

Landmarks at Sea

Warning against exclusive claims to The Truth, Philip Smith considers how religious traditions can help us towards kind hearts and a kind society.

Picture the scene. You are joining your friends on the shore of your island to row out, across a wide choppy sea, to the mainland just visible on the horizon. You set out. As rowers your eyes are on your point of departure. Keeping in line from there you hope to steer fairly straight towards your goal.

Now call the sea our life, and our destination the kingdom of Heaven. It's a metaphor of course. It is a physical place, the place of justice and peace we should be striving for on our planet. The Bible says a lot about this – more than it speaks of a life beyond death. But it is also a place in our psyche, a place and time which we find ourselves calling 'heavenly'. So aiming for the kingdom of Heaven involves making the place where you live a peaceable place of justice and mutual caring; and also it's where you can just *be*, in spiritual contentment in this life and beyond.

Now see this metaphor as where we are amongst the world's religions and faiths. Hopefully we are all aiming to row towards much the same destination, which we see as Truth, though you could be forgiven for wondering. We may be setting sail from different points on the shore, and we may not end up at exactly the same pier. But we believe that the kingdom of Heaven, of Truth, is large enough to accommodate all who find their way there.

In my congregation we have recently had speakers from three of these other traditions. They have each claimed to have had, in the past, final truth revealed to them. The problem is that they all differ! So can we be sure that any one is not the only correct course?

First, we had a professor of philosophy and a noted spokesperson for the Roman Catholic Church. He was prepared to question everything except his certainty that the Roman Catholic

tradition was a given by God. Everything had to flow from that fixed position. Logical? Or wishful thinking? After all, the Christian history reveals very many differing views on what the true gospel may be, and surely his is only one of these.

Then we had an outspoken minister of the 'wee' Free Church of Scotland whose fixed point is his interpretation of the Reformed, biblical, literal take on theology and politics. He was blunt and dogmatic. But true? I see him as having started from the Christian, biblical, position but then becoming stuck around the Reformation of 1560 on a sandbank half way to the destination and unable to progress further.

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Soon after we had the rabbi of an Orthodox, Conservative, Jewish congregation. Their fixed point is the law said to have been declared by Moses. This is final and absolute forever. The two subsequent Talmudic writings flow from this, and even such writings finished with the Babylonian Talmud in the 5th century. No other apparently can be forthcoming. Truth is all referred backwards in time. They seem to me to have let down a sheet anchor, and they can't allow themselves to progress further.

If we asked Muslims they would say that the writings in the Qur'an are their fixed point. The Sharia Law is derived from it. But Shiite and Sunni wings come to blows over their different versions. Other faiths have difficulties over all

Islamic beliefs. So can we say that we all are heading in the same direction?

We could tabulate many other fixed positions taken by other groups including diverse Christian ones. When I was training to be a Church of Scotland minister in Edinburgh from 1955-58, the teaching was that God progressively revealed himself, through the Old Testament days, to the fulfilment in Jesus Christ. That became our fixed position. Yet when you study early church history you discover that there were at its outset many different versions of belief and practice. Christianity has been an evolving story. Except for those who don't want to evolve! For me, as for many labelling ourselves 'progressives' in the Church of Scotland, the process of revelation, of how to steer, has not come to an end.

There comes a time when the fixed position from which you have been steering is receding in the distance. It's becoming fainter and less important. A greater priority arises because it is time to turn round and peer over your shoulder into the distance to see where you are aiming for. We no longer steer by past landmarks. We look for landmarks ahead where we hope to make landfall. Alas, where we are in mid-ocean the waves are higher, the wind more troublesome, the steering and the courage required more taxing. But onwards we must go. We have passed the point of no return.

Where the traditional religions of the world compete in their claims to be the whole and unique Truth we are left confused. We must concede that all religions have developed into their present forms because they are all human creations. They may indeed be based on earlier inspired, tumultuous, visions of the divine experienced by their founders. But then they were developed, perhaps debased, by those who followed from moments of crisis into cultures, practices and laws. So mustn't we be humble and open-minded when thinking and trying to define God's self-revelation to his creation?

These fixed positions throughout the world's cultures cannot all be completely correct. They cannot all define one true faith. So is any one fixed position true? Can we take it for granted that only ours is that one? In any case, should we

not look ahead, move on, into our long journey? Should we not consider the possibility that all religious faiths and practices need to be open and ready to evolve? Human understanding in other spheres is certainly evolving; so why not here too? Or has God ceased to reveal his ways for us? And need we look, for further revelation, only to religious groupings? Could it be that understanding of God's truth may be found also within other spheres of life? Might God not be speaking also to those who don't see themselves as religious, but who do care responsibly for the world and all within it? After all, Jesus found truth in some Samaritans, who did not represent any orthodoxy.

The small book *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* by Carlo Rovelli (Penguin, 2014) is a popular, helpful and dramatic statement of where physics is at today, which has been translated into 24 languages. While I still can't picture how space and time bend, or where gravity comes into the whole business, what really struck me was Rovelli's humility. As a top scientist he is the first to admit how little we still know. Great minds in the past, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Einstein in their explorations of the universe, and Niels Bohr in Quantum Theory, have all been corrected or updated later. Knowledge has been evolving and still is. Our understanding of the universe and of our place in it is evolving. Theology has to catch up and evolve too.

The Jewish faith in Jesus' time was that the 'End of Days' would come with Messiah. This would not yet be the end of the world, but the end of life as we know it. With it would come peace and righteousness. Paul espoused this belief, declaring that Jesus was that Messiah and that the end of days was soon to come about. All should prepare for it and be saved, for the time was short. Alas, we know 2000 years later that righteousness and peace are as far away as ever in the world, though not necessarily within a believer's psyche. 'Religious' folk fight each other, for instance, over possession of the Holy Land, and will continue to do so while they look backwards, believing that God made promises way back that the land should be theirs. This was wishful thinking then and still is today. We need to look at our goals and not at our past if we seek to reach the peaceable kingdom of God.

I wonder, hopefully, whether world societies may be beginning to discover, through agencies other than religious ones, that all peoples of the world belong together. Some folk are turning to humanism, which teaches this; but was not Jesus a good humanist? He was assuredly a spiritually driven humanist, not a secular one. But in God's sight might not all humanists be drawing their motivation from a spiritual basis? Might not God be revealing his ways for us also through apparently non-religious channels? Do we not need to think out of the box and see how understanding can evolve when we are not anchored to the past?

We popularly think of the world as being in three dimensions: length, height, depth. We're told by brainy folk that there are other dimensions, involving space and time. Hegel in the early 19th century believed that the divine is a dimension of our humanity; and this accords with our incarnational theology. So might there not be a spiritual dimension to life – could this be where the divine is to be found? This dimension cannot be measured by our scientific instruments, but is another dimension to our life in which we all exist.

The spiritual – God – is hard to define but has to do with feelings, with aspirations, with sensitivities, with loyalties, with responsibilities, with love – the things important and common to us all. This is more than a matter of how our brains work to bring about such feelings. It is the significance of the fact that we have such feelings and of what this means for the lives we live. In Rovelli's last lesson, entitled 'Ourselves', he writes: '

In the big picture of contemporary science there are many things that we do not understand, and one of the things which we understand least about is ourselves.

He goes on to teach that we are not entirely programmed by our inherited natures. He declares: 'We are parts *of* but only partly belonging *to* nature, with a longing for something else.' We have consciousness and emotions and curiosity to find out things:

Our reality is tears and laughter, gratitude and altruism, loyalty and betrayal, the past which haunts us and serenity. Our reality is made up

of our societies, of the emotion inspired by music, of the rich intertwined networks of the common knowledge which we have constructed together.

Rovelli goes on to state his belief that our human race is bound to terminate, if not by war, or disease, or exhausted resources, or pollution, or the rough forces of nature, then hopefully by natural evolution into something stronger. We are born to die as the stars are born and die. We belong to a short-lived species. All our earlier cousins are already extinct, e.g. the Neanderthals. What then would be left of the 'fixed positions' adopted by little earthlings long before?

Let us hope that any new race will be more intelligent than ours. There is some, perhaps wan, hope. There are geniuses today who can do what few others can, and seem to inhabit a realm beyond our own. There are mystics, artists, poets, musicians like Vilde Frang playing the Brahms violin concerto, or a cellist playing the Bach *Adagio*, or William Byrd's *Miserere*, or a Christmas carol, to name just a little of the music which has recently brought a lump to my throat and a 'wow' to my lips. Let us pray that such inspirations suggest what might be part of the nature of a future, more spiritually evolved, race.

But for now: Is there any hope of any revelation of the divine? What is the divine? Who, or what, is the infinite truth out there? We give it the name God, not because God is a He, a bearded man above the bright blue sky, but because we have to give it some name. Paul Tillich called God not 'a being' but Being itself. Others call the divine the Great Mind, the Life Force, the Unknowable One, or – the one I prefer – Divine Energy (this seems to accord with what physicists tell us, that all things – electrons, light waves, radio waves etc., and matter itself – are composed of energy particles of some sort).

Far back in Old Testament times the Hebrew people had different names for God, but they settled for four letters: JHWH (we read this as 'Jahweh'), which they dared not pronounce. For them these letters suggested that they could not give the Almighty a fixed name because the Almighty is elusive and unknowable. That is still our feeling. The unknown looms above us

whenever we look at the night sky and the billions of galaxies and planets out there, or look within in wonder at the tiniest electron.

So this is, I suggest, where a theology ought to take up its direction. Not only looking backward to past insights but with openness to the future. The divine will guide us through caring, spiritually driven humanism, into the peace and goodwill promised in the Jesus movement. The Christian scriptures themselves witnessed to change and evolution. The writers in their varying times, had differences as well as similarities. Scriptures probably should never have been read literally, for their writers could only speak in metaphors when dealing with the infinite and unknowable. All writers put into their own words where they were at in their time and in their spiritual journey.

So what are we seeing when we turn round and look towards our kingdom goal? We see a spiritual reality, beyond the final definition of human words. One involving something more

mystical, more to do with feelings and emotions, aims and ambitions, love, and caring involvement with our planet and our fellow travellers. We know we should see ourselves no longer as competing tribes and countries, fighting other tribes for the means of life. All on Earth are members of the one tribe, in which even enemies are to be loved and cared about. May these realities be our compass points as we struggle on to our final home.

And for me? I look back also, to the founder of my faith, Jesus of Nazareth. He was a man of his time. His followers have developed their religions in many, sometimes questionable, directions. Yet Jesus still today embodies what I see as true kingdom values. For me he remains the guide for our pilgrim journey, the landmark both behind and ahead of us.

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The Ship of Faith. Anonymous Russian icon, 17th century.