Challenging Religious Issues

Jeff Astley
on Rudolf Otto on
Numinous Experience

Leslie J. Francis
on Was Jung Correct: Is
Religion Good for the
Psychological Wellbeing
of Normal People?

Abdullah Sahin
on Islam and Democracy:
Are they Compatible or
Irreconcilable? (Part 1)

Samuel Tranter
on Utilitarianism and
Theological Ethics

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Challenging Religious Issues

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Contents

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Rudolf Otto on Numinous Experience

Jeff Astley

The article describes Rudolf Otto's analysis of religious experience and lists some criticisms of it.

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC/EDUQAS Unit 2: Section B - An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion,Theme 4: Religious Experience (part 1), B: Mystical Experience, Rudolf Otto.
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Introduction

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) was an influential German Lutheran theologian, politician and religion scholar who taught mainly at the University of Marburg. Otto's thought was influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who identified the essential spirit of religion with *piety* (understood as religious consciousness), rather than within its intellectual and moral dimensions accentuated during the Enlightenment (Schleiermacher, 1958, second speech; Otto, 1931, ch. VIII). Schleiermacher's language often suggests that he was concerned only with people's subjective feelings, from which God would have to be inferred, but Otto rejected this idea in favour of something that is directly 'felt as objective and outside the self'. Otto, therefore, sought to replace a consciousness of 'createdness' that implies a creator, by the consciousness of *creaturehood*: 'the feeling of personal nothingness and abasement before the awe-inspiring object directly experienced' and its 'overpowering might' (Otto, 1923, pp. 11, 18, 21). In fact, Schleiermacher's intention was actually similar: to point to a direct awareness of the divine presence, an objective personal *apprehension* or emotional *perception* of the spiritual, which he variously described as 'immediate feeling', 'a sense and taste for the infinite', 'intuition . . . linked to a feeling', 'a feeling of absolute dependence'

or 'God-consciousness' (Schleiermacher, 1958, pp. 36, 39, 280-281; 1928, pp. 17-18). Otto followed Schleiermacher in treating religious beliefs as secondary, derivative accounts and expressions of spiritual experiences (Schleiermacher, 1958, p. 87; 1928, p. 76).

Otto understood religious experience in terms of a response that lay at the root of all religious sensitivity and worship, and was a natural capacity of human beings. As (what is now called) a 'perennialist', he identified a 'common core' of inherently religious experience that is basically identical across religions and cultures, although it may be expressed in widely differing ways (cf. Otto, 1932).

Otto's phenomenology of religious experience

Many regard religious experiences as individual and intensely personal: something that people can only undergo for themselves, and others cannot really appreciate. Rudolf Otto acknowledged this by beginning his account with the caveat that 'whoever knows no such moments [of deeply-felt religious experience] . . . is requested to read no further'.

He coined the adjective 'numinous' (deriving it from the Latin *numen*, 'divinity' or 'divine power/will/presence'), and used this term to describe a category of value and a mental state that was 'perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other'. This, he argued, is the characteristic mark of the fundamental, original sense of the idea of 'the holy'. Today, 'holy' seems only to mean 'completely good'; but Otto argued that the word had an earlier, more distinctive and essential meaning of otherness and mystery, and would only later (but quite properly) acquire this moral connotation. For Otto, the holy essentially denotes an 'unnamed

Something' that has as its object (which he also designated as 'numinous') the aweful yet entrancing, transcendent, ineffable 'Wholly Other'. Otto labelled this, in a Latin phrase, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the dreadful and alluring Mystery). This 'Holiness itself', discerned as an overpowering majesty and urgent energy, results in 'blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute' (Otto, 1923, pp. 6-8, 11, 26, 59; see chs IV–VI generally).

While Otto regarded the numinous experience as in principle universal, he recognised that there are different levels to this experience, and secular analogies as well – including the 'uncanny' and 'spooky', and the horror and 'shudder' evoked by stories of ghosts (or aliens?).

It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of – whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *Mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures. (Otto, 1923, p. 13).

Mystery is a deeply-felt aspect of much religious experience and devotion. According to Otto, numinous experience is essentially unique and unanalysable, and provides an authentic mark of the divine presence. Although the experience itself is arational (that is, non-rational – not based on reason; as opposed to irrational – going against reason), and is unmediated by language and tradition, it becomes articulated and expressed ('schematised') in various ways through religious language and beliefs. Thus, the element of *tremendum* is expressed in

terms of a daunting, overpowering awefulness and dread (as in biblical references to the 'wrath of God': pp. 18-19, 23-24). *Mysterium* marks that which is 'wholly other' and therefore 'beyond our apprehension and comprehension'; in the very strongest sense, it is 'something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one' (pp. 28-29). The *mysterium tremendum* therefore gives rise to talk of the 'transcendence' (otherness) of God.

The element of fascination (*fascinans*), however, combines with the feeling of awefulness in 'a strange harmony of contrasts'. Together, they constitute the 'dual character of the numinous consciousness'. Therefore, Otto writes of the person undergoing a numinous experience:

> The 'mystery' is for him not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication. (Otto, 1923, p. 31)

This non-rational element of attraction may be rationalised and expressed in religious analogies as God's 'goodness', 'love', 'mercy', 'pity' or 'comfort' – the traditional moral ttributes of the holy God (pp. 31, 33-34, 145).

Critical evaluation
Otto's phenomenological account of the nature of religious experience has been widely praised; but some of its aspects have been challenged, as have several of his related claims.
(1) Otto regarded mysticism as an extreme form of numinous experience: one that features an '*identification*, in different degrees of completeness, of the personal self with the transcendent Reality', and in which 'religious feeling surpasses its rational content, that is, . . . its hidden, non-rational, numinous elements predominate and determine the emotional life' (Otto, 1923,p. 22; 1932, p. 141). Most scholars, however, distinguish these two types. For them, the numinous describes the 'outer and thunderous quality' of an intense, external *encounter* (sometimes 'prophetic') with the divine, or even with nature; this is contrasted with the serene 'inner visions' of mystical *unity* that arise from contemplative practices (e.g. Ninian Smart, who identifies the two as different ends or poles of a single spectrum of religious experience). In the unitary state of the mystical experience, it is said, 'distances are annihilated and distinctions overcome'; whereas the 'sense of absolute otherness, or distance, or difference' seems to be part of the 'very fabric of numinous experience' (Wainwright, 1981, p. 5). Others, however, reject this separation of numinous from mystical experience (e.g. Ware, 2007).
(2) According to Otto, religious experience is a mixed phenomenon. In it we are, at one and the same time, fascinated yet also apprehensive, even terrified. But is the 'shudder' of otherness an intrinsic part of valid spiritual experience? Many religious believers would claim that a wholly non-judgemental experience of the light and warmth of love and forgiveness (grace) is a more reliable experience of the divine than is the cold, dark experience of holy terror. The 'fear of the LORD' that is the beginning of the knowledge of wisdom in Proverbs (1:7; 9:10) 'implies

not anxiety and dread but rather unwavering devotion to . . . God' (Clements, 2003, p. 438; but cf. Otto, 1923, p. 14). In response, however, we might say that Otto argues for a development of religious consciousness from an earlier stage that emphasised the element of tremendum, to a later stage in which the element of fascinans became more central (Otto, 1923, p. 32).

(3) The privileging of experience and mystery over doctrine and the *content* of revelation is often criticised for side-stepping issues of truth and rationality, and for focusing on human experience rather than divine revelation. (Yet revelation, too, is presumably initially received in some form of human experience.)

(4) Otto's appeal to what is *sui generis* treats religious experience as well as its object as altogether different from everything else ('*wholly* other').[1] This tends to protect religion and religious feeling and experience from comparison with other forms of human emotion, experience, knowledge and activity, and from scientific (including social scientific) investigation.

(5) Feminist critics argue that Otto's account of numinous experience is 'mediated and constituted by the androcentrism of Otto's own world-view' (Raphael, 1994, p. 513). His emphasis on the themes of separation, transcendence and the sacredness of spirit – in contrast with intimacy, immanence and (the profanity of?) the this-worldly and the material – is said to encourage a disparagement of women's spiritual experience. Lowliness and 'creature- feeling' are particularly problematic for women in a society dominated by men.

(6) Many philosophers dismiss Otto's positing of a 'Kantian' mental category that is a priori (not derived from sense experience) as our faculty for apprehending the holy (e.g. Paton,1955, pp. 129-145). His process of schematisation[2] has also been criticised for leaving the meaning of the divine attributes largely uncertain.

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[1]Numinous experience is 'inexpressible' for Otto both because it is an immediate experience and because it is an experience of what is wholly other. However, we should note Otto's references to analogies, which provide *some* account of the nature of the experience and its object.

[2]In this process, numinous experiences are 'illustrated' – but not exhaustively or 'conceptually' rendered – by evocative and symbolic 'ideograms' that are rooted in analogous human experiences, such as our 'fear' or 'love' for other people (Otto, 1923, pp. 19-20, 24, 26, 34-35, 48).

Glossary

Androcentrism is a focus on the male.

Immanence: the idea of the divine as indwelling, operating within and pervading nature.

Intuition: direct knowledge of an entity or truth, involving no conscious reasoning processes.

Phenomenology: in a general sense, how experience appears to the recipient – 'how things seem' to her or him, regardless of whether they are that way or not. (On a more technical understanding of phenomenology, great stress is laid on the importance of 'bracketing' or 'setting aside' presuppositions about the truthfulness or value of an experience.)

Sui generis: literally 'of its own kind', unique.

Transcendent: that which goes beyond the limitations of our being, experience and language.

Links

https://www.britannica.com/biography/ Rudolf-Otto (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_ Otto (Wikipedia)

Discussion points

1. The following passages from the Bible have been proposed (some by Otto himself) as good examples of numinous experience. What features justify their selection?

   Exodus 3:1-6; 4:24; Deuteronomy 5:26; Isaiah 6:1-8; Job 38:1–42:6; Mark 9:2-8; 10:32; 16:1-8; Luke 24:36-37; Hebrews 10:31.

2. Can you think of other passages in (any) sacred scriptures or religious hymns or rituals, or other religious or secular poems or prose, that might give rise to or express something like a numinous experience? What about examples from music, drama, dance, film, art or architecture; or your own experiences of people or nature?

3. How might Otto be defended against the criticisms of his thinking outlined above?

4. How might a believer resolve the tensions within the 'strange harmony of contrasts' of the numinous experience?

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Was Jung Correct: Is Religion Good for the Psychological Wellbeing of Normal People?

Leslie J. Francis

The article draws on the empirical science of the psychology of religion to test the thesis that religion is good for the psychological wellbeing of normal people. To do so the article discusses the complex problems of conceptualising and operationalising both religion and wellbeing before focusing on evaluating the evidence.

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC/EDUQAS Unit 5: The Philosophy of Religion, Theme 1: Challenges to Religious Belief (part 2), B: Carl Jung: religion necessary for personal growth; religion as source of comfort and promotion of positive personal and social mindsets arising from religious belief; the effectiveness of empirical approaches as critiques of Jungian views on religion.

Introduction

At face value, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung seemed to take opposing views on the contribution made by religion to human flourishing: Freud seemed to see religion as a force for bad, while Jung seemed to see religion as a force for good in human development. Such opposing views have been taken as a challenge by the empirical science of the psychology of religion to test the evidence that may support or may contradict such views.

The starting point for the empirical science of the psychology of religion is always with the twin concerns of how religion is conceptualised and measured, and then with the twin concerns of how the correlates of religion are conceptualised and measured. In other words, if we are concerned with exploring the connection between religion and psychological wellbeing we need to start by examining what we mean by religion and what we mean by psychological wellbeing. The present paper pursues these two questions with the specific intention in mind of testing the position that argues that religion is good for psychological wellbeing.

Conceptualising and measuring religion

Within the empirical science of the psychology of religion, religion is recognised as a complex and multifaceted construct. As soon as you start to explore the correlates of religion (for example in terms of psychological wellbeing) it becomes clear that different answers may emerge from focusing on different facets of religion. The two most frequently accessed facets are affiliation and practice, and there are conceptual problems associated with each of these facets.

Religious affiliation is the aspect of religion commonly used in national censuses, like the question included since 2001 in the census for England and Wales and in the census for Scotland. Affiliation is concerned with an aspect of individual identity, like ethnicity, sex and language. Religious affiliation may overlap with all kinds of ethnic, cultural and family-related strands. To know that someone is 'Church of England' or 'Muslim' may not always tell you much about their personal religion.

Religious practice is often measured in terms of frequency of public worship attendance. The problem with taking worship attendance as a measure of religion was spotted by Gordon Allport (1966) and Allport and Ross (1967) when they were researching the correlates of prejudice. Religions, they argued, generally support openness and inclusivity. Yet the empirical evidence suggested that frequent churchgoers were often more prejudiced against minority groups than non-churchgoers. This empirical finding prompted Allport and Ross (1967) to look more closely at divergent motivations underpinning churchgoing. They distinguished between two opposing motivations that they characterised as intrinsic religion

and extrinsic religion.

According to Allport (1966, p. 454) the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity separated 'churchgoers whose communal type of membership supports and serves other, non-religious ends, from those for whom religion is an end in itself – a final, not instrumental good.' Allport (1966, p. 455) proceeded to argue as follows about the nature of extrinsic orientation.

> While there are several varieties of extrinsic religious orientation, we may say they all point to a type of religion that is strictly utilitarian: useful for the self in granting safety, social standing, solace, and endorsement for one's chosen way of life. (Allport, 1966, p. 455)

Regarding the nature of intrinsic orientation, Allport made the following case.

> The intrinsic form of the religious sentiment regards faith as a supreme value in its own right . . . . A religious sentiment of this sort floods the whole life with motivations and meaning. Religion is no longer limited to single segments of self-interest. (Allport, 1966, p. 455)

Religious affect

In much of my own research within the empirical science of the psychology of religion, I have been attracted by Allport's focus on intrinsic religiosity and on trying to access and measure the individual's deeper internal commitment to religion. The problem, however, with Allport's measures of intrinsic religion is that they focus on differentiating the motivations underpinning outward religious practice (like churchgoing). I take the view that people can be deeply open to religion

without engaging in this form of outward practice. In my own tradition of research, I have been keen to access a deep interior commitment to religion that I have conceptualised as religious affect and as the attitudinal dimension of religion. I first measured and operationalised this notion of religion in the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis, 1978a, 1978b). The reliability and validity of this measure has been supported by a number of studies (Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Brown, & Lester, 1995). Studies have shown a high correlation between my measure and measures of intrinsic religion.

While the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity was originally constructed to assess religious affect within Christian or post-Christian societies, subsequent measures have been constructed to operationalise the same construct among Muslims (Sahin & Francis, 2002; Ok, 2016), Jews (Francis & Katz, 2007), Hindus (Francis, Santosh, Robbins, & Vij, 2008) and Buddhists (Thanissaro, 2016). It is this family of instruments with which I have tried to monitor the connection between religion and psychological wellbeing.

Conceptualising psychological wellbeing

The notion of psychological wellbeing is no less problematic or contested than the notion of religion. When people speak of psychological wellbeing they may have very different things in mind. The empirical science of the psychology of individual differences begins the task of clarifying this problematic notion by distinguishing between two core ways in which the term may be used. One way is concerned with psychological pathologies, and the other way with different levels of wellbeing among normal and healthy people. These

are two very different fields of study.

Psychological pathologies may include phenomena like psychotic and neurotic disorder. There are ways in which religion may become involved in such disorders, but this is not the focus of the present study. Here the focus is on psychological wellbeing among normal and healthy people, which belongs to the domain of positive psychology. Within positive psychology there remains considerable debate among different conceptualisations and measures of psychological wellbeing including measures of satisfaction in life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), purpose in life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969) and personal happiness (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989; Hills & Argyle, 2002).

From among these varied conceptualisations and measures of psychological wellbeing, my research group has favoured the measures proposed by Michael Argyle and his colleagues, and in particular the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989). This Inventory is built on a rigorous and clear definition of the construct being assessed and has been shown in a number of studies to possess good properties of reliability and validity (Francis, Brown, Lester, & Philipchalk, 1998). Argyle's notion of happiness embraces three components. The first component is the frequency and degree of positive affect or joy. The second is the average level of satisfaction over a period of time. The third is the absence of negative feelings, such as anxiety and depression. The important point is that these three components do not function independently but rather as coordinated indicators of a stable underlying construct. It is this stable underlying construct that Argyle regards as happiness.

Was Jung Correct?

Linking religious affect and personal happiness

Building on these reflections on the definition and measurement of religion and psychological wellbeing, my research group set out in the mid-1990s to explore the connection between religious affect and personal happiness by inviting a sample of 360 first year undergraduate students to complete a survey that included both the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity and the Oxford Happiness Inventory. The survey also included questions about age and sex and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985). In exploring the correlation between religious affect and happiness, age, sex and personality were important control variables to take into account. Eysenck's three dimensions of personality (extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism) have been shown by other studies to be significant predictors of individual differences both in relation to the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Francis, Brown, Lester, & Philipchalk, 1998) and in relation to the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis, 1992).

The results of this first study, reported by Robbins and Francis (1996), demonstrated a significant positive correlation between religious affect and happiness, after controlling for age, sex and personality. In other words, the study indicated a positive association between religions and psychological wellbeing.

In building up a body of scientific knowledge the notion of replication has an important part to play. The results of a single initial study should always be treated with caution until other studies conducted with the same individuals have been given the opportunity to check whether they generate the same findings. With this aim in mind, my research group invited further samples to complete the same set of measures. In these studies, there were 212 undergraduate students in the United States of America (Francis & Lester, 1997); 295 individuals, ranging in age from late teens to late seventies, recruited from participants attending a variety of courses and workshops on the psychology of religion (Francis & Robbins, 2000); 994 15- to 16-year- old secondary school students (Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000); 496 members of the University of the Third Age (Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000); 456 undergraduate students in Wales (Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000); and 89 students in Wales (Francis, Robbins, & White, 2003). Taken together, these seven samples (in which N = 360, 212, 295, 995, 456, 496, 89) demonstrated a consistent pattern of a significant positive correlation between religion and happiness based on employing the same instruments in different contexts. The scientific strategy of replication seemed to be bearing fruit, although further studies remain desirable.

The next stage of the programme of research extended the replication studies beyond the Christian or post-Christian context. The first extension of the research was within a Jewish context in Israel using the Katz-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Judaism alongside the Oxford Happiness Inventory. Between 2002 and 2014 three studies were published that all reported a significant positive association between religion and happiness among students in Israel: 298 Hebrew-speaking female undergraduate students (Francis & Katz, 2002); 203 Hebrew-speaking male undergraduate students (Francis, Katz, Yablon, & Robbins, 2004); and 348 Hebrew-

speaking female undergraduate students (Francis, Yablon, & Robbins, 2014). Further replications are currently under way in Israel.

The second extension of the research was within an Islamic context in Turkey, using the Ok Religious Attitude Scale (Islam) (Ok, 2016) alongside the Oxford Happiness Inventory. This study conducted among 348 students studying at a state university also found a significant positive association between religion and happiness (Francis, Ok, & Robbins, 2016). The second study within an Islamic context was reported by Tekke, Francis, and Robbins (in press) among 189 students studying at the International Islamic University in Malaysia who completed the Sahin-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Islam (Sahin & Francis, 2002) and the Oxford Happiness Inventory. This study also reported a positive correlation between religion and happiness.

Conclusion
This paper set out to explore the evidence for the view that religion is good for the psychological wellbeing of normal people. The research question was refined and sharpened by serious discussions of what is meant by religion and what is meant by psychological wellbeing. In light of these discussions a long-established research programme was introduced that set out to explore the associations between religious affect and happiness. Employing these definitions and measures, a series of studies conducted in Christian, Jewish and Islamic contexts has generated consistent evidence to support the view that religion is good for the psychological wellbeing of normal people. In turn, this view is consistent with the broader position advanced by Carl Jung.

Glossary

Attitude is defined as a relative stable underlying predisposition to evaluate specific phenomena positively or negatively.

Conceptualisation refers to the way in which an idea is formulated and shaped.

A *construct* is an abstract noun or quality (which is often carefully defined and 'operationalised')

Control variables are 'constructs' that need to be taken into account to clarify the association between two key variables under consideration. For example, if females are both more religious and less happy than males, sex differences may contaminate the association between religion and happiness. Consequently, sex needs to be taken into account as a control variable.

Correlation refers to the extent to which one variable varies consistently with another variable.

Items are the individual sentences, phrases or words in a questionnaire that combine to generate scales.

N is the statistical notation that means the number of participants in a study.

Operationalisation refers to the way in which a concept is measured.

Reliability is defined as the extent to which psychological measures produce stable measures.

Validity is defined as the extent to which psychological measures actually measure what they claim to measure.

Variables in empirical research are 'constructs' that can carry two or more values. For example, sex carries two values (coded male=1, and female=2), and a 'Likert rating' carries 5 values (disagree strongly=1, disagree=2, not certain=3, agree=4,and agree strongly=5).

Discussion points

1. How do you understand the notions of 'intrinsic religion' and of 'religious affect'? If you were measuring these constructs, what items would you include in your questionnaire?

2. How do you understand the notion of happiness? If you were measuring this construct, what items would you include in your questionnaire?

3. How important do you think the idea of replication is in establishing a body of scientific knowledge?

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Was Jung Correct?

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Islam and Democracy: Are they Compatible or Irreconcilable?

Part 1: Background and Issues

Abdullah Sahin

The article presents the background to the relationship between Islam and secular democracy, and the issues raised by such a study.

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC/EDUQAS Unit 3: A Study of Religion, Option B: A Study of Islam, Theme 2: Significant historical developments in religious thought, Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief.
EDEXCEL Paper 4: Option 4D: Islam, Topic 3: Practices, 3.2 The ummah as an expression of Islamic identity; Topic 6: Religion and Society, 6.3.
OCR Developments in Islamic Thought, 6: Challenges, Topic: Islam and the State.
AQA 2D Islam: Islam and the challenge of secularisation; Islam, migration and religious pluralism.

Introduction

Recently, the question concerning the compatibility between Islam and democracy and whether Islam can be reconciled at all with modern liberal secular democracy has attracted a considerable amount of discussion in both Muslim majority societies and the West, where Muslims are now an established religious minority. It is not often that one hears a similar debate about Christianity or Judaism, Islam's sister faith traditions, or indeed about other world religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. What, then, makes the case of Islam so salient?

This article aims to explore the topic by first discussing the wider context and rationale behind contrasting Islam, a monotheistic faith tradition, with democracy, a Western secular form of political governance. It must be noted that the inquiry and analysis of such a controversial issue can easily draw in elements of reductionism and anachronism, with the danger of employing concepts and experiences intrinsic to a distinctive cultural practice and which evolved out of a specific

historical period to explain and understand another distinctive phenomenon embedded in a different historical and cultural context. To avoid such a methodological shortcoming, this article will briefly explore Islam's central narrative, the nature of religious/spiritual authority and political theology in Islam and discuss how the relationship between faith and political power has been framed in diverse historical expressions of Islam.

Islam and the re-emergence of the debate on religion in secular democracies

The secular political order together with its myth of the 'inevitable' decline of religion has become so deeply rooted in Western societies that few would have predicted the return of religion in the modern world as a significant socio-political dynamic dominating public discussion. The separation of church and state, leading to the formation of diverse settlement models between secular states and Christian dominations in Western Europe, came out of a long historical process shaped by formative events such as the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. These significant historical events accumulated into the formation of an overarching narrative called 'Western secular modernity'. Mass cultural secularisation largely appears to have occurred with the rise of consumer society out of the economic prosperity following the post-Second World War expansion of a globalising capitalist market economy. Despite the gradual decline in organised religion in Western Europe, the social and moral teachings of the Judaeo-Christian tradition have shaped the notions of public service, work ethics and the common good

essential for maintaining a shared sense of trust within the modern secular democratic political order.

However, the gradual loss of religious memory has pushed religion to the margins of society and it is increasingly assumed by many to be a relic of a long bygone past. A negative consequence of rapid decline in religious observance – as well as in religious literacy, as a recent collection of essays aptly identifies (Stoddart & Martin 2017) – is that religion has become one of the most stereotyped phenomena in the West. But it appears that secular modernity, with its systematic critique of religion, has not quite put an end to religion. On the contrary, in hindsight, it appears that this strong critique has unintentionally helped the rediscovery of the original meanings embodying the spirit of being faithful that were grossly suppressed when organised religion became subservient to the imperial political impulses that often legitimised their authoritarian power structure. The late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a well-regarded expert on comparative religion and an acknowledged authority on Islam, explains how this historical process of rediscovery has taken place in the context of Western Europe by offering a critical analysis of the word 'religion' and its historical evolution and modern reception. He draws attention to the significance of the difference between the modern use of the word 'religion', popularised during the 17th century as a collection of 'ideas and beliefs about God', and its Latin root *religio* which meant faith, a living, embodied commitment and trust, and above all a distinctive way of perceiving life and being in the world. He further suggests that *religio* in turn originates from the word *ligare* meaning to 'bind' or 'connect', hence a distinctive experience

of connecting and binding with God, others and the natural world around us. At the sociological level, continuous fresh spiritual articulation and revival of established religious traditions have been taken by some scholars to mark the start of a post-secular social reality emerging in the West (Berger, 1970; Habermas, 2008).

The social significance of religions in the modern world has kept the debate on the relationship between religion and politics alive. It must be noted, however, that the post-Second World War presence of Islam in Western Europe has significantly contributed to this renewed debate concerning the role and place of religion within contemporary secular democracies. European secular states have well-established settlement models with the various Christian churches, which originated in the Peace of Westphalia (1648) that ended the European wars of religion. But they appear to be struggling to recognise and engage with Islam and to accommodate the religious needs of their Muslim citizens. Part of this difficulty stems from the fact that in Islam, unlike Christianity, religious authority is largely amorphous and does not rest within an easily discernible representative institution like a church or (a) person(s) such as a pope or a system of ecclesiastical authority. More significantly, political and cultural secularism, a phenomenon that is unique to the story of Western Europe where religion is often said to be confined to the sphere of personal space, remains alien to Islamic self-understanding. And, finally, the reality of historical rivalry between medieval 'Islamdom' and 'Christendom' has resurfaced within the context of the modern world, in the guise of the conflict between 'Islam and the secular West'.

Post-Second World War Muslim migration to the West and the reality of a conflict-ridden Middle East, together with the rise of religiously-inspired international terrorism, have all created an irrational fear of Islam/Muslims ('Islamophobia'). Islam is increasingly associated with fanaticism, conflict and violence and therefore seen as a threat to world peace. Within the alarmingly increasing anti-Islam rhetoric of populist far right politics, as well as aggressive secularist humanism, the nature of Muslim faith, and the style of living and thinking that embodies and perpetuates it, is alleged to be a problem in the modern world. In more particular terms, it is claimed that Islam, unlike Christianly, has not had 'its Reformation' or been tamed by the critique of secular modernity and, therefore, remains incompatible with the values of Western liberal democracy that require the separation of religion and politics, guarantee freedom of speech, human rights and equality between women and men, and so on. The migrant Muslim communities, who largely came from highly traditional rural social settings in their countries of origin, are now living in mainly secular and culturally and religiously plural modern Western cities. This has intensified the debate over the relevance of Islam, imagined to be an oppressive medieval religion at odds with the modern world. Islam also poses challenges to secular democracy as it is struggling to address and accommodate the religiously-based demands of Muslims and their rights as a religious minority. At times it can appear that the assimilation of Muslims into the norms of secular democracy and its attendant way of life is the *only* option being put forward to ensure their 'integration' into Western society.

What is Islam's central narrative and how are religious, spiritual and political authorities imagined in Muslim tradition?

For all Muslims, the Qur'ān as divine revelation is the literal word of God. It constitutes the core of religious authority and guidance. For Sunni Muslims, the authentic prophetic reports known as Hadith that contain the living traditions of the Prophet, called Sunna, also act as an inalienable source of religious authority that informs Muslims' personal and social attitudes as well as their behaviour. In addition, for Shia Muslims the traditions and reports attributed to what they believe to be the divinely-appointed guardians (imams) also act as a significant source of religious, legal and spiritual authority and guidance (*marji'*).

The Qur'ān's core message to humanity and its theological vocabulary are embedded in a deeper universe of ethical meanings. It appears that in Islam, unlike other world faith traditions, there is a clear self-awareness and self-naming within its foundational scripture. The Qur'ān addresses the prophet and early Muslims by saying that 'today God has perfected/completed your religion (*al-dīn*) and is pleased with Islam to be your religion' (5:3).[1] But it is significant that the word Islam here means 'peaceful submission' to the will of God, and *dīn* means a sincere commitment to lead an ethically accountable and responsible just life before God, other people and the natural world. Hence, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (a committed Christian) famously said that he was a 'muslim'.

The fundamental ethical logic that permeates all the Qur'ānic narrative can be summarised as follows: God, by virtue of gifting humanity with life, expects recognition and gratitude for this act of divine generosity. Those who, on reflection, choose to acknowledge God's favour and willingly express their gratitude by worshipping God alone, achieve the status of faithfulness, peace and serenity: that is, they become 'Muslims/Mu'mins' (literally, the terms suggest being in a state of peace and security; theologically, they refer to the faithful who trust and voluntarily submit to the creator). Faithfulness is deeply tied to the ethical status of being grateful to the creator and being able to express this gratitude through doing good to others. The Qur'ān depicts the opposite of faithfulness as ungratefulness; those who choose not to acknowledge (deliberately cover-up, ignore and deny) God's favours and the gift of life become 'Kāfirs' (literally, the ungrateful ones) (Izutsu, 2002). As such, in Islam's core narrative, the divine-human relationship reflects a reciprocity of rights and responsibilities; and, most significantly, it is guided by a deeper relational and rational ethics (Rahman, 1980; 2002). That is why in Islam the idea of justice ('*adl/qist*), which is closely tied to the notion of truth (*haqq*), is so central to the point that God's mercy, compassion and love for humanity are qualified within a deeper principle of justice: the desire to affirm the dignity and rights of all, where harmony and balance constitute the heart of personal and social lives. The Qur'ān states that the entire reason for inspiring countless prophets is the expectation that they can become catalysts for enabling humanity to establish justice among themselves (57:25).

Similarly, the fundamental teaching of the Qur'ān, *tawḥīd* (acknowledging the Oneness of God) also means being able

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[1] In references to the Qur'ān, the first number refers to the chapter (*sura*) number and the second to the verse (*aya*) number.

to grasp a deeper level of unity, balance and interdependence within the perceived contingency and diversity of life. The idea is that humans should try to grasp the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence in nature and human existence. This unifying vision of *tawḥīd* should guide humans, while reconciling their differences and resolving possible conflicts. Due to this dynamic ethics shaping shariah, Islam is often depicted as a 'rights'-based faith, as the rights of humans (*huquq al-ʿebād*) and those of the creator (*huquq Allah*) are explicitly recognised in Muslim legal thought. While God, as the giver of the gift of life, has the right to be acknowledged, humans have the right to protect their dignity (*karamah*). By working within the framework of this distinctive notion of 'human rights' in Islam, classical Muslim scholars have identified the following five rights as summarising the ultimate ethos of Islamic ethics and law (*maqasid al-shariah*): the right to protect life, family (progeny), property, religion and, more significantly, the human thinking capacity that is central to preserving human sanity and the essential requirement of religious and legal accountability (*taklif*) in Islam (Sahin, 2011).

The Qur'ān recognises the fact that the embodiment and interpretation of *sharia* in human life will necessarily be context-dependent. Therefore, the Qur'ān acknowledges the inevitable diversity in the historical applications/articulations of the divine *shariah* (5:48; 45:18). The presence of different legal schools of thought in Islam demonstrates the reality of a dynamic legal plurality in Muslim tradition (Hallaq, 2001). What is crucial is to utilise one's reflective thinking competence to discern and understand this ethical guidance (Gwynne, 2004), a process that the Qur'ān recognises as

fiqh, and to develop practical wisdom (*hikma*) to intelligently and responsibly articulate it within the contextual reality of the faithful community. Clearly, application of *shariah* means observing higher ethical values, such as justice, respecting human dignity and taking seriously the social context in which these values will be enacted.

According to Sunni Islam, the Prophetic model (*Sunna*) and the Companions' appropriation of it gradually led to the emergence of a living tradition centred around the Qur'ān and, increasingly, the prophetic Sunna, in that it symbolised the practical application of the Qur'ānic teachings in real life conditions. Prophetic authority, originally embodied in the form of a living tradition, *Sunna*, gradually came to be seen as textual, preserved in the collections of Prophetic reports, Hadith. Despite this shift, it is the consensus-based *authoritative knowing and acting* at the individual and communal level that constitute the centre of religious authority, and not a body of instructions or the assumed infallibility of a particular person. In Islam, orthopraxy, right conduct, has more significance than orthodoxy (right doctrine) as such (van Ess, 2006). Religious and spiritual authority in Islam may appear amorphous but they are not subject to arbitrary formation; they have a strong critical, interpretative and communal character. This necessary hermeneutic ('interpretative') component, recognised by the tradition as the processes of *tafsir/taʾwil/ijtihad*, has important pedagogic ('educational') implications: for there is an interactive process between the sacred address and the hearer/commentator whose reflections discern the guidance from the message that is to be emulated by members of the community. Further, the

whole process remains open to scrutiny by the wider 'balanced faithful community' (*umma Muslima/umma wasat*), and is therefore incomplete – as God's knowledge and wisdom is unbounded (18:109). The process thus requires constant reflection, which is taken to be both a duty and an act of worship.

Formation of political theologies in early Islam

The devastating impact and shock of the first civil war, *fitnah*, in Islamic history (656-661 CE), at the end of the period known as time of the rightly guided rulers (*Khulafa al-Rasheduun*) and over the political leadership of the *ummah*, has largely facilitated the formation of a mainstream quietist political theology advocating compromise and consensus-building in political and social affairs on the part of the faithful community. Therefore, Sunni Muslims, literally those who adhere to the prophetic tradition, are further qualified as people of the community (*jama'a*). The first civil war not only produced an acute political crisis with far-reaching sectarian consequences, but also brought about a set of challenging theological questions. For example, many of those who participated in the civil war were Companions of the prophet, who ranked equally highly in terms of piety but ended up supporting opposing sides in the deadly dispute. A theological judgement concerning the fate of such pious men in the hereafter, who had been involved in a clearly unacceptable act of killing, was hotly debated. All kinds of issues of human freedom, responsibility, the status of the sinful believer, the nature of salvation in Islam and so on were discussed. The infighting between supporters of the prophet's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 CE) as *Khalif* (and who became

the proto-Shia groups) and those who supported his rival Muawiyya ibn Abi Sufyan (d.680 CE), a well-known companion of the prophet, was intensified, with each party claiming the moral high ground. The great majority, in order to avoid further bloodshed, simply suggested that the judgement on all those who had been involved in the civil war should be suspended, and their fate in the hereafter should be deferred to God to decide. Thus, they managed to resolve the theological impasse temporarily but ended up justifying the dynastical model of political governance. The theological views of the latter formed the basis of the mainstream Sunni Islam,

During the height of the civil war, a section among Ali's supporters initiated the question as to why they had to limit the political leadership contest only to two competing candidates. They began to question the legitimacy of both candidates and suggested the selection of a different person who possessed the required leadership qualities and religious virtues. They started deserting Ali's camp (hence they were called *khawarij,* 'those who left, went out') and eventually formed the first sect in Islam. They seemed to have quickly lost what appeared to be a democratic temperament, instead developing the earliest form of a literalist religiosity in Islam that exhibited an intolerant political theology by simply dismissing and legitimising the killing of those who disagreed with them. Ultimately, they were driven out of the community and ended up living at the periphery of the Arabian Peninsula in today's Oman and some parts of Yemen. The traditions that evolved out of this broad *khawarij* interpretation of Islam still survive in the same region.

Part 2 of this article, detailing the arguments both for and against the claim that Islam can be reconciled with modern *secular democracy, will be published in the next issue (13).*

Links

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Fitna (First Fitna, Wikipedia)

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world#ref26866 (Islamic World, Encyclopaedia Britannica)

Discussion points

1. How do you think the negative impact of 'reductionism and anachronism' can be avoided while studying different religious traditions?

2. Do you think that sharia is a fixed religious law, or can it be reinterpreted within the context of modern life? Provide evidence for your views.

3. Do you think that prophets are only spiritual guides, or is their ministry also about social and political justice? Illustrate your point by focusing on the case of the Prophet Muhammad.

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Utilitarianism and Theological Ethics

Samuel Tranter

This article focuses on the relationship between utilitarian and theological approaches to ethics, introducing the reader to some contemporary scholarship on this question and showing what might be at stake by focusing on three ethical topics.

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC/EDUQAS Unit 2: Section A – An Introduction to Religion and Ethics, Theme 4: Utilitarianism – a non-religious approach to ethics; and *Unit 4 Religion and Ethics, Theme 1: A. Synoptic link: how the study of ethics has, over time, influenced and been influenced by developments in the philosophy of religion.*
OCR Religion and Ethics 2. Normative Ethical Theories, Utilitarianism.
Edexcel Unit 1 Religious Studies – Foundations, Area B Ethics 1 A study of ethical concepts.
AQA 1 Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, Section B Ethics and religion.

Introduction

This article focuses on the relationship between utilitarian and theological approaches to ethics, introducing some relevant contemporary scholarship and showing what might be at stake in this question by focusing on three ethical topics. I use the term 'theological ethics' here as shorthand for 'Christian theological ethics', that is, as synonymous with 'Christian ethics' and 'moral theology', though it is important to remember that in other contexts the term could denote other traditions too, as in 'Jewish theological ethics'. By utilitarianism I mean the moral theory, or cluster of moral theories, that owe their origin to thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

Utilitarianism: whither and whence?

The philosopher John Rawls wrote that for 'much of modern moral philosophy the predominant systematic theory has been some form of utilitarianism' (Rawls, 1971, p. vii). In recent years a new generation of utilitarians has emerged, making claims for the supremacy and efficacy of their moral theory that are as ambitious as any before them. Prominent among these are figures like William MacAskill and Toby Ord, young moral philosophers based at Oxford's Centre for Effective Altruism, who have sought to popularise their moral vision through accessible publications and organisations such as Giving What We Can (MacAskill, 2015). Interestingly, and troublingly for

some observers, this school of thought is closely associated with Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute, directed by the post-humanist Nick Bostrom, and both have been influential on a number of philanthropically-minded technology entrepreneurs, such as Dustin Moskovitz, Elon Musk and Bill Gates (for an astute non-theological review of MacAskill's book, see Srinivasan, 2015).

Paving the way for these thinkers, and also involved in Giving What We Can, is the most prominent utilitarian thinker of our times: the controversial Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer (1946-). The second part of this article engages his thought in particular, in critical conversation with theological ethics. First, though, we must examine the broader picture of utilitarianism's relation to Christian ethics.

To its advocates, utilitarianism is a self-evidently superior mode of moral reasoning. Perhaps because of this, they tend to describe it as though it springs fully formed from the minds of clear-thinking moral agents. Their interests, once they have refined and formulated their meta-ethical theory, tend to be practical; the most famous book of contemporary utilitarianism is entitled *Practical Ethics* (Singer, 2011). Comparatively little attention is paid by utilitarians to the historical dimension of morality. Like any tradition, however, utilitarianism is an ongoing conversation that involves important sources and which has been shaped by earlier decisions in particular practical cases. When history *is* mentioned, utilitarianism is usually traced to the 'classical' utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill. An assumption which accompanies this straightforward narration is that utilitarianism has always been an intentionally *non- theological* form of

ethics. This is by no means incorrect, and the modern forms of utilitarianism owe a great deal to these figures, and to their concern and that of their followers that ethics avoid deriving its content from religion.

Nevertheless, utilitarianism was not always conceived of as a non-theological approach to ethics. Its earliest exponents, like William Paley, were Christians, and their writings were works of moral theology. For many years, Paley's work was much more widely-known than that of his contemporary, Bentham. The history of modern Western moral philosophy might have turned out very differently if Mill had followed Paley's consequentialism, rather than Bentham's (see Perry, 2014, pp. 21-37; Irwin, 2009). Mill *did* follow Bentham, though, and utilitarianism came to define itself and to be defined by Christians and non-Christians alike as anti-religious.

During the third quarter of the twentieth century a number of approaches to ethics developed *within* (or claiming to draw from) Christian theology that bear family resemblance to utilitarian ethics. Their kinship with other, non-theological, kinds of consequentialist reasoning has proved controversial. Two of the most well-known, at least in previous decades, were the 'situation ethics' promoted by Joseph Fletcher, and the more sophisticated 'proportionalism', largely the work of Catholic moralists. As Neil Messer writes, however, 'Fletcher's situationism has not worn well' and very few, if any, contemporary Christian ethicists adopt a situationist approach (Messer, 2006, p. 81). Likewise, a magisterial decision *against* proportionalism was taken for Roman Catholic moral theology in the Papal encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae* (John Paul II, 1993, 1995).

Utilitarianism and Theological Ethics

The disagreements which these developments occasioned evoked fresh articulations of long-standing Christian objection to consequentialism. Prominent among these, and widely understood to have gained the upper hand in the debate, were the writings of the American ethicist Paul Ramsey, who made robust arguments for a Christian form of deontological ethics (e.g. Outka and Ramsey, 1968, pp. 67-138). Without doubt, Christian ethics has always entertained ideas of absolute moral commands and laws – ideas which utilitarianism places in question.

Defining the good

Yet large swathes of the Christian moral tradition before (and after) situationist and proportionalist ethics have been concerned with the *good* as well as the *right*: foregrounding human flourishing as much as, or more commonly as well as, what is commanded by God. Indeed, in that Christian theologians have understood the God who commands to be good, to have given existence to a creation which is 'very good', and have secured its goodness in Jesus Christ, the two are not necessarily incompatible emphases. So the novel thing about utilitarianism is not its focus upon, or even prioritisation of, of the good as such.

Nonetheless, one of the most salient differences between forms of consequentialism like utilitarianism and mainstream Christian ethics is a different evaluation of the good. Utilitarianism, in the form which has won out, constructs an account of morality – and therefore of the good – deliberately independent from theological frames of reference. Accordingly, it construes the criteria with which we might evaluate action's moral character simply in this-worldly ways. The concepts of 'happiness' or 'welfare' which play a central role in the moral reasoning of utilitarianism are much 'thinner' concepts than the notions of 'flourishing' or 'beatitude' in classical ethics: whether in an Aristotelian form, or especially as this is theologically modified by St. Thomas Aquinas to include a transcendent end or goal – *beatitude*, fulfilled life with God. That leanness, utilitarians would say, is the attraction: their concepts are simple enough to be universal across times and places. With them as the sole considerations of ethical decision-making, ethics can leave behind the irrelevant and incalculable matters of belief about realities beyond this world and establish something of a mathematical precision. Yet many have found the diminished scope of moral reasoning which utilitarianism entails dissatisfying, and recognition of its limited character has precipitated some of the most significant retrievals of earlier ethical theories. These retrievals have especially emphasised the more metaphysical *teleology* involved in earlier moral philosophy and theology. A seminal article by Elizabeth Anscombe is often credited with reawakening Western moral philosophy from its Kantian and consequentialist slumbers, and for reacquainting it with classical moral philosophy in the form of *virtue ethics*; Alasdair MacIntyre's book had much the same aim (Anscombe, 1981, pp. 26-42; MacIntyre, 2007).

This difference in definition of the good, and in definition of the proper ends and goals to which human nature is destined, becomes acute when we consider the 'preference utilitarianism' of Singer, because it reduces the scope of the good to the pleasure or happiness of preferences alone, and doubts any account of morality which purports to

deliberate rationally about multiple goods in light of the highest good, as classical Christian ethics has done. Indeed, Singer's work starkly denies any objective basis to morality at all; rather suggesting that it is, as Hume claimed, more about desires and wants than about reasoning about values inherent in the way human nature or the world is. (Singer has held, therefore, what is known technically as a non-cognitivist position in terms of meta-ethics.) Interestingly, however, it seems as though Singer himself is starting to doubt whether preferences really *are* irrational, having been persuaded by some of the arguments of the philosopher Derek Parfit (Parfit, 2011). He may thereby come to change his mind about whether there is more than one intrinsic value – that is, if there is more to be taken into account morally than the weighing of preferences (see Perry, 2014, p. 67). This amendment, yielding a less narrow kind of consequentialism, would bring Singer into closer proximity with Christian ethics. Significant differences, nonetheless, would likely remain; not least because Singer regards his change of mind in meta-ethics to be compatible with maintaining the same positions he has held in normative and practical ethics.

Utilitarianism and theological ethics compared

Disagreements between contemporary utilitarians and Christians have flared up over high-profile issues like euthanasia, but the respective approaches can be instructively compared by paying attention to how they play out in concrete moral reflection. (For a clear and exhaustive chart displaying the agreements and disagreements between Christians and utilitarians like Singer, see Camosy, 2012, pp. 256-60).

Humans and other animals

Singer has been an outspoken advocate of animal rights, and in so doing has repeatedly lamented the disregard Christians have shown for other animals, attributing this neglect to biblical teachings reinforced by the similarly 'speciesist' assumptions of later Christians. He observes that there have been Christians, such as St. Francis of Assisi, who exhibited concern for non-human animals, but that these have been the minority. Moreover, they have failed to shape the moral teaching – and more importantly, moral *practices* – of Christian communities. Christian ethicists like David Clough have responded by acknowledging the failures of Christian practice while also trying to show that theology can give a deeper account of the value of animal life than utilitarians (Perry, 2014, pp. 160-176; also Camosy, 2012, pp. 83-136).

Matters of life and death

Singer's concern that Christian teaching is speciesist is directly related to his disagreement with Christianity's understanding of the ethics of life and death. It is here that Singer has been most controversial. He directly challenges what he calls the 'doctrine of the sanctity of life', suggesting that by equating all human beings with the status 'person', and therefore with a right to life, it ranks less-sentient beings (severely disabled, dying, or 'brain dead' humans) above more-sentient beings (i.e. some kinds of animals) to whom Christians do not grant such status or right, and is therefore immoral (Singer, 1995). Christian ethicists have, unsurprisingly, directly challenged Singer's views in this area, and many have found his views about disability and euthanasia in particular deeply

objectionable (see Camosy, 2012, pp. 11-82; Spaemann, 2012).

Obligations to the poor
This topic is one where the views of utilitarians like Singer and of Christian ethicists are in much greater harmony. Like the younger generation of utilitarians, Singer has sought to promote 'effective' aid, and stressed the moral responsibility of richer countries (see Singer, 2009). He himself notes Christianity's radical biblical and traditional emphasis on the duty of sharing surplus wealth with the poor, who have a right to it, and adduces a number of instances of exemplary Christian teaching in this regard (see Perry, 2014, pp. 62-64). Nevertheless, here again he observes the gap between Christian moral teaching and the practice of many Christians, as well as the failure of the institutional church to discipline those who fail to aid the poor, despite its eagerness to do so in relation to those members who transgress its other moral teachings. Christian ethicists, for their part, have again acknowledged the shortcoming of much Christian practice, and sought to explore the ways in which Christian ethics has additional resources to comprehend and respond to the complex challenge of the poor beyond those provided by utilitarianism (Camosy, 2012, pp. 137-177; Perry, 2014, pp. 192-209).

Conclusion
How do utilitarian and theological approaches to ethics play out in practice in the UK today? This is a large question, in response to which I will present just one example: the work of Michael Banner, a Cambridge-based Christian ethicist.

In his *Short History of Christian Ethics,* Banner reiterates a widespread criticism of the family of moral theory from which utilitarianism issues: 'consequentialism seems to offer false reassurances; its failure to acknowledge certain worries indicates its lack of moral sensitivity' (Banner, 2009, p. 121). His more recent work, *The Ethics of Everyday Life,* shows how utilitarianism cannot gain purchase on the moral convictions, embodied in practices, which people hold dear (Banner, 2014). In a moving example, he illustrates the way in which utilitarian insensitivity exacerbated the tragedy of the Alder Hey organs scandal because professional medical ethicists could not comprehend the grief of parents, failing to listen to their concerns and dismissing them as superstitious. This scandal attracted such concern that, in 1999, 'a Parliamentary Inquiry was instituted to investigate the removal, retention, and disposal of organs and tissues following post-mortem examination' (Banner, 2014, p. 155). Even while the eyes of the nation and parliament were on Alder Hey, and although they made the most respectful arrangements they could with parents for dealing with the retained tissue, the hospital kept back samples from these organs without informing or seeking consent from parents. Banner does not tell this as a parable of wicked doctors. Rather, it serves to expose a state of moral confusion. Even under national scrutiny, medical researchers were unable to understand sufficiently why parents were unhappy with the post-mortem removal of their children's organs. They were not alone in their confusion, but were joined by the President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and the prominent bioethicist John Harris. The former described it as 'a philosophical puzzle' that parents were distressed at 'what is perceived as inappropriate disposal of the whole

human body or part of it' despite the greater-than-ever scientific understanding of the 'nature of human life and the biology of the human body' (quoted in Banner, 2014, p. 156). Similarly, Harris wrote that the '"preoccupation with reverence and respect for bodily tissue," which "has come to dominate discussions of retained tissues and organs in the wake of the Alder Hey revelations" is "quite absurd, if understandable"' (p. 157). Yet the concerns of the parents, Banner contends, are rationally defensible and *theologically* intelligible. Observing Christian practices, he suggests, helps us see how physical bodies play an important role in mourning. Whatever its promise of analytical moral rigour, it seems that these practices embody ethical convictions that were obscured by utilitarianism.

Glossary

Consequentialism is an ethical theory that judges whether or not something is wrong by its outcomes.

Deontological ethics places the emphasis in morality upon duty and obligation. It judges whether something is right or wrong based on rules.

Genealogical: relating to the account of the origin and historical development of something.

Magisterial, when used in relation to Roman Catholicism, means promoted by the 'teaching office' of the church, i.e. by church authorities.

Meta-ethical theory is not directly about what we should do or not do, but about how we should think about what we should do or not do. Deontology or consequentialism are types of meta-ethical theory.

Non-cognitivism is the meta-ethical view that ethical statements are not capable of being objectively true.

Papal encyclicals: documents promulgated by Popes, addressing particular issues understood to be pressing matters of the day.

Post-humanism or *transhumanism* is an ideology and movement that seeks to develop technologies that eliminate aging and radically enhance human capacities, in order to achieve a 'posthuman future'.

Teleology: philosophical or theological explanation of the end, goal or purpose of phenomena. Can also refer to that purpose itself.

Links

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html (Pope John Paul II, 1993)

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (Paul John Paul II, 1995)

https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse (Amia Srinivasan, 2015)

http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/3990/full Peter Singer and Nigel Biggar in conversation, 2011)

https://www.utilitarianism.com/hibberd/index.html (Paul Hibberd, 'To what extent is utilitarianism compatible with Christian theology?')

http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1991_42_2_03_Cole_Utilitarianism.pdf (Graham Cole, 1991, 'Theological utilitarianism and the eclipse of the theistic sanction')

Discussion points

1. Do you think utilitarian and theological approaches to ethics are incompatible? If so, why? If not, why not?

2. What other ethical topics might utilitarian and theological approaches to ethics disagree about, and why?

3. What other ethical topics might they agree about, and why?

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