

# **Discourse**

**Learning and Teaching in  
Philosophical and  
Religious Studies**

# Discourse:

## Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

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# Discourse:

Volume 10, Number 1, Autumn 2010

The journal of the *Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies* of the *Higher Education Academy*

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## Editorial—the Future of Philosophical and Religious Studies

*Dr Clare Saunders*  
*Senior Academic Co-ordinator,*  
*Subject Centre for Philosophical*  
*and Religious Studies*

The past few months have been eventful ones in UK (and especially English) higher education. Unprecedented cuts in direct public funding for teaching—including the complete withdrawal of funding for the humanities—coupled with the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees of up to £9,000 per year are likely to have substantial and unpredictable effects on the higher education experience of students and staff alike. Many universities and departments are facing stark questions about their future in this changing HE market, with growing attention focused on ‘key performance indicators’ such as student satisfaction, attainment and graduate employment. In this challenging climate, what is the future of philosophical and religious studies (PRS) in higher education?

Many of the papers in this issue of *Discourse* address

this issue explicitly or tangentially. This edition includes papers from two recent Subject Centre events which explored the nature and role of PRS subjects in 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education—‘Courting Controversy?’, which focused on the policy and practice of teaching Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society (Cohn-Sherbok; Reddie; Cush & Robinson; Moseley; Quartermaine); and ‘Beyond Boundaries’, which discussed the (increasingly?) widespread practice of teaching PRS subjects outside of ‘core’ PRS departments and its distinctive challenges and opportunities (Hanscomb).

Several papers arising from Subject Centre-funded projects (Altorf; Gough and Goldstein; Garvey) also offer critical reflections on the place of PRS subjects in higher education and wider society—in particular Garvey’s analysis of philosophy’s engagement with the ‘sustainability’ agenda in education, and Altorf’s

exploration of the interaction between assessment forms and educational aims and 'learning outcomes'. Such fundamental questions about the nature of higher education also shape Kidd's paper, which offers a diagnosis of philosophical education. This theme is, however, but one strand in the diverse contributions to pedagogy in our disciplines to be found in this edition of *Discourse*.

The Subject Centre is not immune from the changes facing UK higher education—the Higher Education Academy (HEA), of which we are part, is being restructured in light of significantly reduced funding and changing sector needs, and as a result the current Subject Centre network will be closed during 2011/12, with future discipline level support for higher education being led by the HEA's central offices in York. (See our website for details:<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsnews/123>.)

In the meantime, however, the Subject Centre continues to provide a range

of support for PRS learning and teaching, including our latest round of funding—a total of over £40,000 awarded to 15 new projects (see [http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/grants/funded\\_projects.html](http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/grants/funded_projects.html))—and our forthcoming conference, 'Foundations for the Future' (13-14 July, London), (see page 8 of this publication for the provisional programme, and <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/482> for registration) which will draw on the fruits of the work we have undertaken over the past 10 years and celebrate the diverse strengths of PRS learning and teaching, as well as exploring new perspectives and future challenges. I hope that many of our readers will join us at this conference; and encourage all of you to stay in touch with the Subject Centre so that we can advise you of future developments in the HEA and UK higher education.

Best wishes, Clare.

## The Higher Education Academy

**T**he Higher Education Academy's mission is to help institutions, discipline groups and all staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students.

Its aims and objectives are:

1. To be an authoritative and independent voice on policies that influence student learning experiences;
2. To support institutions in their strategies for improving the student learning experience;
3. To lead, support and inform the professional development and recognition of staff in higher education;
4. To promote good practice in all aspects of support for the student learning experience;
5. To lead the development of research and evaluation to improve the quality of the student learning experience;
6. To be a responsive, efficient and accountable organisation.

**<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk>**

## The Subject Network

The Subject Network is a network of 24 subject centres based in higher education institutions throughout the UK. It is funded by the four HE funding bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It aims to promote high quality learning and teaching through development and transfer of successful practice in all subject disciplines.

# The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies is based at the University of Leeds and at a partner site at the University of Wales, Lampeter and covers the disciplines of Philosophy, Philosophy of Science, History of Science (including the History of Medicine and Technology), Theology, and Religious Studies.

## Mission statement

Supporting teachers and learners in Philosophical and Religious Studies in higher education across the UK.

## Strategic Aims

- To identify, develop and disseminate appropriate enhancements in higher education practice.
- To actively support, encourage and participate in the sharing of relevant, diverse and effective practice and research.
- To support individuals and departments in enabling and managing change; and promote their needs and strengths through that change.
- To provide and develop an accessible and flexible repository of relevant knowledge, resources and expertise that adds value to student learning.
- To work effectively and collaboratively across the Higher Education Academy and the sector to add value to our activities.

Visit our website at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk>

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# Foundations for the Future: Subject Centre for PRS Conference 2011

University of Greenwich, 13-14 July 2011

**Keynote speakers: Baroness Mary Warnock and Dr Adam Dinham**

We are pleased to announce our 2011 conference, which will bring together colleagues in Philosophy, Theology, Religious Studies, History and Philosophy of Science, Technology and Medicine (HPSTM), Biblical Studies and Educational Development and provide an opportunity to explore the diverse approaches and challenges in these areas, and to share effective learning and teaching practices.

The Subject Centre for PRS has worked with colleagues in departments throughout the UK and internationally for more than a decade to build a strong community committed to the enhancement of learning and teaching in our disciplines. In that time we have organised over 100 events attended by more than 1,600 people, contributed to hundreds more, funded over 150 projects in learning and teaching in our disciplines, and published 14 books and guides, almost 200 articles in our journal, *Discourse*, and more than 500 other resources, case studies and project reports on our website.

In addition to inviting new perspectives in learning and teaching in our disciplines, this conference will draw together the range of work that we have undertaken and supported over the past 10 years; the wealth of knowledge and expertise that exists in learning and teaching across our disciplines; and the difference this work has made to the learning experience of students in theology, religious studies, philosophy and HPSTM across the UK. It will celebrate good teaching in our subjects, and the many successes of the Subject Centre for PRS working in collaboration with our academic communities.

The conference will consider how these foundations can be built upon as the Higher Education Academy moves to a new structure, and how you can be involved. It will also provide a forum to discuss the future of philosophical and religious studies education in these difficult times for UK higher education.

# Programme

## Day 1

**10:30 - 11:30** Registration and coffee

**11:30 - 12:00** Welcome

**12:00 - 13:00** Keynote 1: Baroness Mary Warnock

**13:00 - 14:00** Lunch

**14:00 - 15:00** Parallel 1

**Session 1.1** Deirdre Burke: *Marking in Religious Studies: hyperlinks to learning resources*

**Session 1.2** Melanie Prideaux: *Employability in Theology and Religious Studies\**

**Session 1.3** John Foster & Myfanwy Williams: *Why do Philosophy in schools—and after?*

**15:00 - 16:00** Parallel 2

**Session 2.1** Chiara Ambrosio & Catherine M. Jackson: *Undergraduate research goes digital: using open educational resources to develop teaching and research on the directed community model*

**Session 2.2** Anne-Marie Gallagher & Frank J Harrington: *The impact on Religious Studies teachers of emotionality in the HE classroom*

**Session 2.3** Keith Crome, Ruth Farrar, Patrick O'Connor & Lisa Clughen: *Learning habits and teaching techniques: Developing a handbook of practices*

**16:00 - 17:00** Parallel 3

**Session 3.1** Jessie Paterson: *The teaching and learning experience—a look back at the last ten years and the way ahead for the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh*

**Session 3.2** Marije Altorf: *Philosophy and the university: Socratic dialogue and education*

**Session 3.3** Laurence Goldstein & Martin Gough: *Gardner-Inspired dog-legged design of teaching materials: a logical illustration*

**17:00 - 18:30** Free time

**18:30 - 19:30** Wine reception/poster session

**19:30** Dinner

## Day 2

**09:30 - 10:30** Keynote 2: Dr Adam Dinham

**10:30 - 10:45** Coffee

**10:45 - 11:45** Parallel 4

**Session 4.1** Stephanie Sinclair: *Blended learning and tuition in Religious Studies: an Open University perspective*

**Session 4.2** Lynne Scholefield & Stephen E. Gregg: *The student learning experience in Religious Studies field trips and study tours: managing expectations and outcomes*

**Session 4.3** Mahlet Getachew Zimeta: *Ethics at the edge: an innovative and interdisciplinary approach to teaching Practical Ethics*

**11:45 - 12:45** Parallel 5

**Session 5.1** Christina Welch: *Blended and distance learning in a TRS Masters programme\**

**Session 5.2** Denise Cush & Catherine Robinson: *Does Religious Studies work? Employability and experiential learning*

**Session 5.3** Brendan Larvor: *Building on two projects in Philosophy\**

**12:45 - 13:45** Lunch

**13:45 - 14:45** Parallel 6

**Session 6.1** Sarah Honeychurch & Steve Draper: *The Development and implementation of a method of collaborative learning for first year Philosophy tutorials*

**Session 6.2** Anja Finger: *Learning through research: students as participant observers of religion/s*

**Session 6.3** Martin Gough: *Education as Philosophy and Philosophy as education: lessons for disciplinarity from running a Philosophy course within an academic development programme*

**14:45 - 15:45** Parallel 7

**Session 7.1** Dominic Corrywright & Tom Cosgrove: *Blending the student experience: e-learning, study visits and interdisciplinary links explanation and evaluation*

**Session 7.2** Mark Addis & Helen Beebee: *Philosophy research training network*

**Session 7.3** George MacDonald Ross: *What's the use of lectures? 40 years on*

**15:45 - 16:30** Closing plenary

\* The titles of these sessions are currently provisional.

## Costs

Conference costs are as follows:

1 day (conference attendance on one day + tea/coffee + lunch): £30

2 days (same as above but on both days): £50

Full conference (2 days + overnight stay + conference dinner): £90

1 day + conference dinner: £50

For students and speakers the following discounted costs apply:

1 day: £20

2 days: £35

Full conference: £65

1 day plus dinner: £40

Some bursaries will be available to assist with speaker expenses in attending.

## Registration

You can now register to attend the conference by visiting our website:

**<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/482>**.

# Teaching Theology/Religious Studies and Gender

University of Leeds, 24 May 2011

Keynote speaker: Deborah Sawyer, Lancaster University.

Speakers include:

- Emma Tomalin, University of Leeds
- Tamsin Bradley, London Metropolitan University
- Rachel Muers, University of Leeds
- Kristin Aune, University of Derby
- Sonya Sharma, Durham University
- Dawn Llewellyn, University of Chester
- Lindsay Simmonds, London School of Economics

This workshop, organised by the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, will explore issues involved in the teaching of theology and/or religious studies (T/RS) and gender within different disciplinary settings in UK higher education. It will bring together participants from a range of academic disciplines, including post-graduates involved in teaching, and facilitate a conversation between colleagues that will:

- Shed valuable light on the variety of learning and teaching approaches used by those teaching T/RS and gender;
- Provide a space for reflection on the learning and teaching issues and challenges encountered by this diverse academic group;
- Identify differences and commonalities in the experiences of those teaching gender in different academic disciplines and in the context of different religions and/or theologies;
- Allow colleagues to showcase and share examples of good practice and to network with others working in the field, often in disciplines other than their own

The deadline for registration is 10 May 2011.

Please see our website for further details:

**<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/484>**

# Teaching the Green Humanities?

London, 25 May 2011

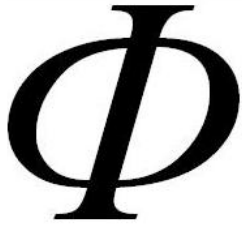
This workshop organised by the Higher Education Academy arts and humanities Subject Centres (English, History, Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, PALATINE, Philosophical and Religious Studies), is about the relationship between teaching the arts and humanities in HE and student learning about environmental and social issues. It will debate the extent to which the pedagogy of the humanities is inherently 'green' and should be concerned with engaging its students in environmental and social issues. It will also create opportunities to share current practices in addressing these issues in (and outside) the classroom and demonstrate how pedagogical innovation in the arts and humanities might contribute to environmental and social awareness.

This workshop will be structured around four themes, the first two of which we see as being concerned primarily with theoretical debate, and the second two as concerned with practical aspects of teaching and curricula:

- What is 'green' about humanities pedagogy?
- Should the arts and humanities teach students to be 'green'?
- Arts and Humanities teaching and environmental engagement
- Arts and Humanities teaching and social engagement

Please see the English Subject Centre website for more details:

**[http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event\\_detail.php?event\\_index=304](http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=304)**



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## **Reports and Articles**



# Christian Triumphalism and the Hook-Nosed Elephant in the Corner

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**Dan Cohn-Sherbok**

Professor Emeritus of Judaism

University of Wales Trinity St. David

This paper was originally given at the conference 'Courting Controversy' organised by the Subject Centre for PRS, 8th-9th July 2010.

I am most grateful to you for asking me to speak to your conference, Courting Controversy. I see from your programme that you will be exploring a number of issues around the policy and practice of teaching Theology and Religious Studies in higher education in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society. Now, it is my intention to confront what I believe to be a major problem in university and college departments and in the classroom. It is a dilemma and difficulty that I

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies,

**Vol. 10, No. 1, Autumn 2010, pp. 17 - 27**

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have personally faced during the thirty-four years I have been an academic in Britain. And so, much of what I will say will be autobiographical. But, of course, I want to use my experiences as a basis for reflecting about the subject more generally.

The title of this keynote address is: Christian Triumphalism and the Hooked-nose Elephant in the Corner. You will tell me that elephants don't have noses; they have trunks. That's true. But of course I mean this metaphorically. How do I go about explaining what I am referring to? Let me begin by telling you a secret: I have a disreputable distinction. A disgraceful distinction. A regrettable distinction. A troubling and puzzling distinction. It is this: In 1975 I was appointed a lecturer in theology at the University of Kent at Canterbury. I was to be the specialist in Jewish studies in a department of five. My other colleagues consisted of a Professor of Christian ethics, and three lecturers: one in Biblical studies, another in Church history and a third in religious studies. For over twenty years I was the Hebrew specialist, and in addition I taught a range of courses dealing with the history of Judaism from biblical to modern times. Students were interested in the subject, and I think I must have over the years had thousands of undergraduates in my classes. However, in 1997 I left Kent to become the Professor of Judaism at the University of Wales, Lampeter. On my departure, I was not replaced even though a number of appointments were subsequently made. Biblical Hebrew vanished from the curriculum, as did all the courses I ever taught. There is no course dealing exclusively with Judaism. Even though the University of Kent department of religious studies advertises itself as proud to offer modules in the world's religions, Judaism is totally absent as a separate subject. The Kent website declares:

Religion is a vital element in human culture, and today religious issues are everywhere—from current affairs and international events, to the history of ideas, art and literature, and our own immediate experience and environment. Religious studies at Kent involves investigating and discussing these ideas, experiences, practices and institutions, through texts, films, historical data and directly observing the world today.

Yet, despite such a claim, there are no courses devoted specifically and exclusively to Judaism as there were when I was a lecturer. Judaism has

vanished into a black hole.

At Lampeter I was the sole Jewish specialist in a department of what became over thirty members of staff. From 1997 until this past October I taught introductory, intermediate and advanced Biblical Hebrew as well as courses in Jewish history and thought, Jewish theology and philosophy, modern Jewish life, and the Israel-Palestine problem. For some years I was the sole teacher for a joint honours programme in Jewish studies. Yet, in October when I retired—as at Kent—I was not replaced and every undergraduate course I ever taught vanished. There is no Biblical Hebrew, nor are there any courses on Judaism (even though a course is now offered on the Druids). A line was drawn through all Judaism undergraduate modules. Although Lampeter describes itself as committed to exploring the world's major faiths, Judaism has evaporated.

You must admit, it is a dubious distinction to have taught in two universities for a total of thirty-four years, to find that not only is one not replaced when one leaves, but the subject I taught—Judaism—was abolished from the undergraduate curriculum immediately after I left.

In two departments that describe themselves as committed to the study of the world's faiths, Judaism has disappeared. My wife teases me about this. I have to admit it is a bit humiliating. After all, Judaism is a major world religion. It's been around for nearly 4,000 years. Christianity emerged out of Judaism. Jesus and his disciples were Jews. Paul was a Jew. Israel is constantly in the news. But at two places where I taught the subject, there is the pretence that Judaism doesn't exist. It's the elephant with a hooked nose in the corner that no-one wants to acknowledge.

I wonder if it's me. Now it could be. It may be that I have been such a disagreeable and difficult colleague that my fellow academics couldn't bear the thought of having another Jew in the department. Or, possibly my lectures were so disastrous that it was felt better to eliminate the subject of Judaism altogether. But, my classes were always full—they were the most popular both at Kent and Lampeter. So maybe my colleagues were jealous and wanted no further competition. Or there is the possibility that they thought I was corrupting the young.

It could have been a combination of all these factors. But I don't think so. It was something else. And that is what I want to explore with you this morning. For over three decades I have experienced in differ-

ent ways an assumption of Christian superiority *vis-a-vis* the world's faiths. It has been so amongst the few evangelical colleagues I have had as well as many of the most liberal. Nearly all my colleagues have been Christian—some deeply religious; others lukewarm; some indifferent. But almost without exception they have assumed that Christianity is normative, and that anything non-Christian is tangential. This, I believe, is a modern form of Christian triumphalism. I don't mean to suggest that Christian university academics in departments of theology and religious studies seek to convert their students. It is not that at all. Instead, there is the overwhelming feeling that the teaching about Christianity is of fundamental importance. From Aberdeen in the North to Kent in the South to Exeter in the West and Cambridge in the East, courses about all aspects of Christianity—theology, history, ethics—predominate.

Now, in one sense there are very good reasons why this is so. After all Britain is in origin a Christian country. Most of our students come from a Christian background. The students themselves are more interested in studying about Christianity than any other religion. And the government is anxious to inculcate values of citizenship that are indirectly shaped by the Christian tradition. There is nothing wrong in this. There is every reason why Christianity in its various forms should predominate on the syllabus. Yet, in my many years of experience I have repeatedly witnessed amongst my Christian colleagues an unpleasant attitude of condescension and derision.

You might think that what I am referring to is a subtle form of antisemitism. But that would be a mistake. The patronizing stance that I am describing is not directly against Jews or Judaism, but toward adherents of all non-Christian traditions. I shall give you an example of such an attitude. A number of years ago, one of my Christian colleagues formulated plans to establish a Centre for the Study of Religion. The aim was to attract scholars from other institutions to conferences, organize a series of research seminars and attract external funding for projects. However, this individual insisted that the Centre's activities should be confined solely to Christianity. At that stage Lampeter had just hired a professor of Islam. When he heard about the plans for this Centre, he was troubled about its title. If its aim were to study religion, then why were non-Christian religions excluded? He took this person to lunch at a local restaurant and explained his perplexity. Why, he

wondered, couldn't the Centre be renamed to reflect its Christian orientation? Couldn't it be called: The Centre for the Study of the Christian Religion? Then there would be no confusion. I too, as the Professor of Judaism, made the same point. Despite our objections, the department pressed ahead with its plans. Only Christians were asked to be fellows of the Centre, and staff members associated with the Centre were restricted to Christian members of the department. My Muslim colleague and I were cross. Our pleas had been totally ignored. When I told my wife (who had attended a girls' boarding school with a strong Christian tradition) about the situation, she wasn't surprised. 'What do you expect from these bigots?' she said. 'Is there anything I can do?' I asked. 'Well,' she replied. 'You can give the Director of this new Centre a little parody of a well-known Christian hymn.' The original goes like this:

The Church's one foundation  
is Jesus Christ Our Lord.  
She is His new creation  
By water and the word.  
From Heaven He came and sought Her  
To be His holy bride.  
With His own blood He bought Her  
And for Her life He died.

She took out a pen and wrote a new version that goes as follows:

Religion's one foundation  
Is Christianity.  
The faiths of Other nations  
Don't make the category.  
From all their works defend us

Preserve us from their texts.  
We know these faith pretenders  
Are naught but heathen sects.  
Though liberals argue plainly  
For Hindu, Muslim, Jew  
And keep repeating vainly  
That they're religions too.  
Our faith will never falter,  
Truth's trumpet still will sound.  
It's on the Christian altar  
That true religion's found.

I fear that the Director of the Centre was not amused when I handed over a copy. It is no surprise then, even though it is deeply troubling, that Judaism has been eliminated from the curriculum in two departments of theology and religious studies, where I taught for over three decades. It is the hook-nosed elephant in the corner that is ignored. 'Though liberals argue plainly for Hindu, Muslim, Jew, and keep repeating vainly that that they're religions too'—it does little good. Their voices are drowned by Christian trumpets that proclaim the truth: 'it's on the Christian altar that true religion's found.' I shall tell you next of a little altercation I had some years ago about just this point. The University of Wales, Lampeter was a Christian foundation. It was established in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a training college for Anglican priests in Wales. Its aim was to educate Welsh clergy who were too poor to study at Oxford and Cambridge.

All this changed in the 1970s when St David's College was secularized and became part of the University of Wales. Nonetheless, it still has a lovely chapel in the centre of the original Georgian building where students were housed. It currently functions as the university chapel. Every day there are services for the faithful, and at graduation a leaving service is held just before the degree ceremony. Although the

service is for all students who wish to attend, regardless of their religious orientation, it is a Eucharist.

The difficulty with such a service, however, is that non-Anglicans as well as members of other faiths like me who would like to attend are left out of the focal point of the service: the Eucharist itself. Concerned about the inappropriateness of such a religious event, I recommended to the Vice-Chancellor and the Chaplain that it would be more suitable to have a simple Matins service. This, I believed, would be completely consistent with Christian practice and more inclusive. However, when several of my Christian colleagues heard about my suggestion, they were outraged. It was, they believed, presumptuous for a rabbi to interfere with the traditions of the university. In response, I pointed out that the Eucharist service was a recent innovation. In the end, the Vice-Chancellor put the matter to Council. I was not allowed to attend the meeting, and I later heard that in the light of the forceful criticisms made by the Christian members of Council, it was decided to proceed with the Eucharist service as planned. I might add that this Eucharist service is very poorly attended.

Such a lack of sympathy for the non-Christian again illustrates my main point: Christian triumphalism in a modern guise continues to pervade the way in which universities and departments of theology and religious studies are run. Now, you might object by pointing to the creation of my own lectureship and Chair of Judaism. If I am right, then how did I ever get a job teaching Jewish studies in a university in the first place? I shall tell you. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a thriving department of religious studies at the University of Lancaster headed by Professor Ninian Smart. Unlike most departments, Lancaster actively fostered the teaching of religions other than Christianity. Reacting to this recent trend, Kent decided that they should add non-Christian religions to the curriculum, and a temporary lectureship was advertised in 1974. However, before an appointment was made, the Chairman of the department and others attempted to attract external funding from the Jewish community to support this new lectureship. The same applied to my Chair at Lampeter, and my first task was to establish a joint honours degree in Jewish studies in the expectation that this might attract Jewish support. However, because of the remoteness of Lampeter, it was an impossible task: no Jewish organization felt it worthwhile to help support a post with such a

limited number of Jewish students. Why do departments of theology and religious studies seek outside funding for non-Christian appointments while posts dealing with Christianity are funded from university resources? The answer is obvious: non-Christian religions are viewed as tangential to the central activity of the department and a means of raising external funding for the institution. But there are serious dangers in this approach. Externally funded appointments come with strings attached. In many if not most cases donors are involved in the appointment process and have their own agendas.

There is a final point that I should make. It is true that lectureships and other posts in religions other than Christianity do exist at numerous universities (often funded in the way I suggested). But in almost all cases, such individuals do not take leadership roles in the department. There is an unspoken assumption that Heads of Departments of theology and religious studies should be Christian. It makes no difference if they are Catholic, Anglican or Protestant or male or female. What is vital is that they are perceived as mainstream. In this case, gender discrimination has been eliminated, but religious discrimination is the norm.

So, there we are. Throughout the country departments of theology and religious studies proclaim they are anxious to foster the study of other faiths. But in fact non-Christian religions are sidelined in numerous ways. At times such discrimination is blatant. At others it is subtle. This is what I mean by modern Christian triumphalism. There is no evangelical quest. Rather, there is a pervasive assumption that Christianity is mainstream and should occupy centre stage. Other faiths, like Judaism, can be given a bit part in the drama of the religious history of humankind. But, sometimes they are completely ignored and do not even appear on stage. Certainly at Kent and Lampeter the poor hooked-nosed Jewish elephant has disappeared entirely.

Recently a comic campus novel, *Degrees R'Us*, was published by Impress Books based at the University of Exeter. The author is anonymous, but I shall let you into the secret: it was written by my wife who is rather incensed by what I am describing. In one scene, the protagonist, Dr. Felix Glass, a Jewish philosophy lecturer had just been co-opted into the theology department. In an interview with his Head of Department, Dr. John Pilkington, an evangelical Methodist, he asked why he was taken on since he was not a theologian.

John stared out of the window. 'I know you're not and this may be a problem. We must see how it all works out. To tell you the truth, several of us are rather troubled by your background in particular.' 'My background?', Felix wondered. 'Now I really was flummoxed. What could my background have to do with joining the theology department? I thought back to my parents: my father was a doctor, a dermatologist, and my mother dedicated herself to running the house, looking after her family and volunteering for a range of good works. I could not see anything very objectionable to that. Perhaps our neat 1930s villa in Hampstead Garden Suburb was the problem? Or could it be my new colleagues were unhappy with the fact that I had won a partial scholarship and had been educated as a day boy at Westminster School? Perhaps the theologians found something objectionable in private education. 'I am sorry, I don't understand. What's wrong with my background?' I said. Pilkington looked embarrassed. 'Well,' he said, 'as you know, we are a Christian department. Most of us are in some sense committed to the original vision of the university as an evangelical missionary college. Of course, its role is different now. We're a modern university. We have a new vocation: to bring educational opportunities everywhere around the globe. Yet there is still the feeling in the department that our first duty is to encourage students in their faith. "Fides Quaerens Intellectum", faith seeking understanding. You see...that's the purpose of theology, at any rate here at our university.'

My heart stopped and I stared at him. I had been warned about this, but in my entire career I had never had to face it before. My family were completely non-religious. The only time in my life I had ever entered a synagogue was to go to the bar mitzvahs of various of my school friends. It was true that both my parents as children had fled with their families from Germany. They had been lucky. Both sets of grandparents were originally from Berlin, and they knew what was going on. With the rise of the Nazi party, they had realised there would be real trouble for anyone with Jewish ancestry. They had settled in England as soon as things became difficult in 1933. In London they had established a new life, cultured, civilised, influenced by their German heritage certainly, but determinedly secular and patriotically English. 'You mean you don't like the fact that I'm Jewish', I said. 'You people are always so sensitive,' Pilkington replied. 'I knew it would be difficult to talk to you about this. What I am

trying to say is that we do see ourselves as a Christian department. We're particularly strong in Biblical studies. We want to get away from the misguided twentieth-century fashion for phenomenology and world religions.'

Assuming I am right about this, is there anything that can be done? What is required, I believe, is a revolution in orientation. Many of you will be familiar with the distinction drawn by philosophers of religion such as John Hick between a Christo-centric conception of the world faiths, and a Divine-centric approach. According to these writers, a Copernican revolution is now required in the understanding of religion. In the past it was assumed that Christianity contains the fullest divine disclosure. On this basis, Christianity was at the centre of the world's faiths. Christian thinkers who embraced such a view were like scientists who endorsed a Ptolemaic view of the universe in which the earth is at the centre. In the modern world, however, where adherents of one tradition continually come into contact with adherents of other faiths, it is difficult to sustain such a narrow vision. Instead a complete shift in orientation is required. Instead of placing Christianity at the centre of the world's religions, there should be a paradigm shift to a divine-centric conception of religious history. On this basis, the world's religions should be understood as different human responses to the one divine reality. In previous ages religions conceived of this one reality either theistically (as a personal deity or non-theistically as non-personal), but such differences were in essence the result of historical, cultural and psychological influences. A frequent image used to represent this new conception of the universe of faiths is that of alternative paths ascending a single mountain. The routes of these faith communities are all different, yet at various points they intersect: these intersections should be understood as those areas where religious conceptions within the differing traditions complement one another. Thus, as pilgrims of different faiths ascend to the summit, they will encounter parallels with their own traditions. But the divine reality they all pursue is in the end unattainable by these finite quests. As the Infinite, it is unknowable and incomprehensible. It is the cloud of unknowing hovering beyond the mountain itself. Such a pluralistic conception of the universe of faiths calls for a shift away from viewing all religions from a Christian perspective, and towards acknowledging the spiritual integrity of other religious traditions.

This is the model that I want to endorse. Departments of theology and religious studies should seek to free themselves from an attitude of Christian superiority. Even if there are more courses dealing with Christianity on offer, space should be made for other faiths. No university should drop a major world faith as Kent and Lampeter have done in the case of Judaism.

It is not enough for departments to state in their publicity that they support the teaching of the world's religions. They should do so in fact. There should be no fear of hiring lecturers from non-Christian traditions to teach about Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and other major traditions. Scholars from non-Western countries should not be denigrated. If the teaching of religion in the United Kingdom is to thrive, a Copernican revolution needs to take place. The spiritual treasures of the world's religions should be on display. For thirty-four years I have had the pleasure of being an academic. I am deeply grateful to the UK university system for saving me from the rabbinate which, believe me, is not a job for a nice Jewish boy. I can say without hesitation that I truly loved my job. But I have been dismayed by the way Judaism and other faiths have been treated at the universities where I have taught. There is a poor, neglected hooked-nosed elephant in the corner. He does not like being treated as a nobody. He is proud of his tradition and heritage. He does not want to crowd out Christianity. But he wants just a bit of respect. He wants to be liked. He wants to be seen as an equal. He is lonely. And he wants some friends. Is it really too much to ask?



# **‘If Heaven is Such a Wonderful Place, Then Why Would White People Tell Black People About It?’:**

Problematizing Black Christian Confessional Belief in Postcolonial Britain

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## **Introduction**

I had the privilege of being invited to attend and indeed sit on one of the panels at the first ‘State of Black Britain Symposium’ held at the Commonwealth Club in London on the 17<sup>th</sup> October 2009. The event brought together a number of prominent Black British spokespersons,

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies,

**Vol. 10, No. 1, Autumn 2010, pp. 29 - 53**

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personalities, politicians, entrepreneurs and educators to discuss the current state of Black people in Britain. At an earlier juncture in the meeting, as the conversation addressed the issue of the rise of the BNP and the implications of this apparent growth in support for Black people in Britain, a leading Black Christian minister rose to his feet and declared that ‘Black people should join the BNP and so attempt to undermine them from within’. There was a moment of silence, followed by a ripple of applause and some general nods of agreement. Several minutes later, I overheard two older Black people observing that whilst they might not go as far as attempting to join the BNP, they would certainly vote for them as they were, and I quote one of them directly at this point, ‘They are at least standing up for Christian Britain’.

Suffice it to say that I was stunned at what I had just heard. Voting for the BNP as a Black person is akin to turkeys looking forward to Christmas. A fascist party whose stated *raison d’être* is the removal of all non-Anglo-Saxon people from country is not one that seems to even want Black support let alone the absurd idea that Black people should vote for them and possibly even join the party to undermine them from within.

What intrigued most, however, as a Black religious scholar, was the notion that voting for this party was a means of defending Christian Britain. The fact that the BNP cannot be said to represent Christian anything, is clearly, the first obvious point to be made. I was stunned that the BNP would even countenance trying to defend a religious faith, whose sacred figure at the heart of it was a Palestinian Jew. But whatever the logic, or otherwise, of the BNP seeking to defend Christian Britain, it is perhaps the even more critical question as whether ‘Christian Britain’ is something worth saving by Black Christians that is exercising my thoughts in this lecture. This is the same Christian Britain of empire that gave us Transatlantic, chattel slavery of African people; the same Christian Britain of Empire and of colonialism; and the same Christian Britain of the mass exploitation of subjugated peoples, appropriating their lands, their bodies and their very selves. Is this the construct these individuals were hoping to defend by voting for a fascist political party?

In this paper, it is my intention to demonstrate how my scholarship and teaching has sought to address the often inhibited and inter-

nalised colonisation of the mind that has bedevilled and continues to impact on Black people in postcolonial Britain. I am interested in how a participative model of Black Theology, influenced by notions of transformative pedagogy, can be the means by which ordinary Black people of faith can be enabled to reflect more critically on the implication of the underlying theological constructs they hold. In what ways do the confessional belief structures that arise from particular theological themes become harmful and even detrimental to the Black self? How can these elements be challenged, resisted and even overcome? Clearly, in the scope of one lecture, I will not accomplish all of the aforementioned, but at least, in the words of a now a famous Russian meerkat, 'You know where I am coming from.'

Before I commence with this paper, let me offer a few caveats in advance of the remainder of the paper. First, while there is no doubting the arresting nature of the title of this address, drawn from the words of Roy Sawh, I will not be exploring the efficacies or truth claims of the substantive belief in heaven, either as a concept, or as a psycho-social construct for human meaning-making. Rather, I want to use Sawh's comments as a rhetorical device to explore aspects of a seeming *naiveté* amongst some Black Christians in Britain regarding the relationship between the material, historical reality of their Blackness and the superstructure of the Christian faith, which sits in dialectical tension with the former as a means of connoting identity and subjectivity in Britain.

I think it is also important that I make it clear that my work offers only a small snap shot, a microcosm if you will, of what is undoubtedly, a large and significant social phenomenon. I am not writing about or speaking for or against all or every Black Christian in Britain. I write as someone who is himself a confessional believer within the very code I am critiquing. My insider status is not meant to offer me any sense of being 'authentic' or providing greater veracity for my account than that provided by many others.<sup>1</sup> Rather, this work is based on two personal,

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<sup>1</sup> I have sought to problematise the notion of the privileged voice as the subjective-insider in theo-ethnographic work in a previous piece of work. I argue that such discourse is often nothing more than a simplistic device to attain a form of 'authentic' authorial voice that attains towards unchallenged authority in the recalling of any socio-cultural accounts of reality. I am not questioning the importance or indeed the efficacy of insider accounts in any absolutist sense; rather, I am critiquing their usage as a short hand descriptor for what which is supposedly more authentic. See

experiential encounters, which are then juxtaposed with wider theoretical material drawn from the literature in order to provide a richly textured account of how and in what ways is the critical consciousness of Black Christians in Britain impacted by the false consciousness provided by Imperial Missionary Christianity.

The other caveat I think I need to make is that my polemical attack on Imperial Missionary Christianity does acknowledge that there were many good, decent and kind White Christians whose individual works of grace and kindness acted as a clear antithesis to the often brutal outworking of colonialism and empire. Clearly, it would be wrong to traduce every White Christian missionary, minister or colonial apparatchik and tar them all with the same anti-imperial polemical brush. My work seeks to attack the overarching phenomenon of imperial, empire based Christianity and to work within the weight of the numerical probability, which reminds us that ‘the goods’, whether in terms of mission schools and hospitals; or in individual works of piety, were very much in the minority. To cite the words of a Black South African friend talking about the number of so-called ‘liberal White people who always opposed apartheid’, he says, ‘If there were so many of them against apartheid, and if they were all actively on the side of us, the oppressed Black people, then why did it last for so long and why did so many of have to die or live such miserable lives?’

I do not doubt that some evidentially good things emerged from colonialism and empire and that some good people were involved within it, but this should not deflect us from the overarching misery, suffering and oppression that was the life and death experience for millions of people across an extended period of time, across the many ‘pink bits’ of the globe.

## The Imperial Legacy of Britain and the church

My assessment *vis-a-vis* the colonial context in which Christianity in Britain is located can be witnessed, in part, in two dialogically matching responses to this phenomenon. First, is the very fact that I am

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Reddie, Anthony G., *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God Talk* (London: Equinox, 2006), pp. 10-25.

before you, a Black, African Caribbean male, a descendent of enslaved Africans. The second is that my parents came to this country in the late 1950s, from the Caribbean island of Jamaica. This dialogical, experiential truth reminds us of the positionality of Britain within the colonial construct of empire, which links it with a part of the world several thousand miles from these shores and which finds me standing before you, as a postcolonial subject. In the words of a poster beloved of the anti-racist movements of the left in the 1970s and 80s, 'We Are Here Because You Were There'.<sup>2</sup> It should be axiomatic that one cannot talk about Christianity in Britain without engaging with the broader thematic hinterland that is Empire and Colonialism. I write as a confessional Black Christian from within the Methodist tradition, for example. Methodism found its way to the Caribbean via the missionary enterprise of Nathaniel Gilbert, even though the indefatigable work undertaken by his Black enslaved women has largely gone unheralded.<sup>3</sup> The 'historic church'<sup>4</sup> version of Caribbean Christianity into which

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<sup>2</sup>This phrase has now been developed into a multi-media educational resource for teaching about empire, nationality and asylum in Britain. See [http://www.virtualmigrants.com/we\\_rhere/index.htm](http://www.virtualmigrants.com/we_rhere/index.htm).

<sup>3</sup>In more recent times, my colleague and friend Michael Jagessar has sought to both critique Gilbert's importance and give agency to the two enslaved African women in an important essay. See Jagessar, Michael N., 'Early Methodism in the Caribbean: Through the Imaginary Optics of Gilbert's Slave Women – Another Reading', *Black Theology: An International Journal* Vol.5, No.2, (2007), pp.11153-170.

<sup>4</sup>In using this term I am referring to those established denominations of the Protestant tradition, plus the Roman Catholic church, which account for the greater majority of the population that can be described and identified as attendees and practising Christians. The churches in question are the Anglican church (the Church of England), the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, the Reformed Church (the United Reformed Church in the UK) and the Roman Catholic Church. These churches account for approximately two thirds of all Black Christians in the UK. Pentecostalism, which emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century in North America accounts for the other third. As I will detail at a later juncture in this paper, Black Pentecostalism displays an alternative set of pathologies than that exhibited by Historic church Christianity. Both branches or wings of the Christian faith have, nevertheless, been informed by the Imperial missionary strains of British Christianity via the Caribbean and the continent of Africa. See entries marked 'Christianity' and 'Churches' in Dabydeen, David, Gilmore, John and Jones, Cecily, (eds.) *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), pp.99-104.

approximately two thirds of all Black people of Christian faith in Britain have been inducted and formed is one that echoes to the continual strains of British run slavery in the English islands of the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Caribbean Christianity, which emerges from the comparatively more recent Pentecostal tradition, has nonetheless, been influenced to an equal extent by the blandishments of Empire and colonialism. Michael Jagessar, commenting on Caribbean British Pentecostal Christianity as it pertains to Joe Aldred's book *Respect*,<sup>6</sup> writes,

Further, in spite of his discourse on the richness of Caribbean diversity (ethno-religious), what comes across from this volume is the sense that the default mode represents Caribbean folks stepping off the Windrush, so fully de-culturalized and purified of their inter-cultural ethno-religious heritage that their faith resembled the chalky white cliffs of Dover and the pristine un-deconstructed euro-centric theology.<sup>7</sup>

The continental African dimension of Christianity in Britain has also been informed by colonialism and empire, which continues to circumscribe the parameters of acceptability and notions of what constitutes the status-quo and normality in terms of faith adherence.<sup>8</sup> In using the term 'Imperial Missionary Christianity', I'm referring to the development of the Christian faith that arose from the missionary activities, which went hand in hand with empire and colonialism. It was this version, as opposed to more indigenous movements, such as North African Orthodox Christianity,<sup>9</sup> into which the bulk of colonial subjects

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<sup>5</sup> See Reddie, Richard, *Abolition: The Struggle to Abolish Slavery in the British Colonies* (Oxford: Lion, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See Aldred, J.D., *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity* (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Jagessar, Michael N., 'Book Review of J.D. Aldred, *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity*'. *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Vol.5, No.2, (2007) pp.128-130 (p.130).

<sup>8</sup> See Chike, Chigor, *African Christianity in Britain: Diaspora, Doctrines and Dialogue* (Milton Keynes: Authorhouse, 2007) for an excellent appraisal of African Christianity in Britain.

<sup>9</sup> There was a long legacy of Christianity in North Africa, which existed prior to Christianity reaching Britain. This is often known as the 'Alexandrian School' and was characterised by its great learning and the contribution it made to the intellectual development of early Christianity. See Brown, Michael Joseph, *The Lords Prayer*

were inducted and formed. A number of writers have spoken of the mis-education and indoctrination elements of colonial Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Constraints of space prevent a detailed exploration of the relationship between Imperial Missionary Christianity and Black Christians in Britain—suffice it to say, that there can be no doubting that the two are inextricably linked, to a level and at a depth that scholars are only now beginning to tease out. It is worth noting that at the time of writing, there are only a handful of texts that have explored this relationship to any satisfactory degree.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between empire, colonialism and Christianity, in many respects, remains the unacknowledged ‘elephant in the room’. Empire and colonialism found much of its intellectual underscoring on the basis of White, Eurocentric supremacy, which marked the clear binary between notions of civilised and acceptable against uncivilised and transgressive. There are no prizes for guessing on which side of the divide Black people found themselves relegated. The unacknowledged weight of invisible Whiteness and its damnable offspring, White supremacy has been remarked upon by the African Caribbean, Black British TV presenter and religio-cultural commentator, Robert Beckford thus:

I would say that theology is the last bastion of White suprema-

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*Through North African Eyes: A Window into Early Christianity* (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See Erskine, Noel L., *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1981), Gregory, Howard, *Caribbean Theology: Preparing for the Challenges Ahead* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1995), Williams, Lewin L., *Caribbean Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), Davis, Kortright, *Emancipation Still Comin’: Explorations in Caribbean Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990). A more recent offering, which provides, perhaps, the most radical riposte for the conservative and reactionary theological motifs contained within (Caribbean) Imperial Missionary Christianity, see Thomas, Oral, *Biblical Resistance Hermeneutics Within a Caribbean Context* (London: Equinox, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> See Beckford, Robert, *Dread and Pentecostalism: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000). See also Reddie, Anthony G., *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Postcolonial Black British Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2007) and Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Black Theology in Britain: A Reader* (London: Equinox, 2007).

cy in Britain. Most disciplines have woken up to the need to engage with critical theory. They've engaged with diversity at the core, thinking more critically and constructively about how they shape things. Sociology students here at Goldsmith's take courses in 'critical Whiteness'. In theology circles they'd think you were dealing with table cloths they have at different times of the year!<sup>12</sup>

At the time of writing it is interesting to note the paucity of theological texts written by White British authors seeking to explore the relationship between empire, colonialism, Whiteness, racism and the church in Britain.<sup>13</sup> The almost complete absence of literature pertaining to the collusion between Imperial Missionary Christianity and Black people of faith remains one of the significant challenges facing Black and Asian theologians in the British context. R.S. Sugirtharajah, the doyen of Postcolonial Biblical hermeneutics writing on the development of Imperial Missionary Christianity writes:

It is no coincidence that the founding of all these missionary societies took place contemporaneously with the activities of the trading companies like the East India Company and the Dutch East India Company. The East India Company initially resisted the presence of the missionaries. It feared that the interference of missionaries in local religious customs and manners might be counter-productive to its mercantile interests. However, [with] the renewal of the Company's charter in 1833 and the abolition of its monopoly, missionary enterprise received a boost....Once the impediment to missionary work was removed, the missionaries themselves became willing supporters of commercial expansion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Robert Beckford in *Reform* – URC magazine. (London: 86 Tavistock Place, June 2010), pp.12.

<sup>13</sup> To the best of my knowledge these texts include Leech, Kenneth, *Struggle in Babylon* (London: Sheldon press, 1988), Leech, Kenneth, *Race: Changing Society and the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2005), Haslam, David, *Race for the Millennium: a Challenge to Church and Society* (London: Church House for the Churches' Commission on Racial Justice [CCRJ], 1996), Haslam, David, *The Churches and 'Race': a Pastoral Approach* (Cambridge: Grove books, 2001), Wilkinson, John L., *Church in Black and White : the Black Christian Tradition in 'Mainstream' Churches in England: a White Response and Testimony* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993), Gorringer, Timothy J., *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Sugirtharajah, R.S., *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of*

But if the legacy of the under explored relationship between ‘Christianity, Commerce, and Civilisation’<sup>15</sup> within White British theological circles is a cause for concern, the record amongst Black Christians in Britain has, until comparatively recently, been equally lamentable. I must make the point at this juncture that the absence of writing in terms of the latter has not been an indication of the lack of ability amongst Black people of African descent to write. One can point to such landmark texts as the now iconic *The Empire Strikes Back*,<sup>16</sup> produced by the then ‘Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ at the University of Birmingham, as an example of the excellent work undertaken by Black British scholars. This work has become part of a larger tradition of cultural studies and sociological work that has made explicit the relationship between the Christian super-structure that buttressed and offered the necessary theological underscoring of the colonially-led, missionary enterprise that underpinned empire and the development of Britain’s imperial might, at home and abroad.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that it took some twenty-five years for Black Theology in Britain to produce its equivalent text.<sup>18</sup>

It was not until the 1990s, in fact, 1990 to be precise that the

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*Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM, 2003) pp.24.

<sup>15</sup> Comments made by Stanley Livingstone to sum up the imperial colonial missionary enterprise in Africa. See Nkomazana, Fidelis, ‘Livingstone’s Ideas of Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation’. *Botswana Journal of African Studies* Vol.12, Nos. 1 & 2, (1998), pp.45-57.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1970s Britain* (London and New York: Routledge in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> Within the British context, this work has, until more recent times, been undertaken with greater alacrity by sociologists and cultural theorists than theologians. Amongst the best work that has emerged from the former, see The University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982). See also Sivanandan, A., *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 1982); Prescod, Colin and Waters, Hazel, (eds.) *A World to Win: Essays in Honour of A. Sivanandan* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1999); and Kundnani, Arun, *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2007). To my mind, the best collective work from a Black theology perspective in Britain can be found in Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Black Theology in Britain: A Reader* (London: Equinox, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Black Theology in Britain:*

development of Black, politically charged Christian writing in Britain began to emerge that would challenge the sleeping elephant in the room. *A Time to Speak*<sup>19</sup> and its sequel, *A Time To Act*<sup>20</sup> were landmark texts that began to demonstrate the importance of linking confessional Christian faith to critical reflections on racism, White Supremacy and colonialism. These important texts were in turn, followed by the now iconic first, fully-fledged Black Theology text in Britain by Robert Beckford, entitled *Jesus Is Dread*.<sup>21</sup>

While Black Theology in Britain (about which I will comment more in a moment) has continued to grow and develop since the first texts were produced in the 1990s, it nevertheless remains a minority pursuit amongst most Black Christians. It is the contention of this author that greater attention to Black Theology would enable Black Christians in Britain to be better equipped to deconstruct the debilitating effects of internalised oppression and self-negation that has remained the constant legacy of Imperial Missionary Christianity in the psyche of some Black people of Christian faith in Britain.

In using the term ‘Postcolonial Britain’, in the context of this paper, I am seeking to problematise the overarching political, economic and cultural frameworks that have circumscribed and constrained Black subjectivity and life in this country since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In an earlier piece of work my colleague, Michael Jagessar and I introduce the notion of ‘postcolonialism’ by saying it:

is not about the demise of colonialism as ‘post’ since it embodies both ‘after’ and ‘beyond’. It is not about historical chronologies, but more about a critical stance, oppositional tactic or subversive reading strategy.<sup>22</sup>

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*A Reader* (London: Equinox, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Grant, Paul and Patel, Raj, (eds.) *A Time To Speak: Perspectives of Black Christians in Britain* (Birmingham: A Joint Publication of ‘Racial Justice’ and the ‘Black Theology Working Group’, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Grant, Paul and Patel, Raj, (eds.) *A Time To Act: Kairos 1992* (Birmingham: A Joint Publication of ‘Racial Justice’ and the ‘Black and Third World Theology Working Group’, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Beckford, Robert, *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain* (London: DLT, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Postcolonial Black British Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2006), pp.xvii

Postcolonialism is a critical, intellectual and methodological approach to deconstructing and unmaking the surreptitious, hegemonic power of colonialism, which arises from the toxic residue of empire. It is worth quoting R.S. Sugirtharajah at length, at this juncture. Sugirtharajah, reflecting on the nature and purpose of postcolonialism as a counter-hegemonic, anti-imperial discourse writes:

First, in a historical sense, it encapsulates the social, political and cultural conditions of the current world order, bringing to the fore the cultural, political and economic facts of colonialism, and aiding the recognition of the ambiguities of decolonialization and the ongoing recolonialization. Secondly, as a critical discursive practice, postcolonial criticism has initiated arresting analyses of texts and societies. It provides openings for oppositional readings, uncovers suppressed voices and, more pertinently, has as its foremost concern victims and their plight. It has not only interrogated colonial domination but has also offered viable critical alternatives. Thirdly, the term applies to the political and ideological stance of an interpreter who is engaged in anti-colonial and anti-globalizing theory and praxis. Applied to biblical studies, it seeks to uncover colonial designs in both biblical texts and their interpretation, and endeavours to read the text from such postcolonial concerns as identity, hybridity and diaspora.<sup>23</sup>

Black Christianity in Britain, in its various guises, has been ‘infected’ by the viral strain of Imperial Missionary Christianity, that has exerted a form of cultural dissonance on the colonised mind of the Black Christian subject in the UK, to such an extent, that many are unable to incorporate their own material realities and existential needs alongside that of their faith. What one often sees exemplified in some Black Christians in Britain is a de-contextualised faith, which incorporates, at a subterranean level, all the traits and hallmarks of a form of self-negation of Blackness. This as a corollary, then, manifests itself in a form of religio-cultural ‘turkeys looking forward to Christmas’ type syndrome, which cares more about abstract theologising as opposed to contextual analysis of colonial, Mission-imparted Christianity.

One can witness this, for example, in the number of prominent

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<sup>23</sup> Sugirtharajah, R.S., *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2003), p.4.

Black Christians who chose to sign the ‘Westminster Declaration’,<sup>24</sup> which whilst not overly ‘Party Political’, nonetheless, adhered to the basic tenets of right-wing, ‘family values’ political rhetoric. The latter, which has remained consonant with those proponents who are more likely to want to argue for the ‘decline of Christian Britain’, form the high water bench mark of empire and colonialism.

I am not arguing that all the signatures to the document subscribe to the rhetoric of Britain’s glorious past (although several of them do), it is that the link between this discourse and the implicit language of Britain’s imperial past was not made by these Black Christians. That White conservative Christians might want to sign such a document seems axiomatic—the fact that Black Christians should do so might be construed as being psychotic.

As I hope to demonstrate in the context of this work, Black Theology in Britain can be best exemplified as the critical, intellectual and discursive practice that has attempted to offer a more politicised conception of Christian for the expressed purposes of Black existential liberation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The pre-amble to the Westminster Declaration reads thus: ‘Protecting human life, protecting marriage, and protecting freedom of conscience are foundational for creating and maintaining strong families, caring communities and a just society. Our Christian faith compels us to speak and act in defence of all these.’ See <http://www.westminster2010.org.uk/declaration/> for further details.

<sup>25</sup> This work is exemplified in a number of the significant texts in the British context. See Beckford, Robert, *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain* (London: DLT, 1998), Beckford, Robert, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000), Beckford, Robert, *God of the Rahtid* (London: DLT, 2001), Reddie, Anthony G., *Nobodies to Somebodies: A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2003), *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God Talk* (London: Equinox, 2006), *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), *Working Against The Grain: Re-Imaging Black Theology in the 21st Century* (London: Equinox, 2008), Jagessar, Michael N., and Reddie, Anthony G., (eds.) *Postcolonial Black British Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth press, 2007) and *Black Theology in Britain: A Reader* (London: Equinox, 2007). See also *Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998-2002) and *Black Theology: An International Journal* (London: Equinox, 2002-).

## Black Theology in Britain

When speaking of Black Theology in Britain, I am speaking of the specific self-named enterprise of re-interpreting the meaning of God as revealed in Jesus the Christ, in light of existential Black experience in Britain. This approach to engaging with the Christian tradition is not unlike Black Theology in differing arenas like the U.S. or South Africa, where one's point of departure is the existential and ontological reality of Blackness and the Black experience, in dialogue with 'Holy Scripture'.

Black Theology in Britain, like all theologies of liberation, is governed by the necessity of ortho-praxis rather than orthodoxy. In using this statement, what I mean to suggest is that one's starting point in talking about God is governed by the necessity to find a basis for acting in response to the existential struggles and vicissitudes of life, which impinge upon one's daily operations in the attempt to be a human being. The need to respond to the realities of life as it is lived in postcolonial Britain is one that has challenged many Black British Christians to seek, in God, a means of making sense of situations that seem inherently senseless.<sup>26</sup>

In seeking to make sense of the Black condition in Britain, Black Theology has been inspired by the work, of predominantly, North American scholars, most notably James Cone,<sup>27</sup> Delores Williams<sup>28</sup> and Jackie Grant.<sup>29</sup> The frameworks for re-imagining Christianity by means of an explorative heuristic of Black hermeneutics, drawn from Black existential experience, has been most forcibly explored from within the British context by Robert Beckford.<sup>30</sup>

In seeking to outline the definitional dimensions and parameters

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<sup>26</sup> These themes are explored to great effect by Robert Beckford in the third of his groundbreaking trilogy of work *God of The Rahtid* (London: DLT, 2003), pp.1-30.

<sup>27</sup> See Cone, James H., *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> See Williams, Delores, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> See Grant, Jacqueline, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholar's press, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> See Beckford, Robert, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000).

of Black Theology in Britain, I am forced to acknowledge my own myopia at this juncture in the proceedings. For whilst there is a growing wealth of literature that has explored Black theology from within other religious paradigms, including Rastafari,<sup>31</sup> Hinduism<sup>32</sup> and traditional African religions,<sup>33</sup> Black Theology in Britain, like her counterparts in South Africa or the U.S., has been dominated by a Christian-inspired gaze.

## Combining Black Theology with transformative, experiential knowledge

The bulk of my scholarly work has been concerned with exploring the relationship between Black theological reflection and differing forms of Christian education. In this work I am interested in how the latter—by means of transformative, experiential learning can be achieved through the framework provided by the central tenets of Black Theology. My own engagement with transformative learning has its roots in my engagement with Paulo Freire, Ira Shor and James A. Banks. The latter describes transformative knowledge as that which challenges the dominant theories and paradigms that constitute the normative frames of epistemology.<sup>34</sup> Transformative knowledge proceeds from a critical, dialectical inquiry into the very basis of what constitutes knowledge and truth.<sup>35</sup> Central to the epistemological framing of transformative knowledge is the challenging of the alleged objectivity of western scholasticism. Banks asserts that ‘The assumption within the Western empirical paradigm is that knowledge produced within it is

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<sup>31</sup> See Spencer, William David, *Dread Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> Jagessar, Michael N., ‘Liberating Cricket: Through the Optic of Ashutosh Gowariker’s Lagaan’, *Black Theology: An International Journal* (Vol.2, No.2, July 2004) pp.239-249.

<sup>33</sup> Karran, Kampta, ‘Changing Kali: From India to Guyana to Britain’, *Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis* (Vol.4, No.1., Nov. 2001) pp. 90-102.

<sup>34</sup> Banks, James A., (ed.) *Multicultural Education, Transformative Knowledge and Action: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996) p.9

<sup>35</sup> See Habermas, Jurgen, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1971).

neutral and objective and that its principles are universal'.<sup>36</sup>

Banks' challenge to the seemingly axiomatic centrality of the western empirical tradition is central to this work. In this method for engaging with controversial subject matter in the teaching-learning process, I am inviting adult learners to reflect in a critical, dialectical manner on what constitutes truth, using Black Theology as a normative theological paradigm through which this process of transformative knowledge takes place. It is the dominant, captive possession of knowledge and truth arising from the western empirical tradition that has provided the vital underscoring of the construction of White Eurocentric hegemony, in which Christian theology and the church has been a convenient hand-maiden. Emmanuel Eze has demonstrated the potent and corrosive relationship between Enlightenment thought and White Eurocentric knowledge construction and the hierarchical claims for White superiority and supremacy.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the central task of this work is that of using the frameworks of transformative knowledge, coupled with Black Theology, in order to critically re-evaluate the essential meaning of Blackness and the ontological value of Black people. Perhaps the centrality and import of this task can be perceived in the following quotation from Gayraud Wilmore, who writes:

'If I had a choice before I was born to be one color or the other, which would I prefer and why?' The pejorative connotations continued in the English vocabulary where we continue to speak of 'blackmail', 'blackguards', 'black sheep of the family', or of having one's reputation 'blackened'. All these and many more found in the dictionaries, are negative images that reflect on Africans and Diasporic descendents. On the other hand, whiteness has been consistently presented to the world as something positive—something connoting goodness, cleanliness, beauty, holiness, and purity. It would be much fairer to make the case that we are all somehow 'obsessed' with color than to single out the psychology of black people as unfortunate. As much as we may deplore it, the color symbolism of our language in Great Britain and North America gives the white-

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<sup>36</sup> Banks, James A., *Race, Culture and Education: The Selected Works of James A. Banks* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) pp.148.

<sup>37</sup> See Eze, Emmanuel C., *Race and The Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

ness/blackness dichotomy ontological significance—at least, up to the end of the twentieth century. We must wait and see what happens now in the twenty-first, but not look for any startling changes.<sup>38</sup>

Transformative knowledge in the context of this work alludes to a critical process of reflection and action on how oppressive epistemologies are constructed and enacted. It is an invitation to ordinary learners (of all ethnicities) to critically assess the veracity of particular truth claims and the processes that produce hegemonic, interlocking systems and structures that constrict and inhibit the God-given selfhood of Black peoples.

Using Black Theology as a heuristic device for illustrating the illusory dimensions of the White, Euro-American western world order, this work seeks to enable ordinary people to pose critical questions and to gain important insights on truth and knowledge, in the hope that what accrues from this educative process is a form of learning that is transformative. As bell hooks has observed, transformative knowledge can give rise to new, distinctive forms of thinking, which as a corollary, can assist in re-shaping one's perception of reality that is not conditioned or silenced by the hegemonic, patriarchal constructs of imperialism and androcentric totalism.<sup>39</sup>

## What does this look like in practice?

The theoretical paradigms provided by Transformative knowledge and learning clearly inform this approach to Black theological reflection. The use of experiential models of learning, in which the adult learner is immersed within a constructed exercise, game or drama, becomes a means by which they are enabled to reflect critically on the immediate experiences and feelings that have accrued from the activity itself. Participants are invited to reflect on what they have felt and learnt whilst being immersed within the embodied, metaphorical activity that

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<sup>38</sup> Wilmore, Gayraud S., *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith Through an Africentric Lens* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp.142-143.

<sup>39</sup> hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.93-128.

forms the active element in the Practical theological process that has emerged from what I have now termed as ‘Participative Black Theology’.<sup>40</sup>

Immediately following the performance of the exercise, role-play/game, I usually spend several minutes with the participants helping them to reflect upon the events in which they have just taken part. Participants are encouraged to connect with their feelings for a few moments as they reflect on the implications of the embodied metaphorical exercise for the faith positions and theology they presently hold. Oftentimes, within the central activity, there will be inbuilt dynamics that seek to represent the issues of contestation and argument that are often commonplace in all philosophical and religious frameworks that give substance to and which act as meaning-making operations in life. This opportunity for reflection is essential because it provides the necessary bridge between previous beliefs and attitudes, and the possibility of critical, reflective change that sometimes accrues from the performative activity.

Central to the working of the exercise/game or role-play is the sense that at the heart of this approach to theological reflection is the demand, indeed the expectation that participants are willing to enter into the ‘internal logic’ of the activity. By internal logic, I am referring to a process in which the participant takes seriously the perspective of the performative activity itself—that is, they are acted upon and are active subjective selves within the activity in which they are a part. It is essential that each participant imbues their role within the activity with a degree of seriousness. This does not mean that the activity is one replete with solemnity and sententiousness. On the contrary, I would argue that comedy and laughter have been central ingredients in all my participative Black Theology work since its earliest conception in the mid 1990s.<sup>41</sup> This mode of behaviour is not unlike that demanded of

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<sup>40</sup> This work is best exemplified in two books: See Reddie, Anthony G., *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God Talk* (London: Equinox, 2006) and Reddie, Anthony G., *Working Against The Grain: Re-imaging Black Theology in the 21st century* (London: Equinox, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> The use of comedy can be seen in several of my books. As The Revd Dr Colin Morris has been known to remark, ‘The opposite of funny, is unfunny, not serious’. i.e. that there is no oxymoron in juxtaposing ‘funny’ and ‘serious’ in any approach to theological reflection. Jacqueline Bussie has written an award winning study on

participants in Groome's<sup>42</sup> or Berryman's<sup>43</sup> respective educational approaches to Practical theology.

This approach to undertaking educational, transformative Black Theology-related teaching is one that challenges Black Christian learners to suspend reality as they have experienced it and to enter into the basic logic of a 'simple game', in which they are invited to engage and interact with others. The premise of the game or exercise may appear absurd or ridiculous, but participants are challenged to take the game seriously, in terms of their participation in it.

This sense of asking participants to suspend their critical, realist judgements, in order to enter into the internal logic and dynamic of a piece of activity, is one that lies at the centre of this approach to the teaching and learning of so-called controversial topics. This approach is one that seeks to engage with the emotional or the affective repertoire of adult learners and not just the cognitive domains of the human self. The process is also critical because in the final analysis, it is with the emotional or the affective self that profound changes in religious consciousness are most likely to accrue. The best theology is never just a cognitive affair. It is one that engages not only the emotions, but perhaps, most crucially, it stimulates the imagination. What would happen if one were enabled to see something completely differently? How might one's perception of God be changed, if through an exercise, one were able to witness, if only a glimpse, of another way of knowing, or an alternative mode of being?

As an educator, using this method of teaching and learning, perhaps the greatest challenge that confronts me is the need to ensure that I seek to create an environment in which participants can be

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the relationship between laughter, oppression and resistance. The pointed use of laughter and comedy becomes a means of effecting resistance in the face of oppression and marginalisation. See Bussie, Jacqueline, *Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison and Endo* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> See Groome, Thomas H., *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministries* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1991) and *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass [1st published 1980] 1999).

<sup>43</sup> Berryman, Jerome W., *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg [1st published in 1991 by Harper: San Francisco] 1995).

enabled to ask critical questions of the Christianity and some of the underlying theology that underpins many of the accepted norms of the faith. In the learning environment of the classroom or the workshop, the use of such activity-based learning is to provide a cathartic space in which the participant can be enabled to see that there are differing possibilities to what we often assess as religious truth.

## Re-visiting an old exercise

The exercise that follows is one I have used on many occasions to demonstrate how an imperial, Eurocentric missionary inspired interpretation of Christianity has led to many Black people interpreting the truths of the Christian faith in a manner that negates their Blackness and unwittingly supports White supremacy.

The exercise I created was entitled *Are You in the Story?* After further revisions and amendments it was later incorporated into the introductory material in volume two of *Growing into Hope*.<sup>44</sup> This exercise was intended to help leaders understand more clearly a process that has afflicted African people for approximately five hundred years. A process of mis-education and biased, self-serving teaching strategies have led African people to develop a negative psychological condition manifested primarily as a form of self-denial. This can be seen in the inability of 'colonised' people to assert their own worth, or to see themselves reflected positively in popular stories, myths or historical events that have become central within the narratives of the metropolitan centre.

The aim of this experiential exercise is to describe clearly one of the principal sub-texts of *Growing into Hope*, namely, the need for oppressed people to re-interpret and appropriate the defining narratives that constitute story/vision (of the Gospel) for their ultimate liberation. This work enables Black Christians to attempt to claim the Gospel of Jesus Christ as their own, through the inculturation and re-thinking of the central norms of what constitutes the Christian faith.

The exercise asks individuals to imagine a scene from the Bible—I chose John's account of the feeding of the five thousand in chapter

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<sup>44</sup> See Volume Two of *Growing Into Hope: Liberation And Change*, pp. 7-8.

6, verses 1-15. All participants are asked to imagine the scene in the story in as much detail as is possible. What does Jesus look like? What are the disciples like? What is the boy wearing? How do they see the crowd? What is the cultural setting of the scene?

Having imagined the scene in great detail, individuals are then asked to reflect upon where they are in the story. If individuals see themselves as one of the disciples at the centre of the story, then they are encouraged to walk to one particular side of the room. Conversely, if they are mere bystanders, standing near the back of the crowd, then they are encouraged to walk to another side of the room. Finally, I ask some if they are even in the scene at all, or are they watching the action as if they are in a living room, far removed from the whole event, viewing everything on television?

The crucial learning that has resulted from this exercise is the sense that marginalised and oppressed Black people tend to see themselves as distant spectators in God's story, not as central players.<sup>45</sup> This in itself should not surprise us. If broader society largely confines Black people to subservient and demeaning roles, then why should we necessarily expect these self same people to imagine themselves in central, defining positions within biblical narratives? In the exercise, it is often the case that biblical narratives and their concomitant, underlying theological themes are re-interpreted in light of English societal manners and social mores.

In my initial doctoral research back in the mid 1990s, I was concerned to locate a mechanism that would enable Black Christians to experientially inhabit the Christian 'story' by means of a process of self-actualisation. Reflecting back on that work, I want to return to some of my words, written in the late 1990s, taken from volume two of *Growing into Hope: Liberation and Change*. In opening that text I state that:

In much of our Biblical reflection and related materials, we present a one-dimensional image of the Bible. The Eurocentric perspective holds sway, and the stories and events become re-enactments of European culture, incorporating their values and beliefs. In such circumstances, Black children are excluded. They, coming from a variety of backgrounds and informed by different cultures, are

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<sup>45</sup> See Reddie, Anthony, *Growing into Hope: Liberation And Change*, pp. 8-9.

simply observing. They are watching, but are not a part of the story, or the ongoing traditions of faith. They are observers who do not belong in the truest and fullest sense of the word.

Many studies by researchers in education have shown, clearly, that many black children, when they are asked to imagine people in their minds or to draw pictures that are visual representations of themselves or people they would like to become, these images are often of white, European models and are not accurate pictures of themselves or people recognised as members of their family. Such has been the dominance of white images and models that are always presented as being the norm, that for many black children, these white forms become more desirable than those images that represent their own cultural backgrounds and identities.

We need to find inclusive images, stories and alternative ways of reading these narratives, in order that different cultures and backgrounds are depicted and that Black children and young people can feel a part of the story. – That they can believe that they belong and are not simply observing or standing aside, looking on.<sup>46</sup>

This process of performative action operates within constructed, often contested spaces in which religious participants are invited to adopt particular roles in various exercises (such as the one I have just described) as a part of an imaginative process of role-playing.

The exercise I have described has been used as a means of enabling many confessional Black Christians to reflect on their inherited belief structures in a more critical manner; but using a learning device that enables them to adopt the semantic game-playing of pretending it is ‘just a game’.

This particular approach is necessary because many confessional Black Christian believers will enter the theology class intent upon defending their inherited faith.<sup>47</sup> A number of Black scholars have

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<sup>46</sup> See Reddie, Anthony, *Growing into Hope: Liberation And Change*, (ibid.) p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> The renowned Euro-American religious educator, John Westerhoff identifies a four part typology in Christian faith formation and development. He argues that people move from ‘Experienced’ faith to ‘Affiliative’ faith, through to ‘Searching’ faith and finally ‘Owned’ faith. See *Unfinished Business: Children and the*

demonstrated the extent to which Christianity as a global phenomenon has drunk deeply from the well of Eurocentric philosophical thought at the expense of African or other overarching forms of epistemology.<sup>48</sup> Black Christianity in Britain has imbibed these overarching Eurocentric, Greek influenced thought forms, often at their expense of their own identity and African forms of epistemology. This adherence to 19<sup>th</sup> century Biblicism has meant that the blandishments of Historical-Critical Biblical studies, for example, have barely failed to penetrate the edifice of the Black Christianity across the world.

It is interesting to note that many Black evangelicals will argue vehemently against notion of syncretism (the coming together of and mixing of differing religious and philosophical frameworks as a way of understanding and talking about God). In the many workshops I have led over the years in a variety of Black Christian communities, I have lost count the number of times I have heard Black Christians rail against the incorporation of ‘African Cultural practices’, for example, in any understanding of the Christian faith. Even when one can point to respected scholars such as Gayraud Wilmore, one of the architects of African American Black Theology, as evidence of the legitimacy of such an approach, many ordinary Black people of faith remain steadfastly unconvinced.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, when I have then reminded them (some at least) and told others (for the first time), that much of John’s Gospel, particularly the opening sections, which describe the Cosmic Christ as the ‘Logos’ is in fact a Greek philosophical idea; which represents the very kind of syncretism they claim to despise, many remain silent on this matter.<sup>50</sup> It would seem that syncretism is not really that appalling when the

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*Churches* (London: The Consultative Group on Ministry among Children, CCBI publications, 1995), p.35. See also , Westerhoff, John, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Sebury Press, 1973).

<sup>48</sup> See Hood, Robert E., *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro-Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). See also Byron, Gay L., *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> See Wilmore, Gayraud S., *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith Through an Africentric Lens* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 87-152.

<sup>50</sup> This issue is raised by Robert E. Hood in his landmark *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro-Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

dictates of orthodoxy sanction it. Perhaps, more critically, the issue may be more concerned, not with whether Christians can tolerate syncretism (for clearly all of us can, to some extent), but more pertinently, with what kind of syncretism can some of us live?<sup>51</sup>

While the inclusion of White-Euro-American religious thought forms as a means of enabling us to culturally appropriate the Christian faith seem acceptable, the inclusion of Black-African traditions seems not to be. In more recent times, one can point to the work of Michelle Gonzalez, who has undertaken considerable work looking at the relationship between Afro-Cuban religious traditions and Roman Catholicism on that particular island.<sup>52</sup>

For the most part, Black Christianity in Britain is often locked into literalistic readings of the Bible, in which many adherents claim to believe the whole of the canon as being divinely inspired and the supreme authority in all matters.<sup>53</sup> My concern in assisting Black Christians in Britain to reflect on and to re-assess the implications of their Christian faith arises from the dangers of reading subliminal Whiteness into their overarching hermeneutical frameworks for interpreting truth. When some Black Christians claim to be defending 'Christian Britain' what they are in effect stating in covert ways is a desire to protect normative Whiteness. When some claim that the BNP 'may have a point', once again what such protestations illustrate is a penchant for re-scribing White supremacy, often at their own expense, which is at a variance with their experiential, social realities. White Imperial Missionary Christianity does not need Black subjugated minds and bodies to defend it. Black Theology offers a means by which

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<sup>51</sup> As Hood reminds us, it would appear that so long as 'White' European cultures and thought forms are being intertwined with so-called 'pure' Christianity, then any notion of syncretism (often rarely admitted as such, however) can be tolerated. But when Black African traditions are being utilised like Vodun in Haiti or Santeria in Cuba, then the dictates of White Euro-American hegemony are brought to bear, often at the expense of the latter. See Hood, Robert E., *Must God Remain Greek?*, (ibid.) pp. 43-102.

<sup>52</sup> See Gonzalez, Michelle A., *Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture and Identity* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> See 'The Statement of Faith' of the influential Council for Black-Led Churches. <http://www.cblcuk.com/membership/index.php?pageID=429> Accessed 22/3/2010.

this specious artefact from colonial history and empire can be resisted and hopefully, deconstructed.

Having used a number of embodied, metaphorical activities in a number of educative settings, be it formal classrooms and informal workshops in Black communities across the UK, indeed, across the world, I can attest to the ways in which they can be helpful means of creating subtle nuances, multiple meanings and new interpretations for how we understand and assess the meaning of Christian faith in the context of postcolonial Britain.

In this particular method for undertaking Black Liberation theology in the British context, I have adopted an approach that uses experiential exercises as a means enabling ordinary Black people to become part of a process that provides them with opportunities to enter into the performance of theological activity.<sup>54</sup> The performance is one that encourages them to engage in a fictional game-activity that allows them to enter into the dramatic possibilities of the exercise in order that their often inhibited subjectivity can be challenged by the revealed truth arising from the game itself. That in effect, they are able to tease out or adopt provisional truth claims arising from their engagement with the exercise or game (or some cases drama sketches I have written) without any substantive commitment to that position itself.

This kind of dialectical repository of truth; namely being able to hold to one's confessional belief in many of the creedal building blocks of Christian faith; while being able to juxtapose alternative belief structures is one that is central to this method of teaching and learning and theologising. It is this type of improvisation within the context of an exercise, game or piece of drama that enables ordinary Black people to become part of a process of trying to discern and create new truths, as supplement to their existing confessional belief structures.

This work is built upon the active involvement of ordinary voiceless people.<sup>55</sup> It is an approach that enables them to engage with

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<sup>54</sup> Some of my initial thinking has been inspired by Jose Irizarry and his notion of theology as 'Performative Action'. Irizarry argues for a dramatic process of doing theology in which participants and the educator enter into a process of performance in which there is an inherent dialectic and from which new truths can be discerned. See Irizarry, Jose R., 'The Religious Educator as Cultural Spec-Actor: Researching Self in Intercultural Pedagogy', *Religious Education* Vol. 98, No. 3, (Summer 2003), pp.365-381.

emotions and aspects of their lived experience and reality of Black people, in manner that brings these elements into conversation with their faith. Hopefully, by means of this kind of educative-theological work, Black participants are enabled to see the links between the constructions of social reality and revealed nature of religious faith. When one is able to combine the two, hopefully, the inane discourse of wanting to defend Imperial Missionary Christianity; the very framework that has often been the cause of one's own estrangement from oneself, will begin to dissipate. Similarly, the desire to want to defend the BNP as defenders of 'Christian Britain' will be disregarded as arrant nonsense.

This dialectical process is one that eschews the blandishments of Imperial Missionary Christianity, with its emphasis upon upholding and supporting the unreconstructed and unacknowledged pernicious normality that is Whiteness and White supremacy. This approach is one that teaches ordinary Black people to be just a tad wary of the exalted possibilities of heaven as proclaimed to them from within the dictates of White hegemony. I am not asking ordinary Black Christians in Britain not to believe in Heaven, just to be a tad more suspicious of the Imperial Missionary Christianity they have imbibed, and to ask whether the social reality of Blackness as they have experienced it is always best served adhering to a religious tradition that has often been revealed to them in the noxious and toxic fabric of empire, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

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<sup>55</sup> Aspects of this theological dynamic can be found in the Black liturgical practice of the 'Call and Response' tradition of Black preaching, which exists in within numerous Black ecclesial contexts across the African Diaspora. See Fielding Stewart, III, Carlyle, *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness* (Trenton, New York: Africa World Press, 1999) pp.105-120.



# **‘Do They Really Believe That?’:**

## Experiential Learning Outside the Theology and Religious Studies Classroom

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**A**t Bath Spa University, thanks to ‘mini-project’ funding from the HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, and in partnership with colleagues from Newport and York St. John Universities, we are engaged in a project to explore and enhance the use of experiential and fieldwork learning within Theology and Religious Studies. The main outcomes planned for the ‘Living Religion’ project are:

- i) a survey of departments to discover how widespread is the use of experiential elements;
- ii) increased opportunities for fieldwork placements gained

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies,

**Vol. 10, No. 1, Autumn 2010, pp. 55-72**

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- from sharing ideas and resources;
- iii) provision of on-line support materials; and
- iv) to encourage a dialogue about religion as lived experience.

We value experiential learning as providing for students a direct encounter with Cultural and Religious Diversity which may sometimes also ‘court controversy’ as students are brought face to face with beliefs, values and lifestyles which they may not share and which may even be directly opposed to their own.

Cultural and Religious Diversity denotes the plurality of beliefs and values that characterises modern Britain. However, the nature and relationship of both culture and religion are contested. For example, opinions differ on the meaning and status of culture and religion: whether culture is an unambiguously human creation whereas religion has a divine or transcendent source; if culture is believed to be a stable inheritance or it is in a constant process of creation; and if religion is believed to possess an essence and true existence or if it is identified as an act of imagination associated with the modern West with only a derivative and dependent reality (Cush, 2008: 48-49; Lincoln, 2000: 409; Nesbitt, 2004: 139; Smith, 1982: xi). Opinions also differ on the connection and scope of culture and religion: sometimes culture and religion are seen as interchangeable, sometimes as incommensurable; while culture may be regarded as incorporating religion or, alternatively, religion may be deemed to include and extend beyond, or even above, culture (Cush, 2008: 48; Hulsether, 2005: 500). In such circumstances, the phrase Cultural and Religious Diversity points to a range of conceptual issues.

Moreover, Cultural and Religious Diversity is only one, albeit complex, dimension of the wider Equality and Diversity agenda. Consequently, while Cultural and Religious Diversity presents itself particularly prominently within Theology and Religious Studies, other aspects such as age, disability, gender and sexuality are also encompassed by the overarching Equality and Diversity agenda. Indeed, since cultures and religions, on whatever definition, have norms and expectations that are relevant to features of this wider agenda, they offer ethical perspectives on and insights into conduct and lifestyle. In turn, these pose their own problems, while also affording exciting opportunities, for students encountering lived religion given that, as Weller

(2008:192) observes, there are '[t]ensions [b]etween the "[s]trands" ' of Equality and Diversity (an obvious issue in the news and in our recent research experience being attitudes to diverse sexual orientations).

Questionnaires were sent by email to 40 Theology/Religious Studies Departments with a response rate of 19 out of 40. Fourteen of the nineteen respondents indicated that departments do offer experiential elements here defined as students engaging directly with religious practitioners in their own settings (rather than say as visiting speakers). It might be presumed that those who did not respond are less likely to be engaged in these activities, but it is interesting that the five departments who did not do so cited mainly practical difficulties. Thus at least one in three departments offer experiential elements which were discovered to be mainly of four types: the day visit, to a place of worship or religious interest, usually led by a tutor; the study visit abroad (e.g. India, Korea, Egypt); the fieldwork placement in a specific community and the vocational placement in, for example, youth work or for ministerial training. One interesting discovery was that not one department had a specific policy on experiential learning, an omission the project seeks to rectify.

To focus on our own institution, which offers Religious Studies but not Theology, we offer day visits, a study visit abroad (South Korea) and a one-week fieldwork placement in a religious community. Such elements have been considered a vital part of the curriculum for several decades and have been given a high priority in our use of resources. At this point it is appropriate to explore the rationale for this stress on experiential elements.

By experiential elements we mean learning opportunities that involve students in meeting members of faith communities in their own centres and places of worship. One obvious resonance here is with experiential learning. Again, there is much disagreement about how to define it, given that any definition inevitably involves a specific view of both experience and learning so that if there is a consensus it consists in the claim that experiential learning connotes a special sense of experience that informs a distinctive kind of learning. Nevertheless, one definition that has much to recommend it has been proposed by McGill & Warner Weil (1989: 248) as follows:

The process whereby people individually and in association with

others, engage in direct encounter, then purposefully reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their different ways of knowing. Experiential learning therefore enables the discovery of possibilities that may not be evident from direct experience alone.

This definition conveys two of the vital features of experiential elements in Theology and Religious Studies, these being direct encounter, in our case with religious people in religious places, and reflection on this experience, in our case often associated with assessment.

Jennifer Moon (1994: 120) suggests that experiential learning has certain connotations, among which is the unmediated nature of the process that is based upon direct experience and active engagement as well as the role of reflection and the availability of feedback. Crucially, experiential learning is framed by what Moon (1994: 120) calls the ‘formal intention to learn’ and is believed to offer ‘a favoured manner of learning’. These two features clearly cohere with the inclusion of experiential elements within Theology and Religious Studies where they are embedded in student programmes and where, we wish to argue, they do indeed offer an especially valuable learning opportunity that can foster genuine respect for and appreciation of another life-world.

Yet experiential elements have another resonance—religious experience. The term religious experience is in common currency yet, arguably for this reason, lacks clarity and focus (Fitzgerald, 2000: 125). In part, this reflects debate about religion as *sui generis* and thus about religious experience as distinct and different from other types of experience (Connolly, 1999: 137; Merkur, 2005: 173). Although it is necessary to bear in mind that religious experience is difficult to define, for present purposes it is more pertinent to note that there may be more of a division within Theology and Religious Studies since, while this contrast can be overstated, Theology students may be working within a familiar religious context whereas Religious Studies students tend to be dealing with a variety of religions without necessarily any commitment to any of them. Thus, in general terms, given the explicitly Religious Studies ethos of our course, we are concerned to provide students with experience of religions. That being said, we cannot exclude the possibility that students will have religious experiences, probably more

likely during extended and intensive study though, of course, possible in any visit or placement. Such experiences may be welcome or—and this is the significant issue—unwelcome. Especially in the latter instance, there is an ethical dilemma between openness to the transformative potential of lived religion and the importance of maintaining personal integrity in the face of challenge. Here, in the clash between understanding and empathy, on the one hand, and believing and endorsing, on the other hand, for us at least, is one way in which experiential elements court controversy even if we recognise that this may not be a major concern across Theology and Religious Studies at least in the same form.

The point is that experiential elements do allow for a rich and deep form of learning. It is not that students do not meet Cultural and Religious Diversity in the classroom, whether through interaction with members of staff, visiting speakers or each other, not ignoring textbooks, documentaries and other sources of information and insight. Nevertheless, learning in the classroom can be complemented and/or critiqued by learning outside the classroom where that learning is holistic and contextualised, occurring in the company of religious people and on their sacred ground.

## Day visits

At Bath Spa University experiential elements include day visits and it is perhaps worth noting that similar activities emerge as the most common form of experiential element in the survey we conducted of Theology and Religious Studies departments. These are group visits to religious centres and places of worship led/accompanied by a tutor or lecturer but in which students interact with members of faith communities. These visits are arranged for first year students on both the compulsory core module that introduces a range of new religions and alternative spiritualities along with issues in and methods of studying them and the optional modules focused on major religious traditions.

One of these optional modules introduces Sikhism, Buddhism and Hinduism and for this module a day visit is arranged to Bristol. The reason for this is the limited diversity of the city of Bath, suggested by the 2001 census figures which show that 72% of the population

returned as Christian and, of those residents who indicated a religious affiliation of any kind, Christians constituted 98% (Bath and North East Somerset Faith Forum, 2010: 6). There are Sikhs but no Sikh group even though there is a Sikh representative on the local SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education). Bath Sikhs themselves go to Bristol to attend gurdwara. There are a number of Buddhist groups, four Tibetan in character (Bath Diamond Way, Bath Jamyang, Bath New Kadampa and Bath Sakya Groups), the multi-tradition Bath Buddhist Group and, in nearby Keynsham, a Soka Gakkai Group. None of these groups have their own centres. There is a Hindu group that is looking towards building its own temple but as of yet is still meeting in rented premises. Therefore, in order to enable students to gain experience of Sikhism, Buddhism and Hinduism, we go to Bristol which has a larger religious minority presence. Students visit the Shri Guru Nanak Prakash Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Lam Rim Bristol (a Tibetan Buddhist Centre combined with the Centre for Whole Health offering complementary medical services and courses in various 'Eastern' arts and disciplines) and the Hindu Temple (Bristol) (founded as the Sanatan Deevya Mandal in 1979 in what was once a Methodist Church). Of the students who completed a questionnaire about this day visit, none had previously visited a gurdwara and only a small proportion had visited a Buddhist or Hindu place of worship. In part, this may reflect the nature of the University's intake which remains predominantly regional with a majority of students drawn from the South-West and Wales where, with some notable exceptions, there are fewer opportunities for such visits.

The day visit for the compulsory core module was to Glastonbury. While Bath has a strong and vibrant alternative scene, Glastonbury has a special reputation as a place of pilgrimage where pilgrims will find a vast assortment of resources and services for spiritual development. Glastonbury is a small Somerset town, about an hour from Bath, with a rich Christian heritage both historical and mythological combined with a strong New Age and Pagan presence and a variety of 'Eastern' influences including Hindu and Buddhist ideas and groups (Bowman, 2005: 159-164, 169-173). What Glastonbury offers is a very different type of diversity where that diversity is religious but not cultural as it often is in minority religions with a particular ethnic or migrant profile (Bowman, 2009: 167) It may be subcultural, of course,

in that its diversity is located in the presence of a particular 'post-Hippy' subculture. On this occasion, students went to the Goddess Temple where they were addressed by a priestess, the Isle of Avalon Foundation where they listened to a druid speaker and Chalice Well Gardens where they saw the well which is identified as the resting place of the Holy Grail but also with the Goddess as well as visiting the Tor and some specialist shops. Most of the students who completed a questionnaire about this day visit indicated that they had had none or very limited experience of practitioners of these New Age and Pagan religions. In terms of prior experience of Glastonbury in particular, some had visited previously (one or two lived nearby) though mainly to go shopping or see the tourist attractions rather than to make pilgrimage. It should be added that these day visits are integral to the modules concerned and attempts are made to bring together the lecture and seminar programme, recommended reading and the visits in order to avoid a shallow and superficial encounter that more resembles tourism than research (cf. Geaves, 2007: 248-249).

Before considering student responses and reactions to these day visits, it is worth setting out why we believe such experiential elements to be so important. Take the now famous example of Ron Geaves' account of bringing first year students to the Baba Balaknath Mandir in Walsall where a nominally Hindu temple containing images of Sikh gurus and Sant masters presided over by a priest who rejected the title of *pandit* in preference to that of *bhagat* and who self-identified as Sikh rather than Hindu and with both Sikh and Hindu worshippers unified by their shared Punjabi background (Geaves, 1996). The contrast with the conventional model of religions as discrete reified entities is striking as is the mismatch with official orthodoxy where a Jat Sikh, not wearing the Five Ks that symbolize Khalsa membership, has a family history of priesthood dedicated to Baba Balaknath who is conceived as an incarnation of the Hindu deity, Skanda, and as a forerunner of the first Sikh guru, Nanak (Geaves, 1996). To say the least, those first year students were presented with a version of religions that diverge markedly from standard textbook portrayals and with the dominant images of religion, for instance, the features generally attributed to Sikhism defined on the Khalsa model emerging from the modern *Tat Khalsa* reforms. What students stood to gain from this, therefore, was a nuanced understanding of lived religion, a snapshot of a particular

religious community at a particular time (cf. Geaves, 2007: 246), that incorporated, even if in a very limited sense, some anthropological or ethnographic data.

The significance of lived religion is increasingly being acknowledged. Vasudha Narayanan (2000) has argued against the hegemony of a textual model of Hinduism, particularly at introductory level, choosing instead to emphasise local independent goddesses and musicians and dancers who do not claim Vedic origins for their arts and insisting that there is a multitude of voices to which we should listen. In order to do this, it is necessary to move beyond a textual approach and a more anthropological or ethnographic methodology has been employed in many recent studies such as those focused upon Buddhism in diaspora (Wuthnow & Cadge, 2004: 363). This methodology is particularly appropriate when examining new trends and movements though its suitability to reveal perspectives other than those normally represented in the academic literature which tend to be high class and male in addition to deriving from a textual source is of more general application (cf. Geaves, 2007: 238).

Certainly our students, when asked in anonymous questionnaires, were able to articulate the advantages of day visits, many stressing the value of first-hand direct experience benefiting from encounter with believers themselves and, borrowing from an image used by a student, moving beyond a two-dimensional account. The impression conveyed is of the authenticity of the insider's account in contrast to the lecturer who is seen as an outsider. However, they also suggested some potential disadvantages where, counterpointing the insider's authenticity, is the notion of bias or selectivity where the outsider is deemed to be objective which makes any deviation from academic norms problematic. It is instructive that one student observed that time was too short to experience much at all, underlining the need for additional and extended experience.

To return to the main point, such responses may be controversial in terms of how we do Theology and Religious Studies—it is clearly one thing to be told that the Sikh holy book, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, is treated as a human Guru and another to see the bed where it is placed at night or again to be told about the many spiritualities found in Glastonbury and to see this on the ground. Admittedly, this is a comparatively safe and undemanding exposure to lived religion but even

here students expressed some concerns and sensitivities. They were anxious about how to ask questions without giving offence and to observe the protocol and etiquette of the communities they were visiting yet students also had personal issues, for example, unwillingness to bow before the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and how to cope with feelings of antagonism stirred up by a speaker's comments.

Further feedback was given by students in reflective portfolios at the end of the module which included the visit to Glastonbury. Many comments affirmed the value of experiential learning: 'sitting in the Goddess temple is probably one of the best ways one can think of in which to 'feel' and understand the significance of Glastonbury'; however the experiences are not always positive when image and reality were seen to be at odds or when speakers expressed opinions with which students took issue. Others stressed how experiential learning brings surprises; 'the difference between Welsh and English Druids is astonishing'; 'what stayed in my mind was the commercialization...from Wiccan artefacts to Buddha images'. The impact could be personal 'I expected myself [as a non-believer in either Christianity or alternative spiritualities] to be rather indifferent, but it was the total opposite' going on to describe being 'awe-inspired' in the Goddess temple. Interestingly another found significance in the group experience 'being with my colleagues...was a transcendent experience ultimately'.

## Fieldwork placements

For purposes of the project, fieldwork placements are defined as intensive or sustained experience, often residential, in which students spend time in religious communities and employ ethnographic methods in their study. A number of departments in our survey used variations on the fieldwork placement.

At Bath Spa students undertake a compulsory one-week placement as part of the core course on studying religions in the contemporary world. The placements used include Buddhist monasteries of various traditions, Christian convents, new religious movements such as ISKCON or the Brahma Kumaris, the Salvation Army, alternative spiritualities in Glastonbury, and a local Gurdwara.

Students can choose their placement, with the proviso that it must not be a tradition that features either as their current personal affiliation or that of their upbringing. The reason for this is to maximise the distance between the beliefs and values of the student and the host community and thus both the experience of Religious and Cultural Diversity, but also of being in a minority in this context. Placements are assessed by both oral/visual presentation and a research project that focuses on a particular theme or issue relevant to the host community and includes reflection on methodological and ethical questions.

The value of fieldwork placements in which students act as ethnographers seems clear to us as the culmination of experiential elements within the undergraduate programme. The suitability of ethnography is evident in this description of the approach:

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally. (Brewer, 2000: 10)

Fieldwork placements enable students to study religious people in their own communities, thereby to discover what religious people believe and practise by sharing, insofar as is possible, the life of their communities so as to gain the necessary information and insights to offer an authentic interpretation.

Writing in the 1970s, John Saliba (1974: 154-155) advocated an increased use of fieldwork in the study of religions, commenting favourably upon the possible contribution of ethnography in resisting the impulse to impose one's own views of religion and instead in seeking to discern the views of one's informants with openness and without distortion. (Interestingly, given the subject of this paper, Saliba (1974: 155) refers to an understanding of religion as 'simply a form of experiential knowledge' and thus concentrates on various modes of knowing, neither privileging the religious nor prejudging what is religious.) The 2010 OFSTED report on Religious Education in schools also recommends increased use of fieldwork.) Yet, still now, fieldwork is not a mainstream part of Religious Studies scholarship (Geaves, 2007: 249).

This is in spite of fieldwork's significance and benefits albeit combined with particular demands and difficulties. For example, as Geaves (2007: 238, 240, 243, 245, 248) explains, fieldwork offers another dimension, challenging stereotypes of religions and generalizations about them, and undermining essentialist notion of religions as unified and bounded. However, fieldwork requires interaction with other human beings and accordingly means that the fieldworker has to cope, not only with academic issues, but also with her/his personal responses to other worldviews, be they positive or negative, prompting reflection and critique (Geaves, 2007: 240-241). Moreover, the fieldworker's own beliefs may restrict the extent to which s/he can share in the life of the community and pose moral dilemmas about how to conduct oneself so as to remain true to one's own convictions while showing appropriate respect and courtesy to one's hosts (Geaves, 2007: 250-251). Indeed, fieldwork can be engaged as well as ethical in character. For Kim Knott (1995: 209-211), fieldwork is shaped by her feminism and is governed by principles that include '[a]ccountability and partnership'. Perhaps by its very nature, fieldwork promotes personal involvement with, alongside professional responsibility towards, informants.

Our students' thoughts on their fieldwork placements, that echo some of these points and contribute others, were gathered from focus group discussions with separate groups of second and third year students convened by a member of University staff outside the Humanities Department where Study of Religions is located. Students endorsed the fieldwork placement as part of a Religious Studies programme as a new and important form of learning, describing it as both vital and valuable. They emphasized that the placement was integral to a broad-based study of religion with its comparative dimension. One student observed that they had learned far more than they would have from lectures and books, and one commented on the improved grasp of theory and method that was a consequence of applying it for oneself. Among the features of the placement that were identified as particularly rewarding were the opportunity to see a religious community in its everyday life and to learn how to interact with people from different backgrounds. There was also recognition of the role of placements in students' personal and academic development.

Additionally, students' responses ranged across possible chal-

lenges. They alluded to ‘culture shock’ and the need to consider how to cope with this and to the balance between participation and observation in the light of the community’s attitude. Where students were on placement with other students rather than individually, they noted that interpersonal dynamics could be problematic. They recommended keeping an open mind, acknowledging that the placement can lead to questioning one’s own values. Further, they appreciated the merit of independence and self-management in the research setting where initiative and flexibility are useful while they showed awareness of issues of interpretation given doubt about how far their own experiences of a specific community were representative of the religion as a whole.

Some of the students’ responses suggested possible areas of controversy. Students advised future students to remember that their role is not to change the community that they are researching. Yet is it possible to avoid the ‘researcher effect’ when students, either individually or in small groups, for a week or in successive weeks, often over a period of years and, in some cases, decades, live in the community, working and, to some extent at least, worshipping alongside its members? Hostility towards students was also raised where a student felt that s/he had been met with rudeness. Here too there are difficulties since the student is dependent on the community for her/his research and, though consent has to be given on behalf of the community, members may take a different view, especially as our students are, by definition, ‘outsiders’ who do not share the community’s values. A clash of values can also occur where a student is confronted with beliefs and practices that are not only different from her/his own but opposed to them, for example, the perceived indoctrination of children. This may not happen frequently but, when it does, it places a student under great strain and not merely academically, at the same time as bringing into sharp focus tensions associated with a religiously and culturally plural society. Finally, there are the unpredictable implications of participation in religious activities. A student may find such participation makes very little, if any, impact upon them yet it may be inspiring and uplifting or profoundly disturbing. The nature and motivation of participation from the perspective of the community that is committed to its spiritual life may contrast sharply with the perspective of the student for whom participation may be purely instrumental in purpose, whatever its subsequent outcomes and however the student may choose to deal with her/his own

reactions. Recent examples of the experience veering into personal religious experience was a student finding learning to meditate of personal spiritual benefit, and perhaps more worryingly, the student who was so intensely involved with ritual practice that s/he experienced visualizations. Careful briefing gives students some resilience against such occurrences but the tutors do worry about the phone call that announces that the student is not returning either to university or their home having found their spiritual path more important than degree or family.

A survey of recent student projects reveals some new insights such as the ability to understand the role of the divine office in the life of an enclosed community, or of art iconography and ritual in Tibetan Buddhism. There are some surprises such as the business organization needed to run a concern such as Bath Abbey, or individual devotees with very different interpretations from the party line. There are occasions when the student had something approaching a religious experience, or found it hard to maintain an academic perspective when so involved in the life and worship of the community. Finally examples of clashes of values included more than one example where observations, research and interviews revealed gender inequalities in communities with a rhetoric of equality, and other examples where treatment of vulnerable people were queried.

## Concluding observations

The value of experiential elements, we would argue, is that cultural and religious diversity is experienced in the raw and at first hand. The plurality of beliefs and values both across and within traditions is underlined as are the complex interactions of the 'religious' and the 'cultural', often a topic of discussion within the communities themselves. The difficulty of negotiating the tensions between respect for the beliefs of others which one does not share, and holding firm and possibly speaking out about one's own beliefs and values becomes more than theoretical, and vague platitudes about tolerance are shown to be thin. Our desired outcome is that students learn to conduct an ongoing dialogue that acknowledges difference and disagreement without fear and with respect.

As part of the Subject Centre-funded project that we have been undertaking, we have prepared a Skills Audit based upon the Theology and Religious Studies Benchmarking Statement (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007) and the Subject Centre Employability Guide (Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, 2009). In this, we argue that experiential elements facilitate the development of a range of skills including those relevant to Cultural and Religious Diversity and thus to controversy arising out of conflicting beliefs and values.

From the Benchmarking Statement, we suggest the following skills, listed under ‘[d]iscipline specific and intellectual’ and ‘[g]eneric’ skills which we identified in all experiential elements (that is, the day visit, fieldwork placement, study visit abroad and vocational placement), are particularly pertinent (the wording has been revised for brevity):

**Representation of views other than one’s own with fairness and integrity and express own identity without denigration of others.**

In respect of this skill, we comment that students require briefing, guidance and debriefing in order to equip them with the capability and confidence to achieve this.

**Awareness of the passion and claims to certainty in traditions, with their positive and negative effects.**

In respect of this skill, we comment that the value of meeting adherents is that students can gain an understanding of the meaning and implications of commitment.

**Engagement with the convictions and behaviours of others with empathy and integrity.**

In respect of this skill, we comment that this requires students to be prepared for the experience and encouraged to develop these attitudes.

From the Employability Guide, we suggest the following skills, listed under ‘[g]eneric competencies’ and ‘[p]ersonal capabilities’ which we identified in all experiential elements in the case of the first two skills and in placements, both fieldwork and vocational, in the case of the final three skills, are particularly pertinent:

### **Interpersonal sensitivity**

In respect of this skill, we comment that a major strength of experiential elements is that students develop their awareness of different perspectives and both respect and learn from the views of others.

### **Questioning**

In respect of this skill, we comment that students develop their capacity for appropriate questioning often across cultural and language barriers.

### **Achievement orientation**

In respect of this skill, we comment that placements may enhance the ability to achieve the intended outcomes. We further comment that interaction with alternative worldviews and lifestyles may simultaneously offer a radical challenge to the hegemonic discourse associated with conventional notions of achievement.

### **Adaptability and flexibility**

In respect of this skill, we comment that placements involve students working in unfamiliar environments informed by religious beliefs and values that the student may or may not share.

### **Tolerance of stress**

In respect of this skill, we comment that placements may put individuals under pressure in a variety of ways, especially when living and working in a new setting. Our students' responses demonstrate the pertinence of most of these skills but also the complexity inherent in, though perhaps obscured by, their rather technical formulation given the reality of diversity on the ground and the resultant potential for controversy.

The next stage of the research includes continuing our series of host community interviews to investigate the experience from the point of view of the receiving communities. We will also develop a template for recording what the communities can offer to students, and visit partner universities to facilitate the sharing of good practice. We will develop the website to include case studies, good practice guides, sample documentation (e.g. policy guidelines) and ideas for curriculum and assessment. It would be useful to know what else university depart-

ments might find useful.

We are aware that we are developing our ideas in a climate where the future of Higher Education as a whole includes many uncertainties. On the one hand, subjects like Theology, Religious Studies and Philosophy may be under threat from being viewed as small or economically irrelevant. Experiential elements are costly both financially and in time and other resources. On the other hand, the Equality and Diversity agenda requires that authorities take account of religious and cultural diversity. The role of religions in the public sphere is being debated nationally, with some seeing the volunteering capacity of religious communities as a major resource in a political climate emphasising the downsizing of the state and the role of social enterprise and active citizens in the ‘big society’. Research reveals that religious communities already contribute to social welfare—for example it has been estimated that in our small unitary authority of Bath and North East Somerset religious communities contribute community-based activity to the financial value of £3,600,000 per year (Bath and North-East Somerset Faith Forum, 2010:4). Concerned as we are about the political and social implications of such an instrumental approach to religious communities, we continue to argue for the importance of a religiously literate society and for experiential learning as one of the most effective means of developing the requisite inter-religious and intercultural skills in the citizens of the future.

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# **The Exoteric-Esoteric Distinction in Theology and the Changing Interests of the State:**

Handling 'Diversity' in the Teaching of  
Theology and Ethics

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**I**f we are to handle diversity in the teaching of Christian theology and ethics in British state-funded universities (and indeed elsewhere), it would be good to take into account the historic interplay and clashes between exoteric and esoteric modes of theological discourse and Biblical exegesis. In the medieval era both modes were woven together in such a way that theology was 'the queen of sciences'. Priests trained in theology and the branches of knowledge were trained in esoteric dis-

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies,

**Vol. 10, No. 1, Autumn 2010, pp. 73-99**

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courses which contributed to cryptography, which enabled the defence of church and state from armed enemies without and within. It was first in Italy and then in Puritan Britain that cryptography was demythologised, as part of a revolution in theology and the sciences. The neglect of this reality has led to a state of affairs where much modern theology has become quasi-esoteric, far removed from ongoing political and scientific debates rooted in Biblical exegesis. This has gradually led to a vacuum concerning the depth of the relationship between theological disciplines and the interests of the state. ‘Modernity criticism’ has filled this vacuum in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having a major impact on the teaching of Theology and Christian Ethics in the English-speaking world. This paper criticises the case of Alasdair MacIntyre in the light of the relationship between theological disciplines and cryptography. Benedict XVI parallels MacIntyre in diagnosing the problem of ‘diversity’ in theological and religious knowledge as being rooted in a ‘fall from grace’ since the high middle ages, when the Papacy and the Latin Church governed western Europe. The story is told in an idealised manner that focuses narrowly on the internal coherence of ethics and metaphysics, ignoring Biblical exegesis and theology as the roots of both. The result is that students are in danger of being fed a misleading understanding of the historic types of Christian thought and dissent that developed in Britain and migrated to other parts of the world. This makes it more difficult to handle the reality of historic and present diversity within Christian theology in teaching.

## Why diversity in Theology and Ethics matters to the state

The mission, strategic aims and values of the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (Subject Centre for PRS), which includes support for learning and teaching in Christian theology and ethics in its remit, endorse diversity.<sup>1</sup> The statement of values of the Subject Centre for PRS includes ‘working for the public good’, and highlights several concepts includ-

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/about\\_us/the\\_centre/index.html](http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/about_us/the_centre/index.html).

ing ‘accountability’ and ‘diversity’. Other values include ‘collegiality’, listing autonomy, trust, responsibility, openness and honesty; and innovation, specifying that ‘evidence must inform all our work’. All of these values may be deemed exoteric, not esoteric. Management and valuing of diversity, of beliefs and values, is central to the ideology and practice of surveillance of the contemporary state. Diversity also of course denotes diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds. In recent years the public concern about immigration has focused mostly on Muslims, and fears that some of them might want to attack the state and civil society. This is notwithstanding the fact that many immigrants to the UK are of Christian background and therefore enhancing the diversity within Christianity in the UK. Since 9/11 this concern about Muslims has frankly given the state a grand excuse for an ideology of surveillance of the population and of ‘religion’ in general.<sup>2</sup> University teachers of Islamic Studies were very concerned that the government wanted to control what and how they taught the subject. From the standpoint of Christian theology and ethics, we should also be concerned in case any government would want to exert as much control as it clearly wanted with Islam. Is theology in a good place to critically engage with such surveillance, in order to handle issues of diversity? This paper takes some steps to address this problem. In order to do so, I shall argue that surveillance as we now know it developed partly from the secularisation of cryptography in Italy and then Britain in the early modern period.

Cryptography was originally expressed in the mode of esoteric modes of theology and scriptural exegesis. Before going on to recount the secularisation of cryptography, it is worth setting out a definition of what is ‘esoteric’ discourse, following Antoine Faivre.<sup>3</sup> Esoteric doctrines are kept secret, for initiates only. Thus their intrinsic hiddenness is further socially and politically concealed. There is an assumption of

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<sup>2</sup> Aldrich, Richard J., *GCHQ: The Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Intelligence Agency* (London: Harper Press, 2010) pp. 532-550. Aldrich concludes by agreeing with Sir Ken Macdonald, the former Director of Public Prosecutions, who blames western populations’ use of communication technologies for the rise of state surveillance, as the state has harvested information from private companies catering to private individuals’ perceived needs.

<sup>3</sup> Faivre, Antoine, ‘Esotericism’ in Jones, Lindsay, *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, vol. 4. 2nd ed. (Farmington, Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2005) pp. 2842-2845.

the esoteric meaning of the apparent reality of texts, history and nature (a theological gnosis). There may be a belief in the transcendental unity or primordial unity of religions that was lost but needs to be rediscovered by esoteric hermeneutics and practices. This belief may not be a wholesale belief, however, but may only apply to an underlying natural philosophy rather than to beliefs about divine law and redemption. Faivre lists four ‘intrinsic characteristics’ of esotericism in religion: microcosm-macrocosm correspondences in the cosmos, the belief that nature is alive and permeated by a hidden fire, imagination and meditation as central faculties of knowing, and the experience of alchemical transmutation, either personal or of nature. Faivre also provides two lesser characteristics: concordance between several or all spiritual traditions, leading to comparative study of them in the hope of bringing out what is common but hidden; and transmission: from master to disciple; initiatory societies, sometimes ‘secret’. The assumption of a concordance between different religious traditions and theologies enabled possessors of various kinds of knowledge to work together in situations of diversity (e.g. Christians living under Islamic rule in the Middle East), or also to pass on sensitive secrets to enemy powers. Many of Faivre’s criteria for esotericism fit with medieval western and eastern theologies. Indeed we can begin to see that esotericism remained at the core of theology as long as the body politic was conceived in an organic and hierarchical fashion in Christendom. Furthermore, esotericism is first discussed in theology right at the birth of the discipline in Alexandria, at the time when it is reflected upon in Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> Because esoteric modes of theology and exegesis typically claim that they are rendering visible truths that have been hidden for a long time, the question of whether Clement of Alexandria and Origen invented or discovered esoteric Biblical exegesis continues to be a very difficult one to answer. It is complicated by the question of the extent to which they could have been using Jewish esotericism, and whether this came mainly from Hellenistic Diaspora Judaism or from the Essene community. If the latter is the case, the question of the possibility of esoteric exegesis

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<sup>4</sup> Hägg, Henny Fiskå, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Itter, Andrew C., *Esoteric Teachings in the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

touches on debates about theological truth-norms, as the Essene or Enochian movement, far from being confined to Qumran, produced writings that were influential on the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> This turn to Jewish esotericism is significant because it has occurred in both Biblical Studies and Patristics. In the early modern period, one motive for historical-critical study of the Bible was provided by Egyptophile exegesis of the Old Testament, a trend deriving from Hellenistic Judaism. This provided Renaissance-influenced Neoplatonists with the tools for reading behind the text against the Puritan preference for plain reading.<sup>6</sup> This strand has repeatedly surfaced in 'high church' traditions, especially in the established churches wherein esoteric movements such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry have thrived.

Making esoteric assumptions about some aspects of reality would always be controversial. An esoteric approach to the doctrine of God always risked undermining a normative Christian or Islamic political order, whereas an esoteric approach to nature did not necessarily carry this danger. It could positively feed the development of the natural sciences. On the other hand, the esoteric idea that nature is alive could conceivably block the development of natural sciences by permitting the view that experimentation is an injury to nature. Esotericism could theoretically be a friend of diversity concerning religion and redemption whilst being an enemy of scientific progress. Thus more attention needs to be paid to the history of the interrelationship between exoteric and esoteric modes of theology and other disciplines if we are to gain a deeper understanding of the relation between theology and the arts and sciences, including those involved in statecraft.

## Theology, cryptography and the state

A degree of secrecy is essential to any social group, including a religious group, and also to the workings of the state.<sup>7</sup> Religions have typ-

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<sup>5</sup> Boccacini, Gabriele, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: the Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Droge, Arthur J., *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1989). Assmann, Jan, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).

ically kept knowledge of various kinds secret by shrouding them in esoteric forms of theology and scriptural exegesis. It is highly significant that we almost never teach this truth when we teach theology in universities. Yet to neglect this is to neglect the historic reality. Many different branches of knowledge were contained by esotericism, and these included the kinds of knowledge affording the most social and political power. Cryptography and cryptology, the encoding of messages and the science of their decoding in the service of combat, originated in esoteric theology. To be precise, it was found in all ancient civilizations and religions. In Judaism and Islam, it was developed from close reading of the sacred texts; Kabbalistic reading of the Torah, and gematriacal reading of the Qur'an. As the Kabbalistic tradition only kicked off after the Jews lost their state in AD 70, it did not contribute directly to a distinctly Jewish school of cryptography, but would later be a covert influence in western cryptography. The story of Islamic cryptography was different, as the Qur'an was the holy book of a religion that very early on became the ideology of Arab imperialists, and thus close reading of it, including esoteric reading, could feed the development of cryptography for the purpose of hiding military communications.<sup>8</sup> Cryptography underwent numerous transformations in the modern era. The first was by the use of numbers, specifically Arabic numerals. Before then, ciphers were only alphabetic (and only numeric insofar as letters were also used for numerals in many scripts). All of this changed in the Vatican in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Leon Battista Alberti claimed to have invented the polyalphabetic cipher, which also included Arabic numerals.<sup>9</sup> David Kahn now suggests Alberti got the idea from Raymond Lull's quasi-kabbalistic machine, though I would suggest he got it from an Arabic source, as the Islamic 9<sup>th</sup> century cryptographer al-Kindi knew of polyalphabetic ciphers.<sup>10</sup> This happened as the Papal states were pioneering the rise of the

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<sup>7</sup> Bok, Sissela, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) pp. 171-190.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Kadi, Ibrahim A., 'The Origins of Cryptology: The Arab Contributions', *Cryptologia* 16/2, (April 1992) pp. 97-126.

<sup>9</sup> Kahn, David, *The Codebreakers* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> Kahn, David, 'On the Origin of Polyalphabetic Substitution', *Isis* 71/1, (Mar. 1980) pp. 122-127.

princely Renaissance state.<sup>11</sup> Indeed Alberti's alleged invention was part of the Papacy's contest with the Republic of Venice for political supremacy in Italy.

Prior to these developments, the Dominican Order of Preachers produced the medieval church's most brilliant theologians, including Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, both of whom wrote about esoteric disciplines such as alchemy and astrology, viewing them as integrated within exoteric theology.<sup>12</sup> Members of the Order continued their inquiries in this respect. The cryptographer Johannes Trithemius was a Dominican Abbot, and it has been argued, surely correctly, that had he lived further than 1516, he would have taken the side of his later Jesuit supporters.<sup>13</sup> His most famous work was the *Steganographia*, written in 1499 and published posthumously in 1606. It was put on the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books in 1609 as it appeared to be a book of magic teaching the use of spirits to communicate long-distance. It was removed from the Index in 1900. The decryption key was published in 1606, and since then many scholars have come to realise that the magical work functioned as a ciphertext for a treatise on cryptography and steganography.<sup>14</sup> The controversies over Trithemius need to be understood in the light of ambiguities in Thomas Aquinas' hermeneutic of miracles and marvels, his writing on astrology, and his writing on alchemy.<sup>15</sup> They also need to be understood in the light of the split mentality of the western church since Constantine, divided between Augustine's ambivalent attitude towards esotericism in general and Hermeticism in particular, and Lactantius' commendation

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<sup>11</sup> Bobbitt, Philip, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (London: Penguin, 2002) pp. 75-94.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas writes on alchemy in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II. II.72.2. Marie-Louise Von Franz argues that Aquinas wrote the *Aurora Consurgens* in Von Franz, Marie-Louise (ed.), *Aurora Consurgens: A Document attributed to Thomas Aquinas on the Problem of Opposites in Alchemy* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 2000) pp. 405-434.

<sup>13</sup> On what follows on Trithemius I am indebted to Braun, Noel L., *Trithemius and Magical Theology: A Chapter in the Controversy over Occult Studies in Early Modern Europe* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Reeds, Jim, 'Solved: the Ciphers in Book III of Trithemius' *Steganographia*', *Cryptologia*, October 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Braun, (ibid.) pp. 15ff.

of the latter as a *praeparatio evangelii* in the service of Constantine's Christianisation of the Roman Empire.<sup>16</sup> Trithemius foolishly developed his cryptography via a cover text that was about magic (supposedly angelic magic), developing a practice expressly condemned by Augustine before his discussion of Hermeticism. The problem was that Trithemius had made some important advances in cryptography. Thus succeeding generations of savants tripped over themselves to defend him and absolve him of the charge of magic. They had to absolve themselves of the charge of defending magic and sorcery in the defence of Christian states. Blaise de Vigenère was both a cryptographer and an alchemist who had received a Kabbalistic vision, and he sought to reintegrate a demythologised version of Trithemian cryptography into a theological hierarchy of truths via alchemy.<sup>17</sup> He argued that there were two kinds of writing—ordinary exoteric writing and secret enciphered script. The latter was of elevated origin, and was used by the Hebrews, Chaldeans, Egyptians, Ethiopians and Indians, among many other ancient civilizations, 'for the purpose of veiling their sacred secrets of theology and philosophy.'<sup>18</sup> The Dutch Calvinist theologian Gerhard Voss (1577-1649) also argued that Trithemius' cryptography was merely a method of linguistic encipherment, in his *De Arte Grammatica* (1635).<sup>19</sup>

Trithemius' defenders in Britain were the Rosicrucian enthusiasts on the royalist side of the English Civil War. The Welsh Anglican priest and alchemist Thomas Vaughan (1622-1666), known as Eugenius Philalethes, and John Webster (1610-1662), both wanted to reform English education along Trithemian magical lines. Webster set this out in the 1653 book *Academiarum Examen*. Webster opposed both Henry More and Meric Casaubon, son of Isaac Casaubon who had conducted

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<sup>16</sup> Stroumsa, Guy G., *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) pp. 132-146. Augustine, *City of God VIII*, 19-23; X, 8-12. Beatrice, Pier Franco, 'Hermetic Tradition' in Fitzgerald, Allan D., OSA, *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 429-431. Digeser, Elizabeth DePalma, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Braun, op. cit., pp. 179-180.

<sup>18</sup> Braun, op. cit., p. 180.

<sup>19</sup> Braun, op. cit., p. 231.

a historical-critical debunking of the *Hermetica*. More in return attacked Vaughn, whereas Casaubon attacked De Vigenère and John Dee, the magus of the Elizabethan court. The protestant polymath John Wilkins wrote a rejoinder in 1654 entitled *Vindiciae Academicarum*, directed at Webster. In it he differentiated between concealment and grammar, and between cryptography as magic and cryptography as grammar. As his biographer Noel L. Braun explains:

Wilkins' interest in Trithemian cryptography was prompted by his search for a universal language accessible, not just to a privileged few, but to all who were knowledgeable in the required experimental methods for ferreting out the truth of things.<sup>20</sup>

The distinction arose between the exotericism of the nascent Royal Society and the esoteric standards of Trithemius, continued by the Rosicrucians and the western esoteric tradition. Cryptography was to be based on the idea of a universal grammar or language. This kind of thinking had probably long been in the making since Arabic numerals had come to be used in cryptography. It was to be conceived of in exoteric terms that anybody could understand, not in magical terms that gave the impression that one had to be versed in the magical arts to be able to succeed, nor in hierocratic terms that dictated that one had to be a priest to learn this knowledge.<sup>21</sup> By virtue of its being exoteric it became meritocratic rather than being the preserve of a clergy or priesthood trained in the occult disciplines. This shift was able to happen also because of the shift in trust in British society. Kings and priests were not necessarily fit to govern, as the Puritans had gained massive support over England and Wales (as had the Covenanters in Scotland) for their ideas. The methodological shift was paradoxical given the hidden nature of cryptographic communication, but it laid the groundwork for advancements in the field based on knowledge rather than fantasy. Thus the theoretical basis changed, from preoccupation with nature (or the Bible) as hiding secrets which required reading them as if they were ciphers, to preoccupation with inventing a universal

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<sup>20</sup> Braun, op. cit., p. 236.

<sup>21</sup> Braun, op. cit., 230ff. Shapiro, Barbara J., *John Wilkins 1614-1672: An Intellectual Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).

language for secret communication. Out of this would come the idea of modern computing. If cryptography became exoteric and gradually more ‘scientific’, much Christian theology moved in the opposite direction. With the German mystic Jakob Boehme (1575-1624), magic became linked to ‘unquantifiable religion’, which meant he had an indirect connection back to Trithemius via the disciples of Paracelsus. He wrote that ‘Magic is the best theology, for in it true faith is both grounded and discovered.’<sup>22</sup>

From then on, Britain would be the world leader in cryptography.<sup>23</sup> Black Chambers became common in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. They were organisations where teams of cryptographers worked on a daily basis on mail that had been intercepted by the state. The most reputed Black Chamber was in Vienna, the capital of the Roman Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire. England opened its Black Chamber in 1716, and it was run by the Anglican Wallis family, descended from John Wallis, the greatest English mathematician before Isaac Newton. By 1848, Britain, France and Austria had shut their Black Chambers. No sooner had they done this than they took up the telegraph, newly invented by Samuel Morse, as a better medium of cryptography. Morse used electromagnetism.<sup>24</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain, alongside the United States, continued to be a world leader in

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<sup>22</sup> Boehme, Jakob, *Six Theosophic Points and Other Writings*, trans. John Rolleston Earle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> On Charles Babbage’s work in cryptography and computing, see Franksen, Ole Immanuel, *Mr. Babbage’s Secret* (London: Prentice-Hall, 1985). See Standage, Tom, *The Victorian Internet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998) on the development of the electric telegraph. On the most important decipherment of WWI, see Tuchman, Barbara W., *The Zimmerman Telegram* (New York: Ballantine, 1994). On the Enigma, see Hinsley, F. H. and Stripp, Alan, *The Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Alan Turing’s four last postcards to his friend Robin are entitled ‘Messages from the Unseen World’, and appear to describe a vision of the truths of physics given within a kabbalistic metaphysics, as they start with the sentence, ‘The Universe is the interior of the light cone of creation’. Cited in Hodges, Andrew, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 513.

<sup>24</sup> Electricity was seen as the alchemical quintessence by some 18<sup>th</sup> century theologians. Benz, Ernst, *The Theology of Electricity: On the Encounter and Explanation of Theology and Science in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1989).

cryptography and its offspring computing. This development would contribute to online encryption enabling citizens to protect their own privacy against state surveillance. This has been a key factor in the recent debate over civil liberties in Britain and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> The mathematical transformation of cryptography signalled a step towards its secularisation, because the ever-increasing complexity of mathematics turned the discipline away from correspondence to a language-oriented and language-derived account of reality. When we look at the time when this happened, we see that the mathematization of cryptography occurred just before the challenge to the power of the Papacy by the Reformation. Theological and religious thought was gradually dethroned from its hegemony over a hierarchy of truth and knowledge by the mathematization of natural philosophy and the transformation of mathematics into being a language in its own right.<sup>26</sup>

## Alasdair MacIntyre's narrative of the decline of western ethics in the light of the rise of modern cryptography

The story of the decline of western ethics produced by Alasdair MacIntyre has influenced the scholarship and teaching of Christian theology and ethics over the past few decades.<sup>27</sup> It is striking that it coincides with the story of the rise of cryptography. It is therefore possible to mount a critique of his narrative via attention to the account of cryptography's relation to theology. MacIntyre has always adhered to a story of the decline of ethics, both when he was a protestant and a

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<sup>25</sup> The inventor of 'Pretty Good Privacy' writes about it in Zimmerman, Philip R., *The Official PGP User's Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). On the impact of cryptography on civil liberties and law enforcement, see Koops, Bert-Jaap, *The Crypto Controversy* (Boston, MA: Kluwer, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Steiner, George, 'The Retreat of the Word' in Steiner, George, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), pp. 30-54.

<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the 20th Century*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998). MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985). MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990).

Marxist and since he became Catholic. Pedagogically MacIntyre has been very influential in English-speaking theology and ethics since the 1980s. Arguing for the foundation of a Christian university in Britain, Gavin D'Costa sketches a Catholic narrative of how theology lost its position as the queen of sciences.<sup>28</sup> Like most scholars advancing this narrative, D'Costa draws heavily on MacIntyre and completely ignores the esoteric dimension of theology. Factoring in this dimension, and asking about the extent to which at various times it was congruent with or radically departed in spirit and substance from the exoteric traditions, would likely complicate such stories of decline and the tendency to use them to propose reconstructions of a 'Catholic' unity of knowledge analogous to the unity of ethics.

Four aspects of MacIntyre's narrative require attention in relation to the link between theology and cryptography. First, he has always held that atheism is the end product of changes in doctrine which were preceded by institutional changes regarding authority.<sup>29</sup> This is simply a disguised way of saying that because Papal authority was undermined at the Reformation by rising nation-states, pre-eminently the United Kingdom, the logical consequence of the doctrinal reforms proposed and effected by protestant clergy was mass atheism several centuries later. At the level of belief, the sociological surveys for Britain since the 1960s do not simply register a rise in atheism, but a decline in belief in a transcendent personal God, and a continuance of belief in 'the god within', along with a rise in pagan esotericist and paranormal beliefs.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> D'Costa, Gavin, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Secularization and Moral Change: The Riddell Memorial Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> The gendering of the sociology of religion has teased out the depth and complexity of contemporary religious change much further than conventional secularisation theory could do. See Marler, Penny Long, 'Religious Change in the West: Watch the Women' in Aune, Kristin, Sharma, Sonya and Vincent, Giselle, *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 23-56. My argument about paganisation and the emancipation of esotericism as supplementing a turn to atheism could be read as critically supplementing in the *longue durée* the main thesis of a 'spiritual revolution' involving sacralization alongside secularisation found in Heelas, Paul and Woodhead, Linda, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). They discuss the difficulty of assessing the evidence for a 'subjective turn' in

MacIntyre's theory deliberately ignores protestant theology both in its critical aspect towards the Papacy and in its positive aspects.<sup>31</sup> It is not atheism that has been the result of the Reformation in Britain, but religious plurality in the form of established Anglicanism and Presbyterianism, protestant free churches, and forms of Deism. Esotericism as a mode of thinking broke free from ecclesiastical control after the Reformation. Socially, it is a diffuse and fragmented paganism, rather than atheism, that has been the major religious consequence in modernity. Yet because it has often been expressed in esoteric terms this has not been visible to exoteric modes of theology and sociology of religion. Second, MacIntyre always portrayed Marxism as a sort of Christian heresy due to its being an inversion of Hegel's secularised Christianity.<sup>32</sup> This thesis is misleading when inserted as part of his narrative of the decline of ethics, because Marx was in fact using the inversion of Hegel to attack Judaism, from which his own father had tried to escape.<sup>33</sup> There is no Christology or ecclesiology in MacIntyre's description of Christianity. He could just as well have been talking about Arianism or Deism, both of which appealed to an understanding of ancient Judaism as the original natural and rational religion, thus the basis of 'true Christianity' and right secular order in the early modern period. As Marx was Jewish, and consciously repudiated and ridiculed religious Jews and Judaism, this omission is a

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*Britain and the USA* on pp. 49-76. Where I differ from Heelas and Woodhead is in emphasising that esotericism has always been present in western Christianity, and been gradually detached from official expressions of Christianity, what Hegel would call 'objective religion'.

<sup>31</sup> British theological critiques of MacIntyre have shied away from addressing the Reformation and thus appear rather abstract. Milbank, John, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 326-376. Bretherton, Luke, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 61-91. By contrast the American reformed theologian Richard Mouw has demonstrated clearly that MacIntyre's repudiation of the Reformers on theological anthropology and ethics is misplaced. Mouw, Richard, *The God Who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Marxism and Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1995), pp. 1-18.

<sup>33</sup> Tomasoni, Francesco, *Modernity and the Final Aim of History: The Debate over Judaism from Kant to the Young Hegelians* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Press, 2003).

problem for his theory. Marx was partly using his materialist inversion of Hegel to attack religious Jews whom he considered ‘bourgeois’ for wanting to assimilate into German ‘Christian’ society, or sectarian and reactionary for wanting to remain Orthodox. To further complicate things, it is now well established that Hegel’s philosophy had deep roots in his interests in Hermeticism, alchemy and Kabbalah, none of which require a Trinitarian theology, and all of which can happily exist within the framework of a Deist or Arian or other kind of strictly monotheistic theology, e.g. Islamic theology.<sup>34</sup> The difference here is that without a high Christology one cannot have a proper ecclesiology, and thus apocalyptic has to become wedded to the millenarian earthly society as it was in Marxism. Thus Marxism may be understood as an attack not only on Hegel, but on the ‘secular’ heresies that preceded his, early modern ‘Hebraic’ notions of polity that spanned protestant and heterodox thinking. Towards the end of his life, Marx reneged a little and encouraged his daughter Eleanor to learn the principles of socialism from the Biblical Jewish prophets.<sup>35</sup> The test of my theory here is the fact that had Marx been reneging upon a Christian heresy, he would have told her to read the New Testament. It is hard to derive an ethic for the ‘earthly city’ and international socialism straightforwardly from the New Testament as it is so focused on the church *vis-à-vis* the state. Thus it could be argued that Marx was attempting a radical critique of the early modern *respublica hebraica*. Marx’s materialising of Hegel led to jettisoning the esoteric disciplines that underlay the latter’s theology, including the Jewish Kabbalah, and that of other mainline protestants influenced by Freemasonry. Marxism can thus be said to be thoroughgoing in its anti-esotericism. Third, MacIntyre’s early work is more important for understanding his later work than some admirers will admit, for it reveals that he was never willing to respect critics and opponents of Marxism and Communism because they didn’t seem to have an overarching metanarrative or metaphysic to back up their objections.<sup>36</sup> It is very dangerous in a liberal democracy to think like

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<sup>34</sup> Magee, Glenn Alexander, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Maccoby, Hyam, *Antisemitism and Modernity: Innovation and Continuity* (London: Routledge, 2006) p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, ‘Notes From the Moral Wilderness’ (1958), reproduced in Knight, Kelvin, *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame

this. As the Hungarian dissident philosopher of science and critic of Communism Michael Polanyi argued, having settled in Britain, that philosophy and other branches of knowledge are in danger of forgetting is the role of tacit reasoning and communities of inquiry which have wonder as their goal.<sup>37</sup> Religiously, Polanyi was an agnostic. The kind of doctrinaire attitude pushed by MacIntyre, and easily propounded by Christian thinkers, excludes Polanyi's wisdom from education and marginalises agnosticism as somehow ignoble. MacIntyre is extreme in his exotericism, if unconscious of it. He strongly insists on Aquinas' prohibition on lying, even though Augustine would have been a better candidate for defending his stance. Fourth and last, MacIntyre has been said to espouse a 'patriotism' that is towards a way of life that celebrates practical wisdom and not toward any nation-state.<sup>38</sup> The slide from Marxism to Thomism looks as if it was a little too easy, based on an internationalism that is rooted in institutions that themselves command a kind of patriotism. The long and short of this is that not only MacIntyre has not been sufficiently attentive to the role of theological disputes in forming modernity (a criticism made by earlier critics), but specifically that he has sidestepped theological doctrines about church and state that have shaped modernity in Britain and elsewhere. As Britain is the home of the toleration of religious diversity, this omission is a rather serious one. Religious toleration can never occur in a vacuum; it is the product of historical conflicts over doctrine. Continued interaction with those traditions which actually supported toleration and diversity is what is needed to maintain those values.

It is important to recall that Alasdair MacIntyre was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain until 1956, when he and many of its intellectuals left because they disagreed with the Party's stance over the Hungarian uprising.<sup>39</sup> MI5 had in fact infiltrated the CPGB back in the 1930s, thanks to the advanced skills of Britain's cryptographers.<sup>40</sup>

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University Press, 1998) pp. 31-49.

<sup>37</sup> Polanyi, Michael, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, 'Is Patriotism a Virtue?' in Beiner, Ronald, *Theorizing Citizenship* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995) pp. 209-228.

<sup>39</sup> Blackledge, P. and Davidson, N., *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953-1974* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> West, Nigel, *MASK: MI5's Penetration of the Communist Party of Great Britain*

The CPGB and the Fascist Blackshirts were under surveillance from the Security Services. Before the deciphering of the evidence about CPGB, MI5's knowledge of CPGB came from several sources: Special Branch reports of political meetings, surveillance by means of a microphone hidden in CPGB's headquarters at 16 King Street, Covent Garden, surveillance via intercept warrants on the telephones of selected members, and informants and directed agents. CPGB was under the control of the Third Communist International (Comintern), formed in March 1919 to promote the Bolshevik objective of a worldwide revolution. It was set up to support, co-ordinate and direct individual national Communist movements. It was involved in espionage, and its International Directorate communicated in codes to members of the organisation around the world. Agents had often spend up to two years at the Lenin School in Moscow, taking classes in political ideology, tradecraft and clandestine communications. The Soviet intelligence organisation involved in all of this was the OMS, the Comintern's Foreign Liaison Department. OMS had full confidence in its cipher system, and as such its messages were often informal and rather indiscreet, revealing the real names of the communicants. British cryptographers managed to crack the cipher system in an operation condemned MASK, and this material became very useful for MI5 and the then Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. MASK traffic was very important for two main reasons.

First, it proved that the Soviet government's pretence that the Comintern was an independent organisation outside of its control was nothing more than an artificial sham, and that it was really a covert instrument of the country's undeclared foreign policy...Second, it showed that the Comintern concealed the existence of a clandestine network that extended its activities beyond semi-legitimate political agitation and the dissemination of propaganda, into the field of espionage and the collection of military and political information that would be of use to an enemy.<sup>41</sup>

The CPGB was most popular during the Second World War.<sup>42</sup> At first

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(London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> West, (ibid.) p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Beckett, Francis, *Enemy Within: the Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: John Murray, 1995), pp. 108ff.

it opposed the war, but when Stalin joined the War it supported it as anti-fascist. Membership rose to its all-time high in 1942 at 56,000. The postwar leaders were the same as the prewar ones, but they no longer wanted violent overthrow of the state, rather ‘a fundamental change in the way society was run’. In the 1945 elections, they had two MPs, lots of local councillors and trade union leaders. When they lost those in the 1950 general election, the general secretary Harry Pollitt travelled to Moscow to get advice from Stalin. He brought back a document that formed the basis for the Party’s new manifesto, ‘The British Road to Socialism’, officially adopted at the 22nd Congress in April 1952. It advocated a peaceful reformist transition to socialism, but only after official personal approval by Josef Stalin!<sup>43</sup> This irony, given that Stalin was no advocate of peaceful socialism in his own country, is a clue to the fact that CPGB had not in the 1950s severed its ties with Moscow, and thus not ceased to be an arm of Soviet foreign policy, designed to bring down the British state.<sup>44</sup> By this time MI5 had the names of roughly 90% of the Party’s membership list, and was aware that it was secretly funded from Moscow.<sup>45</sup> It was only in 1957, after leaving the CPGB, that MacIntyre first published his comparative study of Marxism and Christianity discussed above. He moved on to the Socialist Labour League led by Gerry Healy, a Trotskyist outfit founded in 1959. He left in 1960 and moved on to Tony Cliff’s Socialist Review/International Socialists, and was on the editorial board of its new journal International Socialism. He resigned abruptly in the summer of 1968. MacIntyre’s view by this time was that the proletariat was irretrievably fragmented, such that revolutionary organisations would inevitably become mirrors of managerialism and capitalist bureaucracy. One recent Communist critic has argued as follows about his subsequent Catholic conversion:

At the end of the day MacIntyre falsified all of his own line of argument on this front by adhering to the Catholic church. The reason is that the Catholic church is a beautiful demonstration of

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<sup>43</sup> Beckett, (ibid.) pp. 121-123.

<sup>44</sup> Andrews, Geoff, *Endgames and New Times* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2004), pp. 74 & 90.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew, Christopher, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 402-403.

the fact that bureaucratic hierarchy and the authority of ‘experts’ is not the product of the attempt to do predictive social science.<sup>46</sup>

Yet the Catholic Church sees itself as the fulfilment of Old Testament predictive prophecy, in being the body of the Messiah. Its authoritative hierarchy and bureaucracy is comprised of priests who inherit the role of the Levitical priesthood, who were also experts in various sciences such as medicine, later incorporated into the esoteric disciplines.

Roman Catholicism has historically preceded Communism in its internationalism and attempts at affecting the policies of nation-states. The difference is that for centuries it aspired to rule over Europe as a sovereign state and had its own territories, army and cryptographers. This only ceased when its army was defeated by the Italian nationalist army in 1870.<sup>47</sup> The papal army of the Zouaves is commemorated annually in a Mass in Rome. This celebration declined after Vatican II but became popular again under John Paul II. Therefore, to reject patriotism as a vice, as MacIntyre advocates, is not in fact to embrace a virtue, but to embrace the loyalty to a foreign power that typically wishes to influence or subvert sovereign states. Without the break from Trithemius and therefore from Thomism, cryptography would never have developed and thus someone else, an invading power, would have developed it instead of Britain. Without the cryptographic work of MI5, British Communism may have continued to have more credibility and many would have continued to deny that it was a serious problem for the state. Without this basic technique for defending the state, our university culture especially in the humanities would not be what it is in terms of diversity, and certainly Christian theology and ethics would not be taught therein. Theology and Religion would only be taught at the sociological level.

It is highly relevant that Pope Benedict XVI has embraced MacIntyre’s theory, and that he has been behind the reassertion of the Papal opinion that protestants and other Christians only belong to ‘communities’ not churches, as they apparently do not have ‘the valid

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<sup>46</sup> McNar, Mike, ‘Sects and ‘New Left’ Disillusionment’, *Weekly Worker*, 13 April 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Coulombe, Charles A., *The Pope’s Legion: The Multinational Fighting Force that Defended the Vatican* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

episcopate' or the correct sacramental theology.<sup>48</sup> Although commentators have tried to soften the blow by arguing that Orthodox churches are considered valid, the real subtext is obvious—the repudiation of Papal authority as theologically valid. Considered in a historical light, his attitude towards church-state relations is ironic. In 2006 he wrote the following:

The Church may not exalt itself to become a state, nor may it seek to work as an organ of power in the state or beyond the state boundaries... 'The Church remains outside the state... [but] must exert herself with all her vigour so that in it there may shine forth the moral truth that it offers to the state and that ought to become evident to the citizens of the state.'<sup>49</sup>

If MacIntyre's story of the decline of western ethics is to be taught to students, we should also teach them clearly that that story parallels very close the story of the decline of Papal power and the rise of modern cryptography. It won't do to stay at the safe level of changes in metaphysics. The Papacy has for most of its history had a state of its own. Its land was donated to it in the first millennium. From about the 8<sup>th</sup> century—the time of the forgery of the *Donation of Constantine* to invent the granting of lands to the Papacy by Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century—to the modern period, the Papacy had an army and behaved just like a monarchical and later princely state, i.e. a secular institution wielding temporal power.<sup>50</sup> Rome was occupied by Italian nationalist soldiers in 1870, weakly resisted by papal soldiers. The papal state was annexed by the new kingdom of Italy, and Rome became its capital in 1871.<sup>51</sup> The question of Rome was a problem for the Papacy until 1929,

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<sup>48</sup> As Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, Benedict wrote the encyclical *Dominus Iesus*, August 6, 2000, for the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, asserting this position. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

<sup>49</sup> Benedict XVI, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 69-71.

<sup>50</sup> Fried, Johannes and Brandes, Wolfram, *The Donation of Constantine and Constitutum Constantini: The Misinterpretation of a Fiction and its Original Meaning* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007). Chambers, David, *Popes, Cardinals and War: The Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

when the Lateran Treaties founded the state of Vatican City to guarantee papal independence for the Pope's pastoral ministry.<sup>52</sup> (The Papacy probably had an eye for the difficulty Orthodox patriarchs had vis-à-vis the Byzantine emperors. Nearly a third (36 out of 122) of Orthodox patriarchs had been deposed by Byzantine emperors between 379 and 1451. They had no state of their own.) The Lateran Treaty of 1929 guaranteed the Holy See's sovereignty in the international sphere, confirmed Catholicism to be the official religion of the Italian state, and made Rome the capital of Italy. The treaty also allowed the Church free exercise of spiritual authority, state protection of Christian marriage and religious communities, and the position and payment of clergy. The Holy See was financially compensated for the loss of the Papal states. The Lateran Treaties were revised in 1984, such that religious pluralism was established as legitimate, and renewed the 1929 stipulation for the Italian state to contribute financially towards the payment of priests and to the maintenance of ecclesiastical institutions. This means that the Roman Catholic Church seems to be the 'established' church of modern Italy. So does the Roman Catholic Church fulfil Benedict XVI's criteria for church-state relations? The Papacy which heads the church has a special state of its own to protect it that is not the Italian state—an extra concession compared to, say, the Church of England or the Church of Scotland. It is literally an organ of power within Vatican City State, and was certainly so in the Papal States. It works as an organ of power beyond state boundaries in subtle ways, by having observer status at the United Nations, and through its many societies. It has a Diplomatic Corps, founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when it was at the vanguard of the development of the modern princely state.

This then is the institutional ecclesiological backdrop to MacIntyre's story about the decline of ethics. It is also the backdrop to Benedict XVI's story about the decline and fragmenting of knowledge. As this is relevant to the short history of cryptography outlined above, it is worth summarising briefly. Tracy Rowland argues that Benedict

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<sup>51</sup> Gatz, Erwin, 'Papal States' in Steiner, Bruno and Parker, Michael G., *Dictionary of Popes and the Papacy* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 227-231.

<sup>52</sup> Benz, Hartmut, 'Lateran Treaties' in Steiner, Bruno and Parker, Michael G., *Dictionary of Popes and the Papacy*, pp. 210-211.

sees Catholic theology as a 'double helix' of Christian and Hellenistic components.<sup>53</sup> (It's significant that she doesn't speak in terms of Jewish and Hellenistic components, which would be the correct way to see things.) Benedict claims there are three moments of severance from this 'double helix': Giordano Bruno's reversal to a divine cosmos, Galileo's supposed equation of knowledge of geometry with knowledge of God, and Martin Luther's alleged wish to purge Christian thought of its Greek inheritance. It is significant that Bruno is at the top of this list, as he was chronologically not the earliest of these figures. He was burnt at the stake by the Church in 1600 for practicing black magic and advocating a return to ancient Egyptian sun-worship.<sup>54</sup> Most people would consider it bizarre, not to say deliberately insulting, to put Galileo and Luther alongside him. It looks suspiciously like a way of demonising Protestantism. A further problem is that Galileo cannot be characterised the way Benedict characterises him, for the dispute concerning his work was rooted in Biblical interpretation.<sup>55</sup> As for Luther, he expressed a fondness for alchemy as a model of Christian doctrine, in particular the general resurrection.<sup>56</sup> This is a far cry from repudiating the Hellenistic heritage, for alchemy is Hellenistic in origin. Anybody who accepts it is implicitly accepting an awful lot of Hellenistic metaphysics as at least worthy of serious attention. So did Benedict put Bruno the magician, Galileo the natural scientist, and Luther the protestant reformer in the same boat? The latter two belong together as drawing on the Augustinian tradition in reading the Bible. The former does not belong with them, being a pagan. All three challenged the authority of the Papacy regarding the production and dissemination of exoteric and esoteric knowledge. Institutionally, currents of thinking derived from these three thinkers understood as types, among others, fed into early Freemasonry. There is a long history of Catholic suspicion of it as heretical and even a counterfeit religion.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Rowland, Tracey, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp. 108-110.

<sup>54</sup> Yates, Frances, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Carroll, W. E., 'Galileo and the Interpretation of the Bible', *Science and Education* 8/2, (March 1999) pp. 151-187.

<sup>56</sup> Luther, Martin, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*. (Trans. William Hazlitt) (London: G. Bell, 1902) p. 326.

Freemasonry originated in Scotland as a Trinitarian and esotericist response to elements of the Calvinist Reformation.<sup>58</sup> It soon absorbed elements of Rosicrucianism, which came from Germany, and which falsely claimed descent from Luther's theology on the basis that the rose and the cross were his emblems. Historians and controversialists of Freemasonry have long debated whether the Constitutions of English Freemasonry, written by the Scottish Presbyterian Rev. James Anderson, were inclined towards Deism, and therefore whether this is the basis on which the Catholic Church was opposed to it. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that this is wrongheaded.<sup>59</sup> British Freemasonry always sought to link itself to the political and ecclesiastical establishments, to defend religious toleration and scientific freedom, and oppose sedition. Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 welcomed Protestant Nonconformists but not Unitarians or Catholics or atheists, in the light of Jacobite campaigning against the Act of Settlement of 1701. His revised Constitutions of 1738, approved by the Grand Lodge of England on 25 January 1738, introduced the Noachide Laws and appeared more latitudinarian. Pope Clement XII issued a papal bull condemning and excommunicating Freemasons and all who supported them on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1738. He did not distinguish between British and continental Freemasonry, thus revealing that it was the scope of ecclesial authority that was at the heart of the condemnation. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed, British Freemasons would return to the 1723 Constitutions and draw closer to the Church of England, as well as condemning Deism in 1756 in order to reassure Catholic sympathisers. This trend was supported by Edmund Burke, champion of Catholic emancipation turned hostile to Unitarians. It was in the wake of the French Revolution that British Freemasons would strengthen their

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<sup>57</sup> This kind of argument is made by Anglican priest turned Roman Catholic Walton Hannah in *Darkness Visible: A Christian Appraisal of Freemasonry* (1952) 2nd ed. (London: Chulmleigh Augustine, 1984). Hannah tends to focus on oaths and rituals, without attending a great deal to scholarly debates on their origins, or engaging in theological debate on the relationship of esotericism to Christian theology.

<sup>58</sup> Stevenson, David, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's century 1590-1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>59</sup> Révanger, Cécile, 'Franc-Maçonnerie et Religion en Grand Bretagne: vers une religion de l'Etat', in Porset, Charles & Révanger, Cécile, *Franc-Maçonnerie et Religion dans l'Europe des Lumières* (Paris: H. Champion, 1988) pp. 29-41.

loyalty to the monarchy and the British constitution. Revanger points out that the existence of 39 General Regulations in the Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of England (1813) curiously mirrors the 39 Articles of the Church of England. All of this suggests that Catholic anti-Freemasonry and Catholic anti-protestantism are two sides of the same coin, of opposition to the Reformation as it was played out in the English-speaking world. The opposition to Italian and French Freemasonry, openly Deist and later atheist and revolutionary, was always genuine but also an excuse for this. MacIntyre's exoteric Marxism-turned-Thomism is in sharp contrast to the Freemasonic esotericism that has long lurked within the mainline protestant churches and modern western states. In British politics this conflict can be perceived between the Labour and Conservative parties going right back to the founding of MI5 and the advent of universal suffrage. Labour always suspected MI5 of spying on its members, and always suspected that Freemasonry was rife among the socially conservative. Indeed, along with Anglicanism, it had spread throughout the British Empire. The Conservatives by contrast were not averse to accusing Labour of harbouring secret Communists bent on doing Moscow's foreign policy within the United Kingdom. In other countries, Freemasonry has been patriotic but revolutionary and anti-Catholic, so it has gravitated more towards liberal than conservative politics. Pope Benedict XVI appears to be continuing in the long Catholic tradition of repudiating Protestantism via attacking esotericism. For this argument to work, Martin Luther has to be grouped alongside Giordano Bruno and then written off as anti-metaphysical, and the differences between Martin Luther and John Calvin just have to be ignored. MacIntyre plays a similar game when he assimilates Luther to Macchiavelli regarding the secular autonomy of the state.<sup>60</sup> There is a slippery slope argument at work, as well as a taint-by-association argument.

The Roman Catholic Church gradually lost control over the esoteric disciplines that were closely related to theology, science and statecraft. The story of the 'decline' of western ethics (and with it of western metaphysics and theology, which runs parallel) is bound up with this at the intellectual, not only the contingent institutional level. It is also the story of the rise of religious toleration and the recognition

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<sup>60</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, *A Short History of Ethics*, (ibid.) pp. 121-128.

of diversity. In the medieval era, the Church was the transnational polity that interfered in the workings of states and whose reigning discourse governed cryptography and the arts of war, claiming right to universal assent and obedience. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was Soviet Communism that attempted to fulfil this function. Neither body was tolerant either in theory or in practice of religious or intellectual diversity. The fact that both supported state universities should not blind us to this fact. In theological terms, MacIntyre's turn to Thomas Aquinas in ethics, including on the morality of truth-telling and lying, sits somewhat uneasily with Benedict's general preference for Augustine. MacIntyre defends Aquinas by making the following claim:

Twentieth-century political society, unlike its thirteenth-century counterpart, characteristically lacks...the existence in its midst of any influential body of protagonists of an absolute prohibition upon lying, let alone the presentation of that prohibition as part of a body of thought claiming to merit both its intellectual and its moral allegiance.<sup>61</sup>

Yet as Paul Griffiths has argued, Aquinas' approach to lying was purely ethical, viewing it as an offence against justice.<sup>62</sup> MacIntyre only reads Aquinas in relation to modern ethicists. For Augustine lying was wrong because it was 'a rupture of the divine image'. Aquinas' position is closer to the Greek Patristic tradition. I would argue that this is no accident given that the Greek tradition stretching back to Clement of Alexandria was more hospitable to esotericism and had a closer relationship to the Byzantine Empire, more analogous to Aquinas' relation to the Papacy and its power than to Augustine's critical distance from the Roman Empire. It accords with Aquinas having written dissertations on esoteric themes, versus Augustine's repudiation of such thinking.

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<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, cited in Knight, Kelvin, *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) pp. 155-156.

<sup>62</sup> On what follows see Griffiths, Paul J., *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2004) pp. 171-184.

## Conclusion

The end result of neglecting the history of how the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of theology were separated is that esotericism has come to be seen by many Christians as a style of discourse that is distinct from and mainly opposed to Christian theology. Partly this may have been the influence of Calvinism in some countries, as it was generally opposed to things esoteric, possibly associating them with magic and superstition.<sup>63</sup> Apophaticism has become fashionable among theologians in recent years, yet most have not made the connection with the esoteric disciplines, i.e. the way in which an apophatic theology has served to conceal artistic and scientific knowledge from lay people.<sup>64</sup> Some theologians have turned to apophaticism as an apologetic device to woo students and to ward off what they regard as Biblical literalism.<sup>65</sup> In practice this often translates into ignoring positive exegesis

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas, Keith, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Penguin, 2001). Cameron, Euan, *Superstition, Reason and Religion: 1250-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). It is worth recalling that both Luther and Calvin were heavily indebted to interpretations of Augustine. Calvin and the Reformed churches seem to have inherited Augustine's hostility to esotericism.

<sup>64</sup> See for example the anthology of western apophatic texts collected in Franke, William, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourse in Philosophy, Religion, Literature and the Arts* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2007). On alchemy as conceived and concealed theologically by doctrines of election and priesthood in East and West, see Karpenko, Vladimir, 'Alchemy as Donum Dei', *Hyle: International Journal for the Philosophy of Chemistry* 4, (1998) pp. 3-8.

<sup>65</sup> John Webster perceptively links Rowan Williams' redefinition of apophasis in terms of 'the indeterminable and unsystematic character of knowledge of God' with his 'curious insistence on polyphony, conflict, and incoherence within the [Biblical] canon.' Webster, John, 'Rowan Williams on Scripture', in Bockmuehl, Markus and Torrance, Alan J., *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008) pp. 108-109, 121. Andrew Moody offers a sharp critique of Williams' reliance on apophasis in dogmatics, but as with many writers on the apophatic/kataphatic distinction, he fails to see the elitism at the core of ecclesiastical handling of apophasis which means that the apophatic theologian is forever warding off kataphatic expressions as supposedly too reminiscent of 'simple piety'. This kind of mentality is traceable to Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Andrew Moody, 'The Hidden Center: Trinity and Incarnation in the Negative (and Positive) Theology of





























































































































































































































































































