

“Beyond the binary: The scandal of particularity and the grace of divine plenitude”

There is an extraordinary poem by the American novelist, farmer and poet Wendell Berry. Berry has been described as ‘a Christian—albeit of an eccentric kind.’ His poem is called, ‘Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front’. I am not sure that I understand the complete train of Wendell’s thoughts but it ends as follows:

“Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.”

Wendell’s phrase ‘Practise resurrection’ has caught the imagination and been drawn on by theologians and spiritual writers, most notably Eugene Peterson, who has titled one of his books ‘Practise resurrection’.

What does it mean to ‘practise resurrection’? Peterson notes:

‘We live our lives in the practice of what we do not originate and cannot anticipate. When we practice resurrection, we continuously enter into what is more than we are. When we practice resurrection, we keep company with Jesus, alive and present, who knows where we are going better than we do, which is always “from glory unto glory.”

Robert Atwell, recently retired Bishop of Exeter, has commented, ‘Resurrection is more than a doctrine: it is a reality to be lived each day. It requires as much effort, imagination and practice as does the observance of Lent. I am challenged not just to remember the events of Easter, but to be changed by them.’

Or as St Augustine of Hippo, duly edited by Pope Francis, put it, ‘We are an Easter people and alleluia is our song’.

This by the way wasn’t how I was originally planning to begin this talk. My title is “Beyond the binary: The scandal of particularity and the grace of divine plenitude” and I was intending to begin with comments on the way that life seems to be so binary at the moment. But events of the last 10 days have left me depressed and concerned about the binary nature of current realities so I felt I wanted to start with the joy of the resurrection. Indeed that is in some ways exactly the right place to start. With colleagues in the Diocese in Europe I have been working over the last few years on a course designed to encourage lay people to reflect on and deepen their faith. We try to take the experience of Christian people now and in the past very seriously as our starting point, as a result one of the things I have come to realise is that for the earliest Church their experience of the resurrection of Jesus, whatever precisely they understood by that, was their theological starting point – and the rest of Christian theology, atonement, incarnation and whatever ultimately spins out from that beginning. There’s a wonderful modern hymn by Brian Wren which invites us to ‘Sing my song backwards, from end to beginning... sing resurrection till all the world sings’ which somehow encapsulates this.

And from that beginning now back to the binary.

My perception is that the binary has become so much a marker of current politics, in which the way to win often seems to be to demonise your opponent as much as you possibly can. Reality is confined

to the Either/Or. You can only prove your worth by denigrating or denying the integrity, intelligence or legitimacy of the other. We have just seen it on a massive scale in the very recent election in a certain country just an ocean away. It is also often a feature of UK politics, although perhaps the size of the Labour majority at the last election means ironically that it is less likely to play a factor here in the coming few years. However for me the ultimate binary moment in UK politics was the Brexit referendum of 2016 in which there was a straight Yes/No question without any nuance; and a very small majority which actually meant that the majority of the UK population had not in fact voted for the cataclysmic and seemingly irrevocable decision the UK has been catapulted into.

The binary feels so much the story of the current international scene at the moment. We see it in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and also in the Middle East, specifically in the story of Israel and Palestine. In both of these conflicts compromises and negotiations which once might have seemed possible now seem in themselves to be anathematized, and moderating voices on any side find it almost impossible to be heard.

Binary ways of thinking seem to be affecting the life of the church, certainly my own church, the Church of England, at the present time. The hot button issue of the moment is sexuality, as once it was women, though of course there is in reality a deep, though often unspoken, connection between the two. But if anything there seems to be less willingness to work together to find a way to live together with difference, than there seemed to be a generation ago. It is interesting and significant that such disagreements are often focused around the interpretation of particular biblical texts, and I do think that there is a particular challenge for scripturally based religions, including but not only Christianity, to move beyond the binary, holding together in a creative tension both particularity and plentitude. Scriptural fundamentalism is an expression of the binary to the nth degree.

But the key question I need to address in this talk relates to Christian engagement with other religions and it is a dual one. How do binary ways of thinking affect Christian engagement with non-Christian religions, and conversely can interreligious engagement help us to move beyond the binary?

Sometimes Christians can seek to use other religions as a whipping boy to bridge intra-Christian divisions. I spent most of last week at a World Council of Churches conference at Bossey which was marking the beginnings of the WCC celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. In the course of it I became more aware of how dominant within the Council were the discussions about the date of Easter. By the fourth century the idea that Easter should be celebrated on the 14 Nisan, the actual date of the Jewish Passover had largely been rejected by most Christians, but there was a division between Christians who thought that it should be held on the Sunday next after the Passover or the Sunday immediately after the spring equinox. It was this latter view that won out the day, perhaps partly because it was clearly the preference of the Emperor Constantine. But I found myself startled to discover the terms in which it was explained by Constantine in a letter he wrote to the churches immediately after the Council. As presented in Eusebius' Life of Constantine it reads:

"At the council we also considered the issue of our holiest day, Easter, and it was determined by common consent that everyone, everywhere should celebrate it on one and the same day. For what can be more appropriate, or what more solemn, than that this feast from which we have received the hope of immortality, should be kept by all without variation, using the same order and a clear arrangement? And in the first place, it seemed very unworthy for us to keep this most sacred feast following the custom of the Jews, a people who have soiled their hands in a most terrible outrage, and have thus polluted their souls, and are now deservedly blind. Since we have cast aside their way of calculating the date of the festival, we can ensure that future generations can celebrate this observance at the more accurate time which we have kept from the first day of the passion until the present time. Therefore have nothing in common with that most hostile people, the Jews. We have

received another way from the Saviour. In our holy religion we have set before us a course which is both valid and accurate. Let us unanimously pursue this. Let us, most honored brothers, withdraw ourselves from that detestable association. It is truly most absurd for them to boast that we are incapable of rightly observing these things without their instruction. On what subject are they competent to form a correct judgment, who, after that murder of their Lord and patricide lost their senses, and are led not by any rational motive, but by an uncontrollable impulsiveness to wherever their innate fury may drive them? This is why even in this matter they do not perceive the truth, so that they constantly err in the utmost degree, and will celebrate the Feast of Passover a second time in the same year instead of making a suitable correction.”

Even a cursory reading of this text would suggest that Constantine is using widespread Christian hostility to Judaism and the Jews to seek to bridge internal Christian differences of opinion. He is apparently aiming to overcome one binary by promulgating and reinforcing another. Although this is not the first time in history that Christians set out the charge of deicide against Judaism, indeed in many ways it goes back to the New Testament and the Gospel of Matthew, nonetheless to have the authority of the Emperor widely promoting it throughout his realms in what is intended to be an authoritative communication to his subjects surely was a significant factor in normalising it for the following 1650 or so years of Christian history.

Within the wider context of interreligious dialogue and engagement there is a sense that the Christian Jewish relationship can be both especially binary and problematic and yet also may become the catalyst for Christianity to rethink its understanding of particularity and plenitude. On the surface at least Christianity needs Judaism to be wrong in order for Christianity to be right. It is a long-standing problem. Whether I like it or not I think that supersessionism, or as it is sometimes called today ‘replacement theology’ is deeply embedded into many strands of New Testament thinking; in various and slightly differing forms it is there in Matthew’s Gospel, in John’s Gospel, in Luke’s Gospel and in the Letter to the Hebrews. Paul, I think was conflicted about the question, which is why we have him agonizing over the question for the three chapters of Romans 9-11, and ending up with that cry of exasperated incomprehensibility, ‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways. Who has known the mind of the Lord’. Modern Jewish scholars and dialogue partners often ask Christians to disown our supersessionist history as an aberration. But I am not sure how feasible it is to do so, at least if being honest about historic Christian identity.

It is perhaps more comfortable to be the superseder rather than the supersedee, the one who is superseded, and I have a strong instinct that at least some hostility to Islam on the part of some contemporary Christians comes from the reality that Islam traditionally has sought to put Christianity in a not dissimilar theological space to that in which Christianity has placed Judaism over the centuries.

Over my years of working in the area of Christian-Jewish relations, particularly involved in the question of the interface between this relationship and Christian and Jewish attitudes to the Israel and Palestine issue – there are two other potential Christian positions that I want to refer to both of which in their different ways raise the issue and indeed the problems of particularity.

The first is the situation, common in some expressions of conservative evangelical fundamentalism, which seeks to suggest that the Old Testament promises to Israel, which is understood to refer either to the contemporary Jewish community or sometimes more particularly the State of Israel, are not superseded, but are still valid, with the Jewish community being still the primary beneficiary. Several of you have heard me speak of a personal incident before, but I repeat it as it exemplifies powerfully

both the strength of the viewpoint and its potential danger. The incident dates to 1976 or 1977 when I was living in Jerusalem and I retold it in my later published commentary on Genesis:

“I will never forget my incredulity at being told by a Palestinian friend of mine, an educated Christian woman from Ramallah, a town on the West Bank, how on a visit to Jerusalem she had had a conversation with a Western tourist. On discovering that she was a Christian living on the West Bank this person had informed her, quite categorically, that ‘she couldn’t be a real Christian, because if she were a real Christian she would of course have been willing to leave her hometown, since she would know that God had given the land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ One of the features of Genesis is the way in which it seeks to draw together universality and particularity: and the Middle East today is a region where the ‘scandal of particularity’ can feel truly scandalous.”

I was shocked then and I still remain shocked to this day, even though I feel that view which seemed extreme then is now much more commonplace both among evangelical Christians and among religious Zionist Jews.

Indeed a clear example of this is the recent rebuke given by the current Chief Rabbi of South Africa, Dr Warren Goldstein, to both Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby. I quote:

Rabbi Goldstein said the two senior Christian leaders “have abandoned their most sacred duty to protect and defend the values of the Bible.”

“The world is locked in a civilisational battle of values, threatened by terrorism and violent jihad. Now is the time for religious leaders to come to the defence of society, to speak up for Western values and freedoms.”

Instead, the South African Rabbi said that Pope Francis and the Anglican Archbishop had been “silent”.

Rabbi Goldstein attacked the Archbishop of Canterbury for his support for the recent ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which declared Israel an illegal occupier of Palestinian land – he said this support “puts him in direct opposition to the Bible.”....

“The Bible is not just a book of theology; it is a book of historical facts. What today the UN and its ICJ calls the West Bank, the Bible calls Judea and Samaria, and lies squarely within the borders of the land that God promised and delivered to the Jewish people. Which raises the question: does Archbishop Welby actually believe in the Bible?”

Speaking as “One religious leader to another”, the rabbi went on: “Are Jews in his view illegal occupiers in the land of Israel, the same land of Israel that includes the West Bank that is mentioned at least 170 times in the Hebrew bible? Does he regard the Bible as mere myth?”

One of the shifts in my own position since 1976 is that I would no longer want to suggest that Abraham was a historical person in quite the way that the biblical narrative might be said to imply. I would now suggest that Genesis is intended to be story, and myth and saga, and should not be read as history. How might that affect our understanding of particularity?

Obliquely linked in to this I am not quite sure whether the title of ‘the Abraham accords’ for the recent and probably also future peace initiative in the Middle East is a helpful one. As the explanatory document suggests the title is intended to link together what it describes as the three

'Abrahamic' religions – but I am only too aware the name Abraham is freighted with not always helpful baggage.

Yet there is also a contrasting challenge which Judaism – or at least some Jews – can pose to Christian theology. Mark Braverman is a Jewish psychologist who in his book 'Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews and the search for peace in the Middle East' challenges what he would describe as 'Jewish exceptionalism', namely the concepts of chosenness in relation to people and land. In parenthesis I find it fascinating that if someone sees the idea of 'particularity' in negative terms it is normally referred to as exceptionalism. Walter Brueggemann's writings are mentioned within Braverman's book and he was invited to write the foreword. In the course of this Brueggemann comments, "The central aim of this important book is a critique of exceptionalism, and the insistence that a Jewish sense of being God's one chosen people is rooted in an old tribalism that is no longer viable in a pluralistic world. While this critique of exceptionalism is perforce focused on Jewish claims, in fact Braverman's bold words have implication beyond that. ... his argument invites Christian re-thinking about Christian exceptionalism as well, about being the new chosen people of God and followers of the one chosen messiah... thus by implication this book is also a summons to Christians to rethink their monopolistic Christological claims that are, in some sense, derivative from Jewish claims."

This for me is where the cookie really crumbles. There are many ways of talking about the significance of Christ, his person, his relationship to God and to humanity, and the nature of his work. Some of these ways I am more comfortable about than others. But I find myself unable to conceive of an authentic Christianity in which the particularity of Jesus Christ, however precisely it is phrased, is not part of the picture.

I have deliberately focused in my comments on the Jewish-Christian relationship partly because I think it focuses questions relating to our attitude to the other in a particularly sharp way. I cherish the remark made about 20 years ago by Cardinal Walter Kasper, then responsible for the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity which, in Roman Catholic structures includes responsibility for relating to Judaism. Kasper reflected, that "Judaism is as a sacrament of every otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognize and celebrate."

Mind you, Kasper's remark was prefaced with the comment that Catholic Christians have become, "aware with greater clarity that the faith of Israel is that of our elder brothers". For those of us who know our Bibles quite well, elder brothers do not always get a good press in the story, either in the Old Testament or in the New. Yet they too can speak to us both of the danger of the binary and of its transcendence.

The Bible in fact begins with a binary. The first letter of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 1.1 is the letter B, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The rabbis asked themselves why the book began with the letter B, Beth, rather than the first letter 'Aleph'. Some suggested that it was because 'B (Beth)' was the letter which also begins the word for 'blessing' – berakah. And why not with an 'A' (Aleph)? Answer: Because that is the first letter of the Hebrew word for 'curse.' ('arur). A more widespread tradition, however, drew attention to the fact that Beth as the second letter of the alphabet is also used to represent the number two. The tradition suggests that Beth was chosen for this honour precisely because duality permeates the created universe. That is certainly an insight that resonates through Genesis: creation in Gen. 1 is effected through a series of divisions or bifurcations; in Gen. 2 the animals are clearly 'paired' – contrasted with the human being whose aloneness is 'not good'; later the animals will enter the ark two by two. And then there will be the brothers whom we meet – often in pairs – throughout most of Genesis.

Yet rabbinic tradition also held that behind this duality of creation lay the fundamental unity of God. The unifying aloneness of God is proclaimed through the Shema: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deut. 6.4), in biblical passages such as Isa. 44.24, and in the great medieval Jewish hymn, 'Lord of the world, he reigned alone.'

These first few chapters of Genesis introduce us to the theme with which the entire book will be wrestling, both explicitly and implicitly. How can, or should, the 'one' and the 'two' relate to each other – so that neither dominates nor disappears? Both unity and duality are necessary. And human beings are required to live at the very heart of this conundrum – precisely because we are 'in the image of God.' The concept of image itself locates us somehow between the one and the two. An image is not identical to that which it 'images' – yet at the same time it cannot be wholly apart from it. The task is to live properly in the world of duality – for that is the world in which God has set us – but at the same time to perceive and focus within ourselves the underlying unity of God. I have found myself using the word duality – rather than binary – here. It feels more positive and I am trying to work out why. Perhaps it can be something to explore in our time of discussion. But one of the things I discovered when I was writing a detailed commentary on Genesis was the way that the text unsettles any notion of a simplistic binary of an Isaac and a Jacob who was 'in' and an Ishmael and an Esau who was 'out'. It is arguable that it is the story of the birth of Ishmael which constitutes the centre of the narratives about Abraham, and it is of Esau that Jacob states, 'your face is like the face of God to me, with such grace you have received me'. And it is the mother of Ishmael, the Egyptian servant-girl who is given the name Hagar, deliberately I believe invoking the word Ha-Ger, the alien, the stranger, the foreigner, the binary other with which the covenant relationship between God and the people is intrinsically connected, 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, Ha-Ger, for you were aliens, gerim, in the land of Egypt.'

I will return in a few moments to the language of the image of God and its implications for moving 'beyond the binary', but now for something completely different.

I am trying to sort out and cull my rather extensive collection of books. This is a slow business because I find I often have to read them to discover if I can really bear to let them go. A few months ago I was going through one of the Jesuit Gerry Hughes Lent books and I came across this reflection by him:

'I heard a Sikh give an address at the funeral of Stella Reekie a Church of Scotland deaconess. He said of Stella that 'she was like water, for she gave us life, cleansed and refreshed us. But she was also like water because she assumed the shape of whoever she was with, so that to me, Stella was a Sikh, to my Muslim friends a Muslim, to Jews she was Jewish.'

Now I actually do have questions about the 'rightness' in interreligious dialogue of 'assuming the shape of whoever I am with' but it seemed that that comment was not irrelevant to this conference. And since we want to get 'beyond the binary' to divine plentitude perhaps we might focus on the four elements of creation, Water, Earth, Fire and Wind and ask what each of them might symbolically contribute in turn to our understanding of interreligious dialogue.

Water – has at least in part been done for us – encouraging us to be fluid enough to re-shape ourselves to engage with, perhaps even identify with those of other religious traditions with whom we are in a relationship of dialogue.

Fire – a reminder of both the potential excitement and danger of interreligious engagement, setting a spark going that we might not be able to control and yet also its potential for new vision and change.

Earth – offering us an admonition that interreligious dialogue must never neglect to deal with earthy physical realities, with the importance of creation, of justice, with the cherishing of our human bodies and a meeting of practical needs.

Wind – a movement of the spirit that blows us where it will, and builds bridges between earth and heaven.

Something of this is picked up in the first verse of Bishop Michael Hare Duke's thoughtful modern hymn: *Daring, dancing Trinity*:

Lord, your love has called to being
all that fills the earth below,
myriad stars beyond our seeing,
tiniest creatures that we know;
earth and air and fire and water
woven in the grand design,
witness to the final meaning
of your love for humankind.

So I draw to my close I want to at least remind us that whatever else it may also be to speak of trinity is in itself to move beyond the binary. The Christian understanding of God as trinity ultimately stems from a Christian belief in the resurrection, founded upon the words of the Christ who said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I am ascending to my father and your father'. I consider myself fortunate to have become professionally involved in interreligious dialogue around the period when exploration of the trinitarian vision of God became seen as a theological tool rather than as a hindrance for interreligious engagement. And such a trinitarian vision of God does indeed enable us to hold together both the scandal of particularity and the grace of divine plentitude. That indeed is the presupposition of *Generous Love: the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue*, the Anglican report on the theology of interreligious dialogue which was published in 2008. It is also an underlying principle of a report I worked on while at the WCC '*Who do we say that we are? Christian identity in a multi-religious world*'. As this latter document makes clear Christian scholars from different traditions and different parts of the world, such as Mark Heim, Veli-Matti Karkkinen, Joas Adiprasetya, have helped us to explore how the trinitarian language of *perichoresis*, of 'Triune persons working in complex movements of dance, embracing creatures, yet letting them exist in their freedom' offers an evocative image for interreligious dialogue which is yet to be fully explored.

To leave you with three pictures and the two final verses of Michael Hare Duke's hymn.

My first picture. The statue 'Resurrection II' by Paul Granlund. [Resurrection II - Swallowfield](#) "In this imaginative work he depicts the moment that the newly resurrected Christ is breaking free of the bondage of death, breaking from the stone that has held him; almost like a great bird gathering for flight." He invites us to stand alongside him poised about to break the bonds of particularity's scandal to soar into the generous plentitude of God.

My second picture. Jyoti Sahi's exquisite painting sometimes called 'Resurrection' sometimes the Sign of Jonas. [Jyoti Art Ashram: The Sign of Jonas](#) Christ is about to break free from the mouth of the fish which is painted with the language of creation, crucifixion and resurrection. And we are left with

the question, are those two figures hinted at in the bottom of the painting, those who stood watch at the cross, those who came to bring myrrh to his tomb or those who witnessed and were caught up in his transfiguration?

That link between resurrection and transfiguration is also offered in my third picture, the German Roman Catholic artist Sieger Koder's representation of Emmaus. Koder has painted more standard depictions of Christ's resurrection appearance at Emmaus. What is special about this one is the way that Koder has combined the resurrection at Emmaus with the earlier story of the transfiguration. The clue is in the two shadowy figures, representing Moses and Elijah who appear either side of the red circle in the upper half of the painting. [altarpiece – Art & Theology](#) Transfiguration constitutes an invitation to us too to move beyond the binary, become part of the movement of the resurrection, and to join in the divine dance of particularity and plenitude.

So those two final verses of Hare Duke's hymn:

From your self we take our nature,
Maker, parent, love divine.
Bound into your life we flourish,
leaves and branches of the vine.
Through the Christ we see your pattern,
life surrendered, life restored:
echoing through all creation
sounds the spirit's deep accord.

Love releases us for taking
one more risk than we might dare;
glory breaks through dark and danger,
shows the Lord transfigured there.
God who planted our affections,
help your gifts to grow more free,
fan in us the fires of loving,
daring, dancing Trinity.

Canon Dr Clare Amos