Editorial: Denton 2014

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The Denton Conference on Implicit Religion is a rare event in the academic calendar, bringing together theologians and social scientists, amongst others, to explore the substantial areas of common interest between the two territories of enquiry. That the event is small, between two and three dozen participants, and held in the glorious surroundings of Denton Hall in the Yorkshire countryside, adds to its value and its attraction for those taking part. The Denton estate, as Edward Bailey explained in his welcome to the 37th conference, has historical connections with Guy Fawkes, whose thwarted plot to blow up king and parliament in the seventeenth century is today celebrated in Britain on November 5th with bonfires and fireworks. A Denton conference may indeed also sometimes explore ideas of an explosive kind, but it always does so in a spirit of tolerant calm.

Often social scientists interpret the scientific aspect of their discipline so rigidly that they deliberately exclude anything that might be “tainted” with religion, unless they can view it as an anthropological phenomenon. On the other hand, some theologians, while respecting the scientific method of enquiry, feel their minds are legitimately focussed on higher things. Implicit Religion both brings theologians down to earth, and lifts the horizons of social scientists. It recognises that religious activity can be identified as such in much social activity that is not explicitly labelled as religious. Meanwhile the debate as to whether Implicit Religion, as a concept, is a discipline or a methodology, remains ongoing.

As participants come from a wide range of backgrounds, papers presented at a Denton Conference are diverse in their subject matter, but all connect in some way with Implicit Religion. The 2014 conference, the 37th, began with ecology, included poetry, and cartoons, and then incorporated engineering, Celtic Christianity, and Northern Ireland’s Orange Order, before concluding with a paper on Jews in India.

The opening paper, given by Robert Nelson from the School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, was titled “Calvinism Without God:
American Environmentalism as Implicit Calvinism.” He traced an historical line, from the United States’ Protestant founding fathers through to contemporary environmentalists, and observed that in the secular climate of the American public arena in the late twentieth century, the environmental movement had retained the hallmarks of Calvinism, albeit without reference to God. “Americans,” he noted, “disguised their most important religious arguments as conflicts among a pluralism of implicit religions, each invoking the name and authority of science, and typically without any explicit mention of God.”

Environmentalism preached the failures of “progress” and offered a “pessimistic view of the human condition that had striking affinities with Calvinism and its doctrine of total human depravity.”

Ted Harrison's paper took a different slant on the same theme, suggesting that the current secular climate change debate had many similarities with previous explicitly religious apocalypse prophecies, except that these humans were facing the potentially disastrous natural consequences of their own behaviour, rather than a direct punishment from God. He pointed to the irony that, should these natural disasters occur, as predicted by climate scientists, they would still, in legal terms, be construed as “acts of God.”

A conference theme began to emerge: exploring the suggestion that within secularism and scientific orthodoxy there is an (implicitly) religious influence at work. Tatjana Schnell, from the Institute of Psychology at the University of Innsbruck, presented a paper that she admitted, at first glance, appeared paradoxical: “Atheist Religion, Atheist Spirituality.” She observed a change in mood from the time when Edward Bailey's notion of implicit, or secular, religion had been a provocative idea, through to the present day when “atheist churches” have been established and “spirituality for atheists” is debated openly.

“Spirituality and religion can be understood independently of their content, i.e. the reference to a supernatural deity,” Tatjana Schnell suggested. Likewise:

Distinctions between secular “spirituality” and “religion” mirror the gap that has also opened up between explicit spirituality and religion. Atheist spirituality appears to be a rather personal, intellectual stance, grounding in philosophical reflections and validated experientially, by feelings of awe, unity, simplicity, etc. Atheist religion, or atheist churches, predominantly relate to social aspects of religion, such as sharing a myth of how the world came to be, and—primarily—the joint performance of rituals.

However the First Church of Atheism, she observed, does claim a collective belief system which fulfils the religious function of explaining the
meaning and purpose of life and the nature of the universe. Members subscribe to the statement that “Nothing exists besides natural phenomena. Thought is merely a function of those natural phenomena. Death is complete, and irreversible. We have faith solely in humankind, nature, and the facts of science.”

Ton Meijknecht from Delft Technical University, Netherlands, presented a paper titled “The Engineer: A Professional Person of Faith.” What might appear to be a secular, modern and “rational” profession, he said, could trace its roots back to the religious world of the Middle Ages. A long and arduous road has been travelled to create the engineer we know today. A monk invented him long ago. He was fathered by a soldier. As a child, he experienced a golden era, during which nothing seemed to stand in his way. And now he has come of age and lives in a world of nuance and complexity.

Engineers possess something, Ton Meijknecht suggested, that might be referred to as a professional soul. It is a deeply-felt motivation that has turned out to be a remarkable constant over the centuries. He argued that for engineers, faith in the significance of their work has always been a condition for carrying out that work. They profess their faith as professionals. “Otherwise, they can not be who they want to be, and are unable to practice their profession.” However, he said that he had not yet determined what it is that the engineer has faith in:

The next challenge will be, as a theologian, to describe the engineer’s spirituality. What characterizes today’s engineer, beyond his awareness of social responsibility? Why am I explicitly referring to the engineer as a person “of faith,” and not as an “idealistic” or an “existentialist”?

Stefano Sbalchiero from the University of Padua was unable to attend the conference in person, due to an accident and traffic jam on the way to the airport. However, his paper was circulated in which he explored the way scientists employ spiritual language. His work was based on a survey of a group of 160 Italian scientists. They were asked open-ended questions that enabled researchers to identify which were the most common words and ideas they used when talking about the relationship between spirituality, science and religion. Seventy per cent of the group did not belong to any religion; the remainder had an affiliation with Roman Catholicism. Atheist and agnostic scientists, who expressed a degree of impatience toward the dogmatic aspect of religions, found the concept of spirituality more attractive, insofar as it allowed the freedom to explore non-scientific ideas on their own terms.

From the language they employed it was suggested that the scientists viewed personal and spiritual engagement in terms of helping other people:
To an atheist scientist spirituality is different from that of the common person, because through science it is possible to achieve greater and deeper awareness of the physical and biological world as well as of the personal world that, in turn, is made available to the community. Being actors of spiritual awakening in the scientific experience, scientists feel the chance of living each action intensely together with the awareness of their inner feelings, also believing that the individual and direct experience of the physical and biological reality is the only way to understand transcendence, to help other people, and finally to go beyond in search for “meaning.”

The paper that was presented by William Keenan of Liverpool Hope University introduced the concept of “granulation” as a way of understanding faith, and commitment to faith, both within the explicit and implicit contexts. Granulation, he suggested, described the way faith systems are, in reality, understood by members. However consistent and firmly constructed faith systems might appear to be, when formally promulgated by teaching and creeds, the more closely they are examined, it is found that they are understood and practised in numerous different personal ways. And this type of granulation may be found in other fields of social activity including politics and expressions of popular culture. The origin of the term, he explained, was to be found in the language of space science, describing the mottled appearance of the sun’s photosphere when viewed at very high resolution. “Small bright rapidly evolving granules around 1000km in diameter appear against the darker background.”

Three papers explored implicit religion within defined national boundaries. Valdemar Kalundi from the University of Finland looked at what he termed the civil religion of Finland, the sense of national identity as expressed in a range of cultural activities, and the role of military service in nurturing it. Francis Stewart from the University of Stirling in Scotland examined Northern Ireland’s Orange Order, exploring how, despite its explicit connection with Protestantism, it also shared many of the characteristics of an expression of cultural identity of an implicitly religious kind. In both the Finnish case and that of the Orange Order young men were initiated into their cultural “manhood” through joining a uniformed organization with a hierarchical organizational structure that emphasized the physical discipline of marching and parading.

Tahmina Tariq looked at the position of Jewish communities in India and how, despite maintaining their religious and cultural separateness over many generations, the wider society assigned them a position within the Hindu caste system. Indeed, the separate groups of Jews, as defined by colour, were given a different status from each other, both within society at
large and within the Jewish communities.

A Denton Conference is more than a dialogue between theologians and social scientists. The humanities too may be subjected to the scrutiny of implicit religion. Neville Emslie from the Diocese of Canterbury took poetry as his theme in a paper, “Perceiving through Similitude,” borrowing for the title a term from St Augustine. God can be spoken of in two ways, Neville Emslie said: either by saying what he is not, or through metaphor. Poets, he suggested, were engaged in a religious pursuit, as “profound and important as any theologian’s…however this pursuit is exercised in a different way.” He quoted W.B. Yeats, “if it is true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, [then] the saint goes to the centre, [and] the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again.” Neville Emslie described the writing of poetry as a religious, or liturgical, act, and the reading of poetry “is an act of worship.”

Poetry addresses issues of life and death, but Roger Grainger’s paper took a subject of even greater import—football, and the association between implicit religion and sport. “Games and stories stand at a distance from ordinary life so that they may throw light on it. In this they resemble religion, whether it be explicit or implicit. Seen as ‘worlds of their own’ they have the status of independent realities, with their own self-consistent structure.”

Dermot Tredget OSB examined the history and purpose of leisure, drawing on the understanding of leisure in both classical times and the monastic tradition. For many today, he suggested, leisure is what makes life worth living, and is their reward for working hard. Dermot Tredget said that he was interested in the way in which people in contemporary society, and in particular those in positions of leadership, influence and power, use their leisure time. “I sense that although, for many people, leisure has lost its contemplative dimension, there is a struggle to regain it or at least pay it more attention. The search for meaning in life, happiness, fulfilment, wellbeing and work life balance, which are often interlinked are just some of the indicators that justify this claim.”

Some enjoy their leisure in pursuing vigorous activities and Ivo Jirasek of the Faculty of Physical Culture and Palacky University in the Czech Republic described a study in which participants on a winter Outward-Bound course explored the transcendent dimension of their rugged experience. The paper was titled, “Winter wandering on snow shoes: manifestation of transcendence and spirituality in participants’ mind maps.” Those taking part had spent two weeks camping out in the snow and walking six miles every day in snow shoes. Before setting out, each had drawn a
mind-map: they did so again on their return. The two mind maps were compared. Ivo Jirasek described how the mind maps demonstrated radical changes of understanding over the two weeks, and described the course as a pilgrimage experience without a religious framework, such that the journey could be “classified as a spiritual one.”

Gill Hall from Glyndwr University reported on her survey of 598 respondents expressing interest in Celtic Christianity, in the wider context of a decline in formal church attendance, but with a continuing and significant belief in God and a self-definition of “being a Christian.” Of the respondents 65% were explicitly religious, as defined by attending church once a week or more, and 17% were implicitly religious, defined in this instance as attending church once a year or less. The implicitly religious favoured mystical aspects of Celtic Christianity. “Mysticism and imagination are significant themes in the current revival of interest in Celtic Christianity.” Celtic art, she said, was rich in the symbolism and metaphor that have become central themes in the current revival. “Individuals can create their own illustrated manuscripts or knot work patterns. Modern Celtic prayers are very popular. All these seem to be important to ‘implicitly religious’ interest in Celtic Christianity.”

The conference included a session in which Stig Graham, currently chaplain at Myton Hospice, Warwick, and Derek Murray, formerly chaplain of an Edinburgh hospice, compared their experiences of enabling those facing death to address the questions that were of the greatest and most immediate importance to them. And the final morning included a paper that perhaps only a Denton Conference could entertain. Kees de Groot, from Tilburg University, Netherlands, drew on a life-long interest in Tintin, to show how the popular cartoon character had evolved. Tintin and friends had begun life as a strip cartoon in an explicitly Catholic magazine, before becoming an international “brand,” from which all overt Catholicism was removed.

As ever the success of the annual conference depended on Edward Bailey and, this year and last, two members of his family whose many hours of preparation make the weekend possible, and for which this year’s participants were especially grateful in the light of Edward’s recent impaired health.