Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting A-level Religious Studies. The St Mary's and St Giles' Centre

Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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Contents

William James on Religious Experience
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This article considers the discussion of religious experience of the American psychologist and philosopher, William James (1842-1910), who published his book The Varieties of Religious Experience *in 1902.*

Specification links: WJEC/CBAC RS3 CS: Studies in Religion in Contemporary Society (A2), 4. Religion and the individual; RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2) Religious experience; RS1/2 PHIL: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS), 4. An introduction to religious experience: mysticism.

William James's philosophical starting point is the question what sort of place the universe is and particularly whether a *monistic* view is correct. Monism is the doctrine that the whole of reality is reducible ultimately to a single substance. A monist holds that the mind and all its contents and activities are part and parcel of the material world, and that your mind and my mind are included within this grand reality. This doctrine has at least two consequences: first, everything, including spiritual reality, has a material basis and, second, that good and evil are not separate and distinct but fused together at a metaphysical level. James rejected these views. He held that the universe is founded on diverse principles and that God cannot be responsible for evil and that, if evil is finally to be overcome, God must be separate from it. He also thought,

however, that God is 'finite, either in power or knowledge, or in both' – a view that he believed to be that of the 'common believer' also (Putnam, 2007, p. 189).

These considerations were in keeping with James's belief in the uniqueness of human identity but they were also compatible with his understanding that each person must possess a self to which all experiences are in some way attached. Or, to put this another way, there must be something that guarantees the continuity of each human individual such that the experiences you have are truly yours and continue to be yours all your life and that my experiences continue to be mine all my life. Traditionally the soul was thought to provide the connection between our experiences, the thread on which all of them were strung. James, although he did not rule out the possibility that each human being had a soul, put

the self at the centre of experience: it was the self that received experience and interpreted it.

Religious experience

What James meant by *religious* experience was shown by people who reported encounters with religious ideas, or beings or conditions. A person might experience release from guilt and anxiety after what he or she took to be an encounter with Christ; a person might feel swallowed up in the infinite and take this to be an encounter with God; a person might feel united with the whole universe in one harmonious moment. These experiences have been reported either spontaneously and autobiographically in books or letters or elicited by researchers asking people to write about encounters with powers outside their everyday lives.

James collected dozens of such reports in different languages and arising out of different religions, and arranged them into groups (conversion, saintliness, mysticism) and tried to understand them. He believed that religion as a whole could be traced to such experiences among countless numbers of individuals and he was careful to distinguish the reported experience and its value.

He was quite prepared to believe that unusual and strange experiences could have psychological benefits and by this he appeared to mean two things.

- First, he considered that in the normal course of psychological development all of us tend towards the unifying and integrating of the personality such that contradictions and imbalances are removed. The divided self – one that was constantly at war with itself – might be united by religious experience. The person who felt guilt

or anxiety might find these negative emotions removed after an experience of the infinite, especially if this experience was also one of unconditional love.

- Second, he spoke of the 'sick' and the 'healthy' soul and here characterised two broad types of people (James, 1902, lectures IV-VII). The *sick soul* would be prone to pessimism, to seeing faults and flaws in him or herself, to looking at the dark side of life – at disease, pain and death. The *healthy soul*, by contrast, would be buoyed up by optimism and would look at the positive side of life – at beauty in nature, progress in human history and the joys of human relationships. These two categories of people, James thought, tended to approach religion differently. The sick soul would be self-tormenting but might eventually, often through a radical conversion experience, find peace and personal integration. The healthy soul would not need to make such a dramatic religious journey. In this instance the path to the religious life would be simpler though it could lead in various directions, either towards conventional religion expressed through congregational life and worship or towards a love of nature verging on pantheism.

Criticisms of James's work

James wrote very early in the 20th century when psychology was in its infancy. There was widespread agreement that human beings possess subliminal modes of consciousness not immediately open to our rational minds. We may have thoughts and feelings that only float to the surface in dreams or under hypnosis or through word

associations, the tools of early psychiatry. While James did not accept all the details of early psychiatric theory, he did accept that an experience of God might come to us through our subconscious. None of the mechanisms by which this might happen were explored by James either in his writings or in the comments he made on other people's accounts of their religious experience. He simply noted that our consciousness is far wider than the awareness granted by our everyday waking minds.

The most common criticism of James claimed that he made too much room for extreme or strange experiences and paid too little attention to common and unexciting religious experience. To this criticism James would have said that he was trying to map out the field of religious experience and to categorise it, and that without exploring the full range of experiences he could not hope to describe it properly. He needed the great Roman Catholic mystics like St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross and the Protestant John Bunyan, as well as non-Christian (the Upanishads) and humanistic sources.

William James seems to have been the first writer to conceptualise conversion as the unification of personality, a personality previously at odds with itself and bound up in contradiction (cf. James, 1902, lectures VIII-X). Within the evangelical tradition that James draws heavily upon at this point, conversion is seen as a theologically forensic process of justification but there is little or no reference to this aspect of conversion within James's writing. Nor does he focus upon conversion as a process of liberation from sin and accompanying guilt although, within his writing, these elements can be implied from his early discussion of the nature of reality as

containing the contradictory principles of good and evil. In this respect, then, his failure to give a full examination to the texts he has collected is unfortunate. For the evangelical Christian, the sinful self is exchanged for a righteous self by a spiritual or psychological transaction dependent upon identifying with Jesus.

Extensions of James's work

Other studies have taken selected extracts from James's *Varieties* 'presented them in booklet form, and had respondents rate on a 5-point scale the degree to which they had ever had an experience like each of these' (Hood, et al, 1996, p. 250). The Religious Experience Episodes Measure (REEM) produces results that can generate scales that measure how widespread some of the experiences collected by James are today – and they are surprisingly widespread though the figures vary by age, sex, country, religious orientation and so on. In 1985 David Hay interviewed a sample of residents of Nottingham and found that 62% had 'been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self'; while questionnaire surveys of a random sample in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s gave an affirmative response to the same question of between 36 and 48% (Hay, 1987, chs 8-10; 1990, ch. 5 and pp. 79-84. Other research has revolved around the many triggers for facilitating mystical experiences and noted that individuals reported a loss of self by being absorbed in an object of perception. Such loss of self was deemed analogous to hypnotic suggestibility and subjected to further tests in an attempt to refine theory about religion.

Implications of James's work

We may note three implications of James's work.

- First, his concentration on experience shifts the direction of our attention from beliefs, institutions and rituals to the subject of experience. Beliefs may be studied and measured by questionnaire data, and religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs can be compared and correlated. Religious institutions can also be studied by direct observation as well as by historical research. We can see what impact religious institutions have had on society and, to an extent, on individuals. Similarly, religious rituals can be studied by direct observation and the purpose and the origin of ritual can be traced so as to give us an idea of what it is like to participate in religious activities. Experience, by contrast, is more transitory and impalpable and more difficult to focus upon. James has brought the whole dimension of experience into the research domain and made religious studies scholars aware of its importance.

- Second, we note the distinction between solitary religious experience and communal religious experience. Most of the experiences James reported were solitary and many were outside the context of any religious ceremony or activity. Yet there are religious experiences that occur in communal or congregational settings and it is important to include these in any full assessment of the impact of experience upon individuals. A study of religious experience does not prevent the study of the communal aspect of religion or the way religious experiences and religious institutions might be connected.

- Third, James separated religious experience from its value. He was quite clear that unusual experiences might have great value in the sense that they were psychologically beneficial. One may argue that this distinction is in keeping with the 'learning from' aim within much religious studies. Just as men and women who underwent extraordinary experiences in the past were able to report upon them and benefit from them so the modern student can, in the study of religion and experiences associated with it, draw out various ethical and other lessons. Nevertheless, 'James is quite explicit that the answer to the "objectivity" question is quite independent of the biological and psychological benefits that accrue from mystical experiences' (Gale, 2009, p. 19; cf. Astley, 2015).

Links

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Varieties_of_Religious_Experience (Wikipedia)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_James (Wikipedia)

https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKEwjPy6fDvODJAhUDfRoKHYayC38QFggsMAI&url=http

%3A%2F%2Fpinkmonkey.com%2Fdl%2Flibrary1%2Fbook1126.pdf&usg=AFQjCNFDxifg9fKEOcpdd3jo13BTbVlvJw&bvm=bv.110151844,d.ZWU&cad=rja (*Text of The Varieties of Religious Experience*)

Discussion points

1. How would you define 'religious experience'? Can you think of a better method than the one devised by James?

2. Do you think that it is valid to separate the value of an experience from the experience itself, as William James did?

3. How reasonable do you think it is to see religious conversion as involving the unification of the human personality?

4. Can you suggest how you might study religious experiences and religious institutions and rituals and use the evidence from such a study to construct a composite account of religion?

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Worship: Receiving, Developing and Living Tradition
Bridget Nichols

The article considers worship as pre-eminently a shared practice, whose forms have much to say about the way communities understand God. As well as looking to Scripture and tradition as principal sources for patterns of worship, it reflects on the way these strands are absorbed in the living context. This takes different forms in different Christian communities. The role of worshippers as interpreters, and the role of the body in worship are important topics in this development.

Specification links: WJEC/CBAC RS1/2 CHR: Introduction to Christianity (AS), 3. Worship and sacraments in contemporary Christianity; also RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2), Religious experience [in Christianity] Introduction to religious experience; WJEC RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2), religious experience.

Why worship?

Worship, in its broadest sense, begins as response to a supernatural or transcendent being, or to an object with transcendent significance. A powerful personal experience of God, such as Moses's vision of the burning bush (Genesis 3:1-6) or the Magi's encounter with the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:9-12), will evoke a particular disposition of awe and reverence. Experiences which convince individuals of the intervention of God in their lives may lead to outbursts of praise and joy, as in the case of Mary when she is acclaimed by Elizabeth as the mother of the saviour (Luke 1:46-55).

On their own these examples can give the misleading impression that worship is a distinctively personal phenomenon. Anyone who is accustomed to being part of a gathering for the purpose of prayer and praise within a faith tradition will know this to be untrue. The collective offering of thanksgiving, intercession and adoration to God is what we might think of as normative – the default mode – when speaking of worship. This kind of gathering may actually provide the context which gives rise to a powerful experience of God, as in the call of Isaiah during prayer in the Temple (Isaiah 6), and the appearance of the

angel to Zechariah, announcing the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 2:5-14).

How is worship offered and organised?

The way in which worship is offered is an important source of information about the community's understanding of God. Thus Nicholas Wolterstorff has written of the God who addresses us in our own time through Scripture and through the church's customary patterns of prayer, as one who is vulnerable to injury by human beings (a conclusion drawn from the fact that we confess our sins and ask forgiveness) and who not only speaks but also listens (evidenced by the frequency of prayers which ask, and expect God to hear us) (Wolterstorff, 1995, 2015).

This assumes what is true for the greater number of Christian denominations, that they organise their gatherings and the words and actions they use according to a system. To explore this further, it is necessary to introduce another term: *liturgy*. The definitions of and relationship between worship and liturgy are not uniformly agreed. Louis Weil tells us that '"worship" is larger in scope than, for example, liturgy or ritual. . . . [I]n a specifically religious context . . . worship is understood as some form of response to the one who is called God . . . . In liturgical rites, particularly since the invention of printing and the consequent standardization of liturgical texts, words have been the dominant mode of that response' (Weil, 2013, p. 4).

Benjamin Gordon-Taylor explains that ''liturgy" has come to denote the structural body of text and ritual by which the church as a corporate body offers worship to God'. The assumption that

they are synonymous 'has led unhelpfully to an association of "worship" with the Reformed traditions and "liturgy" with Catholic and Orthodox'; rather '*liturgy* is the means whereby *worship* is offered to God by the church' (Gordon-Taylor, 2013, pp. 13-14).

Nevertheless, it is common to find 'liturgy' and 'worship' used interchangeably, or to hear those responsible for organising acts of worship describe their practice as 'not liturgical'. And in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, 'the liturgy' would mean the celebration of the eucharist.

Authority in worship

Roman Catholics and Anglicans will be accustomed to prescribed forms of liturgical speech and clearly defined speaking roles for those leading worship and those forming the congregation. Much of the content may have roots going deep into the history of Christian practice (frequently drawing on liturgical composition in Rome in the fifth to eighth centuries). This is precisely what becomes problematic for others – especially in locally formed, 'grassroots' bodies, house churches and community churches, with no explicit denominational identity. Here, the idea of words imposed by a central body is resisted, on the grounds that such language cannot articulate the community's day-to-day experience or its experience of God.

Patrick Littlefield writes of the 'appeal in emerging churches to mystical expressions of spirituality that not only connect with God, but also connect with a culture'. Emerging churches 'are doing something unique as they interact with the culture in which they find themselves' (Littlefield, 2010, pp. 43-44, 48). This contextual consciousness is

commendable, but it does not in itself guarantee that the self-generated speech of the community will be an authentic response to the God who speaks. Nor will it protect against more insidious forms of authority exercised by powerful group leaders.

How have the rules governing worship developed?

The way that the two main sources of information for the origins of Christian worship – Scripture and tradition – exercise their influence is by no means simple. Practising Christians tend to receive Scripture as interpreted by the church (the worshipping communities to which they are affiliated). Understanding of concepts like 'sacrifice' have been worked out differently by different church bodies through history. From the earliest days of organised groups gathering to worship God, the Christian message has been passed along various pathways and has encountered different local cultures.

Paul Bradshaw advises great caution in assuming that particular events recorded in the Bible or by early Christians refer to actual rites, or even – as in the case of accounts of the Last Supper – that they are distinctive to Christian communities (Bradshaw, 2002, pp. 55-56). Although we can point to references to the last supper and to baptism, and instructions to share the meal and to baptise, there is no guidance on how this should be done (McGowan, 2014, p. 10). The closest we get to any sort of ruling is when Paul rebukes the local Christians for bad practices (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). Much harder to establish are the links between the Last Supper and the Jewish Passover meal in later developments of

eucharistic practice, or between Jewish baptismal rites and the custom of initiating new Christians by baptism from the very earliest moments of the Christian tradition.

Is the liturgy biblical?

We have noted the role of Scripture in offering precedents for actual practices in the communal life of the church, even if it does not provide actual ritual instructions. Arguably, the more direct influence of the Bible on Christian worship is in the determination to balance prayer and praise with instruction and exposition. In most churches, readings from the Old and New Testaments are chosen according to a system designed to provide a strategic exposure to Scripture. Examples of such *lectionaries* can be found from a very early time in the development of the church. Currently, the major churches share the use of the *Revised Common Lectionary*. This scheme aims to ensure that worshippers become acquainted with the Gospels, the writings of the prophets, the narrative of God's covenant with Israel, the letters of St Paul, and the account of the spread of the church in Acts (O'Loughlin, 2012). Appropriate readings are chosen for the major seasons of the *Church's Year* and for prominent saints' days.

There is an internal logic to the choice offered for the eucharist each Sunday, for the themes of the Gospel will be touched on in the Old or New Testament reading and sometimes in both. This is another way of teaching a congregation about the interpretation of Scripture, setting passages widely separated in time and circumstances side by side so that common interests, and fulfilment of events foreshadowed in an earlier

period in a later period can be made apparent.

Slightly less obvious are the direct quotations from the Bible which find their way into forms of address or prayers. Of these, the Lord's Prayer is the most outstanding illustration (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). The eucharistic greeting, 'Grace, mercy and peace', borrows verbatim from 2 Timothy 1:2 and 2 John 1:3. Other regularly used expressions of praise and acclamation likewise quote directly – e.g. the *Sanctus* ('Holy, holy, holy' Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) and the *Agnus Dei* ('O Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world' John 1:29, 36). Finally, quite substantial pieces of text, short quotations or single words may be woven into prayers, and often provide the inspiration for composition. This is particularly true of the form of prayer known as the *collect*, which is recited as part of the opening rite of the eucharist, and of many hymns and songs (e.g. 'As the deer longs for the water' based on Psalm 42).

Louis-Marie Chauvet has described this phenomenon as 'the liturgical Bible' (Chauvet, 1992, pp. 123, 133). It does not displace the traditional scholarly methods of interpreting Scripture; rather, it invites the worshipping community to become an interpretative community in the living context of worship. Bradshaw (1992) helps to specify how this interpretation might take place by describing four functions of Scripture in the liturgical setting (these categories may not be exclusive).

• A *didactic* function, by which the reading of the Bible teaches worshippers about important narratives (e.g. the creation story, the Exodus, the Jacob and David cycles),

introduces them to prophecy, familiarises them with the story of Jesus and instructs them how to live as a Christian community (e.g. through the Pauline letters);

• a *kerygmatic/ anamnetic* function, enabling Scripture to speak prophetically of God's promises of salvation, and to remind those who hear it of the sources and evidence for those promises;

• a *paracletic* function describes the role of Scripture in speaking to the needs of the people gathered for worship at a particular time and in a particular place (e.g. funeral services, in which readings are often chosen because they say something about the deceased, or because they have a distinctively comforting resonance for the bereaved; the task of such readings is to console rather than to teach the doctrines of death and resurrection);

• a *doxological* function concerned with the praise of God, which may take the form of a psalm or canticle (e.g. Psalms 146 – 150; Luke 1:67-79), or a joyful prayer prefacing a communication intended to encourage or teach (e.g. Ephesians 1:1-8; 1 Peter 1:3-8).

We hear Scripture in liturgical action as a multiplicity of dialogues – with other biblical passages; with psalm, hymns and worship songs; with preaching; and with the unexpected dynamics of any act of worship (e.g. spontaneous emotion, or disruption from unconventional behaviour or timing). Scripture poses the question, 'Who is God for us today?' At the same time, its use in worship must try to engage with the constancy through

time of God, who has always been and whose nature is unchanging.

Worship and experience

Theologians cannot control the way that worshippers experience, for example, the eucharist. It is through more formal reflection on that initial experience that participants can be instructed in the meaning of the eucharist as participating in the saving acts of Christ, and becoming part of his own earthly body, the church (Ostdiek, 2015, pp. 5, 9). The sacraments offer particularly direct forms of experience through their use of material elements: water and sometimes oil in baptism; bread and wine in the eucharist. The physical engagement of worshippers by touch and taste, as well as sight, sound and smell, is of a distinctive kind and it is not surprising that the eucharist has been the setting through the course of Christian history for profound and even mystical experience. Visions of hosts (consecrated wafers) which bled when elevated by the priest were reported by medieval worshippers.

Our understanding of liturgical action begins with our bodies, and all worship involves the body to some degree. Even though the traditional repertoire of gestures (kneeling, standing, sitting, bowing, raising the hands, crossing oneself) has contracted, bodily movement remains most evident in contemporary practice within the charismatic and Pentecostal churches. Here prayer and song may be accompanied by uplifted hands, swaying of the body, dancing and speaking in tongues (glossolalia); and worshippers may fall to the ground suddenly, or adopt a relaxed posture on the floor to 'soak' in the presence of God (Lindhardt, 2011; Wilkinson & Althouse 2015).

Links

http://www.commontexts.org/rcl/ (Revised Common Lectionary)

https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/collects-and-post-communions.aspx (Collects of the Church of England)

https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/the-liturgical-year.aspx (The Christian Liturgical Year)

https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/churchgrowthresearch-freshexpressions.pdf (The Church Army Research Unit's Report on Fresh Expressions of Church)

Discussion points

1. How important is it that Scripture readings should address the immediate context and needs of worshippers? Would you place this 'paracletic' function above the teaching and prophetic dimensions of Scripture?

2. The 'spontaneous' prayer of many non-liturgical communities is often noticeably formulaic. What conclusions might you draw from this?

3. How do the shared experience of the worshipping community and the experience of individuals engaged in worship interact with and support each other?

4. Having reflected on the topics raised in this article, how would you formulate your own definitions of 'worship' and 'liturgy'?

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The Enlightenment Debate in Early Buddhism
Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

Fierce historical debates surround the concept of 'true self' in Buddhism and its relevance to enlightenment. Opponents of the concept consider 'true self' an impostor derived from a Hindu worldview. The article presents 'true-self' or Buddha-nature as a possible key to understanding the differences between the nature of phenomena in the cycle of existence and Nirvana.

Specification links: WJEC/CBAC RS1/2 ER: Introduction to Eastern Religions (AS), Section A: Introduction to Buddhism; RS3 ER: Studies in Eastern Religions (A2), Section A: Studies in Buddhism, 2. Enlightenment; also RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2) Religious experience (in Buddhism).

Introduction
The debate over Nirvana
Nirvana is the goal of practice for most Buddhists – a transcendental haven outside the cycle of existence (*samsāra*) and invulnerable to the marks of existence (*samaññalakkhaṇa*). For a place so important to Buddhists, an outsider might expect that Nirvana would be explained clearly in Buddhism, with a definition all Buddhists could agree upon. Unfortunately for students of Buddhism, there are complications that prevent simplification and this mini-overview, rather than claiming clarity where there is none, seeks to present some of the complexities of the debate existing among Buddhists concerning the characteristics of Nirvana. There are some Buddhist texts that go as far as to claim that Nirvana doesn't exist, that it is

just a metaphor for having come to an end of mental impurities or is a place where even animals can go. These views tend to belong to later philosophical developments of Buddhism; in this article I will restrict myself to the debate in early Buddhism.

Why the Buddha was sometimes not specific in his teaching
In Buddhism, ethical teachings are often presented very differently from metaphysics. Where ethical teachings such as the Noble Eightfold Path are frequently explained clearly and in abundant detail, teachings on metaphysics are often nothing short of cryptic. When treating metaphysical subjects, the Buddha would often intentionally *avoid* giving a direct or comprehensive answer – not because he

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couldn't be clear, but because he knew that if enquirers had not practised to a sufficiently high level, they would misunderstand his answer. The Buddha's metaphysical teachings would leave gaps for students to fill subjectively through their own practice.

This lack of detail is a double-edged sword, because although it protects against dogmatism among those who have not yet reached direct experience of metaphysics in their own practice, it also leaves room for interpretation. For practitioners, *some* guidelines are useful, if only to inspire them with the confidence to practise until they can know Nirvana for themselves. Giving too many guidelines, however, may be counterproductive since practitioners will meditate with pre-conceived notions of what they are meant to attain. When studying Nirvana, it is wise to start with guidance from the little scriptural evidence the Buddha *did* leave behind.

Nirvana
Two levels of Nirvana
The word 'Nirvana' (in the Pali language *nibbāna*) has a variety of meanings. Nirvana can be translated as 'extinguishing' (of mental impurities), or it can mean 'escape' (from suffering). Given that the word 'Nirvana' leaves room for interpretation, Buddhists seek to clarify it by distinguishing between Nirvana as a state of mind and Nirvana as a realm of existence (It.38).

Nirvana as a state of mind (*sa-upādisesanibbāna*) is a living person's *experience* of Nirvana – that is, the person who attains it doesn't have to die first to reach it. He or she touches upon Nirvana in their meditation at the point where they have purified their mind of all mental impurities, but their five aggregates (*khandha*) remain intact.

Buddha-nature[1] will manifest inside such a person, imparting the same happiness to them as if they really were inside Nirvana as a realm of existence – but they are still 'alive' in their human body.

Nirvana as a realm of 'existence'[2] (*anupādisesanibbāna*) is a realm outside the body and mind, sometimes known as 'posthumous' Nirvana because the attainer can go there only after the breaking up of their five aggregates for the last time (for they will not be reborn again). The Buddha-nature[1] which they have attained as a state of mind is the vehicle that conveys (what is left of) them to Nirvana as a realm of existence.

When speaking of Nirvana, the Buddha *did* assert that Nirvana exists and is the end of all suffering, but his description of the characteristics of Nirvana consists of a series of negations (for the reasons already mentioned) and elaborated in the Paṭhama Nibbāna Sutta (Ud.80):

> O! Monks! There exists a sphere in which earth, water, fire, air, sphere of infinity of space, sphere of infinity of consciousness, sphere of nothingness, sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, this world, the next world, the moon, the sun have no part. O! Monks! I do not say that that sphere has coming, going, existence, arising, falling away, in a place that has no abode, without feeling . . . this, is the end of suffering.

[1] Also sometimes referred to as *dhammakāya* or the 'body of enlightenment'

[2] Some Buddhists might quibble here, because strictly speaking beings that enter Nirvana no longer exist in a way recognisable to the cycle of existence (*samsāra*).

Characteristics of Nirvana

One part of the debate surrounding Nirvana concerns the extent to which it shares characteristics with the cycle of existence (*samsāra*) – that is, the three Marks of Existence.

Nirvana and Samsāra compared in terms of the Marks of Existence	
Samsāric Phenomena	**Nibbānic Phenomena**
impermanent	**permanent**
suffering	**happy**
not/no-self	self...?

As summarized in the above table, there is evidence in early Buddhist scriptures to support Nirvana being permanent rather than impermanent (*aniccā*) (Nidd II.56): '(Nirvana) cannot be taken away or changed'. Early Buddhist scriptures also maintain that anything that is permanent is no longer characterised by suffering (*dukkha*) or 'not-self' (*anattā*) (S.iii.22):

> Whatever thing is (of the nature of) impermanence is also (of the nature of) suffering. Whatever thing is (of the nature of) suffering is also (of the nature of) no/not-self.

Furthermore, the Buddha specifically said that Nirvana is of the nature of happiness (Dhp.57): 'Nirvana is the highest happiness'. Thus Nirvana is specifically said to be of the nature of happiness and permanence. However, it is only by implication that Nirvana is said to be of the nature of 'self' (*atta*) rather than 'not-self' (*anattā*). Even in the present day, both Western and Eastern academic scholars are still debating this issue. The issues which form the other part of the debate include the question of whether the Buddha taught 'true self' (Buddha-nature), and if so, what 'true self' might actually mean to Buddhists.

The debate

Is 'true self' (Buddha-nature) among the Buddha's teachings?

Some Buddhists believe that 'true self' is a useful Buddhist concept while others disagree. Proponents of 'true self' in Buddhism appear to be greater in number than opponents. Amongst advocates of 'true self' are established Western scholars such as Caroline Rhys Davids (Collins, 1982, p. 7) and Isaline B. Horner (Harvey, 1995, p. 17). Both were scholars of incomparable dedication and expertise in the study of Buddhist scriptures. Both had an important role to play in the compilation of the Pali Text Society (PTS) edition of the Pali Tipiṭaka, which is recorded in Romanised script and is the edition of the Pali Tipiṭaka accepted by scholars throughout the world as the most authoritative. Among other scholars subscribing to the same view are Christmas Humphreys (1959, p. 88) and Edward Conze (1962, p. 39). Such scholars agree upon two major arguments: first that the Buddha never clearly *denied* the existence of the true self (*atta*), and secondly that the original teachings of the Buddha imply that the true self exists in a state that is higher than the level of the Five Aggregates (*khanda*). Such scholars reason that the

Buddha never referred directly to the existence of a true self because those who have not attempted to practise meditation for themselves might misunderstand that the 'true self' in Buddhism was the same as *paramātman* in Hinduism. Even so, there are other scholars such as David Kalupahana (1994, pp. 69-72) who assert that there is no such thing as 'true self' in the teaching of the Buddha.

What 'true self' might mean to Buddhists

The difficulty of interpreting Buddhist scripture arises because the same terms may have different meanings in the Scriptures according to context. Each time the Buddha preached he adapted his teaching to the character and needs of the listener. Thus the use of terms in the Scriptures, even the same ones, may have hundreds of different implications. The words '*atta*' and '*anattā*' are no exception. Some say that the word '*atta*' means 'self' in the same way that '*ātman*' means 'self' in the *Upanishads*. Hindus teach that there is a 'self' inside every one of us, which will ultimately be re-united with Brahma, the Great Being (*paramātman*). Buddhists are afraid that if they accept 'self' then they will be giving in to Hinduism. In fact, these fears are ill-founded because the word '*atta*' has many possible meanings. It can mean 'imagined self' (ego) or the higher concept of 'me' and 'my' for an angel or a god, which must be qualitatively very different. The word '*atta*' can also mean 'true self' in an ultimate sense, of the sort that the Buddha advocated followers to adopt as an 'island' or 'refuge' (D.ii.72):

> May you all take your self as your island.
> May you take yourself as a refuge.

Take no other thing as your refuge.
May Dhamma be your island.
May Dhamma be your refuge.
Take no other thing as your refuge.

In this case '*atta*' obviously has a different meaning from the word '*atta*' as used in the case of 'ego' or the word '*atta*' as used by Hindus. Thus in the study of the Tipiṭaka, it is essential to distinguish the definitions in the two different contexts. The word '*anattā*' needs no less care. There are those who believe that the word '*anattā*' means 'no-self' (i.e. selflessness) and others who believe that it means 'not-self' (i.e. that which is not a self). It is the same as looking at the word '*manusso*' which means 'person'; the word '*amanusso*' also exists – but it tends to refer to non-human beings, not the lack of a person.

So the 'a-/an-' prefix might more correctly be considered to mean 'non-' than 'no -'. This gives a new perspective when we look at the usage of the word 'self' – for example, when the Buddha taught that the Five Aggregates are not the 'self', the implication is that the real 'self' is elsewhere, outside the Five Aggregates. Thus it would seem that the Buddha taught that true 'self' is one's refuge, and that one can attain true 'self' by the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Nirvana: Accessible to all

Buddhism is not an exclusive religion. Anyone who has cultivated as many good deeds as the Buddha or the arahants can, like them, enter upon Nirvana. Anyone who practises the Noble Eightfold Path properly, keeping the Precepts, practising meditation and accruing wisdom, will eventually attain it for themselves.

The Enlightenment Debate in Early Buddhism

Glossary

Aggregates (Pali *khandha*, Sanskrit *skandha*) are the psycho-physical components of a living being consisting of the bodily constituent 'form' (the body), and the mind constituents, 'sensation', 'perception', 'mental formations' and 'consciousness'. Death which involves parting of body and mind is sometimes depersonified in Buddhism by referring to it as the 'breaking up of the aggregates'.

Pali: the earliest extant language of the literature of Buddhism as collected in the Tipiṭaka and the sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism.

Pali Text Society is a text publication society founded in 1881 by T. W. Rhys Davids in Britain to foster and promote the study of Pali texts.

Upanishads: a collection of texts which contain some of the central philosophical concepts of Hinduism.

Links

Some examples of Buddhist opinion concerning enlightenment more or less representative respectively of Theravāda (literal), Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna denominations:

http://bodhimonastery.org/what-does-it-mean-to-be-enlightened.html (Bhikkhu Bodhi on What does it mean to be enlightened?)

http://bodhimonastery.org/what-does-it-mean-to-be-enlightened.html (Kusala Bhikshu on Buddhist Enlightenment versus Nirvana)

http://www.matthieuricard.org/en/blog/posts/what-does-buddhism-mean-by-enlightenment (Matthieu Ricard on What does Buddhism mean by enlightenment?)

Discussion points

1. What opinions are held in Buddhism about what sort of self actually becomes enlightened?
2. What does this debate tell you about disagreement in Buddhism between scriptural experts and those with meditational attainment? Do examples of similar disagreements exist in other religions?

3. The alternative to 'self'-based explanations of the Buddhist path is the metaphor of a selfless 'flame' passed from one candle to the next (representing lifetimes) and eventually extinguishing in Nirvana. Following this conception, what sort of Nirvana would you expect to find described in the Buddhist Scriptures?

4. How might Buddha-nature and Nirvana be explained to differentiate them respectively from the Upanishadic *ātman* and *paramātman* in a way that would satisfy Hindus and Buddhists alike?

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Conventions for Citing Early Buddhist Primary Texts

As with biblical citations, Buddhist academic works referring to primary texts conventionally use non-Harvard style references. Agreed abbreviations refer to volumes of the PTS Pali language edition Tipiṭaka. Romanised numbers refer to volume numbers and Arabic numbers refer to page numbers. Abbreviations used in the article are as follows:

D = Dīgha Nikāya	Nidd II = Cullaniddesa
Dhp = Dhammapada	S = Saṁyutta Nikāya
It = Itivuttaka	Ud = Udāna

Interested students can find a comprehensive listing of agreed Buddhist textual abbreviations at *http://www.palitext.com/subpages/PTS_Abbreviations.pdf*

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The Reformations: Magisterial and Radical
Paul Wilson

This article contrasts the Protestant Reformation with the Radical Reformation (Anabaptism).

Specification links: WJEC/CBAC RS1/2 CHR: Introduction to Christianity (AS), 2. Roots of Christian diversity: The Protestant Reformation.

Introduction

As I write (December 2015), the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life has just published its report 'Living with Difference.' The Telegraph's headline is 'Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is, says judge.'[1]

Whether or not the Commission made sufficient distinction between pluralism as a sociological fact and as a philosophical position, it has raised some interesting issues. On the practical side, the place of bishops in the House of Lords and of the Archbishop of Canterbury in the coronation of the next monarch highlight the connection between church and state, as do the roles of the monarch and the Prime Minister in choosing the Archbishop. On the theological side, the Church of England's reaction to the report begs the question of whether Jesus intended to start a new religion at all, let alone whether he intended it to be allied to the state.

Christendom

The church-state alliance is known as Christendom, and has its origins in the fourth century, when the Roman Emperor Constantine gave Christianity increasing recognition in the Empire and, conversely, gave the Emperor increasing influence in the church. By the end of the fourth century, in an attempt to unify church and state, Theodosius I had defined the church as those 'in communion with the bishops of Rome and Alexandria,' following this up with pressure on free-thinking Christians to conform and on pagans to convert. 'Together, these measures established Christianity, legally defined, as the official religion of the Empire' (Greenslade, 1954, p. 29, cited in Murray, 2004, p. 40).

[1]See:
https://corablivingwithdifference.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/living-with-difference-community-diversity-and-the-common-good.pdf and
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/12036287/Britain-is-no-longer-a-Christian-country-and-should-stop-acting-as-if-it-is-says-judge.html

Unsurprisingly, the church grew, and in 529 the Emperor Justininian issued an edict making conversion to Christianity compulsory for all but Jews (Murray, 2004, p. 54). Babies were to be baptised by law, identifying submission to the state with membership of the church. Although the Roman Empire was declining, the spread of Christianity north to formerly barbarian lands held Europe together. This was solidified in the form of the Holy Roman Empire in 800.

Debate continues as to whether the Constantinian shift was a good thing for the church or a disaster. Either way, Christendom continued in central Europe for over a millennium in the form of medieval Catholicism, and we still see its vestiges today.

Reformation in Germany

It would be easy to imagine that the pioneers of the Protestant Reformation, such as Luther and Calvin, attempted to dismantle Christendom, giving rise to a church free of state control. But this is far from the case. The fact that they are known as the *Magisterial Reformers* 'draws attention to the manner in which the Lutheran and Calvinist reformers related to secular authorities, such as princes, magistrates, or city councils' (McGrath, 1998, p 159).

As a young man, Martin Luther became a monk and was sent to teach at Wittenberg in what is now Germany. His alleged posting of 95 theses on the door of the University Church (the local equivalent of Facebook) was intended to open up a debate, but it changed history. He had initially wanted to challenge the sale of indulgences by the church, but he ended up convinced that the whole system was corrupt. Following his excommunication by the Pope, he was

denounced by the Holy Roman Emperor, the church-and-state-in-league declaring him a heretic and an outlaw. He would almost certainly have been executed had he not been rescued by his friend Frederick, the elector of Saxony, and hidden in a castle, giving him time to translate the New Testament into German.

Luther's writings spread quickly, encouraging priests to break free from their loyalty to the Pope. He also encouraged German princes to break free from the Emperor. The Reformation in Germany depended on both of these happening in one principality. The prince declared for or against Luther, the priests followed the prince, and the people followed the priests. So freedom of religion – Protestant or Catholic – was for princes only (possibly taking notice of the consensus among the priests). Everyone else fell in line. There were now two forms of Christendom.

Luther's central doctrine of *justification by faith* (a personal response to God) was propagated in his writings and preached in the churches, but the means by which people became Lutheran rather than Catholic was purely geographical. Luther recognised that there was a 'true church', composed of people who were justified by faith, but it was invisible – nobody could tell the state of grace of another person's heart. But he believed that there should also be a visible church, meeting to hear preaching and receive sacraments. This idea of two churches – visible and invisible – goes all the way back to Augustine. The continuing practice of infant baptism perpetuated the idea that all were Christians, making the idea of conversion redundant. Luther died a disappointed man, 'stating that the

people had become more and more indifferent towards religion and the moral outlook was more deplorable than ever.'

> Between 1522 and 1527 Luther repeatedly mentioned his concern to establish a true Christian church, and his desire to provide for earnest Christians who would confess the gospel with their lives as well as with their tongues. He thought of entering the names of these 'earnest Christians' in a special book and having them meet separately from the mass of nominal Christians, but concluding that he would not have sufficient of such people, he dropped the plan. (Bender, 1944)

It comes as a surprise to many that the Reformers were not like modern evangelicals. The Lutheran Reformation was a Reform movement within Christendom, not in any sense a missionary movement as it could only operate where the state was Lutheran. Stephen Neill, although writing about England, could be describing almost any country in Europe when he asks us to envisage a typical village

> of not more than 400 inhabitants, where all are baptized Christians, compelled to live more or less Christian lives under the brooding eye of parson and squire. In such a context 'evangelization' has hardly any meaning, since all are in some sense already Christian, and need no more than to be safeguarded against error in religion and viciousness in life. (Neill, 1968, p. 75)

Reformation in Switzerland

Ulrich Zwingli, Luther's contemporary in Switzerland, was minister of the main church in Zürich. Intent on reforming both the church and the city, he preached against practices such as treating the mass as a sacrifice and priests' taking mistresses. He was initially more radical than Luther, advocating the abolition of the mass and of infant baptism. However, he relied on the city council to determine the pace of change, and they were too slow for some of Zwingli's followers who thought that it should be possible for Christians to follow biblical principles without the permission of the civic authorities. In a dispute between Zwingli and his more radical followers in January 1525 the council ruled in favour of Zwingli, leaving the radicals the choice of conforming, leaving Zürich or facing prison (Estep, 1996, p. 13).

Later that month a small group of these radical Christians met in the home of Felix Manz in Zürich, having reached the conclusion that infant baptism was not valid, as children were not able to commit themselves to following Christ in life. Some of the radicals had defied the state by not having their children baptised. But now they followed this through to its logical conclusion by declaring their own childhood baptisms invalid. This made them 'unbaptised' and therefore eligible for baptism. George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptise him, in an act of obedience (to Christ) and disobedience (to the state-church alliance), and they continued until all had been baptised.[2]

Like Luther's Facebook post, this unleashed a huge conflict. Their critics – both Catholic and Protestant – called them '*Anabaptists*' or re-baptisers. But the real issue for the Anabaptists was not baptism *per se*, but the right and duty of

[2] *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GskZlcV1RIA* is a dramatized film clip of this event and the subsequent persecution.

Christians to follow Christ according to Scripture and conscience without reference to or interference by the state (or the state-church alliance). They were not against the state as such, but they were for freedom of religion. The Zürich city council, for its part, embraced Zwingli's Christendom assumption that the church functioned in alliance with the state, and they therefore regarded the Anabaptists as outlaws.

Calvin, a generation later in Switzerland, sought the support of the Geneva civil authorities to make the city a theocracy, with Christian faith and conduct taught by the church and enforced by the state. It is not clear how Calvin reconciled his confidence in secular rulers with his foundational doctrine of 'total depravity'.[3]

The Swiss Anabaptist movement became known as the Swiss Brethren. Like many grass-roots movements, such as the recent 'Arab Spring', Anabaptism arose in other parts of Europe. In southern Germany it was associated with the *Peasants' Revolt*, which Luther had opposed, favouring the exploiters rather than the exploited – a compromise symptomatic of the Protestant Church's reliance on the state. One supporter of the Peasants was Michael Sattler, a Benedictine monk who fled to Zürich and joined the Anabaptists. He was responsible for drafting the *Schleitheim Confession* which was adopted by the Swiss Brethren in 1527.

On the whole, Anabaptists were pacifists and were marked by their principled following of Jesus' ethical teaching, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7), rather than by subjective revelations. But there were '*inspirationists*' on the fringe of the movement, including those who

attempted to set up a theocracy in Münster in north-west Germany. Lacking the diplomatic skills that Calvin later showed in Geneva, and driven by prophetic enthusiasm, followers of Jan Matthys from the Netherlands relied on force to set up Münster as the 'New Jerusalem.' The failure of this rebellion is well-known, and made Anabaptism little more than a footnote in history books for centuries.

Despite the Münster fiasco, north-west Europe was a place of serious theological thought in the sixteenth century. Renaissance humanists, unlike modern secular humanists, were almost all Christians. Erasmus, perhaps the greatest of them, was a Dutch Catholic priest and an influence on Zwingli. His emphasis on reading the Bible rationally encouraged other priests to explore ideas such as 'community of goods' and believers' baptism (Francis, 2010, p. 9) – important ideas in developing Anabaptist thought. Menno Simons emerged as a respected leader among Dutch Anabaptists, who were later known as *Mennonites*. Calvin's influence later spread to the Netherlands in the form of the Dutch Reformed Church, though this was not good for Mennonites many of whom fled to Eastern Europe, England or eventually Canada.

Is the Bible flat?

The Reformations – Magisterial and Radical – happened in the sixteenth century, before the Enlightenment (the Age of Reason). All the Reformers wanted to take the Bible seriously, if rather more literally than would be common today.

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[3]See *http://www.calvinistcorner.com/tulip.htm*

The Reformations: Magisterial and Radical

The Magisterial Reformers – Luther, Zwingli and Calvin – sought justification for their doctrines of grace and salvation in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's letters. But their models of church-state alliance were more like the Old Testament, with monarchy and priesthood running side by side.

The early Christians were almost all pacifists, taking seriously teachings like 'Turn the other cheek' and 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5:39, 44). The Constantinian shift made pacifism impossible, as Christians owed loyalty to the Emperor, and were eligible for serving in the army. Stuart Murray writes:

> Once, being a Christian and joining the army had seemed incompatible, but now a Christian army was being assembled to defend an Empire that was becoming Christian; soon *only* Christians would be allowed to enlist. (Murray, 2004, p.48)

The Anabaptists rejected the Constantinian shift, and therefore rejected Christendom, whether Catholic or Protestant, as an untenable compromise. Theologically, as regards justification by faith they had much in common with the Protestants but they believed that faith entailed following Christ in life, not just assent to some doctrines.

Following on from this, they believed that the church was not formed by compulsory baptism of infants, but by true conversion to a life of discipleship. They therefore rejected the Reformers' distinction between a visible (mass) church and an invisible (real) church, and recognised only one type of church, visible and real.

While they read the Old Testament as well as the New, they did not regard both as of equal importance. In particular, the ethical teaching of Jesus was their 'rule of life,' the 'high point' of the Bible. This included love and non-resistance. (Bender, 1944.)

Glossary

Indulgences were grants to remit the punishment of purgatory.

Justification by faith is an act of God's grace, received solely by trust in God, in which sinners are declared innocent or 'righteous'.

Links

http://www.anabaptists.org/history/the-schleitheim-confession.html (The Schleitheim Confession)

http://www.calvinistcorner.com/tulip.htm (Matthew J. Slick, The Five Points of Calvinism)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magisterial_Reformation (Wikipedia, The Magisterial Reformation)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%BCnster_Rebellion (Wikipedia, The Münster Rebellion)

Discussion: An imaginative exercise

Imagine that you are a convinced Christian in the early sixteenth century. You do not see this same commitment in most of the people in your local church, whether Catholic or Protestant. Reflect on this summary of Anabaptist principles, based on the Schleitheim Confession. Give each of them a mark out of 10 indicating their appeal to you as you consider joining a small Anabaptist church.

a. **Baptism** (including admission to church membership) is only for those who have committed themselves to following Christ in the way they live.

b. **Breaking of bread** (communion) is only for those who have been baptised and are living consistent Christian lives.

c. **Church discipline.** Any who stop living consistent Christian lives should be warned once or twice privately. If they do not heed the warnings, they should be openly disciplined, and required to leave the church.

d. **Separation from evil.** Members of the Christian community will not enter into any alliance with outsiders which could lead to compromising their obedience to Christ.

e. **Pastors in the church** are responsible for teaching, leading worship, sacraments (baptism and communion) and church discipline. They must be of good reputation.

f. **Non-resistance.** As Jesus taught, violence must not be used in any circumstance, including resisting persecution. It is not fitting for a Christian to be a magistrate, soldier or police officer.

g. **Swearing oaths** by way of a promise is neither fitting nor necessary for a Christian, as Jesus taught that we should always keep our word.

If you can find someone else who has done this exercise, discuss your scores together. Do you think that these would be good principles for a Christian community today?

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