



## Christian Triumphalism and the Hook-Nosed Elephant in the Corner

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Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN: 2040-3674

ISSN-L: 1741-4164

Volume: 10

Number: 1

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End page: 28

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***This paper was originally given at the conference 'Courting Controversy' organised by the Subject Centre for PRS, 8th-9th July 2010.***

I am most grateful to you for asking me to speak to your conference, Courting Controversy. I see from your programme that you will be exploring a number of issues around the policy and practice of teaching Theology and Religious Studies in higher education in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society. Now, it is my intention to confront what I believe to be a major problem in university and college departments and in the classroom. It is a dilemma and difficulty that I have personally faced during the thirty-four years I have been an academic in Britain. And so, much of what I will say will be autobiographical. But, of course, I want to use my experiences as a basis for reflecting about the subject more generally.

The title of this keynote address is: Christian Triumphalism and the Hooked-nose Elephant in the Corner. You will tell me that elephants don't have noses; they have trunks. That's true. But of course I mean this metaphorically. How do I

go about explaining what I am referring to? Let me begin by telling you a secret: I have a disreputable distinction. A disgraceful distinction. A regrettable distinction. A troubling and puzzling distinction. It is this: In 1975 I was appointed a lecturer in theology at the University of Kent at Canterbury. I was to be the specialist in Jewish studies in a department of five. My other colleagues consisted of a Professor of Christian ethics, and three lecturers: one in Biblical studies, another in Church history and a third in religious studies. For over twenty years I was the Hebrew specialist, and in addition I taught a range of courses dealing with the history of Judaism from biblical to modern times. Students were interested in the subject, and I think I must have over the years had thousands of undergraduates in my classes. However, in 1997 I left Kent to become the Professor of Judaism at the University of Wales, Lampeter. On my departure, I was not replaced even though a number of appointments were subsequently made. Biblical Hebrew vanished from the curriculum, as did all the courses I ever taught. There is no course dealing exclusively with Judaism. Even though the University of Kent department of religious studies advertises itself as proud to offer modules in the world's religions, Judaism is totally absent as a separate subject. The Kent website declares:

Religion is a vital element in human culture, and today religious issues are everywhere?from current affairs and international events, to the history of ideas, art and literature, and our own immediate experience and environment. Religious studies at Kent involves investigating and discussing these ideas, experiences, practices and institutions, through texts, films, historical data and directly observing the world today.

Yet, despite such a claim, there are no courses devoted specifically and exclusively to Judaism as there were when I was a lecturer. Judaism has vanished into a black hole.

At Lampeter I was the sole Jewish specialist in a department of what became over thirty members of staff. From 1997 until this past October I taught introductory, intermediate and advanced Biblical Hebrew as well as courses in Jewish history and thought, Jewish theology and philosophy, modern Jewish life, and the Israel-Palestine problem. For some years I was the sole teacher for a joint honours programme in Jewish studies. Yet, in October when I retired?as at Kent?I was not replaced and every undergraduate course I ever taught vanished. There is no Biblical Hebrew, nor are there any courses on Judaism (even though a course is now offered on the Druids). A line was drawn through all Judaism undergraduate modules. Although Lampeter describes itself as committed to exploring the world's major faiths, Judaism has evaporated.

You must admit, it is a dubious distinction to have taught in two universities for a total of thirty-four years, to find that not only is one not replaced when one leaves, but the subject I taught?Judaism?was abolished from the undergraduate curriculum immediately after I left. In two departments that describe themselves as committed to the study of the world's faiths, Judaism has disappeared. My wife teases me about this. I have to admit it is a bit humiliating. After all, Judaism is a major world religion. It's been around for nearly 4,000 years. Christianity emerged out of Judaism. Jesus and his disciples were Jews. Paul was a Jew. Israel is constantly in the news. But at two places where I taught the subject, there is the pretence that Judaism doesn't exist. It's the elephant with a hooked nose in the corner that no-one wants to acknowledge.

I wonder if it's me. Now it could be. It may be that I have been such a disagreeable and difficult colleague that my fellow academics couldn't bear the thought of having another Jew in the department. Or, possibly my lectures were so disastrous that it was felt better to eliminate the subject of Judaism altogether. But, my classes were always full?they were the most popular both at Kent and Lampeter. So maybe my colleagues were jealous and wanted no further competition. Or there is the possibility that they thought I was corrupting the young. It could have been a combination of all these factors. But I don't think so. It was something else. And that is what I want to explore with you this morning. For over three decades I have experienced in differ<sup>20</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok?Christian Triumphalism and the Hook-Nosed Elephant in the Corner ent ways an assumption of Christian superiority vis-a-vis the world's faiths. It has been so amongst the few evangelical colleagues I have had as well as many of the most liberal. Nearly all my colleagues have been Christian?some deeply religious; others lukewarm; some indifferent. But almost without ex

ception they have assumed that Christianity is normative, and that anything non-Christian is tangential. This, I believe, is a modern form of Christian triumphalism. I don't mean to suggest that Christian university academics in departments of theology and religious studies seek to convert their students. It is not that at all. Instead, there is the overwhelming feeling that the teaching about Christianity is of fundamental importance. From Aberdeen in the North to Kent in the South to Exeter in the West and Cambridge in the East, courses about all aspects of Christianity?theology, history, ethics?predominate.

Now, in one sense there are very good reasons why this is so. After all Britain is in origin a Christian country. Most of our students come from a Christian background. The students themselves are more interested in studying about Christianity than any other religion. And the government is anxious to inculcate values of citizenship that are indirectly shaped by the Christian tradition. There is nothing wrong in this. There is every reason why Christianity in its various forms should predominate on the syllabus. Yet, in my many years of experience I have repeatedly witnessed amongst my Christian colleagues an unpleasant attitude of condescension and derision.

You might think that what I am referring to is a subtle form of antisemitism. But that would be a mistake. The patronizing stance that I am describing is not directly against Jews or Judaism, but toward adherents of all non-Christian traditions. I shall give you an example of such an attitude. A number of years ago, one of my Christian colleagues formulated plans to establish a Centre for the Study of Religion. The aim was to attract scholars from other institutions to conferences, organize a series of research seminars and attract external funding for projects. However, this individual insisted that the Centre's activities should be confined solely to Christianity. At that stage Lampeter had just hired a professor of Islam. When he heard about the plans for this Centre, he was troubled about its title. If its aim were to study religion, then why were non-Christian religions excluded? He took this person to lunch at a local restaurant and explained his perplexity. Why, he wondered, couldn't the Centre be renamed to reflect its Christian orientation? Couldn't it be called: The Centre for the Study of the Christian Religion? Then there would be no confusion. I too, as the Professor of Judaism, made the same point. Despite our objections, the department pressed ahead with its plans. Only Christians were asked to be fellows of the Centre, and staff members associated with the Centre were restricted to Christian members of the department. My Muslim colleague and I were cross. Our pleas had been totally ignored. When I told my wife (who had attended a girls' boarding school with a strong Christian tradition) about the situation, she wasn't surprised. 'What do you expect from these bigots?' she said. 'Is there anything I can do?' I asked. 'Well,' she replied. 'You can give the Director of this new Centre a little parody of a well-known Christian hymn.' The original goes like this:

The Church's one foundation  
is Jesus Christ Our Lord.  
She is His new creation  
By water and the word.  
From Heaven He came and sought Her  
To be His holy bride.  
With His own blood He bought Her  
And for Her life He died.

She took out a pen and wrote a new version that goes as follows:

Religion's one foundation  
Is Christianity.  
The faiths of Other nations  
Don't make the category.  
From all their works defend us  
Preserve us from their texts.

We know these faith pretenders  
Are naught but heathen sects.  
Though liberals argue plainly  
For Hindu, Muslim, Jew  
And keep repeating vainly  
That they're religions too.  
Our faith will never falter,  
Truth's trumpet still will sound.  
It's on the Christian altar  
That true religion's found.

I fear that the Director of the Centre was not amused when I handed over a copy. It is no surprise then, even though it is deeply troubling, that Judaism has been eliminated from the curriculum in two departments of theology and religious studies, where I taught for over three decades. It is the hook-nosed elephant in the corner that is ignored. 'Though liberals argue plainly for Hindu, Muslim, Jew, and keep repeating vainly that that they're religions too'?it does little go od. Their voices are drowned by Christian trumpets that proclaim the truth: 'it's on the Christian altar that true religion's found.'I shall tell you next of a little altercation I had some years ago about just this point. The University of Wales, Lampeter was a Christian foundation. It was established in the early 19th century as a training college for Anglican priests in Wales. Its aim was to educate Welsh clergy who were too poor to study at Oxford and Cambridge.

All this changed in the 1970s when St David's College was secularized and became part of the University of Wales. Nonetheless, it still has a lovely chapel in the centre of the original Georgian building where students were housed. It currently functions as the university chapel. Every day there are services for the faithful, and at graduation a leaving service is held just before the degree ceremony. Although the service is for all students who wish to attend, regardless of their religious orientation, it is a Eucharist.

The difficulty with such a service, however, is that non- Anglicans as well as members of other faiths like me who would like to attend are left out of the focal point of the service: the Eucharist itself. Concerned about the inappropriateness of such a religious event, I recommended to the Vice-Chancellor and the Chaplain that it would be more suitable to have a simple Matins service. This, I believed, would become completely consistent with Christian practice and more inclusive. However, when several of my Christian colleagues heard about my suggestion, they were outraged. It was, they believed, presumptuous for a rabbi to interfere with the traditions of the university. In response, I pointed out that the Eucharist service was a recent innovation. In the end, the Vice-Chancellor put the matter to Council. I was not allowed to attend the meeting, and I later heard that in the light of the forceful criticisms made by the Christian members of Council, it was decided to proceed with the Eucharist service as planned. I might add that this Eucharist service is very poorly attended.

Such a lack of sympathy for the non-Christian again illustrates my main point: Christian triumphalism in a modern guise continues to pervade the way in which universities and departments of theology and religious studies are run. Now, you might object by pointing to the creation of my own lectureship and Chair of Judaism. If I am right, then how did I ever get a job teaching Jewish studies in a university in the first place? I shall tell you. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a thriving department of religious studies at the University of Lancaster headed by Professor Ninian Smart. Unlike most departments, Lancaster actively fostered the teaching of religions other than Christianity. Reacting to this recent trend, Kent decided that they should add non-Christian religions to the curriculum, and a temporary lectureship was advertised in 1974. However, before an appointment was made, the Chairman of the department and others attempted to attract external funding from the Jewish community to support this new lectureship. The same applied to my Chair at Lampeter, and my first task was to establish a joint honours degree in Jewish studies in the expectation that this might attract Jewish support. However, because of the remoteness of Lampeter, it was an impossible task: no Jewish organization felt it worthwhile to help support a post with such a limited number of Jewish

students. Why do departments of theology and religious studies seek outside funding for non-Christian appointments while posts dealing with Christianity are funded from university resources? The answer is obvious: non-Christian religions are viewed as tangential to the central activity of the department and a means of raising external funding for the institution. But there are serious dangers in this approach. Externally funded appointments come with strings attached. In many if not most cases donors are involved in the appointment process and have their own agendas.

There is a final point that I should make. It is true that lectureships and other posts in religions other than Christianity do exist at numerous universities (often funded in the way I suggested). But in almost all cases, such individuals do not take leadership roles in the department. There is an unspoken assumption that Heads of Departments of theology and religious studies should be Christian. It makes no difference if they are Catholic, Anglican or Protestant or male or female. What is vital is that they are perceived as mainstream. In this case, gender discrimination has been eliminated, but religious discrimination is the norm.

So, there we are. Throughout the country departments of theology and religious studies proclaim they are anxious to foster the study of other faiths. But in fact non-Christian religions are sidelined in numerous ways. At times such discrimination is blatant. At others it is subtle. This is what I mean by modern Christian triumphalism. There is no evangelical quest. Rather, there is a pervasive assumption that Christianity is mainstream and should occupy centre stage. Other faiths, like Judaism, can be given a bit part in the drama of the religious history of humankind. But, sometimes they are completely ignored and do not even appear on stage. Certainly at Kent and Lampeter the poor hooked-nosed Jewish elephant has disappeared entirely.

Recently a comic campus novel, *Degrees R'Us*, was published by Impress Books based at the University of Exeter. The author is anonymous, but I shall let you into the secret: it was written by my wife who is rather incensed by what I am describing. In one scene, the protagonist, Dr. Felix Glass, a Jewish philosophy lecturer, had just been coopted into the theology department. In an interview with his Head of Department, Dr. John Pilkington, an evangelical Methodist, he asked why he was taken on since he was not a theologian.

John stared out of the window. 'I know you're not and this may be a problem. We must see how it all works out. To tell you the truth, several of us are rather troubled by your background in particular.' 'My background?', Felix wondered. 'Now I really was flummoxed. What could my background have to do with joining the theology department? I thought back to my parents: my father was a doctor, a dermatologist, and my mother dedicated herself to running the house, looking after her family and volunteering for a range of good works. I could not see anything very objectionable to that. Perhaps our neat 1930s villa in Hampstead Garden Suburb was the problem? Or could it be my new colleagues were unhappy with the fact that I had won a partial scholarship and had been educated as a day boy at Westminster School? Perhaps the theologians found something objectionable in private education. 'I am sorry, I don't understand. What's wrong with my background?' I said. Pilkington looked embarrassed. 'Well,' he said, 'as you know, we are a Christian department. Most of us are in some sense committed to the original vision of the university as an evangelical missionary college. Of course, its role is different now. We're a modern university. We have a new vocation: to bring educational opportunities everywhere around the globe. Yet there is still the feeling in the department that our first duty is to encourage students in their faith. "Fides Quaerens Intellectum", faith seeking understanding. You see...that's the purpose of theology, at any rate here at our university.' My heart stopped and I stared at him. I had been warned about this, but in my entire career I had never had to face it before. My family were completely non-religious. The only time in my life I had ever entered a synagogue was to go to the bar mitzvahs of various of my school friends. It was true that both my parents as children had fled with their families from Germany. They had been lucky. Both sets of grandparents were originally from Berlin, and they knew what was

going on. With the rise of the Nazi party, they had realised there would be real trouble for anyone with Jewish ancestry. They had settled in England as soon as things became difficult in 1933. In London they had established a new life, cultured, civilised, influenced by their German heritage certainly, but determinedly secular and patriotically English. 'You mean you don't like the fact that I'm Jewish', I said. 'You people are always so sensitive,' Pilkington replied. 'I knew it would be difficult to talk to you about this. What I am trying to say is that we do see ourselves as a Christian department. We're particularly strong in Biblical studies. We want to get away from the misguided twentieth-century fashion for phenomenology and world religions.'

Assuming I am right about this, is there anything that can be done? What is required, I believe, is a revolution in orientation. Many of you will be familiar with the distinction drawn by philosophers of religion such as John Hick between a Christo-centric conception of the world faiths, and a Divine-centric approach. According to these writers, a Copernican revolution is now required in the understanding of religion. In the past it was assumed that Christianity contains the fullest divine disclosure. On this basis, Christianity was at the centre of the world's faiths. Christian thinkers who embraced such a view were like scientists who endorsed a Ptolemaic view of the universe in which the earth is at the centre. In the modern world, however, where adherents of one tradition continually come into contact with adherents of other faiths, it is difficult to sustain such a narrow vision. Instead a complete shift in orientation is required. Instead of placing Christianity at the centre of the world's religions, there should be a paradigm shift to a divinecentric conception of religious history. On this basis, the world's religions should be understood as different human responses to the one divine reality. In previous ages religions conceived of this one reality either theistically (as a personal deity or non-theistically as nonpersonal), but such differences were in essence the result of historical, cultural and psychological influences. A frequent image used to represent this new conception of the universe of faiths is that of alternative paths ascending a single mountain. The routes of these faith communities are all different, yet at various points they intersect: these intersections should be understood as those areas where religious conceptions within the differing traditions complement one another. Thus, as pilgrims of different faiths ascend to the summit, they will encounter parallels with their own traditions. But the divine reality they all pursue is in the end unattainable by these finite quests. As the Infinite, it is unknowable and incomprehensible. It is the cloud of unknowing hovering beyond the mountain itself. Such a pluralistic conception of the universe of faiths calls for a shift away from viewing all religions from a Christian perspective, and towards acknowledging the spiritual integrity of other religious traditions.

This is the model that I want to endorse. Departments of theology and religious studies should seek to free themselves from an attitude of Christian superiority. Even if there are more courses dealing with Christianity on offer, space should be made for other faiths. No university should drop a major world faith as Kent and Lampeter have done in the case of Judaism.

It is not enough for departments to state in their publicity that they support the teaching of the world's religions. They should do so in fact. There should be no fear of hiring lecturers from non-Christian traditions to teach about Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and other major traditions. Scholars from non-Western countries should not be denigrated. If the teaching of religion in the United Kingdom is to thrive, a Copernican revolution needs to take place. The spiritual treasures of the world's religions should be on display. For thirty-four years I have had the pleasure of being an academic. I am deeply grateful to the UK university system for saving me from the rabbinate which, believe me, is not a job for a nice Jewish boy. I can say without hesitation that I truly loved my job. But I have been dismayed by the way Judaism and other faiths have been treated at the universities where I have taught. There is a poor, neglected hooked-nosed elephant in the corner. He does not like being treated as a nobody. He is proud of his tradition and heritage. He does not want to crowd out Christianity. But he wants just a bit of respect. He wants to be liked. He wants to be seen as an equal. He is lonely. And he wants some friends. Is it really too much to ask?

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Created on: May 27th 2011

Updated on: May 27th 2011