

Introduction to Conversations on Religion

written by Mick Gordon



The conversations presented in this book began as the research for a piece of theatre. I am the Artistic Director of On Theatre, a theatre company I founded to dissect and explore the experience of being human. The company is called On Theatre, as each piece of its work is on a given subject, and because the pieces we produce are more like theatrical essays than conventional plays. On Theatre researches, develops and presents one theatre essay a year and to date has produced pieces *On Love*, *On Death*, *On Emotions*, *On Ego*. And these conversations on religion allowed On Theatre to create its most challenging work to date: *On Religion*.

I am fascinated by religions and the questions that surround them. How do we define religion? Can we define faith? Why in our twenty first century world are so many people religious? Why do people believe in a supernatural god or gods? Is religion dangerous? Does it have a value? What should our ambition for religion be? These are questions I wanted to ask a wide variety of religious thinkers and commentators. Why?

Well, probably because I grew up in the Northern Ireland of the seventies. A child of the troubles and the peace movement, my first word was 'slosion, my first grown-up argument was with a Religious Education teacher and my first political act was a boycott of a Scripture Union kids club. As a teenager I experienced Ireland's Protestant and Catholic religions as exclusive, divisive and potentially violent brands, and the ideas of god on which they were variously based, as alienating and judgemental. Later, and because of my work in the theatre, I began to understand what seems to be one attraction of religion - the goal that great theatre shares with religion: the attempt to codify and deliver an experience of the transcendental.

I use the theatre to explore the experience of being human because the theatre is the art form of the human scale. The theatre is a place, or an event, where a group of people come to witness their representatives, the actors, move and reveal and unpack themselves. And my theatre essays are carefully designed to explore people and their relationships to themselves, to others and to their particular social surroundings. So when I make a theatre essay I try to begin the creative process in a very direct, human way: by meeting people, asking simple questions and then listening carefully to the responses.

My first conversation on religion was with the acclaimed English philosopher, A.C. Grayling. And as it turned out, he would eventually become the co-writer of the theatre essay. Given my up-bringing, it is probably not surprising that I had been drawn to Grayling's critique of what he terms, the religions of the book; Islam, Judaism and Christianity. And because I was going to limit the scope of my enquiry to these three religions he seemed an interesting starting point. I had long admired the clarity of his writing and when I met him I liked him, and the positive and humane way he talked about the potentials of life. Also, I was genuinely intrigued to see if a collaboration between a theatre-maker interested in exploring life in all its grubby contradictions, and a philosopher whose fundamental commitment is to clear, rational argument, could actually work.

My second conversation was with Chris Wilkinson, who would become the assistant director of the project and is the co-editor of this book. He had followed On Theatre's work and felt he had much to contribute to *On Religion*. He was right. Chris is a theology graduate from Cambridge and a talented young director and journalist. And perhaps more importantly, his interest in the subject of religion wasn't simply intellectual but really very personal because Chris is a serious atheist and his mum is an Anglican Priest.

The theatre demands argument and balance. It's no good at didacticism. In my experience an audience will just not accept it. A.C. Grayling and I, in our different ways had spent most our adult lives criticizing organised religion. So how could we begin to imagine that we could put an authentic religious voice on stage? Did we even have to? Instinct said we did, conversation would tell.

I had seen the priest, Giles Fraser, the spoon in the pot of British Anglicanism, in action. He had officiated at the wedding of a friend and had given a beautiful address advocating contemplation on, what he called, the dance of truth and love. We met again at his church in Putney where he spoke with passion about his quest for 'better religion.' He sees himself as a religious moderate, a failed atheist who has found a great beauty in the otherness of the Christian conception of god.

Listening to Archbishop Rowan Williams was a pleasure. An intricate and incisive theologian, he explained what religion meant to him sitting in a large armchair in Lambeth Palace, two wooden shepherds' crooks leaning casually against the wall behind him. His notion of an open religion seemed generous and compassionate and utterly at odds with the vehement African and American wings of the Anglican Church which he currently leads.

The developmental biologist, Lewis Wolpert, has argued that science is the best way to understand the world, and that for any set of observations, there is only one correct explanation. In conversation he introduced us to his son, Matthew, a devout and one-time evangelistic, Christian. It was fascinating to watch their two distinct world-views interact as they discussed what religion meant to them.

At almost eighty years of age, Don Cupitt, author of *The Sea of Faith* and self-styled atheist priest is still exploring and re-evaluating religion. In our conversation with him he advocated a religion of life, a religion without God, a religion celebrating the life force of the human spirit.