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Religious studies
—
some contradictions in
Mrs Thatcher's policies

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The modern study of religion has been substantially pioneered in this country at the University of Lancaster. By the modern study of religion I mean an approach which is crosscultural, open, empathetic, descriptive, theoretical and critical. It is a way of dealing with religions which greatly transcends the limited basis of mainline theology in Britain. Nevertheless, there are hardly any theology or divinity faculties in the U.K. which do not add religious studies to their traditional offerings. We in Lancaster can take some of the credit for this, in stimulating competition with our popular and wide-ranging courses. I believe that our approach is suited to the modern world for a number of reasons, which I shall come to.

Meanwhile, I should explain my title. I see the government's policies as at variance with our ideals in some important ways. Mrs Thatcher's value commitments contain contradictions which are very relevant to my argument. I do not want to say that her outlook is thoroughly misguided. Indeed, there is here and there a libertarian aspect to her work: and her achievements in freeing up the British economy contain some admirable results. It is where her policies are contrary to a liberal perspective that there are problems for universities and for religious studies in particular.

The first contradiction I address is her strong nationalism, evident both in her leadership during the war with Argentina and in her quarrels with Brussels, which is inconsistent with the underlying nature of modern economic relations. The fact is that whereas once nationalism accompanied the growth of capitalism, providing chunks of relatively homogeneous populations and territories large enough to mount the new industrial enterprises, now we are knit together in a much tighter global economy.

Princess Diana can wear an ostrich feather one day and send up the profits in ostrich farms in Southern Africa the next day; and gold prices in Hong Kong will affect the City of London instantly. Moreover, most of the great corporations are now transnational. Rapid transport has meant that many citizens migrate from their country to others: and virtually all the Western world is multicultural. There are Pakistanis in Bradford; Algerians in Bar-le-Duc; Italians in Zurich; Polynesians in Auckland; Vietnamese in Los Angeles; Turks in Berlin; Kazakhs in Moscow; Greeks in Melbourne; Indonesians in Holland; Hindus in Malibu; Buddhists in San Francisco; Sikhs in Montreal; Muslims in Munich; Bahai in Illinois; Kimbanguists in Brussels; the Santeria in New York; and so forth. The 'purity' of nations is breached. Everywhere there is plurality. In such circumstances, the old nationalism is obsolescent.

The study of religion is necessarily crosscultural and plural. This is so for theoretical reasons and matters of principle: but it rings a powerful popular bell. For theoretical reasons, because the understanding of religions is greatly increased by the comparative method. Devotional religion, for instances, has its patterns and analogies, whether we look to Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, South Indian bhakti or Christian Methodism. The study of religion is plural for reasons of principle, because the selection of any one tradition as the key would be arbitrary. It is true that by tradition England is Anglican, and it is not surprising if thirty years ago virtually all the chairs in theology were held by Anglicans. Syllabuses were predicated on Anglican premisses. When I went to the H.G. Wood Chair in Birmingham in 1961 students' time was devoted to texts, languages and events up to the Council of Chalcedon in the mid Fifth Century C.E., plus a study of the

Thirty-Nine Articles or a band of Reformation history. It seems to me not only was such a constriction of subject matter absurd educationally but also contrary to principles of justice. Of that I shall speak more anon.

Because the study of religion is crosscultural and plural it is transnational. It is thus liable to run into some conflict with a nationalistically conceived syllabus, which is typical of the way history is taught in our schools. The chief reason, in the modern nation-State, why history is taught in schools is to imbue the young with the national myth. This is no doubt why, in 1066 and All That, history came to a full stop once America became top dog. Even if history is presented scientifically, the selection of events is non-scientific. The British do British history, the Chinese Chinese history, the Americans American history and so on. Now I do not say that all this is wrong: but it should be balanced by a different slant, and ideally by world history. For we are citizens of the globe: our obligations are to humanity as well as to our fellow citizens. So history too should be taught crossculturally. This becomes pragmatically the more vital when we consider the plural character of our cities. Similar remarks apply to literature, and art, and music.

Both modern economic and cultural conditions dictate a world approach, and this is in contradiction with narrowly nationalist attitudes. Patriotism has to be softened. And this is where I perceive a contradiction in Mrs Thatcher's policies, between her free trade economics and her nationalist sensibilities. This is reinforced by the actual consequences of her educational changes. The net effect of the restructuring of the last decade has been to return to more traditional ways of doing things: to go back to the

single honours degree, to reduce the number of foreign languages taught in many institutions, to reinforce culturally tribal modes of syllabus-building - at least in the humanities and social sciences.

I am not seeking to paint an ideal picture of pre-Thatcher universities. As being involved in pioneering a multidisciplinary religious studies programme here, together with my colleagues, I was amazed at how, in a new university, departments could arise which were deeply traditional. It seems to me that new campuses are a place for lovely new experiments, and an updating of the structures of knowledge. I was therefore already critical of the stuffiness of many university courses in the human sciences. Some aspects of the new shake-up are productive. Nevertheless, there is a certain fallacy in the flavour of the Thatcher revolution: it is the taste of the banausic and of immediate economic relevance. It is as if the worth of a subject is its short-term contribution to the GNP.

Now I do not deny that something is to be said about GNP. Indeed I recently wrote an article for a Japanese journal exhibiting the relevance of the modern study of religion to business studies. But there is merit in indirection, for two reasons. First, education is more than a way into usefulness. It involves cultivation of human quests and interests. Second, direct relevance may tend to be self-defeating. It may be superficial, and it may lack theoretical creativity. This is why in universities we do research, for both these reasons. There is not an instant way, for instance, to get to know about Indian culture: the salesperson cannot have some foolproof Berlitz pocketbook which will guide his or her actions and sensibilities among Brahmins and in Bombay.

I hear that Sir Keith Joseph, dining at All Souls and finding himself beside Professor B.K. Matilal, the distinguished occupant of the Chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics, and a fine exponent and interpreter of Indian philosophy, asked him what the importance of teaching Indian philosophy might be. The implication was that the enterprise might well be nugatory. I do not know how Matilal replied. But I know what I would have said. It would have been this: "Sir Keith, I am surprised that you even ask such a question. Do you not realise that India is one of our most important trading partners? Its population is over 700 million, of whom the greatest number are Hindus. It is modernizing rapidly. The opportunities for British business are immense. You do not imagine, I suppose, that you can understand Indian traditions and ways of doing things without some knowledge of Indian philosophy. Why, it is one of the most vital areas in the curriculum, and will yield much more benefit in the short run than studying A.J. Ayer, Donald Davidson and Robert Nozick".

But the interest in Indian philosophy is mostly intrinsic: you study it because you are interested in issues debated by Ayer, Davidson and Nozick: or because you want to understand the Hindu and Buddhist worldviews: or because you are in love with Indian motifs; or because of all of these seductions. Hence, the call of education is intrinsic as well as utilitarian.

This is partly why national governments have subsidized higher education. It is why California, Wisconsin, Virginia and other States have created huge and vital universities. It looks as if Mrs Thatcher is trying to privatize all our campuses. While I do not object to the stimulus of more entrepreneurial activity, I remind the government that State higher education is a natural

activity of successful capitalist nations. But apart from that, there is a proper use of patriotism, and that is the provision of facilities for citizens. So both the rather narrow nationalism of Mrs Thatcher's outlook and her excessive emphasis upon usefulness involve long-term contradictions in the modern world. I now turn to a third problem.

Religious Studies is, as I have said, crosscultural. Its scope includes world religions. It is the logical way to explore religion in the secular university. By 'secular' here I mean 'pluralistic'. It is part of the logic of the university that it should be open to truth. Patet omnibus veritas, as our motto here in Lancaster declares. But many of our universities in Britain entrench a part of the Christian tradition. This goes back to the fact that over a number of centuries, one form of Christianity or another was the official ideology of the realm. You could not in England get higher education, indeed, unless you affirmed the Thirty-Nine Articles. By ironic coincidence I was a member of the Church of England's Commission on Christian Doctrine, in which the Archbishops set us as our first task the formulation of an oath for priests which would get around those articles. We did so by adding among other things that the intending priest should affirm his loyalty to the values exhibited in the lives and work of the Church's saints and - wait for it - scholars! Actually the Church of England is relatively nice and tolerant, and mostly has been. This is the side of its heritage which I would stress. But it is still established: and this is a powerful confusion which muddles the minds of many of our fellow-citizens. Establishment is no longer proper. Our country is a democracy and pluralistic in belief and practice. And as I have said, the logic of the university is liberal and open. There once was a faculty member at

this university who quite improperly excluded males from a course in women's studies. We would be upset if a Marxist was excluded, or insisted upon, for an appointment. The liberal cannot shut out non-liberal positions, but he should preserve the plural milieu. In religion, the university must take cognizance of all faiths and none. When my chair was advertised it was said to be open to a person of any faith or more. Quite right, despite one or two incensed letters to the Times newspaper.

All this is related to education. Religion is too important a force to be left out of the study of human affairs. Moreover non-religious worldviews, such as East German Marxism and various nationalisms, often have the power and shape of religions, and should be included in the general study of symbolic systems. So its study should not be shut out (as it sometimes is in academe, because people fear denominational preaching in the guise of objective teaching). But it should be treated in a plural way, of course. And this conclusion is reinforced by the fact that in Britain we have many atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and so on, as well as Christians. We have from yore the Jewish community: and I am proud that here in Lancaster we set up an unprecedented post to teach Judaism as a living religion (and have been followed in Kent and Manchester and London, at least). Of course more traditional Jewish studies have long existed, as in University College London's excellent department. So: we have in Britain a plural society, committed to mutual tolerance. It is this tolerance and a willingness to explore spiritual values which characterizes the true ideology of our democracy, and indeed of any democracy. This is not a Christian country. It is a country in which forms of Christianity are the most important religious ingredient: but that is something rather different.

Of course, Mrs Thatcher may toy with the idea of disestablishment. The Church of England was supposed to be the Tory Part at prayer, but has turned out to be more like social democracy at prayer. It is a wonder that communion is not offered in wine and cheese. The Church contains bishops who do not do the right thing, which is to believe the correct things continuously, even during sleep. The weakness of course of the Church is that many lay people have never heard of liberal Christianity, that great invention of 19th Century Protestantism and recently embraced by the Roman Catholic Church (except for the Pope and some others). Anglicanism was always a bit secretive, so as not to rock the boat. Anyway, the picture of the Church of England in Mrs Thatcher's Methodist mind is not pleasing. It might be tempting to privatize it. Nevertheless, as her address to the less turbulent Kirk indicates, she still harbours a belief that the religion of our country is Christianity. Christian values are to be inculcated, as a backdrop to moral grit and a sense of responsibility. She may like the effects of yuppies, but she wishes that they had more conscience. But there are problems in presenting Christianity as the framework for moral regeneration. What is the point of Bernard Williams, recently alas lost to Berkeley, if we have to drag in faith to prop up morals? And what about Muslims and all the others? Yet if not Christianity, then what? Do we need to invent a synthetic world faith, or some vague belief in God, as the Indonesian government has done? (I refer to their ideological theism as expressed in the Pancha Shila). To answer this question, let me make a digression into the philosophy of religion.

As is well known, there have been attempts to prove the existence of God, but all such tries are controversial. Indeed any proofs of a religion or ideology are equally open to debate, unless of course

you first accept some premisses from within a worldview. If you accept the Qur'an you can prove certain things. But what is the proof that the Qur'an is the word of Allah? Well, it is splendid in style and profound in message: its Arabic reverberates with the numinous: how could you expect an illiterate trader like the Prophet to make it up? Well, this is a good argument, but it is scarcely a proof - perhaps the Prophet was a kind of Mozart of numinous poetry. So you cannot expect proof of any worldview, though you can have reasons for believing one. Richard Swinburne has reasons for believing in Christianity; and the Aytollah Montazeri has reasons for faith in Islam. A.J. Ayer has reasons for his logical atheism; and Hilary Putman for his adherence to Judaism. It seems to me incontrovertible that all worldviews are open to question and debate. It is true that a scientific world picture may gell from time to time, and some conclusions seem irreversible - the scale of our universe, for instance. Some paradigms, to use a fashionable word, take a grip on our imagination, such as the evolutionary model (though we are doubtless in for surprises about how it works). But these pictures and paradigms are only a part of wider collages which make up worldviews. You can if you wish be a scientistic humanist, but you may reach 'beyond' this universe. There remain possibilities in Marxist ideology, despite its recent fading. In brief, we cannot dogmatically assert any one worldview to be established. The philosophy of religion, or more properly the philosophy of worldviews, takes cognizance of this situation, and reflects about criteria. Some of these may be internal to a worldview. Some go so far as to consider worldviews to be incommensurable. On such a view (represented by Wittgensteinian fideism) you can only understand a faith by belonging or a culture by being part of it. This makes exclusivity even more acutely inappropriate. So in any

case, a worldview is not publicly provable. So much for my excursion into the philosophy of religions and worldviews.

It is I believe a principle of education that you should, where there is doubt, point out alternatives. One of the criteria by which students at the University of California evaluate lecture courses is expressed in the question of whether the instructor presents alternative points of view. I believe this is right. Moreover, there is a main objective in teaching: to induce a critical attitude on the part of students. It follows directly from all this that the study of religion should be plural in scope. And this matches a set of values that ought to inform our society, I believe.

That set of values arises from the notions of toleration and criticism which should characterize a democracy (I blend here Gandhi and Popper, and could add as seasoning some of the heroes of the comparative study of religion, such as Brede Christensen, and in this country two of our honorary graduates at Lancaster, the deceased R.C. Zaehner and the venerable Geoffrey Parrinder). I would like to develop some thoughts in ethics on the basis of these values. Relying on the Christian and Buddhist traditions, one might say that humans' problems are based (Christian-wise) on pride, and (Buddhist-wise) on greed, hatred and delusion. I shall boil these down to pride and delusion. Because we recognize that we are so often wrong in judgment and do and believe such silly things, as we struggle, through science and humane education, to rise up from the slough of delusion, we should be reinforced in our conviction of the unprovability of our deeper values and worldviews. The cure in part is glasnost, openness. I count myself a glasnostic. This implies toleration of other ways of

thinking and living. This does not mean that we should not be passionate in what we believe. For instance I am a passionate proponent of religious studies and social democracy among other things. But other points of view represent a challenge to us, and insofar as we are partly constituted by our existential beliefs alternatives can seem like insults, if we are not careful. This is where we need to be self-confident and serene, and not become violently upset. Such upsets are the products of pride. I can understand, though I do not finally approve, those who get so upset with pornography or Salman Rushdie that they reach out to violent talk. How to combine passion in commitment with serenity in attitude is a vital conundrum we have to solve. Part of toleration is to have some understanding of the other person's point of view, and this requires informed empathy. This is a cardinal element in the very methodology of the comparative study of religion.

It is also a vital ingredient in all education. Thus with regard to genders, males need informed empathy into what it is like to be a female; and conversely. With regard to ethnicity, we need the same thing; and so too with individual relationships. It is an aspect of the educational process often neglected. And, as I say, it is something well recognized in religious studies.

Already we have seen some other values flowing from toleration and criticism: notably the need for self-confidence or serenity, and empathy. Moreover, in order to soften the personalism of the critical mode, we need to be courteous. I think here the Confucian ethos in relation to ceremonial or performatives has something vital to teach us. In parliament we have certain formulae such as the use of the adjective 'honourable'; and we have the Speaker there to shut out mere abuse. Such mechanisms of action are

important in relation to varying worldviews. Though I defend Salman Rushdie's right to write more or less whatever he likes, he was ethically questionable in penning such provocative and discourteous sentiments. But those who are outraged by his words are also greatly to blame, for lack of serenity and self-confidence. It takes two to make an outrage. And it is better to err on the side of the outrager, because outrage too easily happens, because of human pride and delusion.

A society that emphasizes toleration, serenity and informed empathy, together with critical attitudes, has already a fine ethic in place, it seems to me. It is compatible with all worldviews, save those which build in fanaticism. It might be held that it softens commitment, and may rule out some forms of what is of ten called fundamentalism (though I do not like its wide usage). I do not myself think that faith in some value or God is at all ruled out by public uncertainty: indeed faith implies some doubtfulness. Even those faiths which are held fanatically can get let us say eighty per cent of all they want in a tolerant society, and if everybody gets eighty per cent and nobody ten per cent that is better than an intolerant society in which the top ideology gets one hundred per cent and all the others ten per cent, or even no per cent.

It might be objected that my liberalism here is itself a worldview or part of a worldview, and is claiming a hundred per cent validity. I believe indeed that it is a condition for scientific enquiry, university work, the proper pursuit of truth, and so forth, among other things. I would struggle strongly to maintain it. I think that it gives humanity a much better deal than any other system. And I consider that it is remarkably generous to

Marxists and others who might hold alternative opinions. So I stand by my glasnoticism.

This ethic seems to me different in spirit from the quasi-Christian values expressed by Mrs Thatcher in Scotland. It is missing an ingredient, though, which is important in any society: compassion. I take it that that is something which she wishes to express, though she often seems to think of it as a privatized virtue. I believe that it is something which we have learned, through socialist pressures, to reckon a public blessing. Like education, compassion is something which can best be done, for the most part, on a public basis.

There is, then, a contradiction between Mrs Thatcher's free trade and market values and her espousal of a national ideology which leaves Christian establishment in place. Although the chief arguments for doing Religious Studies especially at a new university are academic and rational, the political consequences of seeing the world in a Religious Studies way are profound. Politically its direction is both liberal and transnational.

If we wish, therefore, to teach British history creatively, we should emphasize the progress towards openness, criticism and democracy which we have made: and indeed towards internationalism. We do not want to stick to utter tradition, but to find in tradition modern values. The relative inner toleration of Anglicanism should be seen to culminate in self-effacement in the future, in disestablishment. The rise of science, the reception of refugees, the toleration of other religions in modern times, the freedom of the press and television - such values are there in our history.

Finally, though, we should get back to the intellectual meaning of the study of religion. There has in the past been, among many intellectuals, an undervaluing of religions and symbolic values in human history and society. This was partly because many academics, rejecting religion, thought that it was unimportant. This is the fallacy of ascribing to others your own values, which rarely works. In last decades a different picture has presented itself. The sixties saw a Western revival in spiritual values, particularly Eastern and unorthodox ones. The recent histories of Israel, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, India, Iran, Sri Lanka and Poland, to mention a few countries, indicates something of the remaining vitality of religions. When we look more generally to worldviews, both religious and non-religious, we see that symbolic ideas continue to play a vital part in world affairs. A revolution, for instance, is the consequence of an uprising waving its head, and the head has to be filled with some structured values. I talked lately with some students in Tienanmen Square in Beijing: and they expressed a new kind of democratic and liberal Marxism, which was a picture in their heads to guide their protests and fuel their determination. Though economic concerns drove many of the protesters from behind, their uprising would be a mere bread riot without some perception of a worldview which their society could incorporate. It is here that the study of religion can importantly contribute to an understanding of the role of symbols and rituals in our world and in history. Let me therefore finish with a favourite topic of mine: how to regard the religious dimensions of nationalism, and how thus to contribute a little to analysing this most important of modern political and spiritual phenomena.

I used to analyse a religion through a list of six dimensions, but in a recent book, The World's Religions (Cambridge, 1989), I added

a seventh - what I call the material dimension. The dimensions are as follows. First, there is the ritual or practical dimension. A religion typically involves practices, such as worship, meditation, going on pilgrimage. Second, there is the experiential or emotional dimension: it involves experiences such as conversion, fear, joy and so on. Third, there are doctrines, such as those of non-self, the Trinity and Advaitin non-dualism. Fourth, there is the mythic or narrative dimension, such as the stories of Krishna, Christ and creation. Fifth, there is an ethical or legal dimension, such as the Torah, the five precepts and Hindu dharma. Sixth, there is the social or organizational dimension, such as the Church, the Sangha, the Islamic community and so on. Finally, there is the seventh or material dimension, namely the architectural and other material adjuncts of religious practice, such as the mosques of Isfahan, stupas, ikons and incense sticks.

A comparison between religions and modern forms of nationalism reveals striking analogies. First, there are the rituals of patriotism - laying wreaths at the Cenotaph, standing for the national anthem, the Queen's activities, tourism to significant places such as Westminster Abbey and Stratford, watching military parades, studying the canon of famous English writers and so on. Second, there are appropriate emotions - such as prideful joy when the British recaptured the Falkland Islands, when England beat Germany at football, nostalgia when abroad and emotions when listening to Elgar. Third, there are vague doctrines about what Britain stands for (but I shall return to this point). Fourth, there is the narrative of successful British history, which helps to give us a sense of identity. Such a narrative also includes reference to the 'saints' and heroes of our tradition, such as generals, poets, musicians and so forth: such as Nelson,

Wellington, Henry the Fifth, Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, Elgar, Benjamin Britten, Constable, Turner and so on. There is Churchill, a pugnacious and potent modern symbol of British courage. These are our ancestors. Fifth, there are the ethics of being a good citizen, paying taxes, raising families, being ready to go to war and so on. Sixth, there is the social dimension - the citizenry, and the priesthood - the school teachers who inculcate the myth and ethics; the military, important for the rituals; the Royal Family, symbolizing the national entity; and so on. Seventh, there is the hardware: the flag, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, the terrain of Britain, so dear and beautiful, and so on.

Characteristically, nations are weak on doctrine. The thesis that each nation should have its freedom, meaning a sovereign State, is vital, but thin. Considering that nations demand great sacrifices, such as paying large taxes and, above all, willingness to face death in the military, the ideology underpinning nationalism needs to be strengthened. National altruism needs reinforcing. The Nazi ideology, mainly saying "We are Aryans, so we are entitled to trample on others, especially the poisonous Jews" has a dread simplicity about it. Other nationalisms have typically required something which sounds nobler; such as Maoism as an ideology for Chinese reconstruction, Marxism-Leninism in East Germany and democratic capitalism in the United States. Britain fought World War II under the banners of democracy and Christian civilization. So usually the doctrinal dimensions needs strengthening through some deeper ideology, typically inconsistent in the last resort with nationalist chauvinism and exclusivism.

I offer these remarks as the beginning of analyses which are relevant to the recent history of nationalisms. Often the

question of fashioning an ideology is vital to the pursuit of independence in the colonial and post-colonial - consider India's Neo-Hindu ideology as expressed through Gandhi and Vivekananda; Chinese Marxism adapted by Mao Zedong; Japanese State Shinto blended with Western constitutional values; Iran's Neo-Shi'a; Turkey's secularism; and so on.

I think therefore that Religious Studies can make an important contribution to academic life (and even to business studies). I think that it can also have implications of a profound ethical and political nature. I think that it is a necessary way of studying religion in today's plural society. It is a wonderful subject. I thank the University of Lancaster for having given me, not just fine and remarkable colleagues, but also the opportunity to develop some of these ideas. It happens that near to sixty of our graduates are teaching world wide in institutions of higher education, so that we have had some not negligible global influence; and many more are engaged in education here in Britain, and so play some part in the moulding of younger generations. It has been a privilege to work here, and I hope that the University will continue to nourish the Department as one of the pearls in its diadem.