The Compatibility of Incompatibles

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Most religious faiths claim that their teachings alone are true, and that they are true for everyone; other faiths, it follows, are mistaken. This uniqueness and universality is affirmed, for instance, on behalf of Christianity by the Archbishop of Canterbury (the Pope is not so sure). However implausible such a claim may appear, it is at least intelligible. But it does not help to alleviate the religious conflict with which these articles are concerned. For how can different religious traditions be reconciled if it is part of their essence to exclude one another?

An approach that is gaining ground is to suggest, against the traditionalists, that different creeds somehow have an equal claim to truth. The first two columnists in this series, Kenneth Cragg and Indarjit Singh, both attempt a solution along these lines. But they are trying to square the circle. Many of the doctrines of the different faiths are simply incompatible, and to pretend otherwise is a fudge.

One can understand the motives behind the attempt. Even someone committed to a particular religion can become aware of the sheer oddity of believing that only one faith has the answer. And the only other option – to be equally sceptical of the claims of all faiths – frustrates the liberal desire to be open-minded in as many directions as possible. But the idea that all faiths are true together still fails to make sense.

Imagine a similar proposal made in a non-religious context. If flat-earthers suggested that their central belief was compatible with that of those for whom the earth is banana-shaped, they would not get a hearing. This is doubtless a crude analogy. But even if religious truth is to some degree a special case, it must obey the usual ground rules of logic, or it does not deserve the name.

Of course, any religion may be watered down until there is nothing left to conflict with its rivals. Doctrines may be abandoned, or reinterpreted as symbolic or metaphorical – and more than one metaphor can safely be said to apply to the same reality. But this is the abdication of faith, not its adaptation, and is fatal to its ability to provide what believers seek.

Both Bishop Cragg and Mr Singh recognise, with disarming frankness, the capacity of religion to reinforce the dark tendencies in human nature. But in offering their proposed remedies they equivocate. Bishop Cragg writes: 'it is for each faith to interrogate itself as to why it is, and must remain, distinctive. What does it have which warrants its exceptionality? How far . . . can that which it believes only it possesses inter-penetrate with the crucial thing that others say they represent?'
The implication is that such 'inter-penetration' (rather a foggy term) is indeed possible; and the Bishop goes on to speak of a 'plural world' and 'a positive coexistence'. This might make sense if religions were jointly engaged on a sort of cosmic jigsaw puzzle, each attending to

different areas of the picture. But this is not how they conceive their task. Religions are intended as solutions to the whole puzzle.

Mr Singh is clearer: 'Religions . . . must be made to put aside exaggerated claims to omnipotence [omniscience?] and direct lines to God, and be persuaded to work co-operatively in the service, not of God as sometimes pompously claimed, but of their fellow human beings.' But this package is not an option for religions as they stand: they precisely address themselves to the supra-human realm, and to man's relations with its denizen(s).

We may think that it is absurd for us mortals to try to talk sense about the transcendent, but we have a deep-seated need to try, and religions are the upshot. Mr Singh says that 'no one religion has a monopoly on truth'; but the point of religions is to tell us the truth authoritatively, and if they abandon that role they abandon their status as religions.

What then can we hope for? If a faith cannot cease to be competitive except by abandoning its claim to have the only answer, and if it cannot remain a faith without upholding such a claim, then the potential for religious antagonism will be eliminated only by the demise of organised religion as we know it. This is not a plea for wholesale positivism or atheism, nor a denial of religion's beneficent side. It is only to insist that we should not delude ourselves by talking nonsense about the compatibility of incompatibles.

Different approaches to life can be jointly accepted without incoherence only if they can free themselves from overweening universalism. This way lies a conception of a plural world that makes sense. I mean the view that, though there is certainly a basic stock of universal human values, these allow an indefinite variety of ways of living, none of which can be rationally preferred to the others. These different options, collectively pursued, we call cultures, and the world is enriched by their diversity.

There are many serious problems attendant on multi-culturalism, but conflict of universalist beliefs need not be among them, once the religious element, dominant in many existing cultures, is discounted. It may be deeply unrealistic to hope that this element might wither away, but so long as it remains, trouble is in the wings. You cannot build a stable pluralist order out of absolutist components.

Let a hundred flowers blossom, by all means: but they must be flowers, not the invasive weeds of ideologies that claim unique possession of truth. Naturally freedom of conscience should be respected as an essential component of civilised life. Toleration, except in the face of intolerance, is essential. But a pluralist will not encourage, as part of the diversity he celebrates, creeds that necessarily exclude alternative visions.

Of course, many believers combine unquestioning acceptance of the unique truth of their particular faith with a completely peaceable attitude to other faiths. Whole religions may be quiescent in this way at a particular time (such as contemporary Christianity, some would say). But this does not win them pluralist support. They still contain the permanent seeds of conflict, because they cannot remain true to themselves while allowing other moralities equal status.

We know that evils such as aggressive nationalism can feed off a misplaced sense of religious superiority. This strengthens the case against an acquiescent attitude to religious dogma. But politicians who talk about conflicts fuelled by religious extremism never blame the faiths that

fuel the extremism. Their silence implies an assumption that somehow, one day, faiths can all be fitted together harmoniously, without conflict or loss.

This is an evasion. Even if it is not yet a conceivable explicit aim of a democratic political programme to discourage divisive religious certainties, it is not constructive to pretend that religious conflict is to no degree the fault of religious faith as such. There are plenty of sources of strife, hatred and violence apart from religion; but the burning conviction, endemic in religious belief, that you alone know the truth is a villain worth flushing out.

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