ARE ALL RELIGIONS EQUAL? - Michael Bennett (www.michaelbennett.org.uk)

Whether all religions are equal in a theological or metaphysical sense is a question that I am not qualified to answer, though, in essence, it is a valid question for non-religious people to ask. However, in the context of multiculturalism, we can ask of Christianity and Islam the question of their relative ability to accommodate the separation of church and state. Whilst neither of these faiths is monolithic and each can accommodate a broad spectrum of different views and sects, it is not necessarily the case that both have been equally successful in reaching the necessary acceptance of the position that organised religion should not attempt to interfere in affairs of state.

Putting the issue of religions to one side for a moment, and without rehearsing our arguments against relativism and postmodernism, let us remind ourselves that there is *no necessary reason to subscribe to the position that all cultures are 'equal*'. The notion that we respect other cultures does not have to imply that we see all cultures (and all parts of all cultures) as equally valid and valuable. As Wolf (19914: 78) suggests, the demand that cultures are equally valid is tied to the relativistic repudiation of the existence of all possible standards for making valuations. The paradox in this position undermines the relativist's proposition that all cultures are equally valid. Taylor (1994: 68-9) continues this line of argument by indicating that it is nonsensical to presume equality of cultural value when, to some degree, it is an empirical issue that requires investigation rather than being an a priori necessity. He goes on to suggest that some postmodernist demands concerning the equality of cultures are 'an act of breathtaking condescension. No one can really mean it as a genuine act of respect. It is more in the nature of a pretend act of respect given on the insistence of its supposed beneficiary. Objectively, such an act involves contempt for the latter's intelligence.'

This line of argument does not mean that, when comparing cultures, we have to treat them as wholes. It is possible to hold evaluative judgments on parts of cultures, so that we can compare specific aspects of culture in different societies. If all cultures have made contributions that are of worth they are unlikely to be identical contributions and their claim to worth may differ in their value to humankind. We can legitimately criticise Western culture for imperialism and colonialisation, and yet respect it for the achievements of science and the Enlightenment. This line of reasoning is also true for the relative achievements of different religions.

I write as a non-religious person. Yet, in recent years, I have found that my secularist rejection of religion has been too limiting, too simplistic and has failed to recognise the positive contribution that religions, in varying degrees, have made (and still make) to the lives of individuals and to societies as a whole. Holland has taken this basic idea much further in his recent works of the historical role of Christianity. He has concerns about the way in which the historical role of Christianity can be almost completely ignored. As a paradigm for the way in which Christianity can be eliminated as a significant influence on the development of Western civilisation, he cites the first draft of the European constitution in 2003. He notes (2008b: 34) that this document acknowledges the achievements of ancient Greece and Rome as well as the Enlightenment, but Christianity is not mentioned. This secular re-writing of history benefits no one and, in terms of the argument that I am developing, misses a key achievement of the Christian church. For, following Holland, the date 1077 is very significant and symbolises the start of a process of the separation of church and state. At Canossa Henry IV was obliged to beg for absolution from Pope Gregory VII and cease imperial attempts to control the papacy. 'By presuming to challenge the fabulously ancient nimbus of tradition that hedged emperors and empires about, Gregory had helped to set Europe upon a fateful course. His ambition, a truly breathtaking one, was nothing less than to transform the whole of Christendom: to divide it, from its summit to the meanest village, into two, one realm for the spiritual, one for the secular. .. it was the very success of Gregory and his followers that would ultimately result in the banishment of God from western political life.' (2008b: 36) This inheritance, through the Reformation and the Enlightenment, eventually helps to enable the development of a secular world that can accommodate multiculturalism.

But this is not the case for all faiths despite the habit of certain secularists to treat them as if they were identical. Indeed this expectation can place too high a burden on those faiths that have had neither the longevity of Christianity, nor experienced the particular contours of European history that obliged the church to find its accommodation with secular society. In Europe modernisation was spread over centuries and gave enough time for Christianity to adapt to this process. For the world of Islam this was a much more truncated and brutal experience and it is not surprising that in order to prevent total breakdown it sought to retreat to what Žižek (2008: 34) calls the 'shield of "fundamentalism," the psychotic-delirious-incestuous reassertion of religion as direct insight into the divine Real.' Holland also suggests

(37) that strict neutrality shown to different faiths by European elites is a 'calculated hypocrisy', because the very notion of such neutrality is too much a product of the Christian tradition to be easily accepted by other faiths. The separation of church and state, and the privatisation of faith is problematic for many Muslims. This is an issue that is not easily resolved because Christianity and Islam have important differences. The Christian separation of church and state faces a different set of obstacles in the Islamic tradition which has strong views on what might constitute the role of the state. Jesus' distinction between the world of Caesar and the world of God does not easily translate for a Muslim for whom this issue is addressed less by the Koran than by 'the very fact that their Prophet founded a community and lead it towards the statehood which served as a planned demonstration of the validity of their faith.' (2009: 39) By reason of both theology and tradition we are not entitled to value equally the ability of Christianity and Islam to accept and find a way of living with the separation of church and state.

Christianity's ability to come to terms with a secular world reflects, and is constitutive of, another achievement, namely *the ability to relativise one's own position and see oneself through the eyes of others*. This self-reflexivity, which is also a competence held by people with reflexivity in all faiths, enables the holder to be restrained in their view that other faiths, and secular citizens, are simply mistaken in their views and, therefore, enables them to resist calls to violence and refrain from interfering in public life. Indeed, this reflexivity and ability to gain distance from one's own perspective and tradition is a signal achievement of the West.

Moreover, philosophy, Habermas suggests (2001: 42), which has come to terms with its own metaphysical origins, is the only form of knowledge that can enable religions to see themselves reflexively and undogmatically. More specifically, it is the notion of communicative rationality that can best assist religions to become aware of the reflexivity that reason requires of them as it enables them to become aware that all faiths share the same dependency on validity claims and all the other features of communicative rationality that enable communication. This means that religions must renounce both violence and the refusal to accept other ways of life as valid. This involves a cognitive self limitation, but also ironically, a move to a higher stage of moral awareness. Only the philosophy of communicative rationality with its architecture of validity claims and the preconditions of communication has the potential to provide a universal common ground between

'irreconcilable' worldviews and faiths and thereby enable us to have a more critical understanding of the theory and practice of multiculturalism.

It is the very reflexivity of communicative rationality that also recommends a certain level of self-limitation on secularists in their relationships with believers. Just as a Eurocentrism is avoided by the adoption of a self-critical and decentering form of universal rationality, so should *secular rationalists abandon their amnesia regarding their cultural debt to a Christian past*. In so doing they may recognise that secular myths, narratives and symbols lack, for many people, the power to console and provide meaning in a manner that religious traditions have proven to be very effective. Rather than dismissing this state of affairs in a haughty rationalism that may reflect their own emotional ambivalence, 'perhaps secularists should stop regarding this as a problem to be overcome, and recognise it as a resource to be drawn upon.' (Holland 2008b: 37) A *more confident secularism* that is based on a reflexive communicative rationality rather than a rigid positivistic rationality, or an anarchic postmodern irrationality, can be more emotionally congruent and *less fearful of spiritual engulfment* in its relationship with religions by adopting an attitude of curiosity towards the possibility of learning from religions' ability to provide meaning. In considering the possibility of developing a secular sense of the sacred and a reflexive approach to the power of mythological narratives we can hold a secular perspective less intransigently and less in fear of contamination from the secular temptations of listening to the siren voices of the easy raptures of non-reflexive and totalising believers.

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See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.