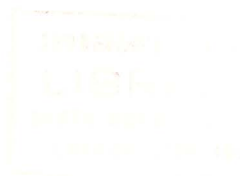


Volume VIII Number 2

Autumn 1985

KING'S

Theological Review



Whither Old Testament Theology? <i>R. E. Clements</i>	33
The Problem of Choice <i>Peter Vardy</i>	38
Luther and the Mystics <i>Grace Jantzen</i>	43
The Kingdom of God is Justice and Peace <i>Paul Ballard</i>	51
Canon and Criticism: A Response to Professor Childs <i>Francis Watson</i>	55
BOOK REVIEWS	59
FACULTY NEWS Insert	

THE PROBLEM OF CHOICE

PETER VARDY

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly secondary school children are moving away from the traditional idea of Christian education into either a religious studies course covering the main world religions or a humanities course dealing with matters of general social concern, ethics, peace, studies and perhaps, although not always, religion as a part of this.

Children are often, therefore, not being taught Christianity as truth but as one amongst a number of available world religious options. There can be little doubt that this increases awareness and tolerance of different traditions and in a multi-ethnic and religious society this must be a good thing. However it leaves both children and teachers as well as the Churches with a problem. The religions are taught objectively – lessons deal with beliefs, rituals, worship, festivals and the like, but the different traditions are all looked at from the outside. If understanding a religion requires belief (a point that is arguable but which I will not debate here), then they are being given knowledge without understanding.

Most children faced with a choice of different religious traditions and increasingly lying outside any of them, they will tend to ignore them all and to see the religious perspective on life as a curiosity but one with little relevance to day to day living; the many problems of adolescence or the later challenges of earning a living and making a way through life. Even if children or adults do take the religious dimension seriously, how are they to choose between Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism or Hinduism – to say nothing of Communism and Humanism (which I will ignore here as being outside the “religious” dimension, although this is a point that might be argued by some)? This is a modern problem – few people in the past did not grow up within an established tradition and fewer still had access to knowledge about all the world religions, with their often contradictory claims and counter-claims. It is not surprising that the problem of choice seems an impossible one to resolve rationally. Even the minority of committed Christian believers are unsettled by not being able to justify their religion against the “competition” on grounds other than upbringing or social background.

This situation leads, inevitably, to an increasing tendency towards “Universalism” and the idea that all religions are different expressions of the same underlying, transcendent reality expressed in different ways by different people in different societies. This, in turn, leads to a reluctance to press the Christian claim to Truth and a willingness to move from the accepted basics of Christianity into a wider interpretation on the lines of Don Cupitt’s *Taking leave of God* or Stewart Sutherland’s *God, Jesus and Belief*.

The aim of this paper is to consider what criteria could be applied to help in the choice between religions and to consider the implications for education.

2. SOME CANDIDATES FOR A SELECTION PROCEDURE

There are various prime facie procedures that could be used to help in the choice between religions. These include:

(a) Moral criteria

Stewart Sutherland argues at the beginning of his book *God, Jesus and Belief* that any religious demand that does not accord with our moral imperatives should be rejected. He sets forth five criteria of which the second is:-

“A religious belief which runs counter to our moral beliefs is to that extent unacceptable.”

In our society, although morality is developing there is nevertheless a reasonably clear, if very general “Western European/North American liberal ethic” – humane, urbane and considerate. A religion which conflicts with this or runs counter to Kant’s Categorical Imperative in one or other of its formulations might, therefore, be rejected as inadequate. Thus worship of a God who might require the sacrifice of human children could be rejected on moral grounds. To be sure, this is a somewhat blunt instrument as most religions call for ethical striving and it would be hard to argue for Christianity, for instance, against Judaism or Buddhism. However, even if this criterion was considered to be helpful, there are considerable problems:-

1. Morality varies between different cultures and it is in any case heavily influenced by religion. There is a two-way interchange. The accepted morality within a culture will tend to favour the predominant religion in that culture. It is not, therefore, suitable as a universal test.
2. Morality is evolving rapidly. In the last twenty years attitudes in the West to divorce, homosexuality, the tolerance of other races and creeds and many other issues have changed radically. A morality that develops in this way is hardly suitable as a litmus test of religion.
3. Morality looks, at least partially, to religion for inspiration and guidance. Plato’s Euthyphro dilemma is still unresolved and what God is held to will as the good is considered important.
4. Religion can claim to transcend morality. Thus Soren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* can talk of the “Teleological Suspension of the Ethical” and the Knight of Faith, on his own, outside the “Universal” (morality) unsupported over 70,000 fathoms in a position of direct relationship to God such as the paradigm of Abraham and Isaac. If this possibility is to be preserved, morality cannot be the judge of religion.

It might be held that morality could be used to reject the claims of a Jim Jones (of Guyana fame) or of a Peter Sutcliffe, however this is a judgement from within a religious and cultural tradition about a claim to a special God-relationship. This is a useful and valid exercise, but it does not help in the same way with a choice between different religious systems. Morality does not, therefore, provide a litmus test for religions.

(b) Rational argument

There is widespread acceptance of the view that the traditional arguments for the existence of God do not

“work” in that they do not demonstrate God’s existence to a non-believer. At most they reinforce the belief of an existing believer and confirm him in his view that his faith is rational. Even if they did work, however, they arrive at a “first cause”. Aquinas recognised this and after his famous “five ways” he says “This is what everyone recognises as God”. What is less clear is whether it is Allah, Jahweh, the Hindu Pantheon or Zeus!

There is no philosophic argument that I know of that will demonstrate the truth of one religion as against the others. It is difficult enough to make a case for theism that rests on more than general probability. Richard Swinburne’s book *The Existence of God* is a case in point, where he goes through the various approaches trying to assess probability and then, in the final chapter, changes his methodology and throws all the weight onto religious experience. In a similar way Basil Mitchell (*The Justification of Religious Belief*) argues for a “cumulative case” and Hick, Mitchell, Hare, Wisdom and others give examples which emphasise that much depends on the perspective of the observer rather than on additional evidence. As Wisdom says in his “Gods” article “The existence of God is not an experiential issue in the way it once was”. It is questionable, in fact, whether the balance of probability has anything to do with assessing religious belief and the appropriateness of commitment. Religious commitment should be wholehearted and not tentative. It is not a matter of weighing facts and then coming to an objective assessment but subjectively appropriating and living the religion concerned. The problem is – which religion does one appropriate and live?

(c) Religious experience

When philosophic arguments for the existence of God fail, revelation is seen to work only within religious belief rather than to act as its support, and rational grounds come to an end, the believer will often appeal to religious experience to justify his faith. Here again, however, we do not have a test which will help in the choice between religions for the following reasons:-

1. All religions claim religious experiences and choosing which to believe on objective grounds is impossible. As David Hume so clearly showed in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, the grounds for choosing to believe one set of claims rather than another are flimsy at best and a suspension of belief in all of them can be the most appropriate reaction.
2. Religious experiences can best be understood as occurring within a particular belief system rather than outside it. It is, for instance, very uncommon for a Hindu (or, indeed, a Protestant) to have a vision of the Virgin Mary – such a vision is far more likely to come to a Roman Catholic. The individuals need to have the concepts before they can see what they are experiencing in the terms of a particular tradition. Paul on the Damascus road already had all the concepts to enable him to have his particular experience. He was a devout Jew and had been persecuting Christians so would have known all about their ideas.
3. Most religious experiences are not sudden and dramatic. They rather fall into two main categories:-
 - a) Experiences of public events (such as the sky at night, a natural scene or the sea) in which the believer “sees” God, or
 - b) Private experiences which are relatively difficult to communicate.

To “see” God in the first case requires one to be within a particular religious tradition. The experience might well best be described as “an awareness of the transcendent” which a Christian or a Muslim will interpret as an experience of Allah or Yahweh and a Hindu, possibly, in pantheistic terms. Similarly private experiences are often relatively a-conceptual and depend on the viewpoint and background of the person having the experience. Religious experiences thus tend to confirm people in their existing faith rather than to act as faith’s foundation.

4. Religious experiences rarely come to those who do not participate in religious belief at least in some way. They are not usually “granted to” a disinterested observer trying to decide between the traditions. In this sense, teaching religion objectively to children makes it difficult for them to participate in any one belief system and therefore is likely to cut them off from a subjective awareness of God.

Religious experience does not, therefore, provide a means of deciding between religions except, possibly, to the individual who has had such an experience and for whom it may have been so vivid that doubt is impossible. However most people could not claim to have had such an experience and must therefore look elsewhere.

3) THE PROBLEM

We are faced with the situation, therefore, that for the outsider to religion, the obvious methods of deciding between religions do not help a great deal and adherence to one belief system rather than another appears to be largely a matter of the community in which one is brought up and educated. If this is indeed the case, the truth claims of Christianity are considerably devalued, as it then becomes a religion that is “right” for Europe and wherever European influence has extended. If this is all that Christianity is, then the Universalists have won the day unless, on the other hand, one takes the position (with David Hume) that all religions are to be equally rejected by an intelligent man.

For children and educated and questioning young people, the problem is even more acute. They are growing up in a world that is increasingly seen as “one”. In their College or University holidays, they may visit the Middle East, India or the Far East and see very different religions practiced with a dedication and fervour that is rare “back home”. It is not, perhaps, surprising that some are attracted away from Christianity to other religions and sects while for others all religions prove little more than a curiosity. For those who are not already firmly rooted in the Christian tradition, there may seem no particular reason for adherence to it. What arguments, then, can Christian theologians, teachers or believers put forward that might influence them or help them in their search? This can be answered at two levels —on the one side a “practical” response from a committed Christian and on the other a response from a philosopher. It is the latter approach I am interested in here.

A related problem revolves round the way religious teaching tends to be conducted today in many (but not all) schools. Teachers feel a need to be impartial and to teach objectively about different religions from a position outside

all of them. The Churches too often seem to assume that Christian education is still taking place in schools in the manner envisaged by the 1944 Education Act. Kierkegaard recognised and signposted this position in his separation of “objective” and “subjective” truth. Kierkegaard wrote between 1840 and 1855 in a Denmark that was almost wholeheartedly Christian, but his complaint was that this was a nominal and “objective” Christianity: a Christianity of Church goers who have learned their religion by rote, who went to Church once a week but did not carry it over into their daily lives by subjectively appropriating it for themselves. The parallels in England today are many, although in this country there are far fewer in percentage terms who are even objectively Christians. Kierkegaard saw his problem as being to woo each individual from an objective acceptance of Christianity to subjective acceptance which would then change their lives.

The problem for the Churches today is the same as that facing committed Christian teachers dealing with young people — only it is more obvious. Young people are taught the basic objective facts of Christianity, but this does not make them Christians. This demands a further step — into persuading them to appropriate Christianity for themselves and to commit themselves to it. It is hard enough persuading many to accept any sort of transcendent perspective, but how does one help the rational and questioning individual to not only accept a transcendent perspective on his or her life but to accept Christianity (or any other religion) as “The Truth”. The choices seem to be between the following:-

1. To accept Universalism and to say that all major religions point more or less equally to the Truth. Each religion, in a different way, points to the same, underlying “Ultimate Reality”. This is an increasingly common view today even though the central claims of the world’s religions conflict and bringing them together is very difficult. If it is possible, it is likely to be at a highly abstract level,
2. To regard religious beliefs as culturally determined and to abandon Christian claims to Truth or to a predominance of Truth. This might permit religion to be seen as providing an altered perspective on this life, in the way that Stewart Sutherland suggests that life can be seen “sub specie aeternitatis”,
3. To avow that the individual has the truth from God and that is cannot be justified or defended. If one takes this view, one is ceasing to do philosophy,
4. To devise some rational argument or at least to sketch the grounds on which a debate might be held which can be understood by the non-religious person and which will make the choice rational and not just a matter of upbringing.

It might, of course, be argued that religion is irrelevant and therefore should not be taught in schools other than as history. However if the aim of liberal education is to teach the “whole man”, then to ignore the religious dimension of life is to deprive the child of an important and possibly vital facet of human experience.

4) THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Epistemology is the study of the sources and foundations of knowledge. G.E. Moore in “In Defence of Common Sense” held up a hand and a pen and identified other simple objects and said that there were things that it made no sense to doubt, such as:-

- “I am a human being”
- “There is a living human body which is my body”
- “I have never been to the moon”
- “That is a bookcase”

Moore’s address was important as it showed that it was a mistake to look for foundations of knowledge. We cannot begin with undoubted “first principles” like Descartes’ “Cogito” or Lockian “Sense Impressions” and then erect edifices of knowledge of these. We must accept that there is a difference between saying:-

- All chains of verification stop somewhere, and
- There is somewhere that all chains of verification stop.

The latter implies a single stopping point, the first maintains that chains of verification stop at certain things that cannot be doubted – like Moore’s hand. Moore showed that his type of simple statements stop the chain of justification. As Wittgenstein put it, there tends to be “agreement in judgement” in respect of these propositions. I want to draw a parallel between this approach and the ideas of a prominent 19th century theologian — Albrecht Ritschl.

Ritschl saw the role of religion as resolving the state of contradiction in which men existed as, firstly, a member of the natural order and, secondly, with a spiritual side. Only religion can resolve the tension. The Christian religion consisted of a series of “Value Judgements” in which the “moral example of Christ in the community” is placed at the centre of a man’s life. Ritschl rejected the idea that religion should be reduced to or depend on morality — although morality was vital to religion. Once the value judgement had been made, then the individual could have an insight or intuition into the nature of the truth which was not fallible and he could see, by reflection, what moral actions were required of him based on the picture of Jesus in the New Testament (which Ritschl considered was sufficiently accurate for this purpose).

Once a person has seen and understood the moral impact of Jesus in the community, then the reality of this, of the central tenets of the New Testament and of man’s relation to God as well as the Concept of God itself will no longer be in doubt. It is not a matter of believing or disbelieving in God based on a balance of probabilities, but of knowing in such a way that no evidence could count against this knowledge. So we have the idea of knowledge that cannot be proved in a similar way that statements such as “I am a human being” and the other G.E. Moore propositions cannot be proved. There is an obvious difference, of course, in that whilst no-one would doubt Moore’s propositions, many people might well doubt or fail to see the “moral impact of Jesus in the community”.

There is agreement in judgement at a fairly general level between the major Christian Churches, but thereafter views differ. This need not be too serious as, within the Christian faith, the Christian can claim to “know” the central tenets of his faith whilst he would restrict himself to “belief” in more peripheral areas (such as the Assumption of the B.V.M. or the Immaculate Conception). However this view does not seem to help at all in the choice between religions as there is no “agreement in judgement” between different religions as to the “moral impact of Jesus in the community”, still less is there any such agreement amongst all men. It is to look at where such “agreement in judgement” might be sought, that I now want to turn.

5) DECIDING BETWEEN DIFFERENT RELIGIONS

I want to suggest that a decision between different religions or a debate between them is going to start from certain restricted value judgements which we, as human beings, generally accept. This does not mean that they are immutable or that there will not be some few people who will reject them. It does mean, however, that there are some value judgements we cannot justify. In a similar way, if I were to deny that what I am sitting on is a chair then I would be a candidate for psychiatric treatment rather than for philosophic debate. These value judgements will be overarching and there probably cannot be a great deal of debate about them. They might include, for instance, the ideas of compassion, love and concern for others or at least the value of each individual and the Kantian demand that individuals should be treated always as ends and never as means. If someone does not accept these, there is probably little that can be done to convince them. In a similar way if someone does not accept that one should not kill or hurt others except in exceptional circumstances; if he is amoral, then rational debate is unlikely to change his mind.

Now I am aware that there have been regimes like Pol Pot’s in Cambodia where these ideas would be totally rejected, nevertheless I do suggest (and I hope that it is not just misplaced optimism) that in the absence of extreme indoctrination, there are basic value judgements which many human beings share. They are, in some way, part of what it is to be human.

Care is obviously needed not to put forward value judgements that are a product of our western background and this is difficult to avoid. One should obviously not “load the dice” against Eastern religions. What is needed is a series of questions or “test” for different religions that rest on broadly based human value judgements which may not themselves be able to be justified (although it may be possible to debate their consequences). Such a list might be on the following lines.

Does the religion or attitude or orientation to life that is proposed:

1. Enable the individual to transcend himself (which does not necessarily imply any transcendent “God” or heavenly realm),
2. Give meaning to life,
3. Have intellectual profundity,
4. Have as an aim the good of all mankind rather than a particular group,

5. Have an appeal across a wide range of cultures,
6. Have a value in improving morality,
7. Serve to transform men’s lives,
8. Provide a practical (albeit, perhaps, difficult) way of living life in the modern world?

These may, of course, be disputed, but at least debate about them between different religions is possible and if one religion rejects one of them or suggests another, this may help to tell the enquirer something about that religion. If these were to be acknowledged as resting on primary value judgements, then different religions could be seen in their light. The Christian might well consider that his religion has a unique contribution to make here in terms of the Resurrection of the God-man. This is a major difference from, say, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. Similarly Hinduism and Judaism might find it difficult to take on board the requirement for wide cultural appeal. If the Christian idea of the Resurrection is accepted and the possibility for every individual that is opened up by it is equally accepted, then the Christian might well feel that the over-riding value judgements are best expressed in his own religion and that others come a poor second. Perhaps believers in other religions would not accept this, but at least the grounds for a dialogue would have been established.

I do not claim that the list above is the correct one and suspect it may be too heavily influenced by my own, western Christian background. However the possibility of such value judgements at least opens up the grounds for a debate between religions and such a debate may itself help to point to where “The Truth” lies — if, indeed, it is considered that it lies anywhere and is other than purely relative. Even if it is relative (which I do not believe, although cannot argue against here) the basis for a discussion would have been established.

Universalism is an attractive picture, but the claim of christianity to be “The Truth” must not be lightly forsaken. The view that I have tried to suggest here shows one way in which the claim might be argued on rational grounds (as well as the necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, historical grounds) and can also, perhaps, help to justify the choice between different religions.

6) THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

The Church needs to recognise that schools, in teaching religion objectively, make it more difficult rather than less for the child to take a religious view on his life and a Christian view in particular. If religion or morality (and perhaps even love as a parallel) are examined and analysed, then there is a danger that subjective acceptance and awareness may tend to disappear. Once all religions are looked at from the outside, it is much easier to stay outside all of them. It is one thing to teach religion objectively and quite another to open up the individual’s subjective awareness of religion and its importance in human life. It is doubtful, indeed, whether one can open up such awareness except from within a particular religious tradition. Yet here the teacher has a major problem:-

1. In today’s multi-racial and multi-religious society it is not considered acceptable in most areas to inculcate children into a single tradition, and yet

2. Subjective awareness of religion (which is an important facet of the whole man that educators should be concerned with) can only be found within such a tradition.

In a sense, it may be better for a child to grow up belonging to and being part of any religious tradition rather than none — yet it is not the task of a non-denominational school to choose a religion.

The role of the teacher in this area should be to not only teach the history of religions but to show that there is more to life than may at first appear. Man has the ability to transcend his normal, everyday concerns. The individual needs to be encouraged (though I accept that it may not be easy) to recognise that religion provides a challenge to the normal order and that it is important for the individual to consider and evaluate this challenge. The teacher needs, I suggest, to try to get young people to ask the fundamental questions that religion addresses (such as how life can be given meaning and what is the purpose of an individual's life). These questions could include an examination of the fundamental value judgements that may be common to humanity. This is as far as schools can be expected to go. The Churches must recognise this and accept that it is their task and not that of the school to inculcate children into their traditions. With this recognition should come the necessary action which is to often missing today as it is expected that schools will do the Churches job for them. An individual does not "choose" a religion coldly and rationally — he or she will be influenced by the lives and example of people met in the ordinary course of life. Indeed "choice" may be, because of this, a poor title for this paper. Individuals will become Christians by seeing Christianity lived — this, in itself, places a very heavy responsibility on everyone who considers themselves a Christian.

7) SUMMARY

I have attempted to argue that:-

1. The apparently obvious means of justifying one religion rather than another do not succeed,
2. The religious dimension is important if education is to cater for the whole man,
3. Agreement should be sought on the fundamental Value Judgements which most individuals accept,
4. Schools cannot go beyond educating children in the history of religion and trying to challenge children with fundamental questions, and
5. Subjective awareness of religion can only come from within a particular religious tradition and inculcating a child into this must be the task of the parents and the Churches.
6. Each religion must show how it answers such Value Judgements or else:-
 1. Accept Universalism in some form, thus forsaking any singular claim to truth, or
 2. Affirm that insight into its religion is reserved for a "chosen group".

I am not suggesting that this paper provides answers — what I hope it has done is to raise the questions and by suggesting one possible way forward help the debate so that the "Choice" between religions becomes a choice of one rather than a slide into indifference. I would suggest that there are fertile grounds here for cultivation by and co-operation between Philosophers of Education and Philosophers of Religion and that the issues have so far been insufficiently tackled.

THE HOUSE OF VANHEEMS LTD

Established 1793

ROBEMAKERS AND CLERICAL OUTFITTERS

Makers of Single and Double-breasted Cassocks, Ripon, Sarum and Old English style surplices, Albs, Cassock-Albs, Gowns and Hoods — including the A.K.C. Hood.

We also supply clerical shirts, stocks and collars, choristers' robes, vestments and church textile goods, flags, hassocks and finest quality brass and silverware. A catalogue will be sent upon request.

**BROOMFIELD WORKS, BROOMFIELD PLACE, EALING
LONDON W13 9LB. Telephone: 01-567 7885**