

Common Religion Today

Manchester Cathedral. Feb 99

Thanks: John Atherton;

What are we talking about when we use the term Common Religion?

Those religious ideas and practices which we, subjectively, judge “common” or crude, or even rustic, sub-standard?. The terms “Common” or “Folk” religion have that ring of inferiority about them.

Thomas Luckmann in Invisible Religion (1967) included in his definition the natural, non-transcendent, private world of faith. Not the sort of stuff you’d feel inclined to tell others about. Everyday phrases give it away:

“Well, you’ve got to believe in something, haven’t you”

And so follow faith-healing, fatalism, astrology; magic crystals, & superstitions.

K.Thomas Religion and the Decline of Magic (1973) saw Folk Religion as parasitic upon Christianity - as the residue held in the hearts and minds of the people when the official faith has passed by. You can recognise common features but the medium is crude and the content decidedly unorthodox. This Common religion has the features, said Reggie Askew, that you’d expect of country furniture.

David Clark, however, in Between Pulpit and Pew (1982) saw the cross-fertilisation of official and folk religion, and taught us not to draw too sharp a distinction. After all, what exactly is going on in Church on Mothering Sunday and Remembrance Day? And, in the other direction: see the bemused faces of orthodox Christians as they listen to the Trinity Sunday sermon.

But let’s stop for a moment to select our preferred terms:

You might think for example that to call it “Folk” religion is to be patronising; and “Common” Religion you may feel too vague. Edward Bailey has offered us the term “Implicit” Religion., and I feel that has more clarity.

The Issue you have asked me to address:

What are the implications today of Implicit religion for Theology and Mission?

Well, to judge by what I've already said, there are already many somewhat strained connections between Implicit Religion and the Church's theology and mission.

Sometimes in reality it's a bit difficult to tell them apart!

Some examples:

1. Mothering Sunday,

blessing posies, romantic picture of family. Compare that with the reality of family life in GB today, and with Jesus' own ambivalence regarding the family.

2. Christmas

celebrated in our Churches with the absence of any reference to Herod

3. Church Attendance in Rural Suffolk

where some Church stalwarts freely admit that they attend to save Church from closing. They have the same commitment to the local shop.

Church as Cocoon :

Orr, Ewing and Partners (business consultants) were once asked to research what the Church was really about. Their finding was that from the empirical evidence of what we do - that we are in the comfort business.

I'm sometimes in my travels inclined to award congregations duvet "tog" ratings.

I suspect that Church of England Civic Religion (just one expression of Folk Religion) is largely designed to offer comfort through ritual.

It's a form of "Tribal religion" comforting folk, especially in times of trouble, with a deep sense of belonging and of belonging together for a noble cause. This sort of folk religion concerns itself with Monarchy, Borough, Team or Association membership, or local and family history. "And was Jerusalem builded here...?"

And yet, as noble and acceptable as we may find much of that type of religion, we must also reckon with the fact that the Christian faith itself seems prepared to wrestle with issues of belonging and difference in a much more radical and challenging way. Indeed, Stephen Sykes argued in his The Identity of Christianity (1984) that quarrelsomeness and discord are central feature of the faith - hence the comprehensive

nature of the catholic community and at the same time its diversity - it is not for nothing that there are four different Gospels and two varying accounts of the first great Christian Council meeting. (Acts 15 and Galatians 2)

Hard Core Implicit religion:

Thus far we've only been thinking of those aspects of Implicit religion that have strong similarities with what we might call Official religion, but what of Seances, witchcraft, New Age practices, astrology and the like? What we might call "hard-core folk-religion"?

The Revd Tony Higton was battered by his evangelical colleagues for daring to use New Age elements in his missionary outreach in Essex (a region of GB steeped in Folk Religion). At his Church in Hawkwell he installed icons and crystals, meditational aids, aromatic oils and the like. He invited all comers to enter the church and to look upon these things with new eyes, seeing how each could have a sacramental quality - how each could speak of the presence of God in our midst, if viewed from the Christian perspective. In the very same month however, I read in a parish magazine that a clergyman was leading a campaign against health-food shops for being New Age.

We clearly have a problem.

When I first became a bishop in south Essex, a former bishop offered me some wholesome advice. He wrote, "always let the very popular nature of Southend remind you of **the essential vulgarity of the Gospels.**" A Christian incarnational faith means that the distinction between orthodoxy and folk religion can become a touch blurred. For incarnation declares that the holy has sunk itself into the secular - the veil of the temple is ripped in two. We may blanch at the thought that the holy can tangle with the common, and yet the sacrament is aptly named "Holy Communion" to make that very point. When Moses espies the burning bush, it is the Almighty and Holy God who is speaking from the heart of a common, weed-like, desert bush. When God 'Emmanuel' is with us, is not God declaring God's preparedness to be present even in the vulgar matter of Folk Religion?

But let us not stray into a romanticism about religious faith.

Because, for all our talk about folk religion, most folk have no religion at all.

The idea of God no longer enters into the average modern human mind. Most just don't see the point. I was talking with the head teacher of a large public school who had had his first experience of inviting a parent to the school to discuss his son's misdemeanours, only to find that the parent just could not see what was wrong with the boy's behaviour. Surely the teacher did not believe in an objective moral standard any more.

The journalist Matthew Parrish reported his friend Rob saying, "it has never crossed my mind for so much as an instant that there might be a God.. .. and ..Perhaps even those who say they believe are secret agnostics. [The Times "Wishing upon a Star"97]

Or what of Dawkins' comment:

"Living organisms have existed on earth without ever knowing why for over three thousand million years."

I remember one answer to a street survey. The question was: "Do you believe in a God who plays a part in the life of the world?" The answer: "No, I just believe in the ordinary God."

Or Eisenhower: "I believe in religion; I don't care what kind."

But whilst not being romantic about residual Christian faith, let's not underestimate it either. For you can never know what someone's "sacred" is going to be until you know them intimately. [Habgood?]

I therefore prefer to be thankful that we have vestiges of Christian faith and quite a large measure of Implicit Religion in our land - for, where it does exist, I believe it to have a certain sacramental quality, and it can form the base from which to build our missionary strategies in a thoroughly secularised world.

For although both orthodoxy and Implicit religion have their pathologies and their crackpots, at their best they can both serve to open up for us avenues to an experience of the Transcendent.

We Search for the Transcendent

I have written at length about 'Implicit' experiences of the transcendent in the lives of those who live in our inner cities in the book "God in the City" (p.72ff & p105ff.) so today I will talk in broader terms about this experience and leave you to read the other material another time if you have that particular interest.

But I do want to stress that I think that God loves to surprise us. And the surprise that hits me time and again is that the essential mystery of God is so evident in creation.

(Romans 1 v20) and yet it always remains a mystery. (The Sunrise of Wonder, Michael Mayne, 1998)

But the mystery takes us forward, rather than simply leaving us where we stand.

The mystery of God which we sense makes it perfectly plain that we don't have it all tied up - thank God for implicit *mystery*.

1. There is the mystery of ourselves. Not only the mystery of the mind and soul, but the mystery of our physical selves too. (Again, I've written a lot about this elsewhere)

In the western world, we're all turning on to touching the transcendent in sport, dance, physical exercise, and of course sex. Losing ourselves, and letting go, to a sense of wonder.

I'm intrigued by the golf player, who spends hours of frustrated physical energy, trying just once to recapture that once-in-a-lifetime, unlikely brilliant shot. Struggling to be touched by that experience just once again. (Most golf players understand what 'missing the mark' or 'falling short' is all about.

I think at the heart of those aspects of Implicit Religion can often be that sense that we are just a small part in something which is beyond who we are and yet deeply immersed in who we are - that we are creatures, and our very creatureliness itself, in all its raw physicality, can bring us to the arms of the Transcendent. Much New Age religion seems to hang on either the sense of our creatureliness as physical, one with the trees and the stars, or our selves as beings who can lift out of that frame of reference and through our very physicality, touch that which is not physical at all.

2. There is that experience of getting ourselves together:

One of the meanings of the Greek for devil is 'the one who separates and divides'. And that sense that things hold together for good - that there is a harmony - is often at the root of many experiences that lay at the root of Implicit Religion. Looking at the beauty of nature - and all the superstitions and minor rituals that speak of that. Feeling that thrill at the sound of a well-tuned engine or sensing or trying to sense the meaning of the cycle of birthing and dying. The surge of the football crowd's songs of enthusiasm as the team gets it together at last. The care taken by the ship's captain not to break any seafaring taboo, least his crew sense the breaking down of long-tested rituals of harmony with the sea and her power.

And at the heart of all that, that sense of the importance of harmony in all things, that "all can be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Akin, perhaps to what C.S. Lewis called the "Ah" factor - heaven is where there will be a lot of ah!

And all this fascination is looking for some expression - in ritual, mantras, codifications, and sharing.

Residual Christianity

The common religion of our culture has been largely shaped by Christianity. That unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the Church's understanding of what God requires of those who believe, has transformed western society over the centuries, and, because of the imperialism of Europe, reached across the world. This pervasive force has left much in its wake, to the extent that one wonders whether there would even have been a Universal Declaration of Human Rights had Christianity not shaped our culture.

The residue left in the wake of Christianity is called by Iris Murdoch the "Sovereignty of Good". It is this that is the real common religion - a set of values fast disappearing and often misunderstood or misinterpreted but still hanging on in our communities.

Few people talk about “Goodness” but there is a lot of it about. And the most fundamental “common religion” is simply that - the celebration of goodness in all its variety.

I’m speaking here of Spirituality - that which gives us life and enables us to breathe, but I have also been talking about the rag-bag of expressions of that spirituality, many of which derive either directly or indirectly from the passed practice of Christianity - which we remember brought with it all sorts of pagan and non-Christian practices and insights.

Before going any further, I would like to say a word about

the cultural nature of religion.

Human beings are not homing pigeons, we are not programmed with an in-built direction finder. We therefore need some framework or construct on in order not to feel as if we are cut adrift in an absurd world.

Berger and Luckmann, in The Social Construction of Reality (1971) named religious culture, be it folk or official, as a social construct which human beings use to help them make sense of that otherwise absurd world. Religion then gives us meanings and frameworks of understanding ourselves and the world around us. It even seeks to give us an answer to the greatest problem of all, the problem of suffering. And in this context it’s interesting for us to note that the orthodox theological answers to the problem of suffering may be too obscure and complex compared with the seemingly simplistic answers with which folk religion will address the question. They may therefore prove to be more acceptable to the people, and who knows, maybe even more enduring.

So, because we are human and not pigeons, religion is very natural.

So is Religion an essential element of Human Being?

A very interesting article appears in John Bowker’s “Oxford Dictionary of World Religions”, entitled, Biogenetic Structuralism and Religion:. The argument is proffered that the human brain is hard-wired to be religious. In the same way that Chomsky has amassed evidence that we are hard-wired for linguistic ability, so also

the brain is pre-programmed for sexual, religious, musical and other competencies. The human brain therefore looks for something to be religious about. Religion is written into the sinews of creation - so let us consider creation, in order to see why this might be.

For I want to argue that deep in the nerve of creation there is relation to the creator which yearns for expression.

What is it to be 'Created'?

(and this by the way is where I particularly want to address that part of my brief which asks us to consider the implications of Implicit Religion for Theology)

I was talking to a sub-atomic physicist the other day and she explained to me that as soon as you get into science at that level, you are into mystery.

Because although we know that the mathematics of quantum mechanics works, nobody can come up with a theory to explain why it works. We simply don't know. It's a mystery as awkward as the Holy Trinity.

But the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of quantum mechanics are related.

For the first thing that quantum mechanics has proved to us is that everything is in relation and at the subatomic level nothing is inert.

A stone may look dead to you and me - but at a deeper level the whole thing is in flux - moving and dynamic. And why? We don't know the answer to that mystery.

The Christian can suggest however that it is because the creator has made creation in God's own image. So creation has to be relational and dynamic like this because the creator God is such - three persons dynamically inter-related. If God were simply a set, unchanging, Oneness, as some primitive religions assert, then the relational nature of the universe to which quantum mechanics attests could not make sense.

However, if God is a dynamic trinity, as Christians have always maintained, then quantum mechanics makes sense of the relational, Trinitarian nature of the God of Christianity and Christianity's creator God makes sense of quantum mechanics. Everything has to be relational.

Second. Quantum mechanics relates to chaos theory. Chaos theory essentially says that creation occurs through random chance. God does “play dice” with the universe. But, when you multiply up the outcome of those random chances (and computers allow us to do the mathematics as never before) then we see that that randomness issues, at a higher level, in order. The laws of science can operate at our level because the chaos at the basic level always works out that way. Or as Einstein said, “the most irrational thing about the universe is that it is rational.”

It is that random chance working in dynamic with order at the higher level, that allows for creativity. But it is also that same dynamic which allows for disappointment and suffering to exist. “Sorry, but chance has ordained that Sonya will contract meningitis.” So we are saying that the same facts that allow suffering to exist, also offer the transformation that allows creativity to exist. And that is what crucifixion and resurrection is saying. Precisely that.

Now if we know from this subatomic physics that all is relational, then there never is aloneness. You can’t be relational by yourself. That’s why God must be relational - a three in one - a trinity. And what’s more, God must be a God who relates to the creation - and at every level. A non-interrelating, non-trinitarian God cannot logically exist. In other words, God knows. God relates. And because this is *always* the nature of God, then creation is always in relation to God the creator. The second person of the Trinity, the Logos, has always been the Logos - the expression, and so creativity has always existed and God has always been in relation to it.

So relation has to continue. That is how we know scientifically, if you like, that God relates to the world even now. That is why prayer and worship make sense now. Because God is interested. And it is precisely because God is as intimately involved and concerned with creation as this that Paul can talk in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans of the fact that God is to be discerned by anyone in the universe. Revelation is that “matter-of-fact”. That’s why Ecology can turn you on. That’s why ‘natural law’ makes sense. That’s why we must take very great interest in Implicit Religion, or Folk religion. Because God is present here, relating to all. . . God actually is Emmanuel -it’s not a myth.

I was also asked to say a word about the implications of Implicit Religion for mission.

In other words, How should the Church respond to all this?

Our little foray into physics tells us that no-one is complete and static - finished!

We are all in a state of becoming - in a state of being created. So any group, even the Church, cannot claim to be infallible and all-knowing.

Our orthodoxy itself is still becoming. This is implied in the statement of Jesus that “the Spirit of truth *will lead you* into all truth” (John 16 v13) - you don’t now have all truth, and the nature of truth is more like a journey anyway (“lead you into”) than an arrival.

So we are a “pilgrim” people, and we must therefore be open to finding God as we journey, not assuming that we have God nicely wrapped up in our lunch box. We must be attentive on the journey to finding God where we least expect, because remember the fundamental of creativity is its unexpected random nature acting in concert with order. So we must allow the orthodoxy to work in concert with those times we will unexpectedly find God in what seems marginal and random. Like Folk Religion.

Mission Opportunities

The Church has long since seen the opportunities which all this affords.

In Acts 17 we are told of one of Paul’s approaches to the tasks of mission. He is in Athens, standing in the market place. He has been roaming around Athens and has noticed that their Folk Religion has kept a place open for the “Unknown God” He latches onto this immediately, seeing that here is an opportunity to preach to the Athenians about something that already they have had an inkling of from their own natural inclinations about God. He links in to Greek Folk Religion.

Most English holidays and religious festivals owe a large debt to old pagan or Roman customs.

Today go into any big bookstore and see displayed a vast array of books on spirituality. They are very odd, some of them, but I sense that Paul would have been examining them carefully to see where God had already been discerned, and where he could continue to open the hearts and minds of the people, starting from that, perhaps meagre, experience of God already manifested in the folk religion.

I've already mentioned how Tony Higton has sought likewise to build on the spiritual search and yearnings which is expressed in New Age Religion. Likewise, Inter-faith dialogue opens us up to learning yet more of the mystery of God.

Engaging in dialogue with Folk religion will also take us out of the Church and into God's world in a profound way. We will be in uncharted waters. We will be asked to engage with the yearnings and passions and muddles of human beings who are not accustomed to our clipped theological phrases and muted language. It will thereby encourage us to see mission not just in terms of convincing others of "our truth", but as a way of engaging with others in our shared concerns. In other words it will remind us that Mission is defined within Anglicanism as having five elements, not just one. The five marks of mission include in Anglican teaching, Proclamation, Care for the needy, supporting those new in the faith, attacking the structures of society that cause injustice, and caring for the earth so that we may live in an ecologically sustainable society. Our understanding of mission then, needs to be thoroughly broadened. Engagement with Implicit Religion takes us into areas where that becomes very apparent.

The Failures of Official Religion

Of course, while we from within the Church make our remarks about implicit religion, it makes its remarks about us. And they're not always affirming.

For although the Church should, in my view, be listening to the yearnings for and experiences of the Transcendent hidden deep within this implicit religion and giving them outward expression and form, the Church is often seen as a closed exclusive group, not able to hear the experience of which Implicit Religion is an inarticulate expression.

The Church has a long history of using pagan and non-Christian expressions of faith as a first stepping stone to Christianity and the Church of England has a proud history of doing this very well.

But the Church is cutting off its own umbilical cord. The CofE has gone inward whereas it used to be firmly in touch with the implicit religion of its day. Now it's

gone onto the defensive, with a determination to create a 'committed membership'. If people come asking for baptism, or better Christening, in a folk religion way, then it closes the door and demands that those outside express the experience of God in *their* Church language rather than their own.

For we must not confuse this inarticulateness with lack of any faith. Much may be dumb superstition. But on the other hand Implicit Religion is very earthy, crude almost, - but what is incarnation if it is not God getting down to earth in what for God is indeed an earthy and crude manner. The question posed by Implicit Religion is: "Where is God to be found?"

Ordinary folk believe that the glory has left the Temple - that God and Jesus are fine, but the Church does not connect with any of that. They sense that the Transcendent has left the Church and can be found better elsewhere. So they stay with the folk religion trinkets and mantras and rituals that have served them in one form or another through ages long.

This may leave us feeling safe, for in this way we will guard the faith and keep it pure. But then we will hear stories of how Jesus berated the Pharisees for precisely that. And we will hear the story of the Sheep and the Goats and be reminded that those who considered themselves outside proved to be inside, and those who had thought themselves inside had been judged to be outside.

In our context what is the meaning of the text: "the First shall be last, and the last first"?

Is God at work outside the Church: often misinterpreted but at work...
the Extra-ecclesial Christ?

Wrestling with Folk Religion can get us into deep water. For in our dialogue we are trying to wrestle with the Transcendent hidden in the heart of creation. So we must be ready, like Jacob who wrestled with the Transcendent at the stream of Jabbock, to sustain injury. But the risk of engagement with Implicit Religion may allow us also like Jacob, to assert afterwards, "I have seen God face to face, and survived."

Questions for discussion:

1. Will opening ourselves to dialogue with Folk Religion not endanger the truth of our Christian faith?
2. Does not our faith demand that we preach the truth to those who are in darkness, and are not people simply in darkness who are reliant on folk religion?
3. Is Implicit religion so different from official religion?
4. Is Implicit religion better than no religion at all?
5. Do we have religious experiences? - and how do we seek to express them?
6. Does religion help people to be human?

Common Religion Today: and its implications for Theology and Mission

What is common religion - or better, 'implicit religion'?

Is it so different from what we see going on in Church - especially when the Church is in comfort mode?

Implicit Religion is as vulgar as the Gospels.

Is it better than no religion at all?

Do we all have religious experiences? Is so how shall we express them?

Theology: the cultural mature of religion and a brief skirmish into quantum mechanics.

Are humans simply created to be religious, and religion helps us become human?

Mission: the Church has always used implicit religion as a building block..

Church of England is beginning to look inward and miss its opportunities.

It's a big risk to wrestle with the Transcendent, whichever religion you choose!

+Laurie Green