if there could ever be convergence about the character of the world and humanity such that we could better see the ‘fit’ of certain words or images. In that sense, the awareness in modern culture of the plurality of religious practice is a positive matter. We have become more aware of the range of what any religious talk has to cope with, the cultural variety, the historical reach, the challenges in catastrophe, pain and tragedy to certain kinds of claim. The point was expressed poignantly by Simone Weil when she said that an indigenous American who had lived through the genocidal terror of the age of the Conquistadors, who had seen massacre and plague and the destruction of a culture, might or might not retain an allegiance to their ‘traditional religion’; but if they did, they would nonetheless think differently about the holy from any thoughts they could have had before. It is an insight taken up by a good many indigenous peoples in our own age. Perhaps one could also point to something similar in the crises and agonies of modern Jewish thought. In the fiction of Isaac Singer – to take only one example – we read about the ‘timeless’ world of faith in the shtetl, the East European Jewish village, with its piety, its folklore, its proverbial wisdom and petty folly, its absolute spiritual solidity; and we read about the lives of rootless post-war emigres, happy neither in the USA nor in Israel, trying to understand what the truth of their Jewish identity and loyalty means in the wake of the most

nightmarish disruption imaginable. If that truth can be vindicated in the ‘new world’ after the camps, its truth claims must be taken more seriously and understood more deeply.

And thus what we come to see in each other as religious communities in the context of the variegated world of modernity, of ‘global’ society, is a range of behaviours each of which seeks to understand how it is to include, to ‘narrate’ (if I can use a fashionable term), the whole range of a world which is no longer the property of any one of them. This does not mean that every religious tradition seeks to adjust and accommodate itself to modernity or that truth is reduced to the capacity to cope with global culture without tears. Far from it: each will, if it knows its business, sharpen its critique of the myths of secular neutrality, each will seek to show how it can contain and effectively transform the particular challenges to its account of humanity thrown up by the new environment; each will struggle to show that it is not reduced to impotence by the complexity of modern discourse. So, although the pressure of modernity may often produce a powerfully reactionary strategy in some religious believers, the sort of thing we generically and not very helpfully call fundamentalism, the pressure is also visible to demonstrate how a tradition in its full integrity can make intelligible order of the chaos around by extending and renewing its repertoire of image and concept. We could think of the history of the Brahma Samaj in India, of the Sufi-influenced Western Islamic apologetic of writers like Gai Eaton or Martin Lings, or of the revival of Russian Orthodox social and philosophical energy at both the beginning and the end of the twentieth century.

Seeing each other like this in the non-confessional, non-theocratic state and culture of modernity, we are better able to avoid the errors I spoke of earlier, the errors that arise from supposing that other faiths have bad answers to the questions for which you have good answers. The issue is now how we exhibit in practice the claims we all in different ways make about our tradition’s ability to tell a truth which will comprehend any human situation it may encounter. Precisely because this is a complex, humanly unpredictable business, in which none of us is going to be able to pronounce a final conclusion acceptable to all, precisely because this is not in any ordinary sense a competition with winners and losers, we need time and space for it. And such time and space are in principle given in societies that assume religious freedom as fundamental, that do not close down the variegated possibilities of the modern. If we start retreating to theocracy, we are by implication admitting that our religious tradition can’t sustain itself in a complex environment; states (Christian, Muslim or Hindu) that enact anti-conversion laws or penalise minority faith groups may have an understandable wish to resist unfair pressure or manipulation in proselytising, but they confess a profound and very disturbing lack of confidence in their own religious resourcefulness.

This is one reason why I see no problem in the fostering of faith schools of different complexions in our own country. Christian faith is no longer legally protected here as the only legitimate religious activity; but the existence of church

schools forces Christians to engage actively with public life, with how society forms its new generations. It forces Christians, you could say, to try to be credible, professional, articulate, in the public arena. Similar partnerships between statutory authority and other religious communities should have the effect of drawing those communities into public conversation, pressing them to become publicly credible in new ways. And this must be healthy for both society at large and the communities in question, since it ought to be the opposite of ghettoisation. It educates faith communities as it educates the managers of our educational systems, and it obliges us to take each other more seriously as faith communities.

Significant interfaith encounter arises from our being able to see each other doing whatever it is we do as well as possible – teaching, worshipping, reflecting, serving. For me, one of the most important such encounters I have ever had was this spring in Qatar, when I was part of an international group of Muslims and Christians meeting to read their scriptures together and discuss them; we Christians were able to benefit enormously from watching Muslims doing what Muslims do with love, intellectual rigour and excitement. It proved a deeper and more truly respectful meeting of minds than any attempt to find a neutral common ground. We met as theologians, committed to exploring the reality of what truthful and holy lives might look like and how they might be talked about. And so we were able not to see each other as competing to answer the same exam paper. At times there was deep convergence, at times monumental disagreement. But I suspect we all emerged with a sharper sense of what our traditions had to deal with, of the complexity of our world and the difference of our questions. My hope for the future of dialogue is for more such exchanges at every level.

But I want to turn in conclusion to two specific issues, already hinted at in what I've said thus far. I want briefly to say something about the general relation of faith communities to the wider society; and I want to add a few reflections specifically as a Christian theologian on the ideas sketched here. On the first issue: it is true that faith communities have something in common over against a secular frame of reference. They all have disciplines of examining the honesty and consistency of believers, ways of encouraging self-scrutiny; they all assume that we are likely to be deceived about ourselves for quite a bit of the time. They all assume that what we are finally answerable to is something other than just the majority vote in a society at any one time. They all teach us to look critically at what seem to be our instinctive choices, and they all warn us against thinking that the material environment (including the human body) is just there to serve such instinctive human choices. There is a basis for what some like to call a 'global ethic' in all this, even if it is primarily negative rather than positive.

However, when there are attempts by governments or international agencies to harness this in support of this or that programme for human improvement, it is important that there should not be misunderstanding. Sometimes there can be an expectation that religious communities will simply follow a broadly liberal social agenda, and a consequent anger and disappointment when this doesn't materialise. This may be when Islamic and Roman Catholic bodies

join to resist a programme which assumes that abortion is a naturally just means of population control; when Christians and Hindus join in objecting to genetically modified crops in Asia; when Muslims condemn globalisation because of its dependence on un-Islamic means of handling money through interest and speculation; when people of a wide variety of religious commitments unite to challenge embryo research. All these issues are complex, and my point is not to suggest that there is a single religious 'line' on any of them. What matters is to recognise that the religious person or group starts from a perspective which on some questions will deliver conclusions similar to those of the secular progressive, and on some questions most definitely will not. The secular progressive tends to think it is a happy chance that makes religious folk agree with the self-evident goals of human justice and welfare. If we are to avoid deep anger, frustration and anti-religious animus, it is important for the secularist to acknowledge that they may find themselves working alongside religious believers who look to the same goals for radically different reasons; and thus to recognise that the goals of secular justice are not after all so self-evident. One of the most important tasks of religion in our culture, I'd dare to say, is to challenge the secularist to produce good and coherent grounds for their goals. And this is made all the harder by the assumption which this lecture has been devoted to challenging – that 'religion' is a subdivision of human activity which belongs among the optional extras, after you have attended to the clear imperatives of non-religious public life. The secular assumption too must strive to make itself credible; when it refuses this, we have a mirror image of theocracy – an uncriticised ideology defining the terms of public life. This is why the partnership between faith communities and public agencies, as in education, is good for both.

And finally: where would I put Christian theology on the sort of map I have been outlining? Christian theology says that the world exists because of the utterly free decision of a holy power that is more like personal life than anything else; that we can truthfully speak of as if it had mind and will. It says that the purpose of this creation is that what is brought into being from nothing should come to share as fully as possible in the abundant and joyful life of the maker. For intelligent beings, this involves exercising freedom – so that the possibility is there of frustrating one's own nature by wrong and destructive choices. The purpose of God to share the divine life is so strong, however, that God acts to limit the effects of this destructiveness and to introduce into creation the possibility of an intensified relation with the divine through the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, above all in his sacrificial death. This new relation, realised by the Spirit of God released in Jesus's rising from the grave, is available in the life of the community that gathers to open itself to God's gift by recalling Jesus and listening to the God-directed texts which witness to this history.

So what matters for the Christian? That the world is for joy and contemplation before it is for use (because it comes from God's freedom and delight, not to serve the purpose of a selfish divine ego); that our account of our own human nature and its needs is dangerously fallible and that we are more limited than we can know in our self-understanding; that it is God's gift in a particular

and unique set of events in the world that it becomes possible for us to be released from some of the most lethal effects of this fallibility; and that the new possibility is bound in with life in community centred on praise and listening and mutual nurture. This is the Christian universe in (very) small space. It must argue against other traditions that the world comes from and as deliberate gift (Buddhists would disagree), that our self-deception is so radical and deep-seated that we cannot be healed by the revelation of divine wisdom and law alone (Jews and Muslims would disagree), that our healing is a 'remaking' effected through a once and for all set of events (Muslims and Hindus would disagree). The Christian must argue that because this picture of the universe makes the fullest allowance possible for human failure and self-deceit and gives the most drastic account possible of divine presence in addressing this failure (God coming to inhabit creation in Jesus), it has a good claim to comprehensiveness as a view of how things are. But it is assailed by those who say that its doctrines of original sin are self-indulgent excuses for the weakness of the will, that its concentration on history limits it to parochial perspectives or ties it to a remote and disputed past, that its view of the common life is weak and fails to make the necessary bid for social transformation in a comprehensive way (a particularly strong Muslim point).

And meanwhile, the Christian is struck and challenged by the fact that outside the visible fellowship of faith, lives are lived which look as though they are in harmony with the Christian universe – which give the right place to contemplation and joy, to self-forgetfulness and the awareness of gift. The theological task is not only to go on patiently clarifying the implications of the Christian universe and reflecting on the sort of critiques I have sketched, but also to think about how such lives outside the frame are made possible and sustained. There is no quick answer to this, certainly no answer that would justify us in saying, 'Forget the doctrine, all that matters is the practice', since the doctrine is what nourishes and makes sense of the practice. Our doctrine is still in formation; and the question of how holy lives can exist outside our own tradition has throughout Christian history led to some of the most searching and far-reaching extensions of our language about the significance of Jesus. I trust that this will go on being the fruit of such questioning. But my aim in this lecture has been primarily to plead for our dialogue to take place at the level of how we place ourselves in the whole universe of our systems, and how we imagine lives that are holy, that are in the fullest sense 'natural', in accord with how things are. At this level, we do not see others either as bad or unsuccessful copies of ourselves or as people who have a few casual variants on a single shared truth. We have to see how very other our universes are; and only then do we find dialogue a surprise and a joy as we also discover where and how we can still talk about what matters most – holiness, being at peace with what most truly is.