

John Barry: *What are the stories we are telling ourselves?*



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Transition Town. He is a keen cyclist, indifferent cook, frequently absent from his family and a passionate believer in the ability of people to initiate social transformation. A former leader of the Northern Ireland Green Party, he is a Green Party Councillor in Ards and North Down Borough Council.

How would you define religion?

I want to begin by differentiating religion from spirituality. Religion is the institutionalisation of transcendence, whereas spirituality is self organising like ecology. I would define spirituality as the human connection with the larger whole, including other people, our ancestors, animals, trees, plants and the universe. Myself, I am a lapsed Catholic. Green ideas for me are a replacement for a Catholicism I didn't connect with, though I appreciated the social justice aspect of Catholicism. I was influenced by Alastair McIntosh's book *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power* (Aurum Press, 2001, 2004) which combines ecology, social justice and radical spirituality. It starts with a vivid account of his childhood on the Hebridean island of Lewis whose local economy, spirituality and culture were beginning to unravel with the advent of modernity. It can also be read as a book of theology in which Calvinism and eco-feminism are fused to offer a liberation theology of creation.

For me, poetry is a portal to spirituality and is the heart of spirituality, expressed for me in the earthy mysticism of Irish poets such as Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) and Seamus Heaney (1939-2013). Poets are well regarded in everyday life here in Ireland, which is not the case everywhere. John Moriarty, the poet and philosopher, is a wonderful mystic in the Irish tradition. He is easy to listen to but hard to read, as is also the case with James Joyce. I think you need to listen to Joyce's *Ulysses* and not try to read it, because it springs from the oral tradition. I think this poetic reading of spirituality enables me to reconcile my own humanism with those who have a God-centred sense of the meaning of life and so on. It also differentiates my atheism and humanism from those fellow humanists who condemn religion and spirituality outright.

Part of the reason for the tenacity and resilience of religion and God-based spirituality is their long historical experience of perfecting this poetic and imaginative articulation of meaning. The aesthetic beauty of religious expression cannot be denied – whether it's the beauty of Islamic architecture, or Gregorian chants, or Native American dance and religious rituals, or the beehive huts and the story of those monks who built them on Skellig Michael off the Kerry coast. This is what I mean by the poetry of religion and spirituality, the way it weaves an aesthetically pleasing narrative about the human condition, its tropes and use of standard narrative devices – failure, being lost, loss, enlightenment, redemption and so on.

The poetry is also expressed in terms of the rituals and narratives that most religions and spiritual traditions create around some of the threshold events in human life – birth, death, marriage, collective food eating, for example.

Why do we make a distinction between religion and other transcendental values and beliefs?

We have bifurcated our value system. There is dignity, power and poetry in equality and democracy and I would give it the same significance as religious belief. The great monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, arrive at a particular moment when we move from simpler societies to land-based and farming-based societies and cultures. Christianity has the idea of stewardship, the earth is not made for us to exploit, which is a capitalist view; we were made for the earth and to pass it on carefully to the next generation. Greens can find common ground with the religious belief in stewardship because Greens also stand for stewardship. Christian or Muslim or Jewish or Hindu or Buddhist, we believe in taking care of God's creation.

You are a Marxist yourself. Would you call Marxism a religion?

Yes, I think Marxism is a great Christian heresy. It has all the hallmarks of a religion: the holy book; the secular saints; the story of the fall; redemption and the future utopia, it has all the archetypal themes. It is the story of a pre-fall, pre-lapsarian idyll; then the fall into capitalism; redemption and catharsis through workers' revolution and the promised utopia in terms of heaven on earth. It has all the traits of the Christian myth, including its own Jewish prophet.

I was always uncomfortable with versions of Marxism, such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Communist Party, which simply dismissed religion as the opium of the people. The view was that a religious disposition was a sign of idiocy. Of course, a pre-modern religion can be used for conservative non-progressive purposes, yet the impulse behind religion or spirituality is positive, religion contains the passionate and progressive nature of the spirit. There many areas where a Marxist view and a Christian one are identical. The Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara (1909-1999) said "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist".

I am an unashamed Marxist in that I understand the world as structured by economic forces, but I am also a humanist in that I understand the importance of a non-material dimension of life, and religion cannot always be reduced to an ideology or false consciousness or the balm of a difficult life. Marx's view of religion is that it was the cry of the heart in a heartless world. Comfort, yes there is an element of that, but also an impulse towards something bigger than ourselves. This is itself what Marxism is about and Marxism is insufficiently critical of its own ethical dimensions; it tried to assert that it is not an ethical philosophy, that it is scientific, it fell into the trap of 19th century scientism. In fact we are really talking about justice and injustice, but these were seen as bourgeois ethical ideas. For me, however, what gives Marxism its righteous indignation is the religious and ethical dimension. The righteous indignation which fuelled Marxism also I think fuels a lot of Green activism, which is fuelled by the knowledge that the world is marred by suffering, by injustice, by vulnerability, which can be solved so that suffering is unnecessary suffering. In my academic work I am upfront that my view of the good life of human flourishing is one

which weaves suffering and death into it. I disagree with the naive view that we can produce a gross national happiness – I am all for well-being, but a fully flourishing human life is one in which we have stories of suffering and death.

The creation of a new life, religion gives us the rituals of passage, marriage, birth, death which give a sense of meaning. I was married in the Catholic church partly because it was what I was familiar with. You can divest religion of the theology of an off-world male deity and the rituals still have meaning, they are familiar stories and I think this is what religion brings to people's lives – the familiar stories and narratives. We are losing a sense of having a good death in Ireland; that was a blessing, to wish someone a good death that was part of what religion could bestow, a good death, at peace with your demons and your conscience. Religion is an element of our experience of liminal areas of our lives, of birth and death.

Do you regard religion as a source of obstacle or inspiration for the Green movement?

The question we must address as Greens is what our stories are, what are the stories we are telling ourselves about the current crisis? I do see a role for faith communities in the transition from unsustainability. I think the faith communities have been lacking in involvement in tackling climate change, perhaps because of too narrow a vision.

There is indeed a particular onus on faith communities because, if they really believe this is God's creation, what are they doing to protect it, how can they not criticise consumerism driven by global capitalism and the injustice? The Bible talks more about injustice than homosexuality, so why are people obsessed with these narrow issues, and not tackling the greater issues of injustice and unsustainability in the world?

We have a shared common ground but it is annoying to meet devout Christians who are hyper-materialists; I ask them what would Jesus drive? He would surely ride a bicycle! They are not living by the book, they have lost their way. The current Pope is interesting and the former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is an inspirational figure. It is sad to see the energy that religion can mobilise being corralled into narrow issues such as abortion and gay marriage, issues of sexuality. We should concentrate on suffering and poverty. Christianity to me is about suffering and injustice, not gay marriage. Where are you going to put your energy, on gay marriage or childhood poverty?

You work in Northern Ireland, a region seen to be dominated by religious conflict. What is it like for you as an elected Green politician in such a contested public space?

The north of Ireland conflict is not a religious war. Religion is a badge of identity here; there is an ethno-nationalist conflict between two failed state-making projects: the failure of Great Britain to establish a stable presence on the island of Ireland, and a failure of the Irish Republic to attract Northern Unionists to the civic republican project. Therefore there was a fusion of religion and politics in the public sphere. The outcome was two states with religious identities embedded into them where minorities were isolated. The northern nationalist community is culturally Catholic but I think that their religion is largely about identity. However a marked Catholic collectivism is still part of the tapestry of Northern Catholic identity. In the republic it has faded and become consumerism and secularism.

So how do the Green ideas work in a public space dominated by religion?

In the Northern Ireland context of Christian conservatism on all sides, Greens have different values. Greens are pro-marriage equality and pro-choice in the case of abortion and in the right to end one's own life with dignity. Greens stand out as all other parties express conservative Christian belief and we are listened to. Green values are inspiring to people who want an alternative to what they know and we are an important and different voice in the public square.

How do you see the place of Islam in Europe?

I see Islam as part of European identity, it has always been here. Islam is not a new foreign entity but part of our European history, especially in its influence on the development of science during the Renaissance through the transmission of classical manuscripts and Arabic numerals and mathematics, particularly algebra. It is part of the rich tapestry of ethical world monotheism. Most Islamic scholars suggest Islamic fundamentalism is not representative. Extreme forms of Islam such as those promulgated by Saudi Arabia do not represent the majority of Muslims.

The larger question is how we build a multicultural society in which we can have agonistic rather than antagonistic relationships. A developed democracy is a contended one. The challenge for us as European Greens is the creation of a democratic agonism, rather than antagonism, where opponents are in a non-violent struggle using debate, satire, humour and so on, but not antagonism. We must have ways of sublimating violence, verbal violence is better than physical force but there is a threshold between violence and non-violence. You can criticise Islam, you can use satire but not hate speech. We need to treat our differences with respect and contend with each other not as enemies but through debate and plurality of thought. This is how the European Union was created, through turning antagonism into agonism. It is a realisation of Montesquieu's vision of an energetic and robust public square, full of non-violent struggle. In Europe we believe in the rule of law, but laws are not unchanging. Laws change as the culture changes, for example, marriage equality. However there are some religions which want their customs and beliefs to be the law, and to impose them on others; however a democratic state should never tolerate the intolerant. There must be a strict division between church and state, with the state not endorsing any one ideology but allowing religious freedom. All change should be agreed and be non-violent.