

A Haunted Dance: Christianity Particularity and the Perplexity of Religious Pluralism

I want to begin with a joke that the great Liverpuddlian comedian Ken Dodd told:

“Three boys are arguing over whose dad is the best dad in the world. The first boy says that his dad is the best because if you were to shoot an arrow at a target he could run after it and catch it with his hand before it reached the target. The second boy says that is nothing – his dad is the fastest because if you fired a bullet from a gun his dad could run after it and catch it in his teeth. The third boy, says that his dad is even faster than that – he works for Liverpool Council, he finishes work at half-past five and he’s in the house by 2 o’clock.”

What I love about this joke is the wild exaggeration of the first two compared with the honest simplicity of the third that reveals just how flawed his greatest dad in the world really is! And so, to religious particularities which are filled with wild exaggerations and innocent revelations of flawed world views!

The story of Christian theology’s consideration of other faiths is a long and complex one. But when we turn to the matter of what this conference calls “particularity” we are pulled up short by another word– “exceptionalism”. As we know, “exceptionalism” carries with it a sense not only of being particular but holding superiority. Thus, when we talk of nationalisms as possessing an “exceptionalism” we are suggesting that it carries the meaning of national and cultural superiority, and this is most common with English and American exceptionalisms. A dictionary definition offered is: “the idea that a person, country or political system can be allowed to be different from, and perhaps better than, others”.

In terms of religion, exceptionalism is a negative comment on the other, whereas particularity is a positive description of what makes my religion distinctive.

So, we might say, “I have a particularity to be treasured, but you have an exceptionalism that needs to be overcome!” The interesting point in the joke from Ken Dodd is that each boy has their “daddy exceptionalism” and all three aren’t that exceptional after all!

So far, we have a couple of words – particularity and exceptionalism, and I want to add in two more – perplexity and hauntedness.

I think it is true to say that Christianity and Islam, in their universality and theological exceptionalisms have struggled with the ongoing flourishing of other religions, including and especially, each other! Both have an account of religious otherness which doesn’t sit easily with the realities of religious pluralism, so they have found ways of coping with that reality and that has several different manifestations which would take an entire conference to explore. Sheikh Zaki Badawi, a great Muslim advocate for inter faith dialogue, wisely observed that Islam has no hermeneutic for minority status, and this might suggest that these two world faiths in particular struggle with religious otherness at a very deep and profound level that is not easy to address. In the arena of “Freedom of Religion or Belief” – very prominent at the moment and likely to be more so with the return of Donald Trump to the US Presidency – this is surely part of why Christians in the West feel so deeply anxious and troubled by Christian marginalization and persecution in parts of the global south. That was never how it should be – Christianity should triumph, and it is therefore a crisis of faith and identity when it doesn’t! Freedom of Religion or Belief, whilst an important human rights issues, never seems to allow for a deeper reflection on what lies beneath the surface, questions of the power of religious exceptionalisms that define themselves over against the

perceived threat of otherness, religious or otherwise. And to what extent does religious exceptionalism easily feed into religious nationalisms where religion becomes more of a political exceptionalism than a theological particularity? This is the case in examples as varied as MAGA, Orthodoxy in Russia at the present, Hindutva ideology in India, prevalent forms of Zionism in Israel, Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and Islamism in some of its manifestations.

Needless to say, this is where the word “perplexity” comes in. The existence and flourishing of Christianity and Islam alongside each other have been a source of great perplexity throughout history. And perplexity is closely related to fear and, as we know, fear can lead people and nations into dangerous places. Western Christendom’s fear of the Muslim East pervades both theology and wider culture, and much of the contemporary far-right rhetoric employed against Muslims is rooted in ancient fears of the invading “Saracen”. And more so when it comes to Judaism. England, sometimes crassly trumpeted as “terra Ecumenica”, also has the ignoble tag of being the birthplace of the “blood Libel”: that Jews kidnapped and murdered Christian children for ritual purposes. The accusation that local Jews were responsible for the murder of William of Norwich in 1132 almost certainly arose due to the resentment of local merchants, displaced from parts of the city by Jews brought to England by William the Conqueror in order to circumvent the Church’s prohibition on usury. What is intriguing and noteworthy is how political and cultural factors map onto the purely theological. So, in traditional Western Christian theology Judaism has been fulfilled in Christ and therefore a Judaism that does not recognize the messiahship of Jesus ought to have withered or have been assimilated into the church, the “New Israel”. But even after 70 or more years of theological soul searching and revision in the wake of the Holocaust, theological anxiety remains.

Bishop Kenneth Cragg expresses well this perplexity:

“has this to be the price, within the human scene, of ‘chosenness’ in the identity of one of its communities?...Are we left, in the end, with the shattering irony that history’s most intense sense of corporate religious destiny and its bitterest crime of rejection go together? Why has *this* election experienced *this* enmity? Why is it that Jewry has somehow become the butt of the deepest revelations of human perversity and Jewish existence somehow the touchstone of human antipathies? Is it that humanity cannot ‘allow’ so confidently ‘elected’ a people? How is it that being a people on behalf of God has meant, so largely, being a people in spite of men? And what, through all the vexing tangle of these questions, becomes of the goal for which election stood, or stands?”¹

He also writes elsewhere, more unsightly:

“their mission could never be shared, since they held the copyright”.

So, who hold the copyright on the mission of God?!

¹ Cragg, The Privilege of Man, p. 95

What I think Cragg is wrestling honestly with here and other things that he says about Jews and Judaism is the conundrum that Christianity declares Christ to be the fulfillment of the law, thus universalizing the covenant, but how Jews and Judaism figure in the divine economy where, in the words of Nostra Aetate, God has not repented of his gifts to the Jews, and the unavoidable fact that the New Testament does not see the Gospel as the Covenant of the Gentiles alone. Thus, replacement theology is fairly hard-wired into Christian theology. The myth of the “Wandering Jew” suggests some of this perplexity about Jews: very popular in medieval Europe, told of a cobbler who refused to offer water to Christ as he carried his cross to calvary and was cursed by Christ to wander the world in perpetuity, homeless, despised wherever he went, cursed never to return to Palestine. Dominant religious narratives struggle at a very deep level with the persistence of difference and often lead to violence against minorities.

It is as though Western Christianity remains haunted by the ongoing flourishing of a living Judaism, and this is accentuated by a Judaism as increasingly defined in terms of a political polity of self-determination and security. The ancient claims of religious particularity therefore combine with new forms of political ideology that are difficult to navigate around. It is not lost on some contemporary religious Zionist commentators that the establishment of the state of Israel is the ultimate refutation of Christian Europe’s antisemitic culture – the Wandering Jew has returned to find its home the land of its ancient belonging, thus triumphing over an ancient, mythological curse.

“Hauntedness” might be a useful lens through which to view religious perplexity of religious otherness. It was the Algerian French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) who is credited with coining the term “hauntology” by which he meant the way in which concepts and events of the past (and sometimes the present) maintain a vivid presence that simply will not go away. They have an atemporal reality to them that cannot be escaped. Derrida was particularly drawing on the remark of Karl Marx that communism was the spectre that was haunting Europe.

But there is another sense in which “hauntedness” is an important lens for understanding Christianity’s relations to otherness. For Western Christianity is haunted by the devastating impact of Christian imperialism, beginning with its othering of the Jews, particularly from the time of Constantine onwards, the Crusades, and the imperial project to bring all peoples to Christ, often by military conquest. The romantic stereotype of the Christian missionary giving away free Bibles and teaching the natives to sing Moody and Sankey is not only persistent in local congregations, but is also far removed from the truth.

But there is another sense in which the lens of “hauntedness” might be helpful. The effects of western imperialism on other religions and cultures are deep and profound. We might suggest that many of the deepest historical traumas where religion is involved have led to new forms of religious exceptionalism that manifest themselves in nationalisms and that much of western Christian theology’s framing of itself has been the enabler of aggressive religious nationalisms in contexts from Delhi to Jerusalem, from Columbo to Karachi and also in Christian states where there is a fear of lost Christian heritage (such Hungary, Russia and the United States). Might we suggest that much of the root of the current wave of religious nationalisms is in a feeling of being haunted by a memory of past religious and cultural glory and in another sense of being haunted by the persistence of other religions that threaten the preservation and continuation of that past? In their work on musical aesthetics and post-modernity, Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds offer a useful phrase that we might borrow in the arena of theology and religious identity, that of a “nostalgia for lost futures”: the

suggestion that music has lost its sense of futurism and has resorted to pastiches of the past, has some resonance with the assertion of what is believed to be a defense of religious particularity over and against otherness that threatens to dislodge the continuation and realization of that memory. The growing fetishization of religious ethno-tribalism is arguably one of the greatest threats to Christian theological particularity, which far from being tribal is concerned with the universal declaration of the self-giving love of God in Christ, that feeds the poor, eats with the outcast and welcomes the stranger.

So how might all this relate to the theme of reflecting upon Christian particularity in relation to the doctrine of the resurrection? Well, if we are to take seriously the notion of perplexity then the biblical accounts of the resurrection are filled with perplexity. Mary Magdalene does not recognise the risen Jesus and mistakes him for the gardener, the disciples on the road to Emmaus are confused and perplexed about what they had witnessed in Jerusalem, and Thomas in his perplexity needs to see and feel for himself. And if we are to read the whole of the gospels as the reflections of the post resurrection Christian community that the words of Nicodemus are salient and important: how can this be?

The Christian encounter with religious otherness has always been one more of perplexity than wonder. We often focus upon the positives in inter religious encounter but if any interfaith practitioner within the churches tells me that they only experience wonder and never have felt perplexed then I would be deeply troubled and probably wouldn't believe them. The question of Paul Knitter "why does God permit not merely the existence but the flourishing of other religions" might lead us to a deeper reflection on the economy of the Holy Spirit not only in terms of religion but in terms of human flourishing. The question from within the Christian community may well be "how can this be?" The lessons of the resurrection suggest to us that the more we cling onto and vigorously defend our particularity, the more otherness prevails.

Living with our perplexities and hauntedness is perhaps the key. By embracing this, far from creating a necessity to overcome the other, we can see it as doors through which we are drawn back and into a deepening of our own rootedness in the Christian faith. This Christian faith is also an important witness: just as the resurrection community of the early church felt called into a public witness in the world, so too a Christian faith enriched by the encounter with otherness, and being prepared to lean from perplexity and hauntedness, is a means of social change in a troubled world. The task for theology therefore is finding a robust, authentic confessional Christianity that places the theological claims of Christianity as central to how we engage with the world at a time when ethno-tribalism is asserting itself as a more potent voice. The ecumenical movement was always the best means to achieve this but it so often falls into timidity and supine public utterances. Is the church existing merely for itself or does it have a more radical vision of hope for a world caught in the throws of violence and destruction? Can we have the humility to learn from others?

I would like to end with a quote not from a Christian but from a Jew, the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who has something helpful to say in response to any perplexity about Jewish particularity, something perhaps we can learn from:

"It is about faith, an unusual faith in which God summoned a people and charged them with becoming his partners in creating lives, and in Israel a society, that would become a home for the divine presence. That faith inspired not only Jews, but also Christians and Muslims,

whose religion grew in Jewish soil, as well as others who respected the Jewish love of family, community, education, tradition, the pursuit of justice, the passion for argument and the Jewish sense of humour that can laugh even in the face of tragedy. I believe that this is not accidental. Judaism was never meant for the Jews alone. It contains a message for all humanity".²

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² Jonathan Sacks, Future Tense. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009, p. 7f