

**'How can we know the way?' (John 14:5)**

Will the future of religion in this country and in the West generally, be multicultural? I ask this question because yesterday at the King's coronation there were representatives from many different faith traditions in the UK. This was radically different from the late Queen's coronation in 1953 – 70 years' ago where the event was exclusively Christian, but then the UK was a very different place culturally. On previous occasions King Charles, or Prince Charles as he was then, said that when King and Supreme Governor of the Church of England, that he would not be Defender of the Faith, but Defender of Faiths.

Well, that hasn't happened, King Charles is still Defender of the Faith, but we know that he has done a great deal to nurture different faith traditions. The King holds a deep Christian faith, but at the same time feels, as many of us do, that in a society where, especially in cities and towns, we daily encounter good people of different faiths, that it would be contrary to Christian tolerance and love to be exclusive and critical of their faith.

Tolerance of this kind wouldn't be so out of kilter with the so-called Generation Z (or 'Zoomers') that is the current 18 to 24-year-olds, where 70% claim to have 'no religion' but buy into multiculturalism and multi-faith society because simply as a matter of fairness there should be no one belief system which dominates another. Recently, for example, 'when students at St Hilda's College, Oxford, were asked to choose between a Christian chapel or a multifaith space, the majority opted for a multifaith space because it seemed fair' (*Religion and Generation Z* page 148).

But this presents us with a problem. Humanists and secularists encourage the move to multifaith 'spaces' because it suggests that if all religions are equally true, then no one religion can claim to be exclusively true so they might as well all equally be treated untrue. They are untrue because they are no more than the products of culture. But that is not the view of the religions themselves. Truth, however difficult to grasp, is not merely a cultural construct but fundamental to existence.

So, when Thomas asks Jesus 'How can we know the way?' Jesus' answer appears to challenge the very heart of multiculturalism and multifaith inclusivism. In those momentous words that we know so well, Jesus says:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14: 6)

I have to admit that I have struggled with this verse, not because I doubt the revelation of truth of God in Christ, but because of the exclusive claim that anyone who is not a Christian is denied access to this truth.

I am not alone in this struggle and for centuries, well before our present multicultural society was born, Christians theologians have wondered what about the millions of people before the birth of Jesus who would of course not have had access to the truth of God's

saving love; or what about those perhaps brought up in rigidly atheistic communist regimes who have never heard of Christianity; or what about those whose culture is exclusively Buddhist or Islamic?

Did Jesus really mean, '*No one* comes to the Father except through me'? Some have suggested that anyone who lives by the truth which Jesus revealed – whether they think of themselves as Christians or not, whether they are of a different faith or none, have in some sense participated in the love of God.

Just before Jesus' reply to Thomas, he has told the disciples that he would be going before them to prepare them a place in heaven – the eternal state of bliss and peace in God. The image he uses is of a many roomed hotel with accommodation for all.

This suggests that through Christ, God's grace is available to everyone regardless of their particular religion or possibly no religion at all. In technical theological language this is called 'prevenient grace' or grace which goes before us. Grace does not depend on us having faith first; no, faith is possible because of God's generous love for us *first*, whether we know this consciously or not. This is how today's Collect puts it:

Grant that as by your grace *going before us* you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect. (Collect for Easter 5)

The Christian writer and radical priest Giles Fraser has warned against the kind of multicultural, multifaith, universal or Esperanto-type religion in which all religions are melded into one because this would destroy all that is distinctive and meaningful in each religion.

We must though, as King Charles has done at his coronation yesterday, celebrate religious difference and pray for greater cooperation between all people of good will for the common good. Not to do so would be a betrayal of our Christian commitment to Christ who for us expresses most fully, the way, and the truth and the life.

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