

How do we talk about Religion?

written by Christopher Haydon



How do we talk about religion? We live in a time when tabloid newspapers are campaigning to ban the veil; Sikh youths are rioting outside theatres; and we are all nervously awaiting Al-Qaeda's next calling card. Reasoned discussion of the issue, it seems, is as urgently needed as it is impossible. As violence and ridicule increasingly become the only languages that are used to communicate, every criticism is taken as a gross personal slur, every expression of piety, a threat of murderous terror.

So in February of this year I joined up with the theatre director Mick Gordon and the Philosopher AC Grayling to create a play that would explore this volatile issue. We wanted to discover what people of faith actually believed, and how, if at all, these beliefs could co-exist and communicate with a rational and scientific, secular worldview. Mick Gordon and I set about interviewing some of the country's most influential thinkers on the subject. We met with scientists such as Richard Dawkins and Lewis Wolpert, philosophers and theologians like Professor John Gray, Tariq Ramadan, and the Archbishop of Canterbury and, of course, ordinary church and mosque going lay-people. Our aim, through these conversations, was to find the best question to ask about this massive, complex issue.

The result, to be performed next month at the Soho Theatre in London, is entitled *On Religion*. Like Gordon's hit show last year: *On Ego*, it takes the form of a Theatre Essay. This style of play, developed by him and his company On Theatre over the last few years, seeks to combine the intellectual rigour of an academic essay, with the narrative drive of a piece of theatre. Whereas a normal essay necessarily prioritises one line of argument over all others, the Theatre Essay can hold a number of opposing positions in tension, and it is from this tension that the drama arises.

As we discovered, this form is ideal for an exploration of religion. The more people we spoke to, the more apparent it became that those without faith were often speaking a wholly different language from those with it. Dawkins, a vehement atheist argued passionately that religious claims about the universe are, fundamentally, little more than "alternative scientific claims". For him, religions are defined by their doctrine, and as such can be demonstrated to be false by empirical means. From this point of view then, it is the 'word' that stands at the centre of all. When this 'word' can be shown, in literal terms, to be inconsistent or factually inaccurate - as it so often can be in the Bible, the Torah or the Quran - any beliefs that rest primarily on them are at best folly, and at worst deeply dangerous.

Yet by contrast, for the many religious people we spoke to, doctrine was rarely at the heart of their definition of what religion was. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, describes religion as "a set of habits". These are, he says, habits of speaking, imagining, and behaving physically which "anchor you in relation to something invisible and incomprehensible." And he spoke of his own journey to faith as a teenager as being inspired by the example of his parish priest who struck him as "a deeply grown up man". For Giles Fraser - the vicar of Putney and a lecturer in philosophy at Oxford University - faith stems from an indefinable, but inescapable sense of 'otherness'. For him, this sense cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by empirical means. His Christianity then, arises as a way of living in response to this.

In both these cases religious faith finds its inspiration or expression primarily in the way people behave. It is the 'action', rather than the 'word', that lies at its centre. And these different ways of thinking go to the very core of what makes up a person's identity. What are we, after all, if not the sum of our thoughts, beliefs and actions? For the playwright, the gap that exists between these two sides is hugely exciting. The play can become more than simply a dramatised lecture or a debate about ideas; it moves into the much more fertile terrain of exploring the fundamental nature individual identity.

On Religion binds these two opposing identities together in the relationship between a mother and son. Grace is a sixty something natural scientist. A renowned expert in her field, she is also a campaigning atheist - or naturalist as she would rather call herself. She is horrified when her son Tom, a thoughtful and inquisitive individual decides that he wants to become a priest. What for Grace represents the height of intellectual betrayal is for him the most meaningful way to live. Their conflict, in which they use the same words but still manage to speak completely different languages, threatens to rupture not just their bond, but that of their whole family.

Yet this broad contrast in approaches which proves so fractious in the play, has been hugely fruitful in the process of creating it. For a philosopher like AC Grayling, language is a precision tool that is used to describe the world as truthfully and accurately as possible. For somebody like Mick Gordon, who is trained in the theatre - a medium that, with its rituals and traditions is, in it's own way can be quite religious - it is often not the word itself, but rather, the act of speaking which matters. Words are amorphous and contradictory, and can hide a multitude of ulterior motives. Their value lies not in what they actually mean, but in what they do. The process of negotiating these two positions has been the driving force behind the play.

These issues are fascinating. But don't they get eclipsed by the shadow of the distorted, splintered wreckage of a number 30 bus in Tavistock Square? The destructive power of what Grace sees as being at the core of all faith, and of what Tom would condemn as bad, or perverted religion is undeniable. And the violence that human beings are capable of - both personal and political - necessarily permeates the whole show. But does this brutality stem directly from the things that we believe? Can a truer appreciation of the world really save us? Or is violence just inherent in our nature? Are human beings fundamentally and irrevocably flawed? Unsurprisingly, mother and son have very different answers to these questions.

They say that you should never discuss religion or politics in polite company. But fortunately, the theatre is not a polite place. The show does not set out to offend - to do that, in the current climate, would be as easy as it would be pointless. What it does try to do, is to really question our assumptions about the nature of the gap that exists between those with faith, and those without. Is the divide, over which the leap of faith has to be made, as irrevocable as both sides would often like to claim? Or is this space a more fluid, ambiguous entity - one that can radically change its shape and size depending on the language that is used to describe it? It would be foolish to say we have come anywhere close to answering this, but hopefully, we might just have found the right question.