

Am I Bothered? Spiritual Wisdom in a Complex Age

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Introduction

It's a brilliant catchphrase - Catherine Tate's character Lauren Cooper captures the zeitgeist perfectly - the teenager who covers up her own inadequacies, and wriggles out of awkward situations by posturing apathy: 'am I bovvered?' Look at my face. Is my face bovvered? Face. Bovvered?' Even Tony Blair has been known to ask it.

For all his faults, apathy is not one of them: after all, Blair's just embarking upon a new Faith Foundation - the purpose of which is "to promote respect, friendship and understanding between the major religious faiths; and to make the case for faith itself as relevant, positive and a force for good in the modern world." A laudable intention, it seems to me - made somewhat problematic by the issue of his credibility on the world-wide stage, post the Iraq war. But we shall see. He is right, though, when he claims

The issue of religious faith will be of the same significance to the 21st Century as political ideology was to the 20th Century. In an era of globalisation, there is nothing more important than getting people of different faiths and therefore cultures to understand each other better and live in peace and mutual respect; and to give faith itself its proper place in the future.

There's lots who aren't bothered, at all, it seems, about the future of the world in this new century. And partly that's because the issues are so large and complex. Where do we begin? The nature of the changing world in which we live - one characterized by Castells as a world 'troubled by its own promise' (2004) - is a world of incredible potential, rich resources, not least in the range of gifts and talents that different peoples bring. We have inherited a world of real natural beauty and capacity for regeneration and supply - ideally there's plenty of resources for everyone to flourish. But it is a troubled promise: the world is increasingly characterized by flows of communication, of global markets with their wealth and concomitant poverty; of flows of people seeking labour, seeking security and peace. A world of so-called clashing civilisations, wars on terror, of deepening ideological polarizations. The US waiting to see the end of George W Bush - and so much hangs on who becomes the next president - or does it, really? Of shifting economic powers, financial crises, of global re-alignments - China on the ascendancy, with all that means, not least in the struggle for human rights - witness the progress of the Olympic torch, provoking protest after protest at China and its very different conception of what it means to be a human subject. In a globalised world different cultures; different understandings of 'law', of democracy, of governance, of humanity, of work - you name it - come together intensely and immediately - and that's before you factor faith in.

Good luck to Tony: he'll know already - and if he doesn't, he soon will - that the relationship between culture and faith is really complex - much more complex than is often assumed. The way we express our faith - or lack of it - is profoundly influenced by the cultures in which we are formed: I am a Christian - an Anglican priest - largely because that was the dominant religion of the context and time in which I was born. Had I been born in Karachi, or in Indonesia, or in the Czech Republic, my faith would have been different. As it is, I'm able to be a woman and a priest because of the particular Christianity which has shaped my identity, along with the different cultures in which I've lived - forming my attitudes and core values in profound ways. And this is not just about individuals: Britain today owes an immense amount to the positive shaping of the Christian faith. Of course, it's gone wrong at times through the ages, but health and education, the development of political thought from the Middle Ages onwards, music, literature and art all adds up to a rich cultural heritage which at its best values an open public space, debate and understanding the other, equality, free speech, respect, humour. Today, I'd argue, that

perhaps the most valuable role that religion can play is by providing a critical voice - to challenge the powers that be - and that's why I'd argue for an ongoing involvement of religion in political and public space: religion which looks at that long tradition of prophecy that stretches back through each of our faiths, through the Prophet, through Jesus, to Isaiah, to Amos - a prophetic faith that is not identified with political power but which holds it to a higher account. And that's the greatest value of religion, I think: its role to critique and challenge the status quo - and then to offer something that transcends current reality and points to higher values, to what God desires for the world.

So one set of questions I bring is how do we distinguish between what is good about the cultures in which we are embedded, and what needs to be critiqued and changed, so that we grow into a fuller humanity, transcending the limits of our current existence. Religion offers a tremendous amount to this fundamental question, and we need to be talking more, from our different traditions, drawing upon the wisdom of our texts and religious resources in order to offer the world - our local communities, regions, nations - something to provoke change for the better. What we mustn't do, it seems to me, is use our religion, our faith, to entrench the worst of our cultural identities into a defensive, aggressive stance that closes down engagement with our neighbour and with God.

So what is the wisdom that we bring from our faith that can help make a better world? How do we access it? How do we communicate it? Questions to return to.

Multiculturalism - or Interculturalism?

But before we do, a little more about the multicultural world in which we live. Tariq Modood's latest book is a trenchant defence of the concept of multiculturalism. He argues against those who say it's segregated communities (Kenan Malik); incited extremism (Hugo Young and Farrukh Dhondy); and perhaps most notably, Trevor Phillips who says that multiculturalism was useful, but is now out of date, no more than a fetish of difference instead of encouraging minorities to be truly British. Since the 7/7 bombing the debate has intensified: Gilles Kepel has observed that the bombers 'were the children of Britain's own multicultural society' and that the bombings have 'smashed to smithereens' the implicit social consensus that produced it. And not only in the UK, either. Across Europe and the US there has been a widespread questioning of the value of multiculturalism post 9/11 - that it fosters separatism and harbours radicalism.

Modood re-emphasises its importance in shaping public policy, but he also offers a strong challenge to the classic liberal position of those (like Kymlicka) who advocate that public or political space needs to be neutral. Modood asserts that most polities have a history in which one or more dominant cultural, linguistic or religious groups have fashioned institutions and conventions - and he cites the example of the British government actions in Northern Ireland where multiculturalism '...can be about institutionalizing respect for different faith communities, based on the recognition that civil peace and other civic purposes require organized religions to be governmental interlocutors and partners in a routinized, institutionalized way' (2007: 30). This is not the privatized religion of classic liberalism of Kymlicka and Rawls, but a new, positive relationship between religion and the state that does not leave religion out of the equation, but recognises its potential to shape society in open and positive ways.

For this to happen, a normative starting point is respect for difference: the sense of identity that should not be disregarded in the name of integration or citizenship - and in this Modood draws on the work of Iris Marion Young (2000) and Bhikhu Parekh (2000). He argues that 'difference' was initially a negative label but has become a positive place to begin in a multicultural society as it opens up the complexity of hybrid identities and community allegiances. Such understanding of difference should not be erased, but 'transform[ed] into something for which civic respect can be won' (2007: 41). Multiculturalism enables new forms of citizenship to be created, whilst sustaining origins and diaspora, with the formation of hyphenated identities. But more than that, multiculturalism recognises not just individuals but groups too - identities, associations, belonging, including diasporic connexions; behaviour, culture, religious

practice, etc and political mobilisation (2007: 50). Modood draws on the work of Charles Taylor on equality, especially his emphasis not just on equal dignity, but also equal respect - a central quality in Iris Marion Young's work too - and so, Modood says, ideas of equal respect and recognition are essential to multicultural equality and integration, and are the basis of an active support for cultural difference.

Modood really gets interesting, I think, when he talks about how minorities can be bearers of distinctive knowledge. They are a primary source about the marginalization and discrimination they experience, and hence of their distinctive location. They have a take on their societies that the majority does not experience and so offers to the majority a very different perspective on their shared society, its institutions, discourses and self-image. They hold a critical mirror up to that society. They are also likely to have sensibilities, ways of thinking and living, heritages they can call upon to widen the pool of available experience and wisdom. In all these ways the presence of diversity is an epistemological condition, a learning experience and the source of the dialogical, two-way character of multiculturalism. Bringing into greater public participation the perspectives of women, gays or Muslims may come to mean that their critical perspectives upon existing practices and values are openly discussed, that marginalized sensibilities become de-stigmatized and come to be more influential and then begin to shape the mainstream. Modood calls this not a dialogical but a multilogical process (2007: 68).

In these multilogical processes, Modood says religious identity should be much more in the public realm than traditional liberal or secularist ideology would allow. He argues that '... religious identity should not just be privatized or tolerated, but should be part of public space' (2007: 70). He draws attention to the way in which the Anglican archbishop of Canterbury often has a critical role in interpreting God's will. A recent example is how he commented upon Shariah law - and yes, the media had a field day, but raising the question, the need for exploration was valid. The established Anglican Church as it sustains its place in the public realm, offers a critique of that principle of secularism, that religion is a feature of private and not public identity.

Modood wants a plural, changing, inclusive British identity, which respects and embeds difference in its political and public structures. I want to come back to how we, as people of faiths, can give a lead to this, and that will be my next section. But first, others have engaged with the same debates about multiculturalism and have emerged with a different word, which I think I prefer: 'interculturalism'. Bloomfield and Bianchini differ very little from Modood in terms of the content of their ideas and their recommendations of what needs to be developed in a book written for city planners and policy makers. They argue that different cultures and communities need to dialogue with each other, and they don't find that possibility within the word 'multiculturalism' in the same way Modood does, seeing it as dated and tarnished by those who critique it as too liberal and secularist. They write:

What is the imperative for interculturalism, rather than multiculturalism? How can and should we live with difference? As argued, we need to ground cultural diversity in both individual autonomy, collective self-organisation and presence within the local public sphere. Yet to ensure the collective organisation, public presence and voice of ethnic minorities it is not sufficient to create wider inter-ethnic alliances, alternative policies, culturally sensitive services and a diverse, inclusive public realm. Solidarity can only be built on shared experience. (2004: 37)

Shared experience. They give various examples from Britain and across Europe of ways in which urban policy is increasingly shaped by intercultural shared experience. They see ways in which the notion of political representation is being recast - from 'the community' to the 'local public sphere'; and find good developing practice of mutual social learning and ongoing dialogue, input and feedback which enables policy makers to keep in touch with creative and imaginative ideas and find constructive solutions. Often in such examples inter-ethnic and inter-faith forums are present and strong. Bloomfield and Bianchini advocate that cities need to have an openness to ideas and social innovation: and for cities to become intercultural and socially creative, such openness needs to become embedded in policy-making, and investment of time and research over long term is important. They advocate creating a memory bank and narrative of urban innovation; developing critical reflection and creative relationships to social

movements, soliciting public debates and ideas from a wide range of different cultural backgrounds. Universities are key partners in developing new ideas - new relationships with sociologists, anthropologists and historians will help to develop intercultural literacy, subtlety and social depth.

But although both Modood and Bloomfield and Bianchini are more open than most to the contribution that faiths can bring to policy making, there's little enough on the drawing board. And I don't think it's surprising that policy makers aren't that bothered about religions and faith communities. It seems to me that we're remissing a trick, all of us, particularly from the so-called Abrahamic faiths - Judaism, Islam, Christianity - we who have offered so much historically to the development of society and civilisation. We are more often than not left out of the equation of policy makers and those who shape society. Why? Because many people perceive us to be more trouble than we're worth: that we come with an agenda; that we are all divided; that faith is just a problem. And when many policy makers will not be religiously literate and will have been educated into a secularist ideology which seeks to confine religion and faith to the private sphere, there's an uphill struggle. Are policy makers bothered about faith? On the whole, not. Can you blame them? especially when people of faith retreat from engaged dialogue to shouting their own certainties even louder, or into a sort of pietism that disengages with critical dialogue, either within their own communities or with those outside. We are not perceived as viable conversation partners and so we are not contributing from the immense wisdom of our faith traditions into the creation of innovative intercultural societies.

I want to turn now to a way in which people of different faiths can begin to develop a solid sense of mutual understanding. I'd argue that only when we've done some proper work together on developing a common understanding can we begin to speak into the political arena with a voice or a range of voices that can be heard. I know in some places people of faith are further down the line than others - but I also know that in other places, like Bradford, we are some way away from convincing the very secularist policy makers that we have anything to say.

Voices of Faith

Spiritual guidance - the theme of the conference: we need as people of different faiths to be able to offer guidance to the world - in our local contexts, cities, regions, and nationally - showing that each of our religions comes with different resources that can inform debate and build a richer and deeper society for all members, all citizens. To do that, we need first to be talking to each other in a lot more depth, exploring what we have in common, recognising and working with what is different between us. To do that takes trust and time. But trust and time well invested.

And a good method by which to work is scriptural reasoning, which has emerged from David Ford and others in Cambridge - so I want to spend a little time describing how it works. What I really like about David Ford's approach to Scriptural Reasoning - particularly in this book *Christian Wisdom* - is the way he grounds what he says in God. In a God who is to be worshipped, loved, adored for God's sake. *God is to be loved for God's sake* (2007: 225, italics in original)

Scriptural Reasoning needs to start from here, he argues. Doing things for God's sake sets human activities like Scriptural Reasoning within a context that is created by God and so challenges human motivation and activity all the time towards God, towards pleasing God above all else. To love God for God's sake is also, as Ford says, inseparably, to love the people and the world God loves. As soon as you say this, Scriptural Reasoning immediately requires community, a school of desire and wisdom that is concerned for both God and the world and within which people can be formed in faith, hope and love.

He argues that such a way of developing wisdom across the three Abrahamic faiths is to hallow the name: loving God for God's sake - hallowing, fearing, loving, praising, blessing, glorifying God's name simply because God is God (2007: 225). From such an approach wisdom comes; from desiring and striving to work out, in both ordinary life and amidst conflicts and large events, a way of being human before God (2007: 227). Ford looks for 'abreadth of mind and heart, continually renewed from the heart of God, a

passionate intellectual life; a constant re-engagement with scripture and tradition. Such wisdom requires openmindedness in many directions. It seeks to combine the gains of modern academic disciplines with a theological wisdom that is most intensively expressed in worship. Ford writes of the importance of worship:

The joyful, ecstatic side of this is in the delighted leap from the wonder, beauty, truth or goodness of creation to amazement at its Creator, or in the astonishment of gratitude that moves into appreciation of the One whose very being is to love, to be generous, to be. ... out of the unimaginable chasm of divine freedom creation is the gift of One who calls it out of nothing. Beyond the fascination of atoms, trees, people and stars, this One is the ultimate and inexhaustible fascination for heart and mind. To try to think God in God's self is to have our language stretched beyond all analogies, sometimes to revel in an abundance of names and attributes, each of them inadequate, and sometimes to accept their inadequacy in silence. It is to generate images and concepts that try to do justice simultaneously to infinity of wisdom, goodness, understanding peace and love. It is to rejoice in their failure because this points beyond them to who God is as God. It is to explore the deepest sense of loving God with all of one's heart, mind, soul and strength. The simple core is: God is to be praised and loved for God's sake. (2007: 228)

So Scriptural Reasoning needs to be set in this context: the context of adoration of God - for God's sake.

Something of the origins of SR. The idea first emerged from Ford's experience of observing Jewish scholars at the American Academy of Religion Conference in the US, engaging passionately and intensely with their scriptures, in an ongoing group that met regularly and which had established good relations of trust and humour amongst participants. Ford, as a Christian scholar who puts his own scriptures at the centre of his theology, appreciated their passion and began to see the potential for gathering together people from Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith traditions into a comparable engagement, each with their own texts, and with honour to the different interpretative methods and traditions that each faith tradition has, to develop trust and dialogue. He writes of SR, that it is 'a practice that flourishes best when each tradition is reading their scriptures and those of others before God (as each identifies God) and for God's sake - the latter being an idea to which, for all their different ways of identifying God, many Jews and Muslims have given comparable centrality.' Crucial is '... a radical honouring of each person for their own sake, whose most complete expression of friendship with each other and in communion with God for God's sake' (2007: 226).

I want to return to the idea of friendship in a while, but first some of the practicalities of this method of engagement.

An inter-faith wisdom

Ford describes SR as an inter-faith wisdom (see 2006: chapter one) - he proposes this as a maxim for it: let conversations around scriptures be open to all people, religions, cultures, arts, disciplines, media and spheres of life. Let us read for the sake of friendship with all. (2007: 273)

He doesn't shy away from the differences - both with regard to the scriptures themselves, but also in the ways each tradition interprets them, but the central thing is, he claims, that 'Each tradition's scripture is at the heart of its identity - in different ways, but recognizing this can be a source of illumination to each. Scriptures in each faith are formative for understanding God and God's purposes; for prayer, worship and liturgy; for normative teaching; for imagination and ethos, and so on. So particularly in the face of change, it's important that debates appeal to scripture. He recognises, though, that this can be difficult: dispute and bitterness can result, and fear of things going wrong is often a reason for it not happening (2007: 274). Things are less likely to go wrong if the debate happens within ongoing relationships of trust. Ford comments that one of the critical things lacking in relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims is such centres of long-term collegiality where ways of study, understanding and application can be worked at and passed on across generations (2007: 275). Study of scriptures has been overwhelmingly

intra-traditional - but now there is a real need for the creation of groups, traditions, networks and institutions able to form readers dedicated to study and discussion:

There are almost no places in the world at present where collegial conversations are sustained jointly around these three scriptures and traditions of interpretation. In a few universities the scriptures of each tradition are studied alongside each other, but that has very rarely led to deep interplay between all three. (2007: 275)

To start to dialogue - or at least to want to dialogue - is to recognise that each of us has a 'hyphenated identity' - that we belong to each other: each particular and different, but with things to learn and share from each other. It's been happening already at St Ethelburga's in London: 'At St Ethelburga's, over the last three years, we have been developing a set of practices that enable Christians, Muslims and Jews to hyphenate. We have studied together as people of faith and we have acted together as citizens' (2008: 1).

SR is text study between Christians, Muslims and Jews - and it requires mutual hospitality to work - hospitality to the other, to what someone different might be saying. It's a double commitment: one needs to stand firmly within your own tradition and love your own scriptures as your own peculiar treasure - but you need also to be open to the God of Abraham speaking from outside your familiar tradition (2008: 6). William Taylor writes;

You need to be open to interruption, stopped in your textual tracks. This is, of course, a biblically endorsed possibility with Jethro, the priest of Midian, offering management consultancy to Moses, his son-in-law; or the Canaanite woman providing impromptu Messiah coaching to Jesus, as he tries to take a quiet stroll along the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. And in the Hadith, the Holy Prophet invites his followers to 'narrate from the children of Israel', to learn from their stories (2008: 6).

To enable such in-depth conversations to emerge it's important to think carefully about the context. The space where such dialogue occurs is fundamental, and Ford differentiates between the university, the place of worship (mosque, church, synagogue) and the 'tent of meeting'. The tent of meeting - and one has been erected in St Ethelburga's - offers a sacred canopy, a generous space, a mutual place not owned by anyone, but where strangers can become friends and are entertained unawares. Taylor again: 'the Tent is that liminal space - beyond the synagogue, the church and the mosque - where those who follow the God of Abraham may, together, learn ... how to hyphenate' (2008: 7).

It's a practice of reconciliation - but it is also a civic practice - exploring issues such as justice, peace, mercy and truth. And sometimes that means disagreement - but a good living tradition allows for disagreement. SR, as it builds relationships of friendship and trust, as it develops, allows disagreements to emerge and be honoured - for God's sake. And that's a clear example of why that's important: the goal of wisdom and trust enables participants to stay with the disagreement:

Traditions allow for dissent and disagreement, even at times internal contradiction. By locating yourself in a tradition you can learn how to disagree well. You learn how to approach the scriptures interrogatively, how to ask good questions of it, as well as allowing scripture to ask good questions of you (2008: 9).

It sort of makes you want to get on with it, doesn't it?

Scriptural Reasoning in Practice

I first met David Ford last summer in Cambridge - when I had the opportunity to describe a small project that I'd initiated in Bradford which had definite resonances with SR. At the Cathedral a local theatre company had staged *Much Ado About Nothing* - Shakespeare's play that revolves around a woman accused wrongly at her wedding of being unfaithful. The honour of her father and the man she was to marry meant that it was better that she die than live. She swoons, and the monk who was to do the wedding, believing her innocence, persuades her and those loyal to her to pretend to be dead. It all works out well in the end - but the central theme of honour and the place - or non-place - of women to negotiate their

own relationships resonated with what I'd been reading about honour killings. So I drew together a group of six women - three Muslim women, each with different experiences - one single; one divorced and remarried happily, the other in the middle of a second divorce; two Christian women - one married; one divorced and now single, and the other, an atheist, in a civil partnership with another woman. We had a fascinating discussion on the basis of the Shakespeare text - starting with how similar the play was to a Bollywood film! But touching also on all sorts of important matters to do with sexuality and relationship, parenting, employment, and engagement with our religious traditions as we explored what it means to be a woman in 21st Century Bradford. Many of the same methods were in place to build trust and friendship - so the conversation is safe enough to go in some depth into issues that matter, and the relationships endure. That's a very small scale example - and we're beginning to explore a proper SR group in Bradford for the Autumn - mainly Christians and Muslims - coming together to explore the themes of friendship, dignity, and hospitality.

Many of the same principles that lie behind SR can be seen in the initiative of **A Common Word Between Us and You** - the open letter, dated 13th October 2007, from leaders of the Muslim faith to leaders of the Christian faith. The letter calls for peace between Muslims and Christians and tries to work for common ground and understanding among both faiths based especially on the two main commandments: (1) love God; and (2) love one's neighbour. Just a few quotations from that letter:

"Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimising some of their formal differences—it is clear that the Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur'an, the Torah and the New Testament."

"Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders. Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace. With the terrible weaponry of the modern world; with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half of the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake."

"And to those who nevertheless relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, we say that our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony."

"So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill."

Conclusion

I think there's real signs of hope here - hope and excitement at the prospect of rich conversation. I want to finish with two main points:

Firstly, that the world needs the wisdom of our faiths - working together in ever-deepening dialogue - honouring our differences, but also seeking what we have in common. We need to be active interlocutors in creating an intercultural world - we can't afford for our voices, as people of faith, to be dismissed because we can't get our act together.

My second main point upon which I want to conclude is the real importance of friendship. And I guess that's where I'd begin to draw together the strands - particularly with regard to spiritual guidance and wisdom. I'm increasingly convinced that friendship offers the means for us to develop the trust required to be honest and brave about what it means to be human in the complex world in which we live. I want very briefly to turn to a Christian classic - written in the 12th Century, by a Cistercian monk who lived here in Yorkshire - at the great house of Rievaulx. Aelred wrote about spiritual friendship - how it needs to be rooted in God. He quotes from John's gospel: 'the one that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him', and goes on to stress that friendship can only really be for its own sake: 'For they have not

learned what friendship is who wishes any reward other than itself'. He argues that friendship is not about self-advantage or gain but about purity of intention - love and affection for the other - for its own sake. He wrote that 'the beginning of spiritual friendship ought to possess, first of all, purity of intention, the direction of reason and the restraint of moderation; and thus the very desire for such friendship, so sweet as it comes upon us, will presently make friendship itself a delight to experience... (84)

On the basis of growing, altruistic friendships between people of faith - friendship that can face and deal with differences, even disagreements - we can find our common ground in the God who draws us onwards towards a better world. Then we can engage much more credibly and meaningfully in the world of the 21st Century, contributing from the wisdom of our faith traditions real insight and spiritual guidance to a world hungry for people who are bothered.

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