Report from the XXXV Denton Conference on the Study of Implicit Religion

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Pace Dr Tatjana Schnell’s report on the 2011 Denton Conference written by her “[i]n the transitional realm of Leeds station, somewhere between ‘here’ and ‘there’,” I mull over, from the transitional sanctuary of a McDonalds, the goings-on—intellectual, social, perhaps even spiritual (in so far as these are known to me as a participant observer)—of the thirty-fifth annual Denton Conference that has just concluded some miles back along the motorway at Denton Hall, McDonalds’ stately “Other.” If there is a prime vantage point from which to take stock of what transpired between 11 and 13 May 2012 in the intellectually-charged, culinary-graced, aesthetically-uplifting rural idyll of “Denton,” it is, surely, a motorway McDonalds. Yet, even so, Heraclitus had a point: “The unlike is joined together, and from differences results the most beautiful harmony.”

Of the 24 conference participants—representing the majority of continents, a considerable array of academic and professional backgrounds, a goodly mix of worldviews and orientations to life—14 presented papers and 7, including the indefatigable conference organiser and host, Edward Bailey, chaired lively sessions (some doing double duty). As ever, “implicit religion” proved to be a generous, inclusive and elastic concept capable of hosting all manner of topoi, issues and problematics central to, to the side of, and on the further shores of, “religion” and the human condition. This year, through Edward’s patient exertions, the papers were circulated electronically in advance, making considerable space for constructive discussion time following each paper. As ever, Denton proved that food for mind
and body work well together within the intellectual republic at its convivial best. Ascetics don't necessarily have all the best tunes.

The Friday evening opening paper on “the implicit religion of academia” (William Keenan), digging down to the subterranean soils of the university “cultic milieu,” was deemed, as it were, evil-light, as some respondents good-naturedly pointed out. I shall dig a little deeper into “demonic theology,” though I'm inclined to the standpoint of Shakespeare's Mark Antony: “The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones” (Julius Caesar Act 3, Scene ii). However, we did have a brief opening and open exchange on the “evil empire” of “the regime of quality assurance,” worming its way through the ivory tower as everywhere else in the Western institutional world.

Norichika Horie, building on Leon Festinger’s classic insights in When Prophecy Fails, shared his acute observations on “the attitude of believers in Ascension after the earthquake in Japan.” Norichika analysed comments posted on internet blogs that discussed the subject of earthquakes in general and the idea of “Ascension” in particular, both before and after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March 2011. “Ascension” refers to the rise of the Earth “as a living and conscious being and to the accompanying evolution of individual consciousness.” He states:

It is believed that those who fail to evolve will be left behind on this old earth and will experience purgatory events, i.e. catastrophes such as natural disasters, wars or pandemics, which will befall on the disharmonious parts of the Earth.

The Governor of Tokyo, Ishihara, claimed that the tsunami was a “divine punishment sent to wash away selfishness,” a statement for which he was strongly criticized as being “fukinshin” (“an imprudent rudeness lacking timely solemnity or sorrow”). Most of the Japanese, we were informed, interpreted those words as an attack on the victims. After that, it became taboo to talk about it from the religious viewpoint of retribution. For Norichika, the belief in the Ascension arose against or under such negative currents. Here, he opened up a theme that reverberated throughout the weekend, namely the “religious” response to calamity and disaster, be that personal and familial crisis, or catastrophic events in the public domain.

On Saturday morning, Stephen Hunt developed ideas on “identity construction,” and considered that “the search for an integrated religious and sexual identity follows neo-liberal models of identity and individualism that reflect secularization impulses rather than reversing them.” Hunt’s argument intentionally runs counter to social scientific orthodoxy in that,
in the context of “the sexualization of society,” he deems the dominant motivating factor is not necessarily merely a spiritual search associated with LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered) sexuality, “but that sexuality is the motive by which such a search is initiated and by which spirituality is negotiated.”

Hunt’s exploration of the elusive zone “between spirituality and sexuality,” where, no doubt, many a crisis is experienced at personal, ecclesial and political levels, led nicely, at least theologically, to Jennifer Davis’s excursion into the “liminal,” with her probing paper on “forgiveness.” Employing insight and imagery from her own lived experience, together with her research work on indigenous North American cultures, Jennifer cut through the positivistic protocols that typically confine subjective sense-making and scientific accounting to separate silos. From within carefully described episodes—personal and public—of great distress, she offers:

a defence of the distinction between forgiveness as an “excuse-me,” “pardon,” “reprieve,” or even to have or show compassion on the one hand; and on the other hand being in a state of forgiven-ness which includes transformation and reconciliation.

As discussants, we pondered just how capacious the concept of implicit religion can be, when handling the interfacing of the sacred and the secular at those seminal life-points where the human condition is hit by tragedy, and yet touches the potentiality of what we might call “grace.” How far “forgiving” and “forgetting” travel together, necessarily, along the highway to “forgiven-ness,” remains a matter for considerable reflection.

Following coffee (and those scrumptious buttered scones, without which Denton would not be “Denton”), Israel Selvanayagam provided a closely observed study of “two tombs on the Marina Beach, Chennai, South India.” He demonstrated just how intricately “piety, power and politics” are interwoven, within the recurring conflicts intended to secure equality and justice in public symbolic culture. Even—or especially—the dead, their shrines and commemorative rites, are manipulated by the powers that be, to secure caste, class and civil advantage. The likelihood of “religion wars” centring on such “political” centres of group identity and belonging cannot be discounted. How implicit religion moves with relative ease, between the national and regional political religious spheres (as in Israel’s paper), on the one level, and the personal “inner life” domain, as it were, on the other level.

Exemplifying the elasticity of the notion of “implicit religion,” Leslie Francis anchored his reflections on implicit religion in “an empirical
enquiry among 13–15 year-old adolescents” and their disposition to “suicidal ideation” (“I have sometimes considered taking my own life”). Leslie’s analysis was conducted on data provided by a sample of 25,726 pupils. (It is worth interpolating that the capacity of the new Wembley is around 90,000). This subset included 13,163 males and 12,563 females, 13,970 year-nine pupils and 12,156 year-ten pupils. The data were analysed by the SPSS statistical package. (Incidentally, Professor Francis launched an appeal for participants in his projected new sample of adolescents. Spread the word!) With appropriate qualification and nuance (and the mandatory call for further research), Leslie suggests the following:

[I]t is reasonable to propose that implicit religion may work in the lives of individuals in the same way as explicit religion to generate positive psychological outcomes like positive affect and the sense of meaning and purpose, but the implicit may not work in the lives of individuals in the same way as explicit religion to offer protection from negative psychological outcomes like negative affect and the sense of despair and meaninglessness.

It is interesting to speculate whether such a finding would replicate itself at the macro level of, say, the nation state, in times of crisis or, at the meso level, among Manchester United football supporters who, on the same day as Leslie’s presentation, lost the national football (soccer!) league championship to their local rivals by measly goal difference! Numbers really do matter, after all, terribly, in that case.

After tea, came Peter Brierley’s annual account of religion-related numbers, this time on “nominal religion as implicit religion.” Peter demonstrates that a substantial body of “fuzzy believers” believe in God without much in the way of church belonging or evidence of behaving “religiously.” He refers to implicit religion (in preference to “implicit spirituality”) as “a sort of imagined tangibility,” “a white ace of spades,” a “softer” religiosity. This insight has the potential to give succour to those optimistic souls who, eschewing “the death of God” and “end of religion as we know it” Jeremias, ask: “Crisis? What crisis?”

By dint of exemplary agenda planning or even of providence, Tania ap Sion’s presentation on “the implicit religion of prayers from the street” followed next. She reports her examination of 417 intercessory prayer requests, collected on the streets by bishops in the Church of England as part of the 2011 “Say One for Me” Lent Prayer initiative. (Bishops out and about? Whatever next? What has explicit, formal, institutional religion come to these days? Dangerous innovation—or back to the roots?)

The study was informed by the constructs of implicit religion and “ordi-
nary theology,” which, Tania says, places “an emphasis on listening to those who are not usually viewed as significant or authoritative in the shaping of belief and practice within explicit formal religion.” Three types of implicit religion were found to be present in the prayer content: societal consensus, the source of explicit religion, and the effect of explicit religion. Tania points out: “Of the 417 prayer requests, 411 were examples of wholly supplicatory prayer (98%). The remaining six prayer requests were concerned with thanksgiving.” Among the conclusions she drew:

that when the Church of England’s religious functionaries went out into the streets offering the provision of intercessory prayer to the general public, the people whom they encountered responded positively and asked them to “say one for me”.

In relation to the 9 (out of 11) bishops who failed to deliver up their promised “data” for analysis, one wonders, en passant, if, next time, they might respond more positively to the implicit intercessory prayer requests of the research team. I wonder if we all, as members of one academic “flesh” so to speak, suffer “research wounds” of one sort or t’other (the McDonalds in which I pen this is still, like Denton, in Yorkshire!).

Following dinner, Barbara Walters gave a moving and informative picture of the irrepressible memorial cycles and the ongoing redevelopment processes that emerged in downtown New York City (where she is located, at New York City University), during the period preceding and following the ten-year anniversary commemoration of 9/11. Applying grounded theory and visual sociology, she created an illuminating typology of sacralization and secularization processes at work, simultaneously, within the “Twin Tower” shrines, rituals and remembrance activities of this as-yet-not-fully accepted (pace Kübler-Ross) national, nay, global, tragedy. For her, the concept “implicit religion” served to make sense of the complex process of revitalisation associated with this catastrophic defining moment in United States, if not, indeed, world history. Once more, implicit religion, as concept and idiom, demonstrates its tensile strength in spanning the personal and the political, the local and the global, the interior life of the soul and the exterior life of the public gemeinschaft.

Francis Stewart shared her research amongst Straight Edge punks and revealed “a specifically post-secular … spiritual identity located firmly within a secular (one could even argue profane) subculture.” For her, these new wave (if that phrase is acceptably “cool”) punks exhibit a “wilfully syncretic approach to spirituality” which is “deliberately mingled with secular practices and ideas.” Straight Edge, she contends, “refuse to acknowledge
distinctions or borders.” Francis outlined the Straight Edge “way” thus:

Adherents follow three rules, tenets or guidelines (the terminology differs from adherent to adherent), which are abstinence from alcohol, drugs (including tobacco), and casual sex. The notion of casual sex is the most debated within Straight Edge communities. Most would simply adhere to the concept that sex should be monogamous and limited to committed partners, rather than with a one night stand or casual acquaintances.

Perhaps not exactly raw-edged “Punk,” as one or two nostalgic “old wave” remembered it. (Note that, at this point, Christine King professed her “true believer” loyalty to “the king,” that is, a certain Mr. Elvis Aaron Presley Jr. Some also may remember him!). More surprisingly still, at least to those weaned on The Sex Pistols’ quintessentially profane album Never Mind the Bollocks, a key sacred anthem of Straight Edge appears to be the moving “spiritual” Amazing Grace. Francis illustrated this indiscriminate “cross-over” from the religious to the “secular” through numerous illustrations—tattoos, album covers, posters etc. When she played clips from Straight Edge venues, not a few of the Denton “crew” barely resisted “moshing” and “slam dancing,” albeit “crowd surfing” may have been a step too far. What is the minimum number of a “crowd” in this particular “edgy” context, one wonders? When two or three are gathered together, perhaps.

Within Straight Edge we already see signs of sectarian fragmentation, a process common across all faith communities, be they explicit or implicit. The “human condition” tends to transcend all our fine distinctions, divisions and denominations. She writes: “[T]here are those who practice explicit religiosity in areas such as Krishnacore and Dharma Punx, while others are more interested in implicit religious practices and concerns.” Straight Edgers, Francis tells us, “have steadfastly refused to remove their religious or spiritual practices outside of their subcultural identities, practices and ideologies. They see no incompatibility.” This is a telling implicit religion point. The spirit of holiness bloweth where it listeth and landeth upon punk and rocker—and, hopefully, on us string quartet and church organ “freaks”—alike.

The Sabbath morning brought John Hey’s “thought experiment,” centred on the intriguing question: “What price a secular Jesus?” Seeking to discover “the secular within the sacred,” John elaborates an “epistemology of salvation.” “Traditional ways of claiming knowledge of God, by means of reason or revelation … fail to give primacy to believing.” He argues that “it is a mistake to seek to reaffirm a metaphysically realist Jesus, but that Jesus … can be viewed in secular terms by modern eyes.” John advocates
“critical believing,” mindful of the probability that certain long-treasured certitudes are forfeited in consequence, such as:

the Jesus who was aware of his divine status, the Jesus depicted as seated in glory at the right-hand of God, the Jesus who will return in judgement, the Jesus who has accomplished a once-for-all salvation from sin, the Jesus who is proclaimed the second Person of the Trinity. But what we gain is a Jesus who is no longer offensive to Jew and Muslim, a Jesus who is accessible to the contemporary cultured despisers of religion, a Jesus who struggles against injustice, prejudice and hypocrisy, in short a Jesus who preserves the primacy of our believing.

Discussion centred upon whether this was so, a matter likely to take us into the middle of next week and beyond. And so we re-engaged with Amazing Grace by way of Kevin Lewis’s presentation on “America’s heirloom comfort song.” He states:

We know the song has crossover cultural power. It wields that power over the confessedly religious: evangelicals, for a start, but also of course over many others of variously negotiated faith under the Christian umbrella. In addition, it wields parallel power over a vast spectrum of the not-so-religious, the unchurched and variously secularized.

Kevin describes the “weightless magic” of this iconic anthem, its capacity to move him personally, to move social and cultural groups of all stripes, to move because, as Johnny Cash put it, this is a song with “no guile.” Discussion centred upon whether the genius of the song lay, at least in part, in its dynamic internal theological, psycho-sociological and musical structure, its expansive capacity to embrace together both the personal subjective interior spiritual life (“saved a wretch like me”) and the hope-filled collective assembly of saints on the march (“When we’ve been there ten thousand years …”). An implicit religion of music offers rich inexhaustible pickings.

Coffee, then “Creation and Destruction,” Karljürgen G. Feuerherm’s presentation on “Enûma eliš: Life as a product of death”. Karljürgen discussed the so-called “Babylonian Epic of Creation” myth, in terms of various levels of mythic structure at work in the human consciousness. He believes that “these are encountered implicitly as human beings experience their reality” and writes:

These levels of consciousness, when articulated explicitly, are named “religious”: they order life in such a way that the human psyche takes unto itself, individually and collectively, covert aspects of religious symbol (implicit religious notions) and expresses them overtly as outward manifesta-
tions with attributed aspects of what are named “gods.”

Following an intricate “Jungian” analysis of binary oppositions within the deep structures of myths in general, and articulated in the *Enūma eliš* creation story in particular, Karljürgen points out that “every myth has at least two levels to it, an intellectual surface representation, which can be harnessed for cultural purposes (e.g. political legitimation), and an emotional underlying form.” What is important from an implicit religion point-of-view, is that “[i]t is the archetypal nature of the underlying form which causes or even forces an audience to identify with the myth and thus accept its message on every other level.” For him, crucially:

This consequence has nothing to do with the logic of the surface representation or its “truth,” as the myths of past dictators and world leaders of the present day and age show beyond any kind of reasonable doubt.

Karljürgen’s insights here on myth, draw implicit religion studies ever closer to the study of ideologies, world-views, “implicit politics” and “thought modes” in general, showing, once again, as we saw throughout “Denton 2012,” the scalpel power and searchlight reach of the concept of “implicit religion,” when it is employed with creative imagination and scholarly care.

The fitting finale of the conference was the presentation by Derek Murray on “the great anniversary of the KJV,” a timely tribute-cum-critique of, *inter alia*, “KJV-onlyism,” upon “the quarter-centenary of the King James … the Authorized Version of the Bible in English.” With sensitivity and gentle humour, Derek asks: “[W]hat is so wonderful about this particular translation, what is the implicit value placed in it, and what distinguishes it from previous and later versions?” Why is *this* sacred text so, well, “sacred”? He tells us why it became so in the lives of nations, poets (Milton, Shakespeare, Burns …), and, tellingly, ordinary folk such as “an elderly couple” whom he visited as a minister in his first parish, “who produced a large Bible from a shelf in an easy chair. ‘We always have a Bible in the house in case someone dies. Then we would place it under the deceased’s chin.'”

The KJV has been commandeered into service in all kinds of diametrically opposed “secular” causes, from the emancipation or subjugation of slaves, women or homosexuals, on the one side, to the proof text for the conjecture that “God is an Englishman.” Somehow, I hae’ ma doots that Derek would concede that one!

“Implicit faith,” Derek tells us, has been placed in this “eikonic text” at every turn, despite exhibiting, in its production, it seems, “definite signs of a committee at work, and of royal preferences being submitted to.” Moreover, he points out, “implicit faith is placed in a book, which might never
be opened.” (I hope this isn’t always true of academic papers.) We are, of course, dealing here with something (the KJV, that is), as Derek reminds us, “conceived to have ‘mana,’ sacred power within itself, even to hallow its surroundings … It embodies the beauty of literary form which has inspired not only common vocabulary but also high culture.”

We are in the symbolic cultural vicinity here of “Denton,” to which “shrine” the annual pilgrimage draws us together, closer to something “set apart,” closer than “quality assurance” is ever likely to get us (see, I am learning to accentuate the negative!). I began this report on Denton XXXV at McDonalds—the Tannoy pumping out, not Amazing Grace, but Madonna’s Material Girl, where, in a quite secular setting, one was bid the ancient blessing, not in archaic KJV-speak, but in hip post-modern “glocaleese” vernacular: “Have a nice day!” Pax vobiscum, by any other name. How the separate “ways” of “Denton” and McDonalds, so contrasting, so opposed, indeed, at the level of explicit spirituality—the one serene, sensitive and inspiring; the other brash, garish and cacophonous (can you guess which is which?)—yet exhibit a certain “harmony,” when looked at from the standpoint of implicit religion.

Edward Bailey, at one point, drew our attention to the entanglements of the things of body and soul; and how unlikely it was that attempts to uncouple them entirely would be successful. And, how Sisyphean a task. There were “contested custodianships” in these matters, he averred, at least this side of the grave. “Denton XXXV” underwrote a considered and warm “Amen” to that.

… “When we’ve been there ten thousand years ….”