

Grey Wisdom: not quite the last word on religious pluralism



In his inaugural lecture at Heythrop College, newly-appointed Professor Michael Barnes SJ explored the value attributed to the 'fourth stage' of life by various religious traditions. Old age 'opens up a contemplative space that cultivates attention not just to the great sweep of life but more exactly to the present moment': how does this idea find expression in different communities of faith?

In the National Gallery of Scotland hangs an early work by Titian. It's an allegory, the 'three ages of man'. On the right hand side two babies lie asleep with a cupid figure prancing mischievously above them. On the left, a young man and his beloved sit entranced, their limbs entwined, their eyes fixed on each other. In the background sits the 'third age': an old man contemplating not one but two skulls. Looming over him is the stunted trunk of a tree.

The meaning is pretty obvious: the melancholy truth that the innocence of childhood and the passion of first love both end in death. Yet that isn't the end of the story. In the background, silhouetted against the sky, is a small church: a sign of salvation perhaps, or the source of real life, what outlasts the three ages and provides stability and hope in a changing world.

What is depicted by Titian is a progress that finds a certain resonance in a number of different religious traditions. The founding myth of Buddhism, for example, is just such a memento mori. The innocence of the pampered prince, kept secluded from the reality of human suffering, is shattered by the encounter with the 'real world' outside the royal palace: a sick man, a dying man and a corpse. But then he comes across a wandering ascetic – and the possibility of a way out, moksa or release. Not mediated by a church, but a sign of salvation or enlightenment nonetheless: it makes him see the human condition of suffering in a new light.

There's a stark realism here. Similar ideas are found in classical Hinduism. What in the Law Books are called the 'stages and states of life' map out the various proper pursuits of human living. In the first stage, or brahmacarya, one is initiated by a guru, learning the ancient traditions, until one is ready for the second stage or grhasthya, living as a householder, earning a living, marrying and raising a family.

The third stage starts, say the Laws of Manu, 'when a householder sees that he is wrinkled and grey' (6.2); it is marked by withdrawal from family duties and seeking refuge in the forest, what we would call these days 'retirement'. And then there is an enigmatic fourth stage. 'When he has spent the third part of his lifespan in the forests, he may abandon all attachments and wander as an ascetic for the fourth part of his lifespan' (6.33). This is the life of total renunciation, sannyasa, the time when one can prepare for the end of life itself, both its termination in death and its true meaning and purpose.

When I started teaching Hinduism at Heythrop many years ago I would illustrate the 'four stages' with a little film about an old man thinking about becoming a sannyasi. One scene showed a fierce row with his daughters over a meal. His wife sat silently in the background, no doubt wondering what might happen to her if this self-obsessed old bore got his way and left her. Alarmed or relieved? Probably both.

However, after travelling and consulting learned pandits in various monasteries he decided that it wasn't for him. Not yet, at any rate. The point of the film was that just asking the question was itself a learning experience. He wanted to take seriously a new possibility, that final last stage. But he still hadn't finished his earlier responsibilities. He remained a husband, a father, a grandfather – and there was still work to be done to justify his existence.

This is supposed to be an inaugural lecture, given by one who is beginning to think that life in the forest (or at any rate the garden) has its attractions. Normally professors are appointed when they are far from retirement, somewhere in the middle of the Hindu second stage. Having mastered an area of an academic discipline, they use an occasion like this to expound their agenda for the future, confident that they have plenty of time to work out new ideas and challenge old assumptions. In that regard I'm a little late.

At first I thought this lecture would be more like an anti-inaugural, a grand retrospective of Barnes's best ideas, with plenty of references to 'the other' and the 'seeds of the Word' to be found in the 'middle of things'. There is, however, more to repetition than saying the same thing, maybe with different words, only more loudly. Repetition is a good Jesuit principle, especially when it leads to what St Ignatius calls the 'application of the senses'. In the Spiritual Exercises this is all part of the

process of simplifying prayer, based on the principle that the most carefully considered meditation on truth has to be interiorly 'relished' and fixed deep in the heart. As a director and prayer guide I have always enjoyed replying to an over-enthusiastic retreatant: 'great; go off - and do it again'. Rather like my old man eager to follow the traditional precepts to the letter, one can move on too quickly. If there is one thing I have learned from years of trying to understand what on earth 'the other' is banging on about, it is to take time, to avoid premature conclusions, to be flexible and keep open the possibility that at some point a deeper understanding may emerge – even if not yet. That may go some way to explaining my sub-title.

And the title itself? Most of the 'wrinkled and grey' among you will have your own funds of sage advice, some of it learned from bitter experience, some of it rooted in culture and tradition. I could give you examples of 'grey wisdom' from the great religions. But understanding any religious tradition demands more than an exegesis of sayings and proverbs. Good religious reading requires repetition, to get to the heart of the matter, to let its meaning sink in. Maybe it is a measure of 'grey wisdom' to recognise that even the wisest of sayings needs attention to the broader context in which they are uttered if their meaning is not to be distorted.

So let me state a limited objective for this lecture. My opening image of the stages of life makes two important points. Firstly, it says something about how we human beings construct narratives to give coherence to our lives. Secondly – and more importantly – it approaches the last stage not as some triumphant resolution but with an open-ended humility. However the last stage is conceived in religious or cultural terms, it centres round a qualitative shift from everyday tasks to something more personal and profound. At the same time we cannot make any sense of that last shift without seeing it in the light of what has gone before.

My initial point is something implicit in Titian's picture; the image of the church on the hill is nothing if not a reminder that an account of human life which stops with a 'third stage' is not enough. That raises an ethical issue – as well as a theological one. There is always a danger in any society, not just the Western secularised model, of institutionalising old age into care homes and geriatric wards. Equally problematic, I would suggest, is a tendency to patronise the 'task of old age' as the managing of decline.

There's evidence that old people do indeed think about the 'meaning of life'; it would be surprising if they did not. But old age does not exempt anyone from the crises and turbulence of faith. Hence the importance of taking seriously the particular value and power of that - perhaps indefinable - fourth stage. It deserves our attention not because it brings resolution (very often it doesn't) but because it opens up a contemplative space that cultivates attention not just to the great sweep of life but more exactly to the present moment, what the Buddhists call mindfulness. The move from the third to the

fourth stage is never achieved in a hurry. 'Grey wisdom' is not a fullness of anything but, more exactly, the readiness to face mortality and the inevitable tragedy of a life which is rarely fulfilled as one dreamed it would be all those years before.

That is where we begin, not with some discrete 'problem' that faces the wrinklies, but with something that affects us all – young and old alike. Qoheleth the preacher is second to none in musing on the ambivalence of everyday experience. Probe a little deeper and you can come across an underlying theme, noted more explicitly throughout the Hebrew scriptures, that God can and does overturn human expectation by granting the blessing of old age and fullness of years - as, for instance, to Abraham (Gen 25.7-8). The preacher knows that nothing lasts, everything returns to the dust from which it came. And yet God's spirit somehow goes on enlivening the world.

The same sense of realism, expressed in less obviously theistic form, is to be found in the Hindu Upanisads where learned gurus initiate young people into the great mysteries of life that are so often shrouded by human folly and ignorance. Rarely, however, is wisdom bestowed like a lordly gift from on high. The Katha Upanisad, for instance, begins with an angry father lashing out at his son for pestering him with unanswerable questions. 'Oh, go to hell', he says. And the son obediently complies – only to find that the god of the underworld is away on his travels. On his return, the god is embarrassed to find his guest alone and apologises by agreeing to grant three gifts – answers, of course, to the questions which the father has been unable or unwilling to address.

There's a neat ironic twist here: it is the guardian of death who gives away its secret. The serious point is that confrontation with the thing we most fear is often what brings an unexpected depth of understanding. In that light death is not a grim and all-powerful force that destroys all rationality but one more change – albeit a very substantial one - in a process human beings experience in every moment. There's a peculiarly Indian 'grey wisdom' here which gives us an insight into how the 'four stages' are to be configured – more exactly about how that tantalizingly obscure virtue of hope helps us to knit together and keep going the narrative we hesitantly seek to make of our lives.

Speaking in purely descriptive terms, what we find in the Hindu Law Books is the amalgamation of two different types of human religiosity, that proper to the person in the world and that of the pure contemplative or solitary. The first three stages are all dedicated to various aspects of dharma – which may loosely be translated as 'duty', the work that is appropriate to each stage as life unfolds. The fourth stage is not a duty or a task at all. For the Hindu it is what comes after I have spent time justifying my existence to someone else. Now I take time to reflect on what has been and where it is all leading. In Hindu terms this leads to moksa or release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Perhaps the point can be illustrated by brief reference to a far less well-known example of Indian contemplative religiosity – the Jains, contemporaries of early Buddhism, who stand within a lineage of ‘ford-makers’ or tirthankaras, sages who are adept in passing over the river that separates this life from the next. Some months ago I had the opportunity to speak at a meeting of Catholics and Jains at an inter-faith gathering in north London. Near Potters Bar on the northern outskirts of London stands a beautiful Jain temple, built into a tiny valley in the middle of a luxuriant park, all rose stonework and delicate tracery.

The most familiar teaching of Jainism is the value of ahimsa which so influenced Mahatma Gandhi. The word is usually translated as ‘non-violence’. We can, however, so emphasise the ‘non’ that it attracts connotations of passivity, of avoiding any action which might destroy, disturb or upset. That is unhelpful. The root is han, to kill; literally it means ‘wishing not to kill’ - or, better perhaps, ‘wishing well’ to someone, that they may enjoy a life which is free of all forms of violence.

The practice of ahimsa runs through the whole of Jain culture, giving rise to the equally important principle of anekanta. Meaning something like the ‘many-sidedness’ of things, anekanta is a deliberate refusal to retreat into some sort of dogmatic system. It sounds at first like a naïve relativism – that no account of absolute truth can be given. But this is a way of thinking which capitalises on the ‘grey wisdom’ of those who are closer to the end of life. At the meeting were quoted these words from one of the most important Jain scriptures, the Acaranga Sutra: ‘All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away.’ The text then continues: ‘This is the pure, eternal, unchangeable law ... seen (by the omniscient ones), heard (by the believers), acknowledged (by the faithful), and thoroughly understood by them.’(1.4.1) What is described is a chain of reception, a living tradition based on the experience of the wise which therefore has an open-ended, never-finished quality.

It is, of course, an ideal. Were the grey elders of the Jain community who entertained us to a splendid lunch, ‘omniscient’, fully versed in the ‘eternal, unchangeable law’? I very much doubt it. Yet they were treated as if they were, as if long years alone granted wisdom. And maybe that’s the point. Jainism shares much with Buddhism. In both, the fourth stage of sannyasa is not a particular choice appropriate for a few, but the crown of religious life which informs every other stage. Being alone, being allowed to take time, no longer having to justify oneself to others: this is not just the privilege of old age but a gift to the young, a reminder of how the regular commitment to dharma, duty and responsibility, has its own purpose and reward. This is what the ‘grey and wrinkled’ dare to offer to the youthful and fresh-faced.

Whatever we mean by that elusive ‘fourth stage’ is bound up with a profound sense of the irreducible otherness of human living. Earnest brahmacarins think they understand it all; by the time they have got

to retire to the forest they know they do not. We are deeply dialogical creatures, made – as Emmanuel Levinas reminds us - ‘in the accusative’, always called to respond to an otherness or difference that takes precedence over our desire to dominate.

Dialogue is often misinterpreted as a debate which negotiates a consensus. In practice, of course, if you take difference seriously, it takes a bit of ‘grey wisdom’ to pierce through the politically correct jargon and create a model of dialogue that sees it not as a means to an end but as an end in itself. Christians may be committed to naming the Word of God in a way that Buddhists simply aren’t. But both, in the repetitions and reflections that characterise their respective patterns of holiness, are concerned with what it means and what it takes to face a future that is never predictable and remains always utterly other.

So how do we, both youthful and grey, go about engaging in this dialogue? At the end of his magnificent Ring cycle at the Proms this summer, Daniel Barenboim gave an impromptu speech in which he thanked the musicians, orchestra, singers, chorus – and us the audience, for our participation in the event. Participation? We contributed, he said, through our silence. There’s a paradox here – for we tend to think of silence as absence, a lack of noise. More positively it connotes receptivity and attentiveness, not just that profound moment of unvoiced truth at the end of the drama but the moment of hope – for it is that – which precedes the drama and out of which it is born.

Theology is a dialogical activity. It’s what a community of faith does as it engages prayerfully with whatever dimensions of the Spirit’s action in the world command attention. In that sense this lecture has inaugurated nothing new. It has only sought to act as a critical catalyst for a wider response. The danger is that the words, the many voices, take over – and ordering them becomes an end in itself, a sort of ecclesial quality control mechanism. If I end by privileging silence, it is to focus, however inadequately, on the possibility that the mystery of God’s Word is manifested somehow in the midst of our poor wordiness.

Revelation is not the passing on of some hidden message but what Emil Fackenheim calls the ‘event of Divine Presence’. In Christian terms that can be translated as the action of the self-communicating God, a cosmic drama initiated and sustained by the divine ‘other’, the Holy Spirit. But to be aware of that drama, let alone become caught up in it, means building some measure of silence into both our beginnings and our endings.

So one last word by way of conclusion. There are two ways of reading the Hindu four stages. The first is in linear terms, one after the other. The idea of a temporal sequence has its place; it’s the way we tell

our stories, to ourselves and to others. If we are not careful, however, we risk colluding with a narrative of growth and decline. We end up with a series of identifiable tasks to justify our existence, to keep young and old contentedly occupied.

My Buddhist alter ego suggests another way.

Beginnings and endings are interdependent, co-inherent say the Buddhists. Throughout, the contemplative Silence which allows Word to live and genuinely be heard, is a task for young and old alike. At their best, our religious traditions subvert our expectations and challenge the ease with which we collude with personally appropriated 'answers'. There's always a different way of looking at the tried and familiar. We don't have to make a choice between contemplating the futility of it all and overcoming meaninglessness with hefty rhetorical force. There's also that generosity of embrace which takes delight in what the Fathers called the seeds of Word while at the same time finding life in the Silence which underpins all things.

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