Editorial

Implicit Religion: The 31st Denton conference 8–10th May 2008

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Thirty-three people gathered at Denton Hall in the beauty of Wharfedale to hear a rich eclectic mix of seventeen papers.

First up, Kevin Sharpe and Lesley van Gelder were speaking about their work on reading the cave paintings of the Dordogne and Pyrenees. They showed clearly how the Catholicism of the original interpreters, Teilhard de Chardin and Marc Breuil, had coloured all subsequent interpretation—that the caves were shrines, and much was about shamanism. They showed equally clearly that some paintings were by men, some by women and some by children, and asked, could not some of these have been done as a pastime on a wet day outside? What was the evidence that 24,000–31,000 years ago all this art was about worship?

Then two freshmen speakers performed well: Gil Dekel (University of Southampton) using his own poetry and video to analyse the process of creating his art, and Rennie Greenfield (Westminster College, Pennsylvania) arguing that film can be a sacred experience. Simon Robinson (Leeds Metropolitan University) described how he was devising units to develop students’ sense of reflective self-awareness and values. In a session that contrasted the whole range of explicit and implicit religion, Rupert Till (University of Huddersfield) eloquently showed how the artist known as Prince had purposely appropriated Christian imagery to create a mysterious Rock God iconic personality to generate sales of tickets and records, while Richard Smith (Biblical Theological Seminary, Hadfield, PA) used a
closely argued piece of exegesis of Romans 1.14–2.8 and 3.9 to show that Paul believed humans cannot help but be religious (homo adorans) but live in tension between God’s self-disclosure and their own failure to fully acknowledge Him, leading to the variety of religions (including implicit) which are but partial apprehensions of truth.

After Saturday lunch, in session on inter-faith, Israel Selvynayaganam (about to become Head of United Theological College, Bangaluru) gave a packed outline of the concept of transcendence in Eastern and Middle Eastern religious traditions (many will await these notes to be more fully written up), and Ted Harrison described how the liberal wings of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths come together on “safe” ground, using language carefully crafted to avoid offence, citing as examples the scouting movement and Commonwealth Day services.

Roger Grainger read his first chapter of a forthcoming book on “Islands,” arguing they encapsulate a specially focussed sense of irresistible otherness. Mike Collins (University of Gloucestershire) described its new courses on Sport and Christian outreach, crossing the explicit–implicit boundary, in seeking to re-connect churches to the strong involvement they had had in sport, and especially its role for youth in particular until WW2. Andrew Wender forcefully explained how he used explicit and implicit religious examples to get his students to connect with his history and politics courses at University of Victoria, BC.

Tim Jenkins (Jesus College, Cambridge) expounded his experiences as a social anthropologist and a parish priest in working out methods of inquiry that had integrity for him and his parishioners and were mutually insightful.

In the final morning, Leslie Francis and Mandy Robbins (now at Warwick University) presented two papers; the first on the mystical experiences written about by a sample of 318 visitors to the Grange at Ampleforth Abbey, three-quarters Catholic and one-fifth Anglican. Regarding the main features of such experiences, 68% agreed it was something they could not verbalize adequately; 76% that is was an experience of overwhelming power; 67% that is was transient; 52% that they felt at one with all creation; 43% that it was a sense of being outside time, and 41% that they had a sense of true self/ego. In their second paper they contrasted attitudes to Christianity and New Age beliefs among 1200 Slovene undergraduates. Those students who held a more positive view of Christianity also did so of New Age, whilst another group had a low view of both, irrespective of religiosity as measured by church attendance. Having operationalized the
Lavrič scale concerning new age belief they would like to replicate the study on a general public sample.

Rina Arya (Chester University) argued that compulsive purchasing held elements of the religious in that it was an uncontrollable urge for the addicts, each purchase never satisfying and having to be followed by another extravagance. Finally, Emyr Williams (also at Warwick University with Leslie Francis) contrasted the beliefs of a modest sample of Welsh and northern Irish students in the paranormal, using Tobacyk’s revised paranormal scale, and traditional religiosity. Traditional religiosity correlated with paranormal religious beliefs (such as in angels, the devil, heaven, life after death) but not with those that are discontinuous (viz—psi, precognition, witchcraft, superstition, spiritualism etc).

The next Denton event will be held on 8–10th May 2009, and has a tradition of friendly, conversive, enjoyable open-mindedness to sustain.