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Challenging Religious Issues

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Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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Approaching New Religious Movements

Richard Bartholomew

This article suggests that New Religious Movements should be understood as responses to the structure and knowledge of the modern world. It explains that 'alternative' religious beliefs and ideas can be found in individualised contexts as well as in formal groups, and argues for a balanced approach to whether particular NRMs are socially problematic. It further argues that NRMs should not be 'exoticised', and that they are of interest because of the insights they can offer into religion more generally.

Specification link: WJEC/CBAC RS1/2 CS: Introduction to Religion in Contemporary Society (AS), 3. Religion and Community.

Defining new religious movements

In popular usage, non-mainstream religious groups are often described as 'cults' or 'sects'. Sociologists of religion also use these words, but in a more circumscribed way, and they are wary of how these labels may imply a negative bias: Christian publications sometimes use 'cult' to refer to groups that they believe hold 'unorthodox' theological views. The term 'New Religious Movement' is a neutral alternative, although the historical context in which a group might be defined as 'New' may in fact now be some time in the past. It is of course possible to refer in a general way to 'new religious movements' in previous historical eras (for example, the Cathars of medieval France, or even the

Christians of the first century), but the formal term has not been embraced by historians and an 'NRM' is usually understood as meaning a movement that has emerged in the modern era, and in response to the conditions of modernity. These conditions include new patterns of social organisation, globalising communication networks, and increasing individualism and consumerism.

However, just as no one would announce that they belong to a 'cult', adherents do not usually see themselves as members of 'New Religions' but rather as belonging to organisations with new – or rediscovered – insights on ancient truths. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, for instance, dates to 1830, but adherents believe that *The Book of Mormon*, which was first

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published in that year, is in fact an ancient text that complements the Bible. NRMs assimilate ancient beliefs and/or adapt them to subsequent knowledge: *The Book of Mormon* connects the history of the Israelites and the life of Jesus to the Americas; the Baha'i Faith regards its nineteenth-century founder as the fulfilment of a revelation from God that encompasses Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and other prophets; the Unification Church (members of which dislike being called 'Moonies') connects Confucian ideas about the family to the work of Jesus. UFO groups like the Raëlians connect ancient religion with modern scientific cosmology by re-interpreting Jesus and the Buddha as extra-terrestrials.

The old idea of new religions

Many of the groups that are usually cited when the subject of 'New Religions' comes up have been established in the UK and other countries now for two or three generations or more. Charismatic founders have died, and their organisations are now run along more bureaucratic lines; members may have been raised within the group, rather than being converts. Occasionally, celebrity fads bring new trends to public notice (such as the singer Madonna's association with Michael Berg's Kabbalah Centre), but it is difficult to imagine a group leader capturing the public imagination in the same way as Reverend Sun Myung Moon (founder of the Unification Church) or L. Ron Hubbard (founder of Scientology) in previous decades.

This is perhaps because the context in which people choose alternative religious identities in the UK has changed. In the 1950s and 1960s, NRMs in the West were part of a 'counter-culture' in which

young people rejected social conformity in matters of dress, lifestyle and gender roles, and questioned the assumption that the scientific rationalism and religious heritage of the West offered the best way to understand the universe and facilitate personal growth and wellbeing. That historical moment has passed, and the primacy of personal choice is now taken for granted in today's consumer society. Identifying with religious ideas that either emerged or spread to the West during the twentieth century is no more counter-cultural than expressing a preference for non-traditional cuisine.

Alternative beliefs and individuals

However, adhering to non-traditional ideas does not necessarily imply membership of a particular organisation, much less 'total commitment' to a cause. Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, is a relatively new set of religious ideas in the West, but although books by the Dalai Lama are bestsellers, his popularity is not reflected in a flood of new members of Buddhist organisations. Organisations and individuals offering spiritual services and teachings may attract customers rather than members or followers.

One example of religious individualism is to be found in a recent interview with Noel Edmonds, a popular television presenter. According to Edmonds:

If you want to be happy you need to think of yourself as a container of energy. There is a universal energy, yes of course, it embraces us.

When you appreciate this, life becomes a lot more exciting. You don't live life, life lives you. There isn't such a thing as death, it's just departure. You cannot die. It's been known for a very long time.

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The energy leaves your container but it has to go somewhere. You cannot destroy energy. My energy will return to where it came from – part of a massive, incomprehensible universal web of energy.’ (Edmonds, in Jeffries and Bellfield, 2015)

Such beliefs are instantly recognisable as belonging to a ‘New Age’ milieu in which vaguely scientific and spiritual terms are intermixed, although Edmonds does not name any specific book or teacher.

Individualised religion has also been noted in relation to the USA. In 1996, sociologists interviewed a woman who explained her religious faith of ‘Sheilaism’, named for herself:

I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice... It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other. (in Bellah et al., 2008 [1985], p. 221)

The authors raised the possibility of there being ‘over 220 million American religions, one for each of us’.

It is not the case, however, that all religious beliefs are given the same amount of respect: Edmonds’ beliefs were reported in the media in a flippant tone, with an undercurrent of mockery.

NRMs and extremism

Despite the individualising trends discussed above, people do still continue as members of religious groups – and like religious beliefs, not all groups are regarded equally. Consider, for example,

what would happen if a serious contender for Prime Minister at the next national election were a member of an NRM. Questions would be asked about whether the candidate’s unusual religious beliefs were a sign of poor judgement, or perhaps even of mental instability. There would also be concerns that the group’s leadership would have an improper influence in running the country.

Such worries would reflect old concerns about NRMs: that groups have a dysfunctional relationship with wider society, and that members are in thrall to authoritarian leaders and irrational doctrines. Talk of ‘cults’ immediately brings to mind a roll-call of tragedies, such as the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway 20 years ago, or the mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. Sociologists of religion, by attempting to present NRMs sympathetically, have been accused of ignoring abuses and of acting as ‘cult apologists’. One scholar, writing a few years after the attack in Tokyo, observed that:

In recent years, the NRM research community displayed a general agreement on a *hierarchy of credibility* . . . according to which self-presentation by NRMs was epistemologically and logically superior to all outside accounts and observations. . . . Recent historical-behavioral autopsies enable us to realize that in every single case allegations by hostile outsiders, critics, and detractors have sometimes been closer to reality than any other accounts . . . Ever since Jonestown, statements by ex-members turned out to be just as accurate or more so than those of apologists and NRM

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researchers. (Beit-Hallahmi 2001, pp. 39, 62)

NRMs face persecution or strict controls in a number of countries. In some cases this is simply because an authoritarian government does not want there to be new social movements of any kind over which it does not have control; alternatively, there may be close links between a government and a particular religion. However, there may also be genuine concerns: in China, for instance, a Christian-based NRM in the mid-nineteenth century called the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom sparked a civil war in the south of the country.

If we focus less on the novel doctrines of New Religions – a tendency that can be seen as a form of exoticisation – and more on religious behaviour in general, we can sum up the broader concern in one phrase that is currently popular in the UK: *religious extremism*. For ‘mainstream’ members of a religion, ‘extreme’ means ‘distorted’ or ‘unbalanced’, and this is how religious groups tend to regard breakaway sects. For the adherent, however, ‘extreme’ signifies ‘purity’ and ‘total commitment’, in contrast to the comfortable but compromised religious mainstream. Some NRMs may thus provide insights into the allure of Islamic State for some young Muslims in the UK.

Normalising NRMs

In some ways, interest in NRMs is disproportionate to numbers and influence: the Unification Church, for instance, has just a few hundred members in the UK. Most groups go about their business without conflict with the authorities. Even the ‘New Age’ appeals to just a minority of (mainly middle-class) individuals, and there is

little evidence of such beliefs having a noticeable impact on how people live their lives. However, NRMs are worth studying for what they tell us about religion in general.

A famous example here is *When Prophecy Fails*, which was published in 1956. The authors studied a group in the USA which believed that on a certain date in the near future aliens would arrive and rescue them from a worldwide disaster. The researchers were interested in finding out how members of the group would react when the day came and the world continued as usual (controversially, they gathered their data by pretending to share the group’s beliefs, rather than asking the group’s consent; this kind of infiltration was later criticised as unethical).

Fortunately for the purposes of the study, the aliens did not arrive, and the researchers were in a position to explore how the adherents coped with the resulting ‘cognitive dissonance’, a mental discomfort caused by holding contradictory beliefs:

There is a way in which the remaining dissonance can be reduced. *If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct.* Consider the extreme case: if everyone in the whole world believed something there would be no question at all as to the validity of this belief. It is for this reason that we observe the increase in proselytizing following disconfirmation. (Festinger et al., 2008 [1956], p. 30)

The authors drew parallels with other situations, and also tentatively suggested that their finding may help to explain the rise of Christianity following the

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crucifixion of Jesus. Like all other classic studies, *When Prophecy Fails* has been subjected to criticism in the light of further research and analysis, but it remains a starting point for thinking about a particular dynamic within religion, and social psychology more broadly.

Further, if NRMs can tell us about religious extremism, they can also tell us about developments within mainstream religion. For example, Pentecostalism is seen as a new movement within Evangelical Christianity, but not as an NRM. Like an NRM, however, the Pentecostal movement is often characterised by new churches with charismatic leaders. Some of these leaders claim to receive messages from God, and to be empowered to perform supernatural healings; in some cases of strict leadership, there are accusations from ex-members and outsiders of 'cult-like behaviour'.

One study of Pentecostalism in the USA is famously entitled *Vision of the Disinherited*. According to the author:

I would hazard the hypothesis that status deprivation and an anti-rationalist, anti-bureaucratic – i.e.,

anti-modern – temper has combined to predispose most of the recruits to the neo-Pentecostal movement. Pentecostals, old and new, have typically testified that before their conversion to Pentecostalism they felt empty and hungry for God or for something they could not articulate. In short, they felt deprived. (Anderson, 1979, p. 229)

'Deprivation' usually means 'poverty', but it can also be a relative concept that applies to middle-class people who may be materially comfortable but dissatisfied with their circumstances. The factors cited here fit very well with the attraction of NRMs.

Conclusion

Social scientists often see their role as to make 'the strange familiar and the familiar strange'. It may be tempting to regard NRM beliefs and adherents as 'weird', but this kind of 'Othering' means that continuities with 'mainstream' religion are overlooked. In either context, you can find healthy functions, as well as problematic dysfunctions.

Link

<http://www.cesnur.org> (Center for Studies on New Religions)
<http://www.icsahome.com>
(International Cultic Studies Association)

<http://www.inform.ac> (The Information Network on Religious Movements)
<http://www.religioustolerance.org>
(Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance)

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Discussion points

1. Is there prejudice against NRMs in the UK? If so, what form does it take?
2. Given the secularisation of British society, can we still contrast NRMs with a 'religious mainstream'?
3. Why might NRM researchers sometimes be accused of being 'cult apologists'?

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Dr Richard Bartholomew has a PhD in the Study of Religion. His thesis was on the Christian publishing and bookselling industry in the UK, in the contexts of religious consumerism and mediated community. His publications include contributions to a guide to new religions entitled 30-Second Religion (ed. Russell Re Manning, 2011).

John Hick's Philosophy of Religion

Jeff Astley

The article critically surveys some elements of John Hick's thought.

Specification links: WJEC/CBAC RS1/2 CHR: Introduction to Christianity (AS), 1. Key beliefs; RS1/2 PHIL: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS), 3. Evil and suffering; 4. An introduction to religious experience; RS3 PHIL: Studies in Philosophy of Religion (A2), all sections; RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2), Religious experience and Life, death and life after death [in Philosophy of religion].

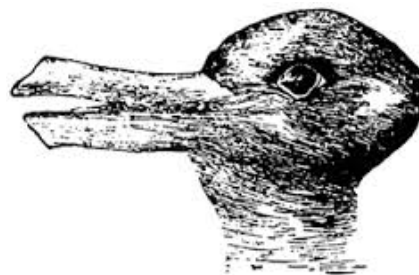
John Hick (1922-2012) was an influential philosopher of religion and liberal Christian theologian who taught in Britain and the United States (see Badham, 1990, 2009; Cheetham, 2009).

Faith and religious experience

For 'the great primary religious figures', Hick argues, belief in God is 'not an explanatory hypothesis . . . but a perceptual belief . . . [not] an inferred entity but an experienced personal presence' (Hick, 1970, p. 116). Religious faith is not, therefore, to be regarded as a 'propositional attitude', a matter of believing revealed propositions (transcendent truths), but as 'a form of cognition by acquaintance or cognition in presence' (1973, p. 38) – and thus of 'non-propositional revelation' of the Transcendent itself (1967; 1983, ch. 5).

Hick understands religious faith 'as the interpretative element within religious experience, arising from an act of cognitive choice' (1974, p. v). He draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's identification of

the role of 'seeing as' in seeing a puzzle picture, such as Jastrow's duck-rabbit, as either a duck or a rabbit (Wittgenstein, 1968, pp. 193-214).



Unlike Wittgenstein, Hick extends this category of seeing as to the act of recognising something as (say) a fork, arguing that someone from the Stone Age would not see cutlery in this way 'because they would not have these concepts or other surrounding cultural

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concepts'. For Hick, 'all seeing is seeing-as' or (more broadly) 'experiencing as', because 'all conscious experiencing involves recognitions which go beyond what is given to the senses' (Hick, 1974, p. 142; 1985, ch. 2; 2010, p. 65).

This recognition-interpretation is not a separate inference that is applied to the experience, 'a theory imposed retrospectively upon remembered facts', but the way in which things are actually experienced at the time (Hick, 1974, p. 143). In religion, too, it is not that people see the world, other people or historical events, and then argue to a transcendent presence and purpose from these observable facts, as an explanation of them. They see (for example) the world as God's creation, other people as God's children and the Exodus as God's saving act. Hence 'ordinary secular perceiving shares a common epistemological character with religious experiencing' (1973, p. 42).

Hick defines distinctively religious experiences (or 'mystical' experiences: 2008, p. 15) very broadly, as 'modifications of consciousness structured by religious concepts', and rejects the view that there is some common raw experience that is interpreted differently according to culturally-bound ways (1999, p. 110). The religious interpretation is already part of the experience.

There are different levels of freedom in a human being's interpretation of their experience. This is minimal in sensory experience, but is at its greatest in religious (or atheistic) interpretation (1974, p. 128; 1989, pp. 160-162; 1999, pp. 167-170). 'The more value laden the meaning the greater our cognitive freedom in relation to it' (2000, p. 272). Thus people adopt 'the religious mode of apperception' by an 'act of will' or a 'state of willingness or consent' (1973, p. 143).

But Hick also holds that great religious leaders were subject to such powerful religious experiences that their freedom of belief was in practice much more limited, and even possessed an 'involuntary and compelling quality' akin to that enjoyed by most people only with sense experience. 'They could no more help believing in the reality of God than in the reality of the material world' (1970, p. 112).

This raises a problem. If these people cannot help having the religious experiences (experiences interpreted religiously) that they have, in what sense are these interpretations open to the human will? Hick frequently claims that the world is religiously ambiguous (rather like a puzzle picture) and can rationally be interpreted in either religious or naturalistic ways. Hick distinguishes between (a) coming to an awareness of God, and (b) (afterwards) enjoying that experience: once people have allowed themselves freely to become conscious of God, 'that experience is, at its top levels of intensity, coercive. It creates the situation of the person who *cannot help* believing in the reality of God' (1970, p. 114). Even so, we might argue that individuals only have indirect control over their religious experiences, presumably by freely opening themselves up to the initial religious interpretation.

Religious diversity and truth

Reacting to his experience of religious diversity, Hick came to embrace a pluralist(ic) theology of religions. This views all great faiths 'as authentic and valid contexts of salvation/liberation'. Each constitutes a 'uniquely different (though overlapping) awareness of the ultimately transcendent Reality, as perceived through the "lens" of a particular religious tradition' (Hick, 1993b, p. 143) by 'the fifth dimension of our

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nature, the transcendent within us' (our spiritual nature), which answers and 'inclines us to respond' to the transcendent dimension that lies outside us (1999, pp. 2, 8-9, 167, 247, 253-254; cf. 1985, 1995, 2007).

Hick treats all religious experience as a particular reception and reaction to a *general* revelation. This is universally 'on offer' from the transcendent, which in the end Hick preferred simply to label 'the Real', which is active rather than passive in its relationship to human 'experience'. For Hick, the various religions are each 'a mix of culturally conditioned responses to a higher reality and the universal impingement of the Real' (Cheetham, 2009, p. 307).

Hick argues that religious beliefs and practices, while obviously *different*, deserve equal respect as ways of salvation and accounts of divine truth. Each is marred by human failings, but equally capable of leading people to their spiritual fulfilment of dying to self and experiencing transcendence. Hick employs the analogies of the sun's white light refracted into the different colours of the rainbow ('the spectrum of the different world faiths'); and of religions as 'human maps of the infinite divine reality made in different projections' (different conceptual systems) – although these maps all distort this reality, 'all may be equally useful in guiding our journey through life' (Hick, 2008, p. 12).

Critical realism

Hick rejected the view that God was merely a symbol or projected personification of spiritual ideals (Hick, 2010, p. 31). Rather, he held a 'realist' view, affirming that descriptions of God refer to an ultimate reality that actually exists outside human consciousness and language. While religious metaphors such as Father may 'picture' God and

are often 'fairly close to analogy' (1993a, pp. 42, 100 n. 2), they should not be treated as literal descriptions – a view associated with a 'naïve realism' that thinks of God as directly perceived or revealed. The *critical* realism that Hick adopts (Hick, 1993b, pp. 5-7) is the epistemological claim that we do not know things (even physical things) directly, but only through some medium of perception and thought, conditional on human categories of understanding and human language. Our human consciousness serves as an interpretative filter, and it continues to exercise that role in our experience and knowledge of God (Hick, 1989, pp. 133, 172-175, 240-249), even 'filtering out the Transcendent and reducing it to forms with which we can cope' (2008, p. 24). Nevertheless, Hick gives priority to religious language's non-descriptive function of transforming human beings: 'different mythologies may each be valid as ways of evoking, within the life of a particular faith community, human self-transcendence in relation to the Real' (Hick, 1989, p. 375).

Hick's critical realism is more radical than most. He takes up Immanuel Kant's distinction between an essentially unknowable 'noumenal' reality and its knowable 'phenomenal' reality – distinguishing what something is 'in itself' from 'how it appears to us' through our conceptual apparatus. Hick applies this view (as Kant did not) beyond our experience of the world to religious experience, calling the noumenal reality that lies beyond this experience, the transcendent, the Ultimate or the Real. This is 'transcategorical': it transcends our categories of understanding and description, including our analogies (1995, pp. 61-71). The personal gods and impersonal absolutes of religion are phenomenal manifestations of this

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ultimate mystery. But in denying that the notion of the Real can have any content (can it even be said 'to impinge' on us?), has Hick undermined the critical realist view of God (Cheetham, 2009, p. 310; see Hick, 1995, ch. 3)?

Trusting religious experience

Hick defines a rational belief as 'a belief which it is rational for the one who holds it to hold, given the data available to him' (1970, p. 115; cf. 109). He endorses the general epistemological principle of 'critical trust' in our experiences, unless we have some reason to doubt them (2010, p. 57). So Hick insists that individuals may rationally trust the veridicality of their own religious experiences, at least if these are powerful: 'a sufficiently vivid religious experience' would entitle a person 'to claim to know that God is real' (1974, p. 210; cf. Swinburne, 2004, pp. 303-322).

But this only applies to first-hand religious experience. In the case of sense experience (which is universal and public, because 'forced upon us' rather than a resistible option) we may also rely on the 'mutually reinforcing effects of the accumulated reports of others both now and in the past' (Goulder and Hick, 1983, pp. 37-38). But this can't apply in religious experience, at least for someone who 'does not participate at all in the field of religious experience', having no first-hand knowledge of it, however slight. Such a person should 'remain agnostic' and 'reserve judgment' (p. 44; contrast Swinburne, 2004, p. 322). So 'for the absolutely un-mystical – if such there are – there can be no good grounds for religious belief' (2008, p. 29).

There are still tests that we may apply to those who claim religious experience, such as whether we regard them 'as fully sane, sober and rational persons', including whether their claims are

'consistent with our other knowledge' based on 'the rest of our experience' (2008, p. 28). But Hick came to regard the key criterion for distinguishing 'between veridical and delusory religious experiences' (1999, p. 163) to be their effects in human life. 'The salvation/liberation which it is the function of religion to facilitate is a human transformation which . . . consists, as one of its aspects, in moral goodness' (1989, p. 309) or spiritual character (1995, p. 77); religions can only be judged, therefore, by 'their human fruits'. Hick's (Christian) critics are scathing that this does not 'settle the truth question', in that 'one *goal* of true religion' has been mistaken 'for a *criterion of truth* in religion'. But he responds that 'saving truth' is not comparable to other forms of truth, and maintains that a religion's truthfulness 'does consist in its power to bring people to the ultimate reality we call God, and thereby . . . to produce in them the kind of fruit' esteemed by the religions, in this present life (Okholm and Phillips, 1996, pp. 61, 78, 87, 185).

Problem of evil

Hick's response to the challenge that evil poses to belief in an all loving, almighty creator contains many elements, including a 'vale of soul-making' theodicy. This argues that growth in moral and spiritual virtues requires an environment where there are real difficulties, dangers and suffering, rather than a safe cage for a pampered pet, or a God who intervenes to protect his creatures from harms inflicted by Nature and others (see Astley, 2013). This risky world forms part of what he labels the 'Irenaean' theodicy, in contrast to the 'Augustinian' tradition. This chart summarises Hick's account of their contrasts and agreements (cf. Hick, 1968, ch. XII).

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'AUGUSTINIAN'

(e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Leibniz, and many traditional Catholic and Protestant accounts)

Responsibility for evil rests on created beings (angels and/or human beings) who have misused their freedom. Moral evil is their fault, and natural evil is the inevitable consequence (punishment) for that moral evil.

This tradition appeals to certain metaphysical views:

- evil is 'non-being' (God only creates good; evil is a going-wrong of good or is to be found where things are at the limits of existence);
- while some of the parts may be ugly, the whole picture is more beautiful as a result of the contrast;
- 'the principle of plenitude' (it is better for God to create at all the levels of existence, so that the universe is as full as it can be of beings - including those that suffer evil or cause it).

God's relationship with the universe is impersonal. Humans are created to complete the list of types of being.

Looks to the past (the Fall) for an explanation of the origin of evil.

The Fall is central to this theodicy. Adam (Man) was created perfect in a perfect world, but sinned deliberately.

'IRENÆAN'

(e.g. Irenaeus, Schleiermacher, Tennant, and many modern liberal accounts)

It is explicitly recognised that **God is ultimately responsible for the evil in the universe.** Moral evil is the fault of free human beings that God has created and permits to sin. God has deliberately put natural evil in the world to create the best environment for soul-making.

This tradition holds no such metaphysical views.

God's relationship with the universe is essentially personal. Humans are created for fellowship with God.

Looks to the future (heaven) for the justifying end, as God brings good out of evil.

The Fall is less important, or is denied altogether. Some argue that the Fall of Adam was like the sin of a child; others that mankind was created or evolved as 'fallen'. (Down here in the mud of the world, we might say, we are free to grow towards God without being overwhelmed by any direct knowledge of the divine nature.)

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The present world is not how God intends it to be. It should be a paradise without suffering, and human beings need to be saved from it by God's grace.

Our behaviour in this world will determine ***our ultimate destination in heaven or hell.***

The world is more-or-less how God intends it. It is a world with real temptations and risks: the only sort of world in which we can freely develop faith and virtue, and learn obedience through suffering, in co-operation with God's grace.

This tradition is ***more likely to reject the notion of hell.*** In the end all will be saved, perhaps through a continuing process of soul-making after death.

(Astley, 2000, pp. 65-66)

For criticisms of the Irenaean theodicy and Hick's responses, see Hick 1973, chs 4 and 5; 1977, pp. 372-384; Hick et al., 2001.

Because we have real human freedom (1983, pp. 41-42; 2006, ch. 10), our right actions cannot be guaranteed; but divine patience will await our 'progressive sanctification after death' (1968, pp. 383-384) through a series of rebirths/resurrected after-lives in physical environments

(perhaps in other universes), until we each fulfil our spiritual potential of transcending selfishness, and (in a non-embodied state) are somehow united with the Real (1976, part V; 2006, ch. 18). Although hell is a real threat for any who would be finally lost, in the end no one will enter it: 'hell exists, but is empty' (1973, p. 72).

Glossary

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge.

Moral evil: pain and suffering caused by human agents.

Natural evil: pain and suffering caused by Nature.

Naturalistic: excluding spiritual or supernaturalistic explanations.

Theodicy: a justification of God's justice in light of the evil of the world.

Transcendent: that which goes beyond the limitations of our being and experience.

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Links

http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/bce/mwt_themes_875_hick.htm (The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology)

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/hick> (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

<http://www.johnhick.org.uk/site> (John Hick: The Official Website)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C79JmHZ4QB8> (David Cheetham on John Hick)

Discussion points

1. Is Hick's defence of the rationality of religious belief successful?
2. How does Hick explain the diversity of religious belief?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the 'Irenaean theodicy'?
4. How do Hick's views challenge traditional Christian belief?

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The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith

Peter Watts

This article explores how much we can know about the historical figure of Jesus and outlines the way that a 'Jesus of history' arose as distinct from the church's 'Christ of faith' at the time of the Enlightenment. After discussing the implications of this division for Christianity, the article looks at whether it is possible to bring the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith back together within our typical twenty-first century understanding of what is historical and what is not.

Specification links: WJEC/CBAC RS3 CHR: Studies in Christianity (A2), 2. Contemporary Christological Debates; RS3 BS: Studies in Biblical Studies (A2), SECTION B: Studies in the New Testament, 2. The Significance of the Resurrection for the Early Church.

Introduction

In the New Testament Jesus asks his disciples, 'who do you say I am?' (Mark 8:29; Matthew 16:15; Luke 9:20) and the question 'who was Jesus?' stands at the heart of Christianity. In fact, for martyrs from the disciples onwards the answer has been a matter of life and death.

The issue has also generated much controversy elsewhere, not least through various conspiracy theories about whether Jesus had a wife and children. But for some the question 'who was Jesus?' is a non-starter: the Jesus of the Gospels simply did not exist. So-called 'Jesus mythicists' who hold this position include Robert M. Price and G. A. Wells, but it finds little support among historians. This is largely because of the range of sources that refer to Jesus within a relatively short time after his death – not

only the New Testament, but also the Roman historian Tacitus and the Jewish historian Josephus. The best-selling American biblical scholar Bart Ehrman, an agnostic who disputes the historical value of much of the Gospels, puts it this way: 'whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist' (Ehrman, 2013, p. 4). Instead, the controversy surrounding the question 'who was Jesus?' is about whether the Jesus Christ worshipped by Christians across two millennia and throughout the world today is a historically accurate description of the Jesus that walked the earth in the first century. Or, to use the terms introduced by the German theologian Martin Kähler in 1892 and adopted by scholars ever since: to what extent does the 'Jesus of history' correspond to the 'Christ of faith'?

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Who is the Christ of faith?

A representative description of the Christ of faith can be found in the Apostles' Creed, which has been used in some form since at least the fourth century and is still recited regularly in churches today: 'I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.' Statements of belief like this were formulated through painstaking discussion and heated debate amongst the leading theologians of the day and they provide a neat answer to the question 'who was Jesus?' precisely because this is a key aspect of Christian faith. The source material was found in the New Testament and especially the Gospels but the effort needed to produce the creeds illustrates how matters of Christology – most importantly, how is Jesus to be understood in relation to God the Father? – were not necessarily self-evident in the Bible. The issue at stake for the early generations of Christians was not whether the New Testament texts were historically accurate, but how a true and coherent understanding of Jesus could be established from the various Gospels and epistles.

The birth of the Jesus of history

This situation changed dramatically with the dawning of the Enlightenment. From the seventeenth century the widespread assumption that the Gospels were accurate biographies of Jesus was strongly disputed. As well as a suspicion

of tradition – especially of the Church – the Enlightenment brought a desire to re-examine history in strictly-defined rational and scientific terms. And there was clearly much for the Enlightenment historian to take issue with in the Gospel stories of Jesus, which are full of 'unnatural' things such as miracles and exorcisms. Consequently, Geza Vermes argues, 'blind faith in the literal truth of the Gospels ended . . . in the late 1800s' (Vermes, 2007); by then the scriptures had become a legitimate object of the same historical scrutiny (known as historical criticism) that was applied to other texts and the traditional Christian view of Jesus Christ had come under intense attack.

In the Enlightenment way of looking at things the Christ of faith came to be understood as a misguided projection onto the historical figure of Jesus that resulted from the irrational emotional experiences of the disciples and early followers of Jesus after his death. The task was to get beyond the Gospel narratives to reconstruct a definitive historical biography of Jesus; only this Jesus could be considered as 'real' or 'true'. The implications of this soon became clear: When Reimarus, a teacher from Germany, produced alternative explanations of various episodes in Jesus' life in the mid-eighteenth century, he intended not only to present the truth about the historical Jesus but to demonstrate that traditional Christianity was misguided (which is why Reimarus chose not to publish his essays on this topic during his lifetime). In the wake of Reimarus came other bold attempts to proclaim what could *really* be known about Jesus. D. F. Strauss (1808-74), for example, focused on challenging the historicity of the miracles in the Gospels, while Ernest

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Renan (1823-92) painted a picture of Jesus as a great moral teacher but little else. On the one hand, if Jesus was not the person the Gospels and the church say he was, then traditional Christian faith could not stand, and yet each of these three scholars also had a more positive agenda: they hoped that their portraits of the historical Jesus would help the church to reinvent itself for the modern age.

It is not just Christians who have a motive to proclaim who Jesus really is, however. This is apparent all the way through to Richard Dawkins who has more enthusiasm than many Christians to set the record straight about Jesus – at least from his perspective. This is not just about re-evaluating an individual's legacy, as was the case recently when it emerged that Lance Armstrong's sporting glory was reliant on chemical help and a huge cover-up operation. Instead, the re-writing of Jesus' biography means reconsidering the history of billions of people shaped by the Christian belief that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, died for the sins of the world, rose again and will judge the living and the dead. Is the faith of all these Christians deluded and are their lives misguided if historians can establish that Jesus was not whom the Gospels say he is? Or, as those such as Reimarus suggested, have generations of Christians been unwitting victims of a deliberate manipulation of the truth about the historical Jesus, a deception that came about in order to help the Christian religion grow in influence and power?

It may come as a surprise that the theologian who dealt most influentially with the question of the historical Jesus went on to be one of the most notable Christian missionaries of the twentieth century, despite concluding that Jesus

was not the perfect human and divine figure portrayed by the church. Step forward Albert Schweitzer – theologian, medical doctor, philosopher, musicologist and owner of a truly impressive moustache. In particular, Schweitzer suggested that Jesus was mistaken in his view about the imminent end of the world and died a failure because he had not brought about the kingdom of God on earth. Once more, however, this is not entirely negative in its implications for Christianity. In light of Schweitzer's research and his own biography, some scholars have seen it as positive to separate the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith: arguing that central aspects of the Christian faith, such as the resurrection, are to be understood not through historical investigation but through faith, and therefore Christianity is protected from the various attempts to redefine the Jesus of history. As Schweitzer wrote: 'Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery' (Schweitzer, 2000, p. 479).

As well as presenting his own view of Jesus, Schweitzer evaluated those earlier attempts to discover the historical Jesus that had resulted in such a diversity of 'Jesuses'. Schweitzer concluded that the 'mistake' of those involved was 'to suppose that Jesus could come to mean more to our time by entering into it as a man like ourselves.' (Schweitzer, 2000, p. 479), an idea that is more vividly known to us through George Tyrrell's elegant description of a biblical scholar who looks into a well to find the historical Jesus and ends up describing a pale reflection of himself (Tyrrell, 1963, p. 49). In other words,

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supposedly rational and objective attempts to describe the historical Jesus were biased by the particular culture and context in which they arose. Or, as Dale Allison has suggested more recently, 'we wield our own criteria to get what we want' (Allison, 2009, p. 59).

Despite this problem, the quest of the historical Jesus continues in the 21st century without any signs of either running out of steam or reaching a consensus. There is a loose agreement on the bare minimum that can be considered as historically accurate within the canonical Gospels, usually that Jesus lived in the small Galilean town of Nazareth at some point in his life, was baptised and crucified. Beyond this, the picture of Jesus of Nazareth that emerges is remarkably diverse - ranging from a wandering wise man or a preacher of social reform to a prophet of impending destruction. The quest for *the definitive* account of the historical life and teaching of Jesus is, therefore, very much still on.

Can the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith be reconciled?

Where does all this leave the Christ of faith – other than showing that many believe the reality of the Jesus of history was radically different? Here we need to follow Schweitzer and take a critical view of the various studies of the historical Jesus. For in the diversity of the portraits of the historical Jesus today there is something that many share in common: It is not only that the incarnation (i.e. God becoming man through a miraculous virgin birth), miracles and resurrection *are not* considered to be part of the life of the historical Jesus but that they *cannot* be historical. In sticking to an Enlightenment understanding of history it

seems that there must always be an unbridgeable gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith from the outset. This is how Roland Deines describes the situation: 'History and faith can live peacefully together so long as they are divorced from each other, as long as faith-based claims about certain occurrences are clearly demarcated as confessional statements only' (Deines, 2013, p. 18). But the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith will always remain a critical question for Christianity because it is a religion centred on the conviction that God acts in history. Faith in God relates to faith in his actions and these centre on the first century figure of Jesus of Nazareth. For most Christians, for example, it is of vital importance that the resurrection was a historical event, an idea which was expressed by the apostle Paul to first century Christians in Corinth: 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).'

One scholar who *has* been willing to tackle the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is Joseph Ratzinger. The fact that Ratzinger is better known as Pope (now Emeritus) Benedict XVI means it is unsurprising that he wants to hold together the Jesus of history and Christ of faith. Nevertheless, his approach is significant for the debate as a whole. Ratzinger argues that if 'Jesus [was] a failed religious leader . . . he would remain purely human, and his authority would extend only so far as his message is of interest to us' (Ratzinger, 2011, pp. 241-242). In other words, if Jesus does not somehow relate to God and is limited

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to our commonly accepted Enlightenment standards of history and objectivity then there is no way that this Jesus can really matter. (You might recognise a certain similarity here with C.S. Lewis' famous apologetic claim that Jesus is either mad, bad or God.) Instead, Ratzinger suggests that to understand the historical Jesus it is important to understand what it meant for Jesus, in his own lifetime, to be utterly shaped by his close relationship with God. And since it is the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead that means he is as important as he is in the world today, then any history of Jesus must attempt to deal with this – even if the resurrection needs to be seen as 'an event of an entirely new kind' (Ratzinger, 2011, p. 275) within history. In this way, Ratzinger urges that God is somehow allowed back into the picture when it comes to considering history and therefore the historical Jesus.

Conclusion

Perhaps this article has raised as many questions as it addresses: How do we assess what is historical and what is real, meaningful and true? Does Christian faith have a reasonable historical basis? To explore big issues such as these is what makes biblical research exciting, and it is why the question of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith has remained a hot topic for 300 years. But I hope it has become clear that in approaching this issue we need to be critically aware of how we understand what is historical and what is not: what we discover about Jesus very much depends on the unexpressed and often unacknowledged limits with which we begin the quest.

Glossary

The Enlightenment was a period from the early seventeenth century to the late eighteenth century in which there was great upheaval in Western thought and culture due to

the re-evaluation of religion, philosophy, science and politics in line with a new emphasis on the supremacy of human reason.

Links

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/theories.html> (Early Christian Writings: Historical Jesus Theories)

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

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IE_Lzek1FWgk&list=PL46F46C0CECF1364B&index=54 (Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Nottingham, 'Why Study...?' Video Series: Jesus Christ)

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Discussion points

1. Do you think it matters if the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history are found to be different? If so why; if not why not?
2. To what extent are the Gospels historically reliable? It might help to think through related questions such as 'when were they written?', 'who wrote them?' and 'what was their purpose?'
3. Does allowing for the *possibility* that God was active in and through Jesus change the way we should understand the Jesus of history?

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The Five Pillars of Islam and their Significance in Modern Society

Declan O'Sullivan

This article defines the five pillars of Islam, indicating when there are legitimate exceptions for a devout Muslim to postpone undertaking them based on specific circumstances arising in the context of the modern secular world within which Muslims also live.

Specification links: RS1/2 WR: Western Religions (AS): SECTION A: Introduction to Islam, 3. Beliefs and practices.

The Five Pillars of Islam (*arkān-al-Islām*)

The word for creed in Arabic is *'aqīdah*, which represents the articles of faith in the Qur'anic teachings, including belief in one God, angels, prophets, scriptures and the final day of judgement. Although there is an obvious division between Shī'a and Sunnī beliefs, both denominations of Islam follow the same creed and five pillars of faith. In Arabic, the terms used are the *arkān-al-Islām* – 'pillars of Islam', and also *arkān ad-dīn* – 'pillars of the religion'.

The five pillars are often referred to in the order of *shahādah*, *salāt*, *zakāt*, *ṣawm* and *hajj*, as portrayed in a significant *hadīth* (tradition) referred to as *Hadīth Jibril* (The Gabriel Narration). This provides a very succinct summary of their meaning, used to enable both

Muslims and non-Muslims to understand what faith (*īmān*) means in Islam. The truly first and most fundamental is enunciated in this *Hadīth*:

A man dressed in white came and sat down so close to the Prophet while he was with his Companions that his knees touched the knees of the Prophet, and said: 'O Messenger of God, what is Islam?' The Prophet answered, 'To bear witness that there is no god but God and that I am the Messenger of God [*shahādah*]; that one should perform the prayers [*salāt*] and pay the legal alms [*zakāt*] and fast in the month of Ramadān [*ṣawm*] and make pilgrimage to the House [in Makkah, *hajj*] if that is possible for one.'
(*Hadīth Jibril*)

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Shahādah

The Islamic creed as the declaration of faith is called *shahādah*. It is considered the first pillar, due to its obvious significance for any devout Muslim to declare the core beliefs of Islam. It is made up of two separate statements, known as the 'two testifications' (*ash-shahādātān*) or the dual *shahādah*. The *shahādātān* reads: 'There is no God but Allāh and Muhammad is his Prophet' (Doull, 2006, p. 46).

When a person converts to Islam, the only requirement to confirm their new faith is for the convert to recite the *shahādah* three times, with true belief and unconditional honest acceptance, in the presence of at least one other Muslim witness. This repeated declaration proves the convert's genuine sincerity. The *shahādah* is also known as the *kalimah* ('the word').

Salāt

The second pillar of Islam is *ṣalāt* (prayer), sometimes spelt *salāh*. Five ritual prayers, each preceded by cleaning the body through ablutions (*wuḍū'*), are observed daily: *ṣalāt al-fajr* (dawn), *aḏ-ḏuḥr* (midday), *al-‘aṣr* (afternoon), *al-maghrib* (sunset), and *al-‘ishā'* (evening). To perform these prayers, Muslims stand up straight with their head down, hands at their sides and the feet evenly spaced. At the end of the prayers the Muslim rests in a kneeling position, offering a blessing of peace to the angels that sit on the left and right shoulders. A Muslim will look over the right shoulder at the angel that records good deeds, giving the blessing *as-salāmu ‘alaykum wa rahmatullaah* – 'Peace and blessings of God be upon you', then look over the left shoulder at the angel that records their bad deeds and offer the same blessing.

The *fātiḥah* means 'The Opening' and is the title of the first *sūrah* (chapter) of the Qur'an. It is revered by Muslims by reciting it in each standing (*rak'ah*) of the five set prayers each day. It is repeated seventeen times a day and always concludes with *amin* (amen). The *fātiḥah* is often recited as part of the *du‘ā'*, or individual and unprompted prayer. The *du‘ā'* is a separate prayer, which may be said spontaneously during any time of the day rather than being part of the set prayers of the *salāt*. There is no set age limit for practising the daily prayers, and 'Muslim children as young as seven are encouraged to pray' (BBC, 2009).

Zakāt

The next pillar is *zakāt*, which can also be transliterated as *zakāh*. This form of charity, provided by those capable of doing so, is extremely important in Islam. The word translates to mean 'purification' and derives from the verb *zakā* which means 'to thrive', 'to be wholesome' and 'to be pure'. As *zakāt* is based on each adult willingly providing a certain proportion of their wealth beyond their basic sustenance and personal needs, it is seen as a form of obligatory taxation on one's possessions. These alms do not necessarily involve money; an alternative contribution for rural farmers can be an amount of their crops or a specified number of livestock. The minimum contribution that each Muslim is required to provide is known as *nisbah*, and is 2.5% of each Muslim's annual net wealth. *Zakāt* is used for people in society who are in need, and also promotes the faith of the one who gives. It is used to relieve people in debt, and to help travellers who are without adequate funds for food, clothing or accommodation. Traditionally it was also a way of freeing slaves.

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Essentially, the primary forms of wealth that are subject to *zakāt* include gold, silver, livestock, agricultural products, and shares and bonds, together with other liquid assets.

There is also an alternative form of voluntary aid towards charity, referred to as *sadaqāh*. The term *sadaqāh* derives from the root-word *sadaqā* which means 'to speak truth' or 'to be true'. This word is used frequently in the Qur'an, in its plural form as *sadaqāt* – 'deeds of kindness and generosity'. One specific form of *sadaqāh* occurs during the celebration of *'Īd al-Fitr*, the celebration at the end of the *Ramadān* when Muslims offer a certain quota of grain for distribution to the poor.

(A similarity may be noted here between Judaism and Islam, because the word in Hebrew related to charity is *Tzedakah* and both translate into English to mean 'righteousness': Woodberry, 1996, p. 180.)

Sawm

The term used for fasting in Islam is *ṣawm*. In the early days of Islam, Muhammad recommended believers to fast in order to establish a form of strict discipline. The most important ceremony involving fasting in the Islamic calendar is the month of *Ramadān*, where there is fasting from dawn to sunset every day for four weeks. During *Ramadān* the breaking of the fast occurs each evening when the family sit together to eat, or large gatherings of many members of the community meet to eat and celebrate together. This part of the day is called *iftar*. Based on the example of the Prophet Muhammad, the fast is traditionally broken each evening after sunset by eating dates or salt. Once the new moon becomes visible, this indicates the start of the *'Īd al-Fitr* festival at the end of *Ramadān*.

The fasting does not just focus only on food and drink, but also includes abstaining from sexual intercourse with one's spouse and from tobacco. Beyond the denial of physical activities, the faithful 'are also expected to do their best to avoid evil thoughts and deeds as well' (BBC, 2009). There are several other occasions throughout the year which also involve fasting. However, as these other celebrations and ceremonies are based on the *sunnah* or *hadith* (tradition) they are not obligatory for every Muslim.

Hajj

The word *Hajj* represents the annual pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca). This occurs during the month of *Dhū l-Hijjah*, the twelfth and final month of the Islamic Calendar. It is known as 'the greater pilgrimage' or the 'canonical pilgrimage'.

There is an obligation for every adult Muslim to undertake the *Hajj* on at least one occasion during their life, should they be healthy enough and both financially and physically able. Those who attend wear a white linen garment made of two pieces of seamless and unstitched cloth called the *ihram*.¹ The pilgrims tend to dress modestly, thus proclaiming the equality and humility of all believers before God, regardless of worldly differences in race, nationality, class, age, gender or culture. This was clearly expressed in a letter sent from Makkah by Malcolm X, who later became known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, during his own *Hajj* experience in April, 1964. He declared that he had witnessed the unity of the ummah, realising that Muslims are of every colour of skin and every level of wealth.

¹ In the last stages of the *Hajj* the pilgrims replace this with their national or traditional local dress, as a symbol of their inevitable return to the profane and secular world.

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There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colours, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white . . .

Never have I been so highly honoured. Never have I been made to feel more humble and unworthy. Who would believe the blessings that have been heaped upon an American Negro? A few nights ago, a man who would be called in America a 'white' man, a United Nations diplomat, an ambassador, a companion of kings, gave me his hotel suite, his bed.
(Malcolm X, 1964)

During the *Hajj* pilgrims symbolically re-enact several events that occurred in the lives of Abraham (*Ibrāhīm*), his Egyptian partner Hagar, and their son Ishmael (*Ismā'īl*). The first event is the *tawāf*, when each pilgrim walks seven times counter-clockwise around the Ka'aba.

When it is fully and correctly undertaken, the *hajj* absolves the pilgrims from all their previous sins; thus attending the *hajj* is a personal act of repentance for a Muslim. (The word for repentance in Arabic is *tawbāh* and it is a major theme throughout the Qur'an.) As attending the *hajj* is held in such high esteem within the Islamic community, a Muslim may choose to add the prefix *al-Hajj* (pilgrim) to their name. This is both a formal title and a public recognition of their dedicated achievement of the final pillar of their faith in Islam.

There is another form of pilgrimage which can be performed at any time of the year. This '*Umrah* or 'lesser

pilgrimage' is also undertaken by pilgrims going to Makkah and undertaking similar symbolic acts and rituals, but it is not an obligation.

The Five Pillars and the Ummah

All five pillars are significant and meaningful to the ummah, the entire worldwide community of Muslims. For example, every Muslim is aware that their brothers and sisters are also praying at the same time, while also implementing the *qiblah* – i.e. facing the Ka'aba in Makkah. This expresses a feeling of complete unity amongst all Muslims: men, women and children, praying at the same time with everyone facing in the same direction. Another unifying factor is that all the prayers and recitations are delivered in Arabic, irrespective of the native language of the local Muslim community. Offering *zakāt* also gives people the feeling of offering something practical to those in need in the wider ummah, both the Muslim and non-Muslim community, instead of just offering prayers or thoughts.

'It should be noted that *jihād* is not one of the five pillars, although some have given it an unofficial status of being the "sixth" pillar' (DeLong-Bas, 2009; see also O'Sullivan, 2014).

Conclusion

Fulfilling these obligations provides the framework of a Muslim's life, by intertwining the practical routines and duties they must undertake with their daily activities, while also maintaining their deeply revered inner beliefs. 'No matter how sincerely a person may believe, Islam regards it as pointless to live a life without putting that faith into action and practice' on a daily basis. These factors connect in a smooth flow of religious commitment, dedication and

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unconditional devotion while Muslims undertake the more mundane practicalities of modern-day life. 'Carrying out the Five Pillars demonstrates that the Muslim is putting their faith first, and not just trying to fit it in around their secular lives' (BBC, 2009).

It is clear that, ideally, all the five pillars should be followed by all Muslims (Shī'a and Sunnī) as an obligation. Of the five, the *shahādah* is clearly an absolute obligation at all times of day, so as to consistently and repeatedly witness the sincere and unquestionable belief in Allāh and the Prophet Mohammad. For *salāt*, the five daily prayer times can be postponed under specific circumstances – including serious illness, a very long journey, being a member of the military while at war or an employee or student coping with a heavy workload, or others under similar pressures. In such cases, a reduction or a suitable delay of these prayer times is allowed, although the prayers must be made up at a later date, when circumstances are more appropriate.

Certain situations allow legitimate exceptions for the other pillars. For example, a Muslim is allowed to avoid *ṣawm* (fasting) if they are ill or travelling a long distance; or if a woman is in her menstruation period, pregnant or after the birth of her child. However, this is under the condition that the Muslim is still required to fulfil the full amount of the required *ṣawm* by making up the period of fasting at a later date when they are able to do so. This is particularly relevant for those who suffer from any serious eating disorder, including anorexia or bulimia. A female teenager from Birmingham interviewed by the BBC explained how she coped with being a Muslim while suffering from an eating disorder (Kadri, 2015). Focusing on her

health needs during her recovery meant that she avoided fasting, especially during Ramadān. 'Last year I didn't fast at all, and that was a difficult decision to come to because my faith is important to me.' She realised that this 'was the right decision', however, because fasting might be detrimental to her recovery., During Ramadān in the following year, she decided to fast on just some days to overcome the side effects of her illness, completing the full amount at a later date, when she could cope. She was supported in this perspective by an imam from the Birmingham Central Mosque, who argued that in any sort of worship 'where health becomes an issue, that worship has to stop.' He added, 'Instead of fasting, people can pay Fidyah where they pay over the month for a poor person to eat', which is a charitable alternative that directly links in with the other pillar of *zakāt*. This supports the idea that all the five pillars are interconnected and can be used as alternatives to support one another.

The teenager reinforced the acceptance of alternative ways of expressing one's faith physically, by strengthening her healthy lifestyle, when she declared: 'Religion shouldn't stand in the way of recovery, it should aid it.' 'It took me a while to realise that not fasting last year doesn't make me a bad person, it makes me a good one. I made a choice to look after my body and mind' (Kadri, 2015).

In the case of the *hajj*, the general obligation for all Muslims to undertake the pilgrimage during at least one point in their life is restricted to those who are physically fit enough to endure its activities, are able to afford the travel and accommodation costs, and are 'sane adults' (BBC, 2009). Clearly the *zakāt* is only possible for those who have some

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savings and can afford to pay 2.5% of their extra wealth. The devout faith of those who are extremely poor or homeless is not doubted, although they can only be the recipients of the *zakāt* and not donors. It is possible, therefore, for most Muslims in modern secular,

multi-faith or multi-cultural society to undertake the *shahādah* and the *salāt*, and still be an entirely committed Muslim, even if the charity donations (*zakāt*), the full engagement of fasting (*ṣawm*), and the ability to attend the *hajj* is far out of their reach.

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Discussion points

1. If a Muslim can never attend a *hajj* in their entire lifetime, how could they still be considered a devout, committed and dedicated Muslim?

2. What are the exemptions a Muslim may consider as being legitimate to avoid undertaking *salāt* and *ṣawm*? Are such exceptions consistent with their religious commitment?

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3. Under what circumstances might it be justifiable for a person to live as a devout Muslim by only professing the *shahādah* and following no other pillar of faith?

4. What arguments might be used for and against the claim that *jihād* may be regarded as a sixth pillar of Islam?

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