

Making On Religion

written by AC Grayling



We are living through yet another period of strife prompted by certainties and doubts about religion, and as a result debate about the sources and justification of religious commitment is rapidly increasing, not just in volume but in heat. There are many ways to explore the questions on which that debate turns, but one of the best is to turn them into theatre. Nothing has quite the impact that dramatisation of conflicts can have, for they show as well as tell audiences what differences of opinion about religion can mean in the context of human lives. This is what Mick Gordon and I are seeking to do in our play “On Religion”.

Mick Gordon is the director of On Theatre, and a former associate director at the National Theatre. In the summer of 2005 he contacted me with the intriguing invitation to collaborate with him in writing a play about religion. While on holiday he had read a book of mine called “What Is Good?”, which traces the history of Western civilisation’s two competing conceptions of value: the idea that human good is something we must generate from our understanding of human nature and society, versus the idea that the good is a transcendent quality, imposed on the world from outside, typically by a deity or deities. Mick saw the book’s point about the relevance of these themes to our present discontents, and wished to explore ways to portray them on stage.

The first task was to transmute a philosophical problem, a tangle of concepts and arguments, into a work of theatre. We talked and talked, and a succession of ideas and scenarios came and went. The first format we tried was a court-case; after a series of transformations a final format emerged, on an inspiration suggested by Strindberg’s “A Dream Play”. Mick and his colleague Chris Haydon interviewed a number of major figures on both sides of the religion divide, including Richard Dawkins, Rowan Williams and Don Cupitt, and out of the transcripts came ideas and insights which we worked into the script. The text continued to be modified as rehearsals progressed, revealing new ways of getting the ideas across clearly.

In the background of the play lies the debate which had first inspired Mick while reading my “What Is Good?”. The first conception of the good identified in that book, a conception I call “humanist” in the broad current sense of the term, says that value must be sought or made among the things of this life, and justified on the basis of our best and most sympathetic understanding of the human condition. On the second conception, which is explicitly religious, the good consists in obedience to or conformity with the will of a transcendent lawgiver. In the religions closest to the experience of Western civilisation, the required morality is one that cuts across human nature, demanding of it much denial and sublimation.

In the book I outlined the nature and basis of these contrasting ethical traditions, which sometimes borrowed from one another but more often disagreed, to the extent that one of them - the religious one - often persecuted the other, asserting its authority by sometimes violent means. But from the beginning of modern times in the West (namely, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) the claim of a religious outlook to dominance over human experience has been waning, and received its greatest defeats in the seventeenth century rise of science, the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and the nineteenth century discovery of the mechanism by which biological evolution occurs.

In the play the interesting point for Mick and me is the motivation of the two contrasting outlooks, respectively faith and reason. Of course some apologists for religion like to claim, as the new Pope recently did, that religion is a fiefdom of reason too; but this is precisely one of the chief points of contention in the debate, and it underlies the play’s central tension.

Do not allow the title “On Religion” to suggest something stilted and formal along the lines of Greek tragedy, all diatribes and harangues. It is genuine theatre, telling a story about a family

riven by differences over religion, in which a tragedy brings the hard questions about those differences vividly home. Grace (played by Gemma Jones) is a secularist and humanist, a professor of science, whose commitment to the austere canons of scientific method put her at odds with her adult son, Tom (played by Elliot Levey) who, despite his upbringing in a non-religious household, has converted to Christianity and chosen to be a priest. His pregnant girlfriend Ruth (Priyanga Burford) and his secular Jewish father Tony (Pip Donaghy) are caught in the cross-fire of the irresolvable opposition between mother and son, between whom the arguments about religious faith and scientific reason rage. Yet in some ways it is they - the apparent bystanders - who bring perspectives to bear which promise ways that the conflict can at least be managed even as it rages.

Behind the personal drama of a mother and son separated by the abyss which these profound and fundamental differences open up - a drama which stands as a signifier for many such conflicts, in all traditions, all round the world - lies a deep and important set of questions. They concern nothing less than our understanding of the universe and our relationship to it. Whatever one thinks about religious belief either positively or negatively, the fact that it is a massive and massively determining fact of history is undeniable, as is its psychological grip on the majority of the world's population. Given this, there is no avoiding the challenge to confront religion, one way or the other.

Today's noisily revived debate about religion thus turns on precisely the points that drive a wedge between Grace and Tom in the play. Critics of religious belief attack it on two fronts, one epistemological and the other historical. The epistemological attack concerns the source of religious belief, which - via scriptural revelation, teaching, and mystical experience - ultimately comes down to an act of faith, a choice or decision to treat religious claims not merely as true but as the truth that defines everything else. This choice is in essence a non-rational one, an emotional one, and in the Christian tradition (as the story of Doubting Thomas illustrates, and as Tertullian's remark about Christianity illustrates: "it is impossible, therefore I believe it"), it is a positive merit to have faith without, or even contrary to, evidence and reason. St Paul included faith thus understood among the three great virtues.

Religion's critics reject this as arbitrary and tendentious, and describe it as having more to do with superstition propensities and the attempt to satisfy psychological needs. They also criticise those with a vested interest in perpetuating religious belief for doing so by proselytising intellectually defenceless young children, who cannot scrutinise the grounds of belief for themselves. In opposition to all this, religion's critics assert instead the rigorous, evidence-based and logic-controlled approach of science and philosophy to the quest for knowledge.

The second of the critic's charges is that, directly or indirectly, religion divides people and causes conflict, as history all too bloodily attests. Nations, communities and families have repeatedly been riven by religion-inspired differences, in the name of which some terrible atrocities have been committed. The contemporary resurgence of religious conviction is bringing the nightmare back, threatening polities which for several centuries have succeeded through secularism in keeping the effect of religious disagreements to a minimum.

Defenders of religion point to charity, works of art, and personal solace as vindications of its existence, but critics reply that this claim is inconclusive, because there are plenty of examples of all three in non-religious dispensations - classical Greece and the modern Western world are two examples, to say nothing of the persisting humanism that links them (Judaism and Christianity are oriental irruptions into European civilisation). Further examples are afforded by the long and magnificent history of China, and those parts of the world where the non-religious classical version of Buddhism - a philosophy, not a religion - have influence. Here is matter for another debate, which "On Religion" touches upon only lightly - one cannot deal with everything; art is selection, after all. The play turns instead on the question of justification and grounds for belief, for this is what has inspired Grace in science, and it is what is rejected by her son Tom in favour of the emotional power of subjective conviction as the test of truth.



There is more than just a coincidence of views and the first three letters of Grace's name with one of the co-writers of the play, though her character owes much to the robust - some would say abrasive - soldiery of Richard Dawkins in his defence of scientific reason. There is also that co-writer's direct personal observation of the same kind of circumstance: I have seen something all too similar happen among those close to me. In life there tend to be many reasons why divisions arise within families, and whereas any one such problem might be the trigger, it is rarely enough by itself to drive wedges between closely related people. But so inclusive is a difference between religious and rationalist world-views that where they are strongly held - held as matters of principle, as defining and identity-constituting fundamentals - the results can be shattering. Public acquaintance with the phenomenon is often restricted to cases where young people are hijacked by cults, and separated from their families as a result. But the private phenomenon is more widespread, and often more permanent.

Almost all my experience as a writer has been restricted to working alone, for hours every day, and for long months and years on a single book. Twice I have collaborated on a book, one of them on the basis of a simple division of labour, each of the co-authors writing half, while the other was written with a collaborator who lived on the other side of the world - in the days before emails.

But working on the play with Mick Gordon was an entirely different experience. He has a superb theatrical mind, and is a wonder to watch in action, both as a playwright and in rehearsal. He never says no to anything that his co-writer or the actors say, yet gets his way in the manner of those martial arts experts who gently and adroitly know how to turn what comes at them into the direction they wish it to go. As a result everyone is always on his side, all is collegial, everything flows forward in an atmosphere of constructive calm.

Some years ago I toyed with the idea of analysing the difference between art forms in which the act of creation has to be repeated every time the artwork exists, and those in which the artwork is presented as a finished and stable object in itself (independently of the different things it becomes in its relation to individuals encountering it). Theatre, opera and ballet fall into the first class, painting, sculpture, poems and novels fall into the second. The proliferation of artistic forms does not break down the divide; performance art joins the first category, video art the second.

The project had to be shelved because of other commitments, but it revives in this experience of making a play. The process gives a privileged first-hand close-up view of the remarkable collaborative effort that theatre represents. On the morning of the first read-through there were twenty people present in the bare rehearsal room: four actors, two writers, and all the other indispensable team-members from design, staging, marketing and more who between them carry ideas from someone's head into the physical and dramatic reality of actors and audience coming together in a theatre. It is exhilarating.

Mick and I have worked together so well, and enjoyed the process so much, that we have a number of other projects now in view: at least four more plays on subjects of major philosophical importance, which is what Mick's On Theatre enterprise is all about. The enterprise is not novel; far from it; it recapitulates what is at the heart of theatre, as theatre is at the heart of the great debate which human communities must have with themselves about what matters most. From Greek theatre in classical antiquity through Shakespeare's histories and tragedies to the acute social commentary in Wilde and Shaw to the brilliant major dramatists of our own day, theatre has always been about ideas, the ideas that drive us and destroy us, make us glorious and make us despicable, help us and hurt us.

In its own way "On Religion" is a contribution to this same noble effort to portray, by means of story-telling on stage, something crucial to our times.