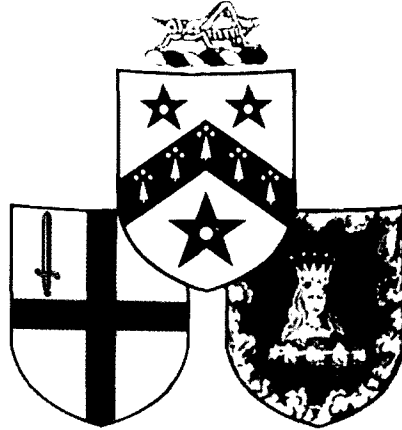


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LIVING THEOLOGY

Lecture 5

LIVING WITH DISAGREEMENT

by

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'Living with Disagreement'

What is life and how are we to live it? Those are the questions that come to us with life itself. When we arrive in life we do not come with an explanatory leaflet attached; we find ourselves thrown into life and we have to figure it out for ourselves. And what seems to be true of our personal lives, also seems to be true of Life itself, life with a capital L: it, too, is lived forward and understood backward. We are getting on with it all the time and only in retrospect does it begin to make some kind of sense to us, some kind of pattern begins to emerge. That is easier to understand when applied to a single human life; but we also ought to understand it in relation to the life of the universe itself. The astounding thing about the universe is that it was going on and on, living itself forward, for billions of years before the capacity for understanding itself emerged in us. Getting your head round that strange fact is disorienting but liberating. If we accept, if only for argument, that it is mind that discovers meaning, it would seem to follow that there was no meaning till we came along to mean it. Even if we believe in the great Mind outside the system we call God, it could not have been known about, either, till we came along to recognise it or posit it. So some doctrine of emergent meaning seems to be inescapable as we struggle to understand it all. Only gradually does life begin to make sense; and even when or if it does make sense, it is always in retrospect, always in the backward look, the review, the summary of the story so far.

One of the interesting twists in all of this is that in the active living forward of our life we inherit stories that offer explanations of its meaning. These stories of meaning are found everywhere, and one recipe for a happy life is to take one of them and make it our own story, internalise it and live by it. Religious stories are probably the oldest method for understanding ourselves, but they are not immune to Kierkegaard's claim that we live forward and understand backward, because the stories themselves emerged as part of the living we have done; so we have to acknowledge them and the role they have played as part of the perspective of the

backward look. The work of understanding ourselves will involve us in revising, re-interpreting or even discarding the stories we have developed as we lived our lives.

One of the most basic stories that we developed as we made our journey was the claim that our life derives its meaning from beyond us, from another sphere. The religious narrative is the first of the explanatory accounts of ourselves that we have developed. Having no memory of the real or actual history of our own evolution and the evolution of the universe, we invented narratives to account for it, because explanation seems to be one of the requirements of consciousness. An account has to be offered, a cause has to be discovered. To that extent we have always been scientists, intent on knowing about our world and ourselves. Religious narrative was our best guess about the meaning of things at the time, and some elements of those guesses are abidingly useful, even though we no longer accept them as factual accounts.

What we might describe as a generic account of religious narrative was offered by the Enlightenment philosopher of History, Giambattista Vico. His educated guess about the beginning of human community and the emergence of the religious account of meaning fixes on the move from forest to cave in the early development of humanity. Moving from the uncertainty of the forest to the controllable environment of the cave created the conditions for the emergence of the family state and the replacement of the free-range sex of the forest with patriarchy and sexual ownership. Vico saw the origins of the religious explanation in the cave dwellers' reaction to thunder and lightning, a guess that is backed up by primitive cave drawings. These elemental forces of nature could be easily identified as the anger of mysterious agents of unpredictable power. They gave rise to the primitive religion of augury and appeasement, the basis for the cruelty that seems to be intrinsic to many religious systems, however refined and developed they later become. The gods, these mysterious agents above and beyond us, have to be placated, so intricate systems of divination are developed to protect humans from the excesses and unpredictable emotions of the gods. The priestly arts of augury and haruspication emerge; and they never quite leave human consciousness, as the

continuing popularity of newspaper astrologers indicates, not to mention the abiding power of superstition, which is common among people in extreme occupations or who engage in dangerous sports

Nietzsche offered another explanation for the emergence of the religious mind. He said that the misunderstanding of dreams was the basis for all metaphysical dualisms.

'In the ages of crude primeval culture man believed that in dreams he got to know another real world; here is the origin of all metaphysics. Without the dream one would have found no occasion for a division of the world. The separation of body and soul, too, is related to the most ancient conception of the dream; also the assumption of a quasi-body of the soul, which is the origin of all belief in spirits and probably also of the belief in gods. "The dead live on; for they appear to the living in dreams"; this inference went unchallenged for many thousands of years'.¹

Religious narratives become more sophisticated with the emergence of creation stories designed to explain the existence of the earth and its creatures, including humanity. These early accounts introduce the idea of purpose or meaning in life; the human story becomes teleological. This comes from the Greek word *telos* for *end* or *purpose*, and is a good example of the way we read meaning back into events as we reflect on them. People who believe in religious revelation, the idea that information which we could not have discovered for ourselves is shown to us directly by God, claim that the idea of an overarching purpose in life is part of divine revelation. Like actors in a play whose parts are written for them, we do not know what our role is until it is explained to us. The trouble with the revelatory hypothesis is that it unavoidably begs the question it poses. There is no doubt at all that the idea that life has a purpose did emerge in human history. We can either decide that, with our passion for meaning, we read purpose into life and nature as a piece of retrojective interpretation; or we can decide that we received the knowledge by revelation from God. 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; 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, 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. And the fact that consciousness emerged out of the chemical soup of the universe makes it all the more amazing. The universe itself, obviously there before us, is just as obviously only called into being by *us*, because it is our understanding of it that forms it as a universe, a knowable system; and there is no understanding other than our own understanding available to us. The same is true of our knowledge of God. God, obviously there before us, is just as obviously called into being by *us*. It is our understanding that has made God knowable, and there is no understanding of God available to us other than our own understanding. Disorienting at first, to accept the centrality of our own role in the creation of God and the universe is liberating. It lifts us out of the endless contention of trying to prove the unprovable, of insisting that we can be in touch with the reality of things as they are in themselves by some means other than our own perception of them. Even if we insist, perhaps for the sake of our own sanity, on positing the independent reality of what is outside us, such as God and the universe, there is no way to know those things other than the only way we know anything: through our consciousness, our understanding, our perception, the way we add things up. We can't jump out of our cognitive skin and get a view on reality from

some other place. Even if we manage to *imagine* such a possibility, how can we get into it except by *ourselves* and *our* consciousness, which is what put us in touch with the possibility itself. We are stuck here, but it doesn't have to feel like a prison. Whether we believe God is real or a human projection (God could be both, of course); or whether we believe the universe is real or is made up by us (both of which are almost certainly the case); there is no escaping our own creative role whichever way we leap. The stories all come from us, and whether there is any beyondness to them not of our own making is the great unanswerable question.

The religious narrative, the story of divine creation we told ourselves to account for the meaning of things, has been largely replaced today in western intellectual culture by the narrative of science. Science looks much further back on things than our ancestors were able to, so it has put our history into an entirely different perspective. The narrative of contemporary science has replaced the compressed intimacy of the ancient creation narratives with a story of unimaginable vastness and duration. The narrative of a god or gods who decided to make a finite world to play with is replaced by the extraordinary story of a universe of universes, exploding through infinity. And one of the most extraordinary aspects of the whole business is that most of the matter in the universe seems to be dead or inert. One definition of living matter is the ability to reproduce or replicate itself. It is the miracle of replication that is the miracle of life itself. That is why many people are obsessed with the possibility of life on other planets or in other galaxies or in other universes. One account of our arrival is almost a version of the monkey with the typewriter, after an infinity at the keyboard, producing Hamlet. Given an infinite series of universes with an infinite set of emerging possibilities, life was bound, at some point to appear; and will probably go on appearing, since universes themselves seem to be subject to evolutionary logic.

On this planet, we are told, life emerged from the carbon dust of burnt out stars. The miracle is thought to have occurred 3.5 billion years ago in the lifeless saline seas of the young planet earth. The earth's atmosphere would have been composed of gases in concentrations that would poison most modern organisms.

'Poured from erupting volcanoes, the atmosphere was a mix of methane, ammonia, nitrogen, carbon dioxide and other gases; it was dark with clouds that poured down rain to feed the shallow, emerging seas. Scientists speculate that a powerful combination of nature's forces, such as sunlight, geothermal heat, radioactivity and lightning, provided the critical jolts of energy that made chemical reactions possible. Over millions of years these ingredients formed and reformed into countless random combinations. The primal gene may have been a product of this chemical roulette. This time, however, there was a difference: it possessed the power of self-replication and was, therefore, the beginning of organic life and its development on our planet.'

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The scientific narrative tells us that after unimaginable eras of time living species emerged from that chemical sea to try life on land; and it is from those awkward amphibians that we ourselves come. One day, probably in the dry savannahs of Africa, our forebears stood up for the first time, probably to expose less of their body surface to the heat of the sun, and we finally staggered onto the stage of history. The rest of our history, not yet completed, is the story of the drive from instinct to intentional human behaviour and an increasing understanding of the forces that impel us. The interesting thing to note is that the religious story of the creative purpose of God for our life could only recently have been read into the narrative of the universe, because we, its authors, are the most recent arrivals. Our telling of the story has reversed the order of things, rather in the way some films begin at the end and trace the story to its beginning. Religious narratives, unless we understand them as poetry and metaphor, come in at the end of our history and offer an account of it that we know to be factually wrong. Though factually wrong, these stories are powerfully suggestive, nevertheless, because they demonstrate our need to for meaning in our lives.

It is this passion for meaning that seems to be most characteristic of us as humans, but the narratives we create to express the desire are less important than the desire itself. And the narratives have been many and varied. Even within single religious systems the variety of interpretation of the official narrative has always been

enormous, but the plural nature of contemporary culture has made it impossible to be unaware of other systems or stories. It is a highly complex phenomenon, which seems to have been produced by a number of elements. The main one is *globalisation*. We are familiar with this term as a description of the economic system that dominates the world; and we now talk of the global village. But it is a mistake to limit this metaphor to economics. Globalisation has profoundly affected the religious and intellectual currencies in the world. We are now aware of other systems and traditions, other paradigms, using that term to mean 'an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques which are shared by the members of a particular community', to quote Thomas Kuhn, the originator of paradigm theory. We have got so used to recognising the claims of other value systems that we forget how new it all is. Paradigms or traditions operate at their best when we are completely unaware that we are in one. *Our* paradigm, our story, is not an arbitrary human construct, the way we happen to do things; it is the way things actually are. Globalisation makes it impossible for us to be unaware of other ways of looking at the world, and it has an inevitably eroding effect on the way in which traditions are held. The term that is used to describe this process of cultural erosion is *relativism*, and there are two, subtly different meanings to the term. One is descriptive: as a matter of fact, it says, your tradition is relative to your context and its inherited perspective. A subtler form of relativism goes on to say that the points of view themselves are all relative, and there is no way in which we can say that any one of them is superior to any other. Whatever we make of that claim, it is important to recognise that one inescapable aspect of living in our kind of society is that we become aware of other cultures and value systems, and that recognition has an inevitably relativising effect on them all.

Many people find that living in plural societies induces enormous anxiety in them, because all the landmarks that once guided them have been moved about. One understandable response to this situation is to stick imperviously to one's own tradition and try to impose it on others. A good example of this approach is provided by Cardinal Thomas Winning, Catholic Archbishop of Glasgow. Cardinal Winning represents one of the most enduring of the human traditions, the Catholic

Church. Catholicism is a system that works with captivating logic, if you accept its founding premise, which is its divine origin and preservation from error. If you are firmly embedded in such a tradition you can provide clear answers to most questions; and you are likely to be baffled by the failure of others to see how obvious they are. It is difficult for absolute systems to live alongside the values of a plural society, which probably accounts for the exasperated voice the Cardinal uses in his frequent intrusions into Scottish politics. One of the many ironies in this situation is the way religious institutions become expert at taking advantage of rights won for them by the kind of secular societies whose values they publicly scorn. An example of this is the way Cardinal Winning persuaded the new Scottish Parliament to call for the repeal of the Act of Succession, because it discriminated against Catholics. But when parliament went on to try to remove the discrimination against gay and lesbian people represented by Clause 28, he mounted a campaign of opposition, in which he notoriously dismissed members of the homosexual community as perverts. This episode exposes the difficulty felt by adherents of a particular narrative or paradigm of meaning when they find themselves, as most of us now do, in multicultural societies where no single view prevails and the whole ethos is one that celebrates the virtue of pluralism. The logic of this situation points to the need for a clear understanding of the necessary separation of religion and the state.

In a celebrated letter on the separation of Church and State, John Locke pointed out that it was *'...necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion, and to settle the just bound that lie between the one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, one the one side, a concernment for the interest of men's souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth'*.³ The separation of Church and State is an important principle that has been muddled by the history of Britain, with its tradition of national churches. The Reformation settlement that established particular versions of Christianity as official religions in Britain has largely worn out, except for a few anachronistic survivals. We should let the remnants go and recognise, with Locke, that churches are voluntary associations that should only have authority over their members, from

whom they can require anything they choose to submit themselves to, but that they have no authority over the civil government, which must govern in the interests of all, including the majority who have little or no religion. Cardinal Winning may have a perfect right to deny homosexual rights within the Roman Catholic Church, which people can choose to leave if they want to; he has no right to interfere with the laws and civil rights of Scotland, from which gay and lesbian people cannot abstract themselves. An extreme illustration may make the point: if a particular religion taught that it was sinful for women to vote, it would be perfectly within its rights, as a voluntary association, to require self-denial at the ballot box from its female members; but it would be quite wrong for it to overturn the right of universal suffrage that had been legally enacted in the nation. Part of the problem for some religious institutions, both in Christianity and Islam, is that they have long genetic memories of times when they called the shots in state as well as in church, so the temptation to try to influence politics in inappropriate ways easily asserts itself, as is clearly happened in the campaign against the repeal of Proposition 28. This episode demonstrates the intrinsic intolerance of many of the narratives espoused by particular religious groups. They all evolved in a particular context and assumed the universal validity of their prescriptions. Implicit in their world view is a sense of its universal normativeness. That is why debating with exponents of the traditional Christian angle on homosexuality can be mutually frustrating. The baffled exponents of the traditional Christian line do not seem able to comprehend that, while it may be appropriate to require their particular version of sexual discipline upon the members of what is a voluntary society, they cannot be allowed to impose it as a compulsory value on a society that espouses many narratives of the meaning of life.

This should not surprise us. Tolerance is not a religious virtue; indeed it was evolved as an antidote to the toxicity of religious controversy. It is no accident that the Enlightenment, which gave birth to tolerance, is now being dismissed by religious conservatives as a mistake! Voltaire, one of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment, was right about our religious certainties: *'...we ought to be tolerant of one another, because we are all weak, inconsistent, liable to fickleness and error. Shall a reed laid low in the mud by the wind say to a fellow reed fallen in the*

opposite direction: "Crawl! as I crawl, wretch, or I shall petition that you be torn up by the roots and burned"?'⁴ Living with the disagreements that are endemic in plural cultures is difficult, but rewarding. I would like to conclude this evening with a few suggestions about how to do it.

The first thing to recognise is that religion can be immensely consoling in the face of the suffering and loss that afflicts people; and it can help to discipline what the Prayer Book calls, rather gloomily, 'our sinful affections'. One reason why people of a conservative disposition are often religious is because of their belief in Original Sin, for which fierce religions can be a useful corrective. Wild tribes have been tamed by the threats and blandishments of powerful religious myths. This is what William James would describe as part of their cash value. The flip side of this is their tendency to hardness and refusal to adapt to new uses and understandings. The paradox of religious systems is that they probably served a very useful purpose in the human struggle for survival and assisted human development. But at the very moment we achieve a scientific understanding of their contribution to humanity they prove resistant to further development. This is probably understandable, given the difficulty of adapting absolute religious systems to tolerant, plural societies; but it is something religions must struggle against, unless they are to sentence themselves to life in a cultural ghetto.

But I want to end on a more positive note about the theological or human value of pluralism. We have offered a pragmatic justification of it, but can we offer some kind of intrinsic admiration, see something in it that is good in itself? I think we can, and I'd like to suggest two characteristics for our meditation. The first is that it is always better to accept, say Yes, to reality than to deny it or run from it. And the fact is that we now see the human struggle to claim meaning and value for their lives as an enterprise that produces many approaches, many answers. I would like to suggest that there is likely to be something of value in that very variety. More negatively, the presence of many systems is a good bulwark against the tendency to abuse that is found in societies where single systems dominate. Single systems always become arrogant. So the relativising effect of the presence of other accounts of the human

adventure tempers the absolutising tendency of single systems or the endless contention that characterises societies with two dominant systems. I'll let Voltaire have the last word: '*...if you have two religions in your land, the two will cut each other's throats; but if you have thirty religions, they will dwell in peace*'.⁵

Richard Holloway

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, section 5, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Penguin Books, New York, 1976, p.52.

² Richard Holloway, *Dancing on the Edge*, London, Harper Collins, 1997.

³ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Tolerance*, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, p.82, Penguin Books, New York, 1995.

⁴ François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Reflections on Religion*, *ibid.*, p.131.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.130.

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