

RELIGION - Michael Bennett (www.michaelbennet.org.uk)

To my own surprise I have, over many years, come to the position that, rather than simply rejecting religion, we need to reframe the sacred within a secular context and translate from religion those concepts and values that respond to our need for redemption, consolation and other such deep existential values which fail to find an adequate response in rationalist cultures. There are a number of religious themes and ideas that can be successfully translated into a secular framework. They include: anamnesis, universal fellowship, redemption, consolation, hope, ritual practices, God as intersubjectivity, the sacred and sin. If this is to be a fruitful exercise we need to take the risk of looking at religion in a more positive light.

The Benefits of Religion

Suffice to say that religion has been the cause of countless deaths and huge swathes of suffering and oppression. This needs to be duly recognised. But it is time to consider, as we move to a closer understanding of the relationship between the secular and the sacred, the positive contribution that religion has made and still makes to western society. In what follows I am not suggesting that religion has been the sole cause of the individual and social benefits described, but it has, at least, been a contributing factor.

a. Christian Sources of Western Liberalism

The confluence of Christianity and Greek metaphysics enabled the introduction into philosophy of many concepts which have a significant Christian flavour. Habermas (2006c: 44-5) argues that there are several clusters of related philosophical concepts that have significant Christian overtones. There is a cluster around normative issues (responsibility, autonomy and justification); there is a second cluster associated with issues of time (history, future progress, anamnesis and innovation); a further grouping involves the concepts of alienation, emancipation and fulfilment and, finally, we have psychological notions like internalisation and individuality. The latter concepts were further stimulated by Protestantism which, by making religion a private matter, promoted the further development and secularisation of the idea of individuality. Many of these concepts would also overlap so that the new stress on the individual would link up with the idea of salvation and create a more linear sense of time and the imperative to move and develop along a line of time.

A number of concepts that we traditionally associated with the Enlightenment and the heritage of liberalism also have Christian and Judaic roots. The idea of freedom connects with the Christian notion of free will and reification links with the Christian idea of the prohibition of images, similarly our understanding of alienation has an association with man's fall from grace as described in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Christianity also made the human person the centre of religious life and has left us with the tradition of making life the highest good. From this there is but a small journey to such values as the equal dignity of all women and men and from thence to the equality of human rights.

One of the greatest legacies of Christianity, argues Cobb (1976: 93), was the denial that ethical action could be solely directed by the rational will:

Primitive Christianity was not satisfied by these limits and expressed the demand that action for others go beyond calculative ethical behaviour and express the motivation of love. In other words, one's feelings as well as one's outer actions were brought within the realm of responsibility. One identified with one's aspirations for a fuller righteousness than the rational will could support. Hence, Christianity rejected the identification of the ultimate centre of existence with the rational will. The self can exist only as a distancing of itself from the will, as well as from emotion and reason, and this implies a sense of responsibility for all of these dimensions of experience.

In outline this view of Christianity provides us with a strong link to a modern notion of selfhood.

Eagleton (2009) reminds us that Christianity also helped to move religious action away from pedantic observances towards practical action. A preoccupation with ritual behaviour, animal sacrifice, strict piety, and faddish conformity to cults was replaced with the imperatives of helping the poor, feeding the hungry, protecting the meek and weak and welcoming the stranger. So that salvation was a consequence of the quality of our everyday social interactions rather than adherence to the apparatus of religion. Eagleton also makes the helpful suggestion that to pay greater attention to the remembrance of our Christian roots does not mean that we have to denigrate the immense value of our liberal and Enlightenment traditions. They are not mutually incompatible. And although the legacy of Christianity has constantly experienced reinterpretation there is 'to this very day no alternative to it. And in

the light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from the substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk.' (Habermas 2002: 149)

b. Translation from the Sacred to the Secular

Translation of valuable ideas from the sacred is not possible if dogmatic rationalists and secularists, either from conceptual rigidity or fear of contagion, maintain a dogged resistance. It is perfectly possible to retain an authentic secular stance and keep a distance from religion whilst being open to certain features of the perspective that it offers. Just as religion demystified traditional myths, then postmetaphysical reasoning can perform a parallel operation on religion. If we can take on board the importance of the moral deficit that currently prevails the urgency of this demystifying process may encourage rationalists not to be high-minded. Rather there is an opportunity to act cooperatively with colleagues from religious traditions to investigate how some religious values could translate into secular language and reinforce the resources for moral motivation that are currently available to a secular society.

For this to be possible rationalists need to embrace two challenges. Firstly, there needs to be a coming to terms with the failure, hitherto, of developing a credible response to the existential conditions of death, suffering and meaninglessness. Silence or stoic resignation are insufficient. Secondly, there is the epistemological challenge of ceasing to dispense with religion as nothing more than superstition and ridiculous irrationality. We have to be open to the possibility that there could be a *rational content to religion*. Only if we are open will we have a chance of developing any translatable potentials that may be discovered, and only if we are open will we be able to work cooperatively with people on the other side of the divide.

A process of translation could unlock at least three doors: a broad potential for useful religious values and concepts; a more productive relationship with religious cultures; and, more specifically, a reappraisal of the need to provide existential consolation through secular symbolic structures. Turning to the first of these we touch on Habermas's developed thesis that philosophy has not exhausted the potential for meaning that religions provide. Thus, he says 'we cannot exclude that they involve semantic potentials capable of exercising an inspirational force on society as a whole as soon as they divulge their profane truth contents.'

(2008: 142) On its own, practical reason has neither the resources nor the motivation to generate the semantic potentials. It needs the stimulus that religion can provide.

With regard to the second of these issues, if the Western world feels able to engage with religion in this way, and thereby present a genuinely more differentiated and complex approach to religion, there is every reason to believe that relations with religions and religious cultures may become less antagonistic and more open to dialogue. This can be approached in the positive light of improving mutual understanding, and in the defensive light of tempering some of the hostility to secularism that comes from the more fundamentalist religions. It makes Western secularism a less easy target.

c. Consolation

The third door that we may unlock is one that can give us access to the religious understanding of the need for consolation and solace. Throughout my various allusions to the benefits of religion and the importance of translation I have touched upon issues of consolation. I want to address this issue in a different light and move away from those traditional rationalists who maintain that the only authentic existential stance to the inconsolability of life is one of resignation. 'It is love, not reason ... which is stronger than death, and from that alone can flow the sweetness of civilisation. Reason in itself is too abstract and impersonal a force to face down death.' (Eagleton 163). Reason, wonderful though it is, is humbled by the destructive power of the following:

- death and annihilation
- suffering
- physical pain and sickness
- grief and loss (particularly with regard to children and intimate partners)
- finitude
- ageing
- lives that have gone astray
- addiction
- anxiety, depression and mental illness
- loneliness and isolation

The list could be much longer but it is worth some detailing because putting it all under the rubric of 'death and suffering' never seems enough. It does not express the sheer depth and intensity of suffering that can face all of us, and some people more particularly. Suicide is not the only indication that inconsolable suffering is too much. The whole gamut of addictions and emotional disturbances bear witness to the misery of suffering. I have managed a counselling service for many years and, although we can develop a long list of reasons as to why people seek counselling, the one we don't really monitor but is nevertheless often in the counsellor's mind, is the inability of many clients to place their pain within a larger context of meaning.

Unless we can develop new languages which are able to promote the ability of individuals to meaningfully connect with larger frames of reference that resonate for them in their daily lives, as well as when they face seemingly inconsolable problems, we will not have the will or the resilience to face and deal with the political, moral and environmental problems that increasingly confront us. There is also a more specific threat of which Siebert (1985) reminds us. Unless we can develop secular narratives that can provide a level of consolation and meaning we will lack the *imagination* and *resolve* to resist the ever-increasing encroachment of instrumental rationality and positivism which, in more recent times in psychological services, come in the guise of industry and state-sponsored cognitive-behavioural therapy. Moreover, without a more energised secular form of consolation there will always be a temptation, when under pressure, for people to revert to religion to find solace. People will not be 'willing or able to live in an inconsolable condition.'

There is, I believe, some confusion around the notion of consolation over its link with finding either 'meaning' or 'justification'. Bernstein (2002), drawing from Nietzsche, draws our attention to the claim that it is not suffering, as such, that mankind ultimately abhors but suffering without meaning. He then connects with Levinas who is concerned with the problem of theodicy whereby suffering is 'justified' by the religious promise of salvation or the secular promise of a utopian society. So that 'theodicy, in both its theological and secular forms, is the temptation to find some sort of justification, some way to reconcile ourselves to useless, unbearable suffering and evil.' I agree with this sentiment, but it is important to distinguish between the consolation provided by salvific promises and a very different form of consolation that reflexively knows not to make this epistemological error, yet is, nevertheless, capable of providing a connection to a meaningful frame of reference. A

parallel situation can be found in psychotherapy where the adult symptoms of childhood suffering are neither justified nor explained away, but are relieved by enabling the client to reframe and reinterpret this suffering into a personal narrative that is integrative and empowering. Consolation can, therefore, be secular, rational, reflexive and epistemologically sound.

d. Critique of Society

Strange as it may sound religion is now quite well-placed to offer a critique of society. Political parties all appear to be crowding around the centre ground with little to differentiate them. Academic research is often tied to business or state sponsorship, and the ability of the 'left' to provide any consistent level of social criticism has been severely hampered by its fear of ideologies and its fear of any attempt to develop a systematic value system. Political correctness has also dampened curiosity by ring-fencing various issues as off-limits to intellectual inquiry. Ironically, it is religion that has been openly critical of government policies towards inequalities of wealth, the inherent greed in the banking system and the need for social solidarity. We may not agree with some or any of the theological premises on which these arguments are made, but various churches have been able to find a certain degree of autonomy and freedom to express views that others are too timid to articulate.

In establishing a secular sacred on a firm rational basis we need to avoid a simplistic rationalist rejection of religion and, instead, engage in a dialogue with it.

References

- Bernstein, R. (2002) *Radical Evil. A Philosophical Interrogation*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Cobb, Jr., J. & Griffin, D. (1976) *Process Theology. An Introductory Exposition*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Eagleton, T. (2009) *Reason, Faith, and Revolution. Reflections on the God Debate*. London: Yale University Press.
- Habermas, J. (2002) *Religion and Rationality*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (2006c) 'Pre-Political Foundation of the Democratic Constitutional State?' in Habermas, J. & Ratzinger, J. (2006) *The Dialectics of Secularization*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press.
- Habermas, J. (2008) *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Siebert, R. (1985) *The Critical Theory of Religion. The Frankfurt School*, Berlin: Mouton.