

THEOLOGY TODAY

A Newsletter from the Institute of Anglican Studies at St George's Cathedral, Perth
~ committed to building up a well-informed and thinking Anglican Community.

ISSUE 4 ~ JUNE 2010

MANY FAITHS, MANY CULTURES

These themes are certainly flavours of the month in June 2010. At St George's Cathedral, Perth, a series of four evening programmes on Christianity and Other World Religions is in full swing. On the national scene, as *Theology Today* reported in March, expected population growth in Australia is causing some anxiety about the clash of cultures and religions that increased immigration will almost certainly bring about. At the level of our Anglican Diocese of Perth, both themes are finding expression.

Other Cultures

A Multicultural Ministry Commission has just been launched at a "banquet of song, story, food and fellowship". Held at St Mary's, West Perth, on 6 June, this Christian celebration was expressed in "a Service of Light" before participants enjoyed the blessings of the various cultures represented.

Other Religions

Many new arrivals in Australia will be followers of other faith traditions and many, perhaps the majority, of Australians know little about other world religions.

The Institute of Anglican Studies has broadened its perspective to include in this year's programme a series of four lectures entitled Christianity and Other World Religions. These lectures are taking place on four Wednesdays at 7.30pm in St George's Cathedral, Perth. The series began with a lecture on Hinduism on 26 May, followed by Buddhism (2 June), Islam (9 June) and finally Judaism on 16 June.



Dr Olav Fykse Tveit - call for compassion

Each lecture describes a particular world faith, followed by comment on the differences and commonalities between that particular faith and Christianity. The aim is to begin to discern possible ways of joint service by people of faith to the Australian community. All are welcome.

One World - One Humanity

The aim of all the above is to encourage acceptance of different cultures and respect for one another's faith tradition. The great need today is for compassion for those in need -

the goal of the World Parliament of Religions held in Melbourne in December 2009. It happens that this was the overriding theme of the Kirchentag (German Church Convention) in Munich.

Religion and Compassion

This year's Kirchentag was celebrated ecumenically for the second time, organised by Protestant and Catholic lay movements, and attracted an impressive 125,000 participants.

Taking place from 12-16 May, it featured Muslim scholar Dr Ataulah Siddiqui and the Reverend Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. The former argued that what really mattered is human concern for the poor and needy. The latter claimed that because God was compassionate, God therefore asks people to be compassionate. All human beings, he said, had a common calling to live according to God's will in God's land.

Siddiqui and Tveit jointly conducted a dialogue on the text of the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31-46 - a passage often referred to as "the judgment on the nations".

For Tveit the text did not intend to speculate "about scenarios for the future", but rather to "express critical, sometimes surprising perspectives on our life here and now". It tells the reader that what is required here and now is "spontaneous attention to the basic need of another human being". The criterion, according to Tveit, is to live as Jesus Christ did, sometimes even against some religious rules, for the sake of humanity. Christ alone is the criterion for the real life of a human being created in God's image, he said.

For Siddiqui, the text does not only challenge Christians. If, as the message of the text has it, human dignity cannot be compromised, there is need for "co-witnessing" - Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths all need to stand together. And for that to happen, Siddiqui said, "we need respectful, hospitable theologies". He stressed the need to "recognise and appreciate the otherness of the other".

The Right Reverend Brian Kyme, Director, Institute of Anglican Studies

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WHAT ABOUT THEOLOGY?



Dr Keith Rayner

Demonstrators outside the venue of the World Parliament of Religions held up placards proclaiming, "Jesus is the only way." The German Jesuit theologian Keith Rayner spoke of anonymous Christians: people who are drawn to God through Jesus Christ even though they may not know his name. This theme was developed by theologian Dr Keith Rayner during a Synod Charge when he was Archbishop of Melbourne.

Each year I like to have a session with the senior students of some of our schools. I usually speak for a few minutes to break the ice and then encourage them to respond and ask their questions. One question almost always crops up: "What happens to people of other faiths when they die?"

The question could be asked in other ways. "Is Christianity true and all other religions false?" Or, "Can you be saved without faith in Jesus Christ?" They are really the same question, and it is a very important one. In my experience those who ask it rarely do so maliciously or as a trap. They are genuinely puzzled...

Our Anglican position is that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation". But this means more than bringing out the odd text which automatically clinches the argument. It means seeing passages in context, weighing one passage with another, and in short seeking to grasp the thrust of scripture as a whole.

Clearly we must take in the utmost seriousness the words of our Lord as recorded in St John's Gospel: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Nor does that definite statement stand alone. Think of Peter's defiant words to the high priest's council after the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." There is no doubt that these passages accurately reflect the thrust of the New Testament that Jesus Christ is uniquely Son of God and Saviour of the world...

The Gospels fill in our knowledge of Jesus, the man from Nazareth. We read of his birth of the Virgin Mary, his teaching and living of divine truth, his healing the sick in body, mind and spirit, his innocent suffering and death, his resurrection and ascension. But the Gospels speak of more than the man from Nazareth. John speaks of him as the Word, present at the beginning with God, and active as the agent of creation: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." That is a startling claim! ... In Ephesians something more is added, that it is God's purpose to gather up all things in him (i.e. Christ), "things in heaven and things on earth".

I have quoted these passages to remind you that the Word of God, the Son of God, the Christ who was made flesh in Jesus, son of Mary, is present in all creation. In him all things hold together. He gathers up all things from the beginning of time. He is also present in the created world, even where the name of Jesus has never yet been heard, and wherever he is, he is active in his work of revelation and salvation...

This means that when the church proclaims Christ among people to whom his name has not been known, we are not taking Christ there for the first time. He is there before us. He is there already in the culture and in the religion of the people to whom we go. He is not known by name. The understanding of his truth among those people will be incomplete, perhaps grossly distorted. But there will be truth; and there will be people who have responded to the light of such truth as they know in remarkable ways. There will be holy people, wise people, people whose lives show the marks of Christ. Whatever is good and wholesome in these people is the work of Christ, even though they do not know him yet by name.

Dr Keith Rayner

WHERE DO WE END UP?

A sermon preached by the Dean of Perth, the Very Reverend Dr John Shepherd, suggested that religions are different streams leading to a single sea. Dr Shepherd maintains that a final, perfect human expression of the reality of God will always prove frustratingly elusive.



Dr John Shepherd

I once invited the Abbot of the Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery in Perth to preach at a Eucharist in St George's Cathedral. During Communion representatives of the Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Bahá'í faiths read passages from their sacred writings, and after Communion an Aboriginal reader offered a dream-time reflection.

Outside the Cathedral a group of people stood in protest, holding placards. The largest placard displayed the text, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." It was meant as condemnation. The Christian witness was being compromised.

It may be possible, however, to attribute a more generous interpretation to this text (John 14:6). Could it be that what is being said here, as with all the other "I am" sayings in the fourth Gospel, is that the way, the truth, and the life is a person, and that no one can come to the Father without being united to Christ "as a person". It is as person that we are to experience God, with all the richness and diversity that personal engagement implies.

So the writer has Jesus say "I am the bread", meaning: It is I, Christ, who is the bread. I, Jesus, the person - I am the bread of life. You want to find the bread of life? Then you will find it in me. Not in the rules of the Temple, or in the religious laws of the scribes and Pharisees, however laudable they may be. Not in dogmatic statements established by religious institutions, however impressive. To experience the life of God, you need to relate to me as a person.

It is Christ as person who is the bread, the light, the door, the vine, the carer (the good shepherd), the way, the truth, the life.

Eliciting dogma from religious experience is all well and good. But it is not what comes first. At first, there was Jesus. Then there was the Church, with its emerging doctrines, trying to keep pace with the continuing divine revelation in the world.

Of course the Church is integral to faith, but its attempts to codify its collective experience of the living Christ will always be partial, always developing. A final, perfect human expression of the reality of God will always prove frustratingly elusive.

Perhaps appreciating this point, the writer of John's Gospel emphasises the importance of staying focused on a living, humane relationship with the person of the risen Christ. And it was in that person that salvation was to be experienced. The way, the truth and the life of Jesus.

The implication that this verse is a gate-keeping verse, intended to negate the authenticity of other faiths and endorse a policy of divine exclusivity is difficult to substantiate.

The Christian position is that it is in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ that God is ultimately to be known. But this belief ought not to imply a denial of any truth in other traditions. That would be a grave presumption, for we would be imposing our own restrictions upon the scope of divine revelation.

We are all moving towards what we hope is a clearer appreciation of that which we call God. We come from different religious and cultural backgrounds and experiences, and we have been inspired by different revelations. And we all have our own tradition of worship - our own perception of a passage to God. The extent to which we find ourselves able to identify with the traditions of other faiths will vary. But this is not the point. The point is that we need increasingly to understand each other's traditions, and to be appreciative of each other's rites of passage.

Of course we spend most of our time paddling along our own streams. And that is only natural. Yet it is equally natural that we should regard our fellow travellers, who are just as surely paddling along other streams, with sensitivity and respect, and to acknowledge each other's journey as a legitimate passage to God.

For ultimately all our streams, about which we can become so obsessive and insular, will empty out into nothing other than the one large sea - the one heart of the one God.

In the words of George Appleton, a former Archbishop of Perth, we are "to stand together before the mystery of the final Reality to whom or to which we give differing names, so great and deep and eternal that we can never fully understand or grasp the mystery of His Being".

Dr John Shepherd

LIGHT FROM THE EAST

The mandala, beloved of Tibetan Buddhists, is a circular figure symbolising the universe. Simon Keyes, Director of St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, London, considers how a non-Buddhist might approach this religious symbol.



1. **A world in a grain of sand:** From a Keatsian stance - "Beauty is truth, truth beauty..." - the colour and elegance of the mandala are God-given qualities that please and uplift us. Kandinsky and Rothko show that we can find a spiritual meaning in abstraction, and we can approach these patterned lines of sand in the same spirit. Simone Weil, ever the mystic provocateur, puts the spiritual case for beauty even more strongly: "The beauty of the world is almost the only way in which we can allow God to penetrate us," she says.

Approach the mandala with a sense of wonder and we may see a new aspect of the divine creation.

2. **Symbols of the unconscious:** For Jung, a mandala is a powerful spiritual metaphor of universal relevance. Our "spiritual journey" is, he suggests, not linear but a "circumambulation around the Self". The maze-like mandala, with its complex symmetry of squared circles, symbolises this. These patterns intrigue us and are strangely satisfying to observe. Jung suggests that this is because they produce an echo in our unconscious which reveals that deep down we have an intuitive awareness of the essential order and inter-connectedness of things. Doodle for a few minutes and I bet you'll soon see geometric patterns emerge.

3. **Companions in compassion:** The central theme of the chenrezig mandala which the monks will build for us is compassion. As Karen Armstrong is busy pointing out, this is a concept also at the heart of most other religious traditions including (particularly?) Christianity. I am curious to see whether the mandala can transcend its specific Tibetan cultural pedigree and speak to us about something in which we share a deep-seated common interest. The patient craftsmanship of the monks is an astonishing thing to witness, as is their seriousness of purpose and their contemplative discipline.

We can share neither their task nor prayers, but this need not be a barrier to spiritual companionship. With such a powerful shared ethos between us I feel sure the rhythm of their daily meditation practices will have an effect on us. I hope it will strengthen our commitment to our own prayer and enable us to renew it in shared silence with them.

4. **God of surprises:** I have always been struck by the honesty with which that great reviver of the Christian monastic tradition, Thomas Merton, acknowledged that his deepest spiritual experience happened not in his Kentucky cloister but on the other side of the world, in front of the great Buddhas of Polonnaruwa (Sri Lanka).

"I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious."

We never know when God will speak to us, but it's clear from the Bible that it is usually from an unexpected place. Christian scripture doesn't say much about sand mandalas or even Buddhism.

5. **Holy envy:** I owe my introduction to the concept of holy envy to my good friend Rabbi Mark Winer. It was coined by the Swedish theologian Krister Stendhal as one of his three rules of religious understanding. "Leave room for holy envy", he says - i.e. be willing to recognise in other religions practices and ideas that you can admire or which you wish could be reflected in your own tradition, even though this may not be possible.

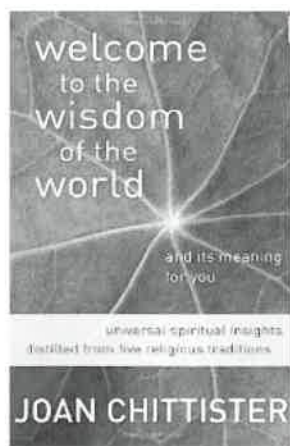
Rabbi Mark loves watching Christian Eucharist - "seeing Christians being who they are" - whilst he recognises, not without a slight sense of regret I suspect, that it can never have the same meaning for him. I find this a helpful idea. It enables us to enter into other people's religious worlds as guests rather than intruders or voyeurs. For me, it's made it possible, for instance, to be wholehearted about admiring the reverence and sense of community I sometimes witness in mosques without feeling that my own faith is prejudiced in any way.

Simon Keyes

REVIEWS

Welcome to the Wisdom of the World and Its Meaning for You: Universal Spiritual Insights Distilled from Five Religious Traditions, by Joan Chittister (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids / Cambridge 2007), \$39.95 from St John's Books, Fremantle.

A Benedictine abbess, well known to people involved in the peace movement and feminist theology, turns her attention to a broad range of spiritual traditions in order to discover models of what it might mean to be a holy person. Chittister's easy style will captivate many readers. The stories in the first part of her book and the epilogue address elements in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity pertinent to her reflections. Highly recommended.



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

EXPLORATIONS IN FAITH - A FOUR-WEEK SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS

Wednesdays from 7 - 28 July, 5.15 - 6.15pm

This series of discussion groups, led by the Dean of Perth, the Very Reverend Dr John Shepherd, poses some fundamental questions:

7 JULY: How much do we need to believe to be a Christian?

14 JULY: Will sinners have to put up with eternal punishment?

21 JULY: What stories in the Bible are true?

28 JULY: Can we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead?

All are welcome.

Venue: Lower Burt Memorial Hall, 38A St Georges Terrace, Perth

Entry: \$10.00 at the door - places are limited to 30, so please register your interest: info@perthcathedral.org - (08) 9325 5766

HERETICS ANONYMOUS

Monday 16 August, 5.15 - 6.15pm

At Heretics Anonymous, deep questions of faith are explored in a supportive fellowship. This session will be led by the Reverend Dr Jane Shaw of New College, Oxford.

Venue: Lower Burt Memorial Hall, 38A St Georges Terrace, Perth

Entry: \$10.00 at the door

Further information: info@perthcathedral.org - (08) 9325 5766

ST GEORGE'S LECTURE

Thursday 19 August, 7.30pm

St George's Lectures were inaugurated in 1995 to offer a platform for visiting scholars to explore connections between the Christian tradition and other fields of learning.

The lecturer will be Dr Jane Shaw of New College, Oxford.

Venue: St George's Cathedral, 38 St Georges Terrace, Perth

Entry: \$15.00 at the door (\$10.00 concession)

Further information: info@perthcathedral.org - (08) 9325 5766

A HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY - A BBC DVD SERIES PRESENTED BY DIARMAID MACCULLOCH

Mondays from 4 October - 8 November, 5.00 - 6.30pm

Over six Mondays, the BBC series, *A History of Christianity*, will be screened in reverse chronological order, followed by guided discussion.

This major six-part series is presented by Diarmaid MacCulloch, one of the world's leading church historians. It reveals how a small Jewish sect that preached humility became the biggest religion in the world. Most Christian histories start with St Paul's mission to Rome, but MacCulloch argues that the first Christianity stayed much closer to its Middle-Eastern roots.

The programmes show how weirdly different forms of Christianity can be because of their very different developments over time.

Venue: Lower Burt Memorial Hall, 38A St Georges Terrace, Perth

Entry: There is no entry charge, but donations are welcome.

Places are limited to 25, so please register your interest: info@perthcathedral.org - (08) 9325 5766

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