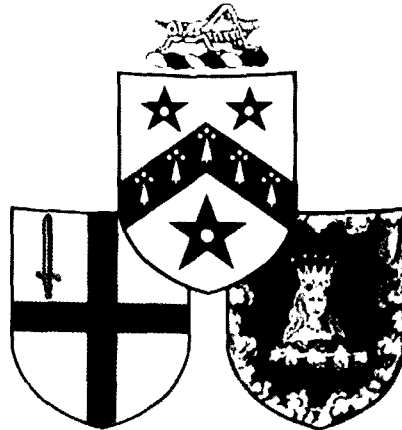


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LIVING THEOLOGY

Lecture 6

LIVING WITH OTHER FAITHS

by

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VI

'Living With Other Faiths'

I want to begin this evening by saying something about three approaches to the mystery we call God. For the moment, I do not want to put any specific meaning onto that famous little word; instead, I want to use it as a term that captures a particular response to the questions: 'Are we alone in the universe? Is there only us?' By 'us' I include any other conscious agents there might possibly be on other planets in far off galaxies, no matter how different to us they are or how much more advanced. If the universe is understood to be that which is created or made or is constantly brought into being, is there anything other than it, no matter how we define the 'it' of the universe or the otherness of the 'other'? I want to leave to one side particular ways of conceptualising or defining that 'other', whether it be conceived of as a personal being or as some kind of transcendent reality. The question I want to ask is about its reality: in what sense can we say that It *is*?

There are, broadly speaking, three approaches towards the question of the reality of this possible transcendence: naive realism, non-realism and critical realism. Let me use the incident from the life of Saul of Tarsus that I used in the first lecture in this current series, as an example that might explain the distinctions: his conversion on the road to Damascus. Here's the text again:

[9:1] Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest [2] and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. [3] Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. [4] He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" [5] He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. [6] But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." [7] The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. [8] Saul got up from the ground, and though his

eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. [9] For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Using the threefold categorisation I mentioned, we can ask our question about the nature of the mysterious reality that lay behind that encounter. The naive realist would say that the Saul who became Paul actually encountered the real Jesus who, though dead for several years, was personally present to him on the road to Damascus and spoke actual words to him in his own tongue. The non-realist, on the other hand, would say that there was no real encounter with anything outside Saul himself. What happened was a projection from within Saul onto an imagined external reality, so what was really happening was the resolution within Saul's unconscious mind of the psychological struggle between his attraction to the Jesus movement and his hold on the religion of his forebears. The naive realist says there was something outside Saul and it spoke to him; the non-realist says there was nothing outside Saul and that he was really just talking to himself.

As you might expect, the position of the critical realist is less easy to define or describe. If we imagine the responses to my original questions as a semicircular dial, with non-realism at the extreme end on the left and naive realism at the extreme end on the right, then critical realism would find itself bang in the centre, at a ninety degree angle to the base line of the semicircle. The point of the illustration is to suggest that, as with all these things, there are degrees of difference within all the broad categories. What we might call pure or central critical realism, however, would hold that there is that which we call the Transcendent or the Other, but that it is inevitably encountered by humans in ways that are relative to their place in this complex universe. In the case of Saul, for instance, the critical realist would argue that Saul had a genuine encounter with a transcendent reality beyond himself, but that it was mediated to him in the particular form it did because that was the arena in which Saul's own struggles were taking place. In other words, for the critical realist, religious experience is an experience of the real, but it is always mediated in forms that are not themselves absolute or necessarily 'real' in the hard empirical sense. This position is called 'critical' realism precisely because it believes that it is necessary to put religious claims to careful examination and strict interpretation.

This is how John Hick, an exponent of this position, puts it: 'Religious experience, then, occurs in many different forms, and the critical realist interpretation enables us to see how these may nevertheless be different authentic responses to the Real. But they may also not be. They may instead be human self-delusion. Or they may be a mixture of both. And so a critical stance in relation to them is essential'. Then he goes on to make an important point: '...the forms taken by religious experience are provided by the conceptual equipment of the experiencer'. He quotes Thomas Aquinas: *'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower'*. Hick comments: *'This fundamental epistemological principle has a wider application than Aquinas himself intended. For the mode of the knower has been differently formed within the various religious traditions, producing our different awarenesses of the divine. The fourteenth century Sufi Al-Junayd expressed the same principle more poetically when he said, "The colour of water is that of its container"; and Al-'Arabi later added, "If one knew Junayd's saying, 'The water takes its colour from the vessel containing it', he would not interfere with other men's beliefs, but would perceive God in every form of belief". For the different traditions are the containers that give its recognisable colour to human awareness of the Transcendent'*.¹

In this lecture this evening it is not my intention to offer a resolution of the question of the nature of the reality of religious experience, because our purpose tonight is to think about how we might best understand the fact of different faith systems. Nevertheless, I want to spend a little longer on the reality question, because the way we choose to resolve it will have a fundamental effect on our approach to people of other faiths. So let me re-visit some things I said in my last lecture, because it anticipated this evening's discussion about the three different approaches to the question of the reality of what we are loosely calling religious experience: 'Whatever explanation we accept, there is no way off the fact that the idea itself comes to or through *us*, either from inside out or from outside in. This is a version of the ancient paradox of appearance: is there a world out there independent of our perception of it? Common sense would suggest to most of us that there is; but the fact remains that we can only know that world through our perception of it. It is our mind, the recording device between our ears, that puts us in touch with it and plays it back for

us. There is no view from nowhere, as it were, no out-of-our-mind 'take' on it that could establish its independent existence apart from our perception of it. To that extent it is accurate to say that it is our mind that calls the world into being for us, along with everything else, including God. There is no way out of this paradox; and all the solutions we offer turn out to be versions of the same old problem. If there is God and a world out there, we can only know them, understand them, be in touch with them, through the agency of our own perceptions. This promotes in me neither despair at ever being able to get hold of anything outside my own head, nor the kind of immobilising scepticism that believes nothing is knowable as it is in itself. What it does compel me to accept is the powerful creativity of human consciousness in the act of knowing'. If you accept that general approach, then it rules out the possibility of pure realism, of having knowledge of things as they are in themselves, because we still have to do the knowing. This leaves the issue unresolved between non-realism (we make it all up) and critical-realism (there is something out there, but we are inextricably involved in its interpretation and never get it neat). To settle on either of these responses calls for a kind of commitment that is close to faith, since the reality status of the Transcendent cannot, as it were, be independently established for us. I find myself, using the dial I mentioned, hovering midway between critical-realism and non-realism. On the one hand, I cannot return to an understanding of religious claims that is pre-critical; on the other hand, I am not entirely prepared to reduce the whole of religious experience to human projection, though much of it clearly is. My own position might be described as projection-plus. I am haunted by the strangeness of the universe, so I am not disposed to rule out possible dimensions of reality within or beyond the three-dimensional reality I think I already know.

For our subject tonight, naive-realism would foreclose any useful discussion of other faiths. If we believe in the absolute reality of a particular religious system then, by definition, it has to make exclusive claims for itself. This is certainly how one great stream of Christian interpretation has gone. It says: 'Only Christians have the final truth; no one comes to God except through Christ; even the virtues of other religious systems are splendid lies, splendid vices'. These are some of the things Christians

have said and believed down the centuries. However, if we adopt the response of critical realism or non-realism, we have to assume an attitude to other faiths that does not dismiss them, though it will prompt us to the task of assessment and interpretation. After that lengthy prelude, let me now take a quick look at the central elements of the world's main faith systems, from the perspective of critical realism.

Hinduism is a term that was probably invented by the Persians who invaded India about 500BCE. They used the term to refer to the people of the Indus valley in North West India, so it really just means 'Indian'. John Hick points out that *Hinduism* as a religion is a modern western concept that has been exported to India and generally accepted there. He goes on to quote a writer who likens Hinduism to an ancient banyan tree: *'From widespread branches (a banyan) sends down aerial roots, many of which in time grow thick and strong to resemble individual tree-trunks, so that an ancient banyan looks like an interconnected collection of trees and branches in which the same life-sap flows...Like the tree, Hinduism is an ancient collection of roots and branches, many indistinguishable from one another, microcosmically polycentric, macrocosmically one, sharing the same regenerative life-sap, with a temporal foliage which covers most of recorded human history.'*²

Let me look at a few of the trunks or branches of this fascinating religious system. One important thing to notice is that, though there are numerous gods in the Hindu tradition, who appear to be in constant and kaleidoscopic change, they are seen as manifestations of the ultimate reality or Brahman. In the Hindu scriptures it is written: *'The Real is one - sages name it variously'*.³ This sounds a bit like an eastern version our friend critical realism. One reason why Hindus can be sympathetic to Christianity is because they have no difficulty with the idea of Incarnation or the manifestation of God in human form. Though there are many forms of the divine in Hinduism, the tradition is mainly dominated by the two great figures of Shiva and Vishnu, but even they are seen as mediators or forms of access to the ultimate reality of Brahman.⁴

Two key concepts in Hinduism are *samsara* and *karma*. We are probably more familiar with the terms *re-incarnation* or *transmigration of souls* than with *samsara*. *Samsara*, which is found in Buddhism as well as Hinduism, refers to the endless cycle of re-birth that characterises the life of humanity. The soul of one who dies does not pass into a permanent state of being, such as heaven or hell; rather, it is reborn into another existence, which itself will come to an end and lead to another re-birth, and so on. The nature of the next re-birth is determined by the law of *karma*, which means deeds or works. How we live in this incarnation determines our status in future births. What we sow we will reap. The process is impersonal; there is no judge or judgement, just the endless repetitions of an ethically interconnected universe. Our deepest longing must be to transcend this process of *samsara*. And this is possible, because within the constraints of *karma* we have the spiritual freedom to move upwards or downwards. Life is to be seen, therefore, as an opportunity to make progress. Life is a journey through many lives, in which we are gradually moving towards our final liberation. In the language of the Gita: *'The man of discipline (yogi) makes a serious effort. He becomes pure. After a number of births, perfected, he reaches the highest goal'*.⁵ The end, or highest goal, is conceived differently within the different strands of Hinduism, whether it is identity with what appears to be absorption into the impersonal infinity of Brahman or loving communion with the divine Person. However we conceive the consummation, it is utterly desirable and can be experienced even now.⁶ Hick offers us a useful summary of this vivid religious philosophy: *'(Hinduism) involves living out one's place in the whole vast scheme of things with its many levels of existence inhabited by many gods and goddesses. We are called to be faithful to our station and its duties as we proceed through life after life. Concretely this has involved, for millions of people through many centuries, a great variety of moral obligations and ritual observances, with their family duties and prohibitions determined by their caste and stage of life. It is also the case that within the Hindu picture of the universe there are many hells as well as many heavens. But these are not in the same category as the heaven and hell of the western monotheisms. They are levels of existence on which jivas (souls) spend limited periods of time. But the ultimate state, whether conceived*

as a union with Brahman in which individual egoity has been entirely transcended, or as individual life within the life of God, is eternal and finally awaits us all'.⁷

Buddhism is as complex a phenomenon as Hinduism, and shares a number of its themes and concepts. Launched twenty-five centuries ago in northern India by Siddhartha Guatama, it also offers a way of salvation or escape from the tedious repetitions of *samsara*. The story is well known of the young prince who renounced worldly glory to seek salvation, and discovered that the stumbling block to his own salvation, and the cause of all human misery, was desire or craving. If he could get rid of that desire, banish that craving, he would know the peace of high Nirvana. The genius of Buddhism is that it is a Middle Way that repudiates two extremes, the worthless life of self-indulgence and the equally worthless life of self-torture. The Middle Way to enlightenment consists in knowledge of the four Truths. The first Truth is the noble Truth of pain: 'birth is pain, old age is pain, sickness is pain, death is pain...in short the five aggregates of grasping are pain'. The second Truth is the noble truth of the cause of pain, which is the craving that leads to re-birth, 'the craving of the passions, the craving for (continued) existence, the craving for non-existence'. The third is the noble truth of the cessation of pain, which is found in 'the remainderless cessation of craving, its abandonment and rejection, emancipation, and freedom from support'. These are the three truths, mastery of which constitute the perfected disciple who has reached the goal of the cessation of pain. The fourth noble Truth consists in the actual process of arriving at these truths, which is called the Noble Eightfold Path: 'right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration'. The Eightfold Path is essentially a course of training. In order to carry it out fully and extinguish craving, the abandonment of normal life is essential, and led to the formation of the Order of monks.⁸

One of the fascinating things about Buddhism is its attractiveness to many westerners, who see in its techniques of meditation and self-discipline a form of spiritual praxis that is not necessarily encumbered with any specific belief in the Transcendent. Whether this is a legitimate interpretation of Buddhism is less

important than the fact that the way of Enlightenment through the purging of desire is an approach to life that appeals to many from both a non-realist and a critical realist point of view. This accounts, for instance, for the popularity in the west of books like *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, which is filled with aphoristic wisdom, such as: '*Suffering is a broom that sweeps away all our negative karma*'.⁹ According to Hick, '*Spiritually, the way to enlightenment is that of prolonged meditation, producing a realisation of the insubstantial and fleeting nature of the self and so leading to an eventual detachment from the ego point of view. This is a transcendence both from egoity and to -- enlightenment, liberation, awakening, nirvana, sunyata (emptiness), conscious participation in the universal buddha nature*'.⁹

Judaism is almost as diverse a religion as Christianity. Like Christianity, it covers the complete spectrum of approaches to the Transcendent with which we began: from naive realism to non-realism, and everything in between. There are groups in Israel who wish to rebuild the Temple and restore animal sacrifices and there are liberal Jews in this country whose humanistic and critical approach to religion and society is one I would have little difficulty in embracing, were it not for the specific importance of race in Judaism. Rabbi Lionel Blue said recently that the thing Judaism has found most difficult to deal with is tolerance. With ample justification, its self-definition has usually been that of a beleaguered and persecuted group. External hostility tends to reinforce tradition, while tolerance tends to erode it. The important thing to note is that Judaism covers the full trajectory of religious experience from a fundamentalist reading of scripture and observance of the ritual law right over to a selective observance that mainly expresses solidarity with an ancient inheritance rather than a real faith commitment. If you read the novels of Chaim Potok about the Hasidic Jewish community in Brooklyn you enter a fascinating world of a people who live in twenty first century America, but who follow an ancient code that separates them from the nation in which they live, much in the way that the Amish people in Pennsylvania observe the traditions of a branch of eighteenth century German Protestantism. Many Christian groups are exclusivist in their theology as well as in their way of life, destining people outside their own system to eternal damnation.

One of the most attractive things about Judaism, in all its forms, is its implicit universalism. One way to look at the ultra-Orthodox commitment to the Law is by thinking of rigorous, counter-cultural religious orders in the Catholic tradition who follow a way of life they would not want to universalise. The members of the order choose to follow God in this way, observing particular times and seasons and dietary laws. They do not claim that their observance is necessary to the salvation of all, though it is the way to which they are called. Judaism seems to practise a similar level of tolerance, believing that the righteous of all nations have their place in the world to come.

The life of the world to come was not an original emphasis in Judaism, however, though there was an evolution towards a belief in the resurrection from the dead, which was always hotly disputed. Readers of the New Testament will remember that the status of the dead was a source of controversy between Pharisees, who did, and Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. An enduring element in Judaism has been a passionate commitment to justice on earth and the mending of creation. It is impossible to understand Jesus unless he is seen as belonging to the prophetic tradition that proclaimed the anger of the just God against oppression of the poor and persecution of the weak.

Unlike Hinduism and Buddhism, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam we only get one shot at life, and the way we live it determines our fate after death. This sense is probably now stronger in contemporary Islam than in either Judaism or Christianity, which have both been heavily influenced by the Enlightenment. In Islam it is not so much personal sins that lead to hell as a complete rejection of God. Again, we find in Islam some of the same tolerance of other ways that we have already noted in Judaism and the religions of the east. It is not the rejection of the Qur'an that leads to damnation, because many people have not received it, but the rejection of the God whose nature has been announced by a long succession of prophets. The Qur'an states that: *'Never has there been a community to which an admonisher has not been sent.'*¹⁰ Hick says that from the unity of God and the unity of humanity in Islam it follows that divine revelation is also unitary, though manifested through

different instruments of revelation. The Qur'an again: 'So has God, almighty and all-wise, been revealing to you and others before you...He has laid down for you the same way of life and belief which he had commended to Noah, and which We have enjoined to you, and which We have bequeathed to Abraham, Moses and Jesus...Say (to the Jews and Christians): "I believe in whatever Scripture God has revealed, and I am commanded to act with equivalence among you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us our actions, to you your deeds. There is no dispute between you and us. God will gather us all together, and to Him is our returning"...God is gracious to His creatures, and bestows favours on whosoever He will. He is all-powerful and all-mighty'.¹¹ According to Hick, behind the Arabic Qur'an revealed through the prophet Mohammed there lies the 'cosmic Qur'an', the eternal Word of God that is expressed in different times and places through different revelatory individuals.¹²

Islam has been a source of great hope and security for hundreds of millions of people, mostly living in poverty in Third World countries. It prescribes a complete and achievable way of life through its observances, while emphasising the compassion of God for human failure. Trust in God strengthens men and women to endure life's tragedies, because they are accepted as God's will. And there is a lyrical and joyous strand of this austere religion seen particularly in the life and writings of the great Sufi poet Rumi, who was born in Afghanistan in 1207 and died in 1273. Let me read you two of his poems, just to savour their quality. My favourite is called 'Quietness':

*Inside this new love, die.
Your way begins on the other side.
Become the sky.
Take an axe to the prison wall.
Escape.
Walk out like someone suddenly born into colour.
Do it now.
You're covered with thick cloud.
Slide out the side. Die,
and be quiet. Quietness is the surest sign
that you've died.
Your old life was a frantic running
from silence.*

*The speechless full moon
comes out now.¹³*

The next on is called 'Say I am You':

*I am dust particles in sunlight.
I am the round sun.*

*To the bits of dust I say, Stay.
To the sun, Keep moving.*

*I am morning mist,
and the breathing of evening.*

*I am wind in the top of a grove,
and surf on the cliff.*

*Mast, rudder, helmsman, and keel,
I am also the coral reef they founder on.*

*I am a tree with a trained parrot in its branches.
Silence, thought and voice.*

*The musical air coming through a flute,
a spark of a stone, a flickering*

*in metal. Both candle,
and the moth crazy around it.*

*Rose, and the nightingale
lost in the fragrance.*

*I am all orders of being, the circling galaxy,
the evolutionary intelligence, the lift,*

*and the falling away. What is,
and what isn't. You who know*

*Jelaluddin, You the one
in all, say who*

*I am. Say I
am You.¹⁴*

I have tried to be positive in this sketch of the great religious systems of east and west. It would have been just as easy to be negative, to point to their excesses. I

could have underlined the way the religions of the east inculcate a kind of fatalism that allows obvious social evils to go unchallenged; and I could have pointed to the pathologies that often characterise Judaism, Islam and Christianity, all with a tendency to the unlovely excesses of fundamentalism. Lionel Blue pointed out perceptively that these three religions all have different ways of going mad, or produce different types of neurotic personalities. Judaism tends to produce obsessive-compulsives, Christianity sado-masochists and Islam megalomaniacs. We could use that insight as an instrument for probing the shadow side of each faith system. On the other hand, we could emphasise the contribution each tradition has made to the good of humanity. From the perspective of critical realism, we could say that each in its own way, from very different historical and cultural circumstances, has responded to the mystery of the possibility of transcendence that seems to haunt humankind. Our wisest response to the fact of the different faith systems should be what the Bishop of New Westminster in Canada calls '*grounded openness*': we can be grounded in our own tradition, with no desire to leave it, while remaining open to other traditions and the costly commitment they evoke from their followers. There is a generosity about that approach which seems entirely appropriate to people who live, as we all now do, in multicultural societies.

Richard Holloway

¹ John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, One World, Oxford, 1999, pp.42-43.

² Ibid., quoting, Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p.5

³ *Rig-Veda I*, 164, 46.

⁴ Hick, *op.cit.*, p.56.

⁵ *Gita*, VI,45, quoted in Hick, p.57.

⁶ Hick, p.57.

⁷ Ibid., p, 58.

⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica, volume 4, pp. 326-327.

⁹ Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Rider, St Ives, 1992, p.96.

⁹ Hick, *op.cit.*, p.62.

¹⁰ Qur'an 35:24

¹¹ Qur'an 42:3, 13, 15, 19.

¹² Hick, *op.cit.*, p.71.

¹³ Coleman Barks and John Moyne, *The Essential Rumi*, Harper San Francisco, 1995, p.22.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.275