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Introduction

When Marx and Engels surveyed 'the condition of the working class in England' (to quote the title of Engels's own work),[1] their anger was fierce. In *Das Kapital*, Marx made repeated use of reports and statistics describing those conditions. "We misconceive the nature of the communist appeal", wrote Lane Lancaster (p.165), "unless we understand that the moral impetus of that appeal came from the bitter indignation that Marx felt when he contemplated the injustice implied in these figures."

Both Marx and Engels recognised that religious people and religious institutions did much to alleviate the suffering involved in those conditions, but from that it follows (or so it seemed to them) that if the conditions are removed, so too is the need for religion. On that basis Marx arrived at his famous conclusion:

> Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opiate of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up the condition that requires illusions.[2]

The conditions in many parts of the world have changed, but religion has not disappeared. Can secularisation succeed where Marx and Mao failed? The problem in answering that question is that 'secularisation' is a pantechnicon word into which many different and sometimes contradictory meanings have been packed. The claim to secularism is made not just by militant atheists but also by some Christian theologians. In fact, secularisation is not a 'thing', an ideology, as some have suggested, "going about like a roaring lion" seeking what religions it can devour. Secularisation is a word of many meanings reflecting, amongst much else, massive changes in religious practices and

beliefs: they include a decline in some, but they also include a growth and an increase in others. 'Secularisation' is certainly not a simple process leading to the abolition of religion.

The abolition of religion, however, has remained very much on the agenda for those associated with people like Richard Dawkins and (in his time) Christopher Hitchens who regard religion as a stupid folly, an irrational survival from the infancy of the human race. As Hitchens put it succinctly (p.64), "Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody … had the smallest idea what was going on." It is not only stupid, in their opinion, but also dangerous: it is, they observe, religious believers who fly planes into high-rise buildings and who fight against us or each other in different parts of the world.

However, even if that were correct, it would still be immensely important to understand religions much better than most of us do, particularly if we have any interest in the survival of human life as we know it now. Religions can be extremely dangerous: there are among their adherents those who are prepared to kill and destroy with *religious* reasons for doing so. Bal Thackeray, for example, who died in 2012, founded Shiv Sena (Śiva's Army) to defend the integrity of Hindutva[3] against outsiders, initially Communists but later Muslims in particular. He spoke of Muslims as a cancer needing cutting out, and he advocated fighting fire with fire: "Islamic terrorism is growing and Hindu terrorism is the only way to counter it. We need suicide bomb squads to protect India and Hindus."

Or to take another example: the self-proclaimed Islamic State appealed to religious arguments derived from Quran and Hadith (authoritative traditions in Islam) to justify its legitimacy and actions, particularly in relation to the establishing of the Caliphate and its way of pursuing Jihad. Those arguments and the violent actions derived from them were rejected by many other Muslims on specifically religious grounds (i.e., with specifically religious arguments), not by secular denunciations of terrorism.

It is often said that it is not religion but the abuse of religion that does so much damage. For example, on its tenth anniversary, 9/11 was claimed by the speaker on the BBC 'Thought for the Day' to be the result of 'perverted religion gone wild'. The abuse and the exploitation of religion may well be involved, but in all religions there are also reasons and obligations *within the religions themselves* requiring believers to act in those ways in specific circumstances. When Skya analysed how Shinto ultranationalists were able to move Japan so decisively towards total war in Asia and the Pacific in the 1930s and 1940s, he emphasised the paramount importance of their religious beliefs (p.324):

> All of them were highly religious people – Shinto fundamentalists – and as such they believed in the core doctrines of Shinto ultranationalism: the divine descent and divinity of the living emperor; the divine origins of the Japanese ethnic group as against the divine natural evolutionary origins of man; and the divine source of political authority stemming from the ancestral deity Amaterasu Omikami. These doctrines were common to all Shinto ultranationalists as much as the crucifixion or resurrection of Jesus Christ is to Christians. Accordingly, for all these radical Shinto ultranationalist theorists, sovereignty resided in the emperor, and no human law was capable of restraining the sovereign emperor.

Beliefs of that kind become politically strong when they are organised into coherent systems. Juergensmeyer has shown how powerfully, since the Second World War, religious beliefs have driven demands for political independence and for the creation of "an indigenous form of religious politics free from the taint of Western culture". Among those beliefs in some particular cases are "the tendency to satanize the United States and to loathe Western civilisation, and the potential to become violent and intolerant".[4] That 'potentiality' now includes the possibility of being armed with weapons of indiscriminate or even mass destruction. For that reason alone we would be wise to understand what religions are and why they have been so important in human life and history. As I put it more than thirty years ago, and long before the invasion of Iraq (1982, p.66),

> The entanglement of religions in virtually all the intransigent problems which confront and threaten us means that we must become more serious in the ways in which we try to understand the power of religious belief both for evil and for good.... One of the most obvious reasons why we seem to drift from one disastrous ineptitude to another is, ironically, that far too few politicians have read Religious Studies at a University. As a result, they literally do not know what they are talking about on almost any of the major international issues. They simply cannot. It is time we began to educate ourselves, not just in economics, or in politics, or in technology, but also in the dynamics of religious belief and continuity, because whether we like it or not, it is religion which still matters more than anything else to most people alive today.

The threats posed by religions, or at least by some religious believers, are extremely real. As I also wrote at the time, if politicians wish to know where the next outbreaks of violence are likely to occur, they should draw on a map of the world the boundaries where religions meet. Iraq is only one example among many of our need to understand religions much more intelligently if

we are to have a better chance of living together, with perception and understanding, in a contested and demanding world.

Even so, the threats are *only part of the story*. There are other, far more positive reasons why it is important to understand religions: religions are the source and context of virtually all the achievements and discoveries which people have particularly valued, not just in the past but often still in the present. In this book it becomes clear what at least some of those many achievements and discoveries are. Without an understanding of religions, for example, it is impossible to understand the art of the world, and one chapter looks in more detail at why that is so. Even then it is only one example among many.

It is necessary, therefore, that the severe and often angry criticisms of religion made at the present time are taken seriously, accepting that those criticisms are important and often (though certainly not always) well founded. At the same time, however, it is equally important to see that those criticisms are too blinkered and narrow-minded to be convincing or to have much effect on religions because they fail to take account of the *achievements* of religions – as much in the present as in the past.

The way in which the criticisms and the achievements *belong together* creates the paradox of religions. If it were simply a matter of observing that religious believers do good things and bad things, it would be pointing out the obvious. The paradox arises from the way in which 'the good' may be the reason for at least some of the bad consequences. To give an example, a recent collection of essays has argued that religion does not cause terrorism. Much depends on how 'terrorism' is defined, but on almost any definition it is clear that religious believers do commit acts of violence and terrorism for reasons (sometimes commands) derived from their religion. Among those reasons is the perception that what is of truth and value (to them) in their religion must be defended.[5]

It is, therefore, the fundamental paradox of religions that *both* parts of the story belong together. Both are needed in any attempt to answer the questions of what religions are and of why they matter. What that means in practice we will see in a wide diversity of key areas ranging from genetics and neuroscience to art and ethics, from evolution and biology to philosophy and the miracle of human imagination.

My purpose, therefore, is to make clear why it is so important to understand religions, and to show through particular and extensive examples something of what the study and understanding of religions can involve. It is not possible to explore the examples in the detail they deserve, but they can at least illustrate the diversity of what is involved. It is indeed a basic part of the discipline of Religious Studies to show how the many different parts contribute to the whole.

In that context, there is an underlying focus and theme throughout the whole. It is to apply to the understanding of religion the recent recognition, particularly in the natural sciences, of the connection between cause and constraint.

That may well sound obscure and academic, but it is truly important and even revolutionary in its implications. When in the past people have tried to find the reasons why things happen or how things have come to be as they are or why people behave as they do, they have usually endeavoured to identify the simplest, basic cause. It is an endeavour often summarised as 'the principle of parsimony', or more briefly as Ockham's Razor (to be discussed in more detail later): it is the determination to cut out all superfluous or unlikely suggestions in order to accept the simplest explanation of the data. If, for example, it is claimed that the earth goes round the sun because it needs the exercise, it is wise to excise that as an explanation.

In recent years, however, it has been recognised (especially in physics and biology) that the attempt to identify and settle for a single basic cause can be misleading. That is so because complex behaviours, whether of particles or of people, are brought about, not only by immediate and proximate causes, but also by *networks of constraint* without which those particular complex behaviours could not occur.

The failure to recognise this led in the twentieth century to the widespread ambition of reductionism – the attempt, that is, to reduce complex behaviours to a single and basic cause. An example considered later in this book is the attempt to reduce 'mind' to underlying neural behaviours in the brain, and to reduce those to the behaviour of nerve cells and molecules. That, indeed, was Crick's "astonishing hypothesis" (p.3):

> 'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Caroll's Alice might have phrased it: 'You're nothing but a pack of neurons.'

That pursuit of reductionism even led Kendall to modernise the razor: "I wish to propound one principle which is, so to speak, a kind of Occam's *Electric* Razor: we should not invoke any entities or forces to explain mental phenomena if we can achieve an explanation in terms of a possible electronic computer" (Mackay, p.85).

The ambition of that principle cannot be achieved, and we will see different examples of its impossibility. Nevertheless, the reductionist 'quest for cause' continues and has led to what has become known as 'nothing buttery', the

now widespread belief that humans are 'nothing but' the most elementary of their constituent parts. But once it is recognised that the quest for cause has to be integrated with the consequences of constraint, it can be seen why that kind of reductionism is both misleading and false. One of the purposes of this book, therefore, is to apply that recognition of the connection between cause and constraint to the understanding of human beliefs and behaviours, including those that are identified as religious.

How that works out in practice is explored in the following chapters in many different ways. It may, therefore, be helpful to indicate the plan and the argument by giving a short summary of the chapters.

After this *Introduction*, Chapter 2 begins with the angry and often passionate criticism of religion and religions. It then explains what the paradox of religions is and how and why it arises, and it begins to show in outline why it is so important and indeed urgent for us to have a much better understanding of religions.

Chapter 3 recognises that today much of the current criticism of religion rests on the widespread assumption that it is science which leads to worthwhile truth in contrast to religion which leads to nonsense. So if we are trying at the present time to understand what religions are and why they matter, the engagement with the sciences in general and with genetics in particular is inevitable. That is so because of the extent to which many of those critics see it as their duty in the name of science to fight against religion. For them, the controlling metaphor of the relationship between science and religion is one of 'warfare'. As Steve Jones, a professor of genetics in London (whose report on the BBC coverage of science is discussed in Chapter 2) put it, 'the battle for your soul rages in your DNA'. On religion he commented (p.14):

> An odd business, religion, and not one – or so it appears – that has much to do with science. To me, it has always seemed no more than a bunch of silly old men in frocks squabbling, often murderously, about who has the best dress designer, but I accept that faith can add real purpose to some people's lives.

Chapter 3 begins by explaining why the model of 'the warfare between science and religion' is seriously wrong, in order to look in more detail at other legitimate ways in which sciences and religions are related. The chapter then illustrates how that can lead to far more constructive and creative understandings of that relationship.

Chapter 4 examines the claim that the conflict between science and religion is inevitable and necessary because religions rely on dogma whereas sciences insist on doubt until observation and evidence establish what is true; the contrast seems complete. But how accurate is that claim?

Chapter 5 recognises that several of those who attack religions in the style of aggressive warfare base their attack on their work in the field of genetics. Their account of religion rests on a belief that the relation of genetics to natural selection and evolution will provide a sufficient explanation of what religions are and why they have come into being. Genes, in their argument, cause and determine those outcomes in biology and culture (including religion) which will assist survival and replication. In that argument there are real strengths but also serious errors, one of which lies in the assumption that there are single causes of complex behaviours.

The error in that assumption leads in Chapter 6 to an examination of the relationship between causes and constraints without which it is impossible to understand human behaviour in general and religions in particular. To take an example from J.Z. Young (p.8), living organisms come into being in the context of invariant constraints (often known as laws) such as those of thermodynamics. Organisms do not create matter or energy and they resist the tendency to dissolution by appropriate expenditures of energy which they obtain from their environment. The constraints of thermodynamics explain many of their behaviours in search of food, but they cannot on their own explain the particular ways in which sustenance is sought, nor even why one food sustains and another does not. There are *additional* constraints that control a lion into its behaviours in pursuit of its prey, and they belong equally to the explanation of that behaviour.

Chapter 7 moves beyond the relationships between the sciences and religions. If we start with religions themselves, we have to begin by attending carefully to what the people involved in the religions believe and do, and that involves trying to understand what they are talking about and what they are actually saying. But that brings us to a basic and fundamental problem: the multitude of languages in the many different religions. Chapter 7 explores what this challenge of translation and interpretation involves in understanding religions.

Religious believers, however, do much more than talk and write. Chapter 8 begins from the point that much religious life is expressed non-verbally, in how people behave and in what they choose to do. Religions offer to people the resources, means and opportunities to live acceptable lives – acceptable, that is, within the tradition involved, and acceptable to the individual, family and social group concerned. In practice this involves 'the internalisation of constraint' leading (amongst much else) to the characterisation of individual lives and of society. Chapter 8 gives examples of what that means in ethics and in art.

Chapter 9 considers the importance in religions of symbols and rituals taking as an example religious understandings of death; it also considers

the challenges to those understandings at the present time. It does this with particular reference to ritual as a largely non-verbal way of sharing and expressing beliefs.

Chapter 10 returns to the claim in Chapter 2 that historically "religions are the context in which people began to explore the world around them and to share the consequences of their explorations." The chapter unpacks in more detail what that claim means in practice, and it suggests that religions can be helpfully understood as communities of shared imagination and shared exploration.

From that summary it will be clear that an underlying question throughout is the question of truth. Religions have been able to achieve so much because they are organised systems of ideas, beliefs and practices that have persisted and developed through time. Religions have taken many different forms, but at their heart is a common concern among humans to protect truths that they believe they have received from the past in order to pass them on to the next and subsequent generations.

What are those truths? And are they in fact true? Are they worth defending to the death, as some believe, or should they be confined to what is sometimes disparagingly called 'the dustbin of history'? Those questions lie at the heart of the study and understanding of religions.

In writing this book, I have drawn on my own work including parts of some lectures and articles from the past, but in all cases I have developed and changed them greatly, not least in correcting errors and misjudgements. Many errors surely remain and the process of correction (I hope) goes on. It is a recurrent theme in this book that our judgements usually have to be "approximate, provisional and corrigible", and may well turn out to be wrong, not least from the point of view of future generations. We urgently need each other to work together, not least in the way of correcting each other, if we are to make any progress in understanding religious beliefs and behaviours.

That point came home to me long ago when I was giving a lecture at Oxford. I was attempting to explain an implication of Gödel's theorem when I realised that I had got it wrong. I stopped and said, "I'm extremely sorry, but I've no idea what I'm talking about." A voice from the back said clearly, "That makes two of us." If we are learners together we have some chance of achieving a better understanding.

2

The paradox of religions

In the summer of 2008, *The Independent* ran a promotion to encourage the better understanding of religion. It was based on a series of short introductions to different religions (published by Oxford University Press) and on my *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. I was therefore invited to write two further 'short introductions' to the promotion.

I began these with a reminder of the trenchant and vigorous attacks on religion that were being made at the time by such people as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. The abolition of religion was once again on the agenda. So the questions in which *The Independent* was interested were these: what is the point of taking religions seriously, and why do we need to understand religions? After all, we no longer believe many of the false, not to say absurd, claims made by religions in the past. For example, we no longer believe that the world is balanced on a pile of turtles, or that the sun jumps into a chariot each morning and drives across the sky. Why take seriously the many other religious beliefs that belong to the pre-rational infancy of the human race? Crick's allusion (in the Introduction) to *Alice in Wonderland* may remind us of the White Queen's boast that sometimes she was able to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. Religious believers, so we are told by sceptics, multiply six by about six billion and believe them all the time.

So why is it important to understand religions? An immediate answer is that religions are deeply involved in many of the long-running and apparently insoluble conflicts around the world. We have seen this in recent years in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Bosnia, Kosovo and the Balkans, Chechnya and Dagestan, Palestine/Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Xizang/Tibet, Xinjiang/Uighur, the Punjab, Sri Lanka, Myanmar/Burma, Nigeria, Sudan and Darfur, Somalia and Eritrea, and now in the rise of the self-styled Islamic State. On 8 December 1992, *The Daily Telegraph*

published a cartoon depicting the feet of victims of violence in a morgue, with the tags of identity attached. But instead of the names of the people being written on the tags, the causes of their death were written instead: 'Killed by religious bigots, Bosnia'; 'Killed by religious bigots, N. Ireland'; 'Killed by religious bigots, India'; 'Killed by religious bigots, Iraq'; 'Killed by religious bigots, Azerbaijan'; 'Killed by religious bigots, Auschwitz'; 'Killed by religious bigots, Beirut'; 'Killed by religious bigots, Armenia'.

The recognition that religions are involved in so many dangerous and violent conflicts simply reinforces the attack on religions made by Dawkins, Hitchens and many others. Maybe, they say, we *should* understand the contribution religions make to conflict and terrorism, but then in addition we should never forget all the other damage that religions do: we might think, for example, of how they have treated women or those of whom they disapprove, such as homosexuals and each other. In his book, *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens listed evil things that religions have done – suppressing reason, promoting terrorism, creating "tempests of hatred, bigotry and blood lust"; men-dominated, they control or condemn whole categories of people such as women and homosexuals; they rely on revelations and keep on inventing them, and they condemn the wayward to the torments of everlasting punishment.

There is no doubt that it would be possible to make a much longer list of the evil consequences of religion, as indeed they are listed in many of my own books: one of them, from 1987, is called *Licensed Insanities: Religions and Belief in God in the Contemporary World*. But then we are left with a puzzle: if religions are so evil and so ridiculous, why have they not disappeared long ago? In fact, at the moment, most people alive (more than three-quarters of the world's population) belong to a religion, however much or little they do about it. So the questions persist: if religion does so much damage, why has it not (as H.L.Mencken used to ask[1]) "gone down the chute" long ago? Why do people continue to believe?

WHY RELIGIONS?

The familiar answers given are that people believe because religion consoles them (it is "the opiate of the people"), or because it is wishful thinking (life on earth is "nasty, brutish and short", so let's hope for something better after death), or because it offered pre-scientific explanations (God, not gravity), or because it is even bigger business than the arms trade (and imagine trying to get rid of that!).

To the question why religions persist, other answers are given in the many disciplines that study human behaviour from the individual to the social,