

Interview with Fergus Capie

Janine Edge

Following the 2008 AGM Conference on 'Fundamentalism in Science and Religion', and recent articles in The Review on 'The God Confusion', Janine Edge interviews Rev Fergus Capie. Fergus is founder and director of the London Inter Faith Centre, which he describes as a meeting place for those of all faiths and of none. This interview addresses some of the same issues as Jorge Ferrer outlines above. Janine is a mediator and Chairman of the SMN Charitable Trust.



Janine: I would like to start with finding out a bit about you personally and in particular how you square your own religious beliefs with acceptance of other religions?

Fergus: I was brought up in a Christian community where (like many others) it was acceptable to consider your own religious position to be right and that of others to be wrong. I suppose it was only when I moved in ministry from Oxford to East London, that my first-hand encounter with those of other faiths, especially Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, gave me a fresh challenge. It was then I became convinced that if we can but be 'true to self and open to others' then, in the words of your question, we might move towards squaring our own position with acceptance of others. For me it is a paradox. The greater the depth of my experience of others, the further I am led into my Christian and Christ-centred life while at the same time becoming more open to those

with different beliefs. It would be easy to say that this was because I found things in common with other religions, but for me, looking for the 'lowest common denominator' is not the way forward. It is true that exposure to insights from other religions – whether it be the Brahman-Atman connection in strands of Hinduism, or the Islamic emphasis on the one-ness and transcendence of God, or the powerful Sikh constant remembrance of the name of God, or Buddhist insights on the nature of the self – have all enriched my own life. Further, some of my Christian spiritual practices have been informed by contact with other religions, particularly those involving meditation and silence. But were I to sum up squaring my position with those that are different, I would say it happens via a sort of paradox, and I do not think it is avoiding the issue to say so.

Janine: I take it from what you say that you are not a relativist when it comes to religion. By which I mean you would consider it simplistic to say that all religions are a version of the same truth?

Fergus: You are right. I am not a relativist – as for me that would suggest there would be a single frame of reference. I was once asked by a Christian colleague ‘Can Buddhists be saved?’ The sense in which the idea of ‘saved’ was being used may work well in the context of Christianity, but in my view could be a sort of category mistake outside such a context. In other words for me this question may not be the best place to start. There are a number of ways of accounting for the religions, and we could for a moment look at three. The first could be described as propositionalist, namely that religious truths are propositions about ultimate reality, ‘handed down from above’. The second could be described as an experiential-expressive approach. Starting from inner experience, the forms of religion are taken to be objectifications of core human feelings and attitudes. I suspect this may have become the default position of many Western liberal Christians and thereby the basis for many of the assumptions of a western inter-faith impetus, as well indeed as underlying assumptions within current related UK government policy. But I favour a third approach which may be described as cultural-linguistic, as outlined by George Lindbeck in his *Nature of Doctrine*. This proposes that each religion could be accounted for as a sort of language, which thus has its own discrete grammar. Such an account enables us to work with contradiction, without needing to find commonality. This would remove the need to explain one religion in terms of another as each is then accorded its own integrity as a system.

Janine: There might be an analogy here with science which originally was seen as a description of actual reality but now there are many different accounts of its epistemological status. One is that it is a codification of inter-subjective experience and another is the social constructionist interpretation. But just as scientists often find the idea of science as just a social construction unsatisfactory, do you not find the idea of Christianity defined by culture and language inadequate?

Fergus: That is not quite a correct description of what Lindbeck is saying because for him the languages of religions are idioms both for constructing reality and living life. I would be more comfortable with saying that on the one hand I see Christianity as expressed via culture and language and the same time not as being limited or wholly encapsulated by them. There is perhaps a sense in which adherents of any religion see its insights as existing precisely to help us break through the limits imposed by culture and language. Lindbeck’s use of the concept of ‘cultural-linguistic’ allows us to see by analogy something of how religions ‘work’ and can be accounted for.

Janine: So the fact that one religious language is different from another is explicable, and should in theory be less troubling, because each has as its purpose the construction of a way of living and each is pointing beyond itself (indeed beyond the idea of a definable reality). But what does your experience show is the key to tolerance between those of different faiths?

Fergus: Were tolerance to mean a sort of ‘anything goes’ in the sense that being tolerant is to be uninterested in and indifferent to the other, then its potential for being constructive could be missed. However when it can mean an active accommodation of and engagement with difference,

then that, I think, can but be creative and helpful – both for those immediately involved and for the wider world.

Janine: What has been most effective in bringing those of different faiths together at the centre?

Fergus: My definition of interfaith is ‘faiths in encounter and the issues raised thereby’. In my experience it is not necessarily the most effective route if the encounters are about faith. So, for example, we have music events. As a result of these three young musicians, a Muslim, a Baha’i and a Sikh have met and now work together. On the one hand they are fully acknowledge each other’s faith and on the other each are putting the faith part of their identity into a wider perspective. One of the dangers of our interfaith project is that we overplay the faith element in personal identity. The fact is that there are multiple aspects to our identity, and having events which are not focussed on inter-faith issues helps to redress this balance.

Janine: What events do you hold which do focus on interfaith issues?

Fergus: Well, we offer a variety of contexts for meeting ranging from informal gatherings such as faith neutral meditations and study groups, to formal conferences and courses. For example over the last decade we have run three 2-year courses, taught by those of different faiths, giving a certificate in Interfaith Relations. Many of those attending had roles in education or society and this course has given them the confidence to enable greater cross faith interaction to occur. One representative of a non Christian faith attending the Centre once said to me ‘we never meet except at your place’. So I have found that events at the centre sometimes enable different ideological groupings from within one faith to come together, thus building cohesion. This in turn may help interfaith relations. Perhaps as much as anything else I believe that if you designate a space for a particular activity, that can help legitimise the activity. In one sense creating the space at the interfaith centre has done just that.

Janine: This comes back to a recurring theme in our conversation, namely that giving permission to each person to be true to their own faith actually helps inter-faith relations, as opposed to trying to ignore or reduce the difference between religions.

Fergus: Yes, and by way of example on that, a Muslim friend of mine applied for the post of Deputy Head Teacher of a Church of England School. After morning assembly, the Head Teacher apologised for the explicitly Christian content of the assembly. My Muslim friend said that he was saddened by this. He had known when he had applied for the job that it was a Church of England School and expected them to worship God in the Christian way. He said to me ‘I could never apologise or deny my faith in that way.’ On another occasion, at a gathering where those of other faiths had been attending, we sang a very explicitly ‘Christ-as-God’ hymn. When someone enquired later in conversation about the sensitivity of that, a Muslim colleague replied ‘If that is what you believe, then sing it’. In my experience, lack of clarity and confidence in your own faith does not help inter faith relating at the faith level.

Janine: You say on your website that you are might like to be thought of more as an inter-ideological, than as an inter faith centre. What do you mean by that?

Fergus: The inter faith impetus in this country emerged largely from responding to the presence of those of other faiths, through the pattern of immigration to the UK in the post war period. But all the other-than-Christian faiths in the UK put together, account for only about 10% of the

population. What of the other 90%? What of the significant numbers of thought-out views, be they within aspects of Humanism or Secularism, or within the spectrum of New Age and New Spiritualities. What of them? We are developing projects towards their inclusion, such as our 'Who Owns Britain?' series of seminars which looks at both the secular and the spiritual/religious dimensions of our society.

Janine: What then do you think is the role of New Age spirituality in interfaith relations?

Fergus: Initially interfaith relating needed to be about the main faiths but I think it can now be extended to include New Age and New Spirituality. Within the New Age movement I personally see a plus and possibly a minus. The plus is that it can offer a way of challenging materialism and gives a spiritual alternative outside the boundaries of traditional religion. In this respect new age spirituality is both salutary and can have a new constructive angle, such as on environmental and gender issues. I have two reservations on New Age spirituality. The first is that this form of spirituality can become like some of the less attractive features of a consumer society, including a type of shopping for a spirituality which suits me and gives me freedom - shopping for spiritual self-fulfilment. Secondly, this 'spirituality shopping' can be problematic and on occasions in my experience potentially dangerous if the shopper is working outside any known grammar of spiritual practice, mixing elements that first arose in different times and places which may never have been intended to be combined. There is a way in which time and consensus can give a tradition authenticity and a proper container.

Janine: What about those such as Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer and Eckhart Tolle who seem to have evolved a new form of spirituality which many are finding fulfilling? Are these examples of new age spirituality not based in any particular religion?

Fergus: They may not appear to be based in any particular tradition, but no one works out of a vacuum and these and other writers also have a sort of place and lineage. So, for example, someone like Wayne Dyer seems to me to have the European Jewish-Christian post-Enlightenment story in his background - however 'free' he may seem in his writing. (I greatly appreciate some of what he has written, such as parts of 'The Power of Intention'.)

Janine: You have talked about how you involve those of no established religion but how do you approach fundamentalists when you encounter them through the centre?

Fergus: As you may imagine, an inter faith centre is not the first port of call for a fundamentalist. Having said that, we have striven to engage with the more conservative elements of each faith. It is easy to think that we have to help people to be less fundamental in their religion, but then we fail to register the force of its significance from their point of view. They see the world as losing purpose through lack of a particular view they hold. It seems they may rather lose their own life to the end of a potentially better human future, as they see it, rather than soften their view within liberal compromise which could then lead to further degeneration of civilisation. Our desire to soften fundamentalism could almost become its own sort of fundamentalism. I would also just like to point out that people can be fundamentalist in their belief but be against any kind of political extremism or violence. I think that two constructive approaches to fundamentalism would be first, to work towards understanding it better; and second, to promote wherever possible (and this is not at all easy) the increased contact between those we consider to

be fundamentalist and their wider social context; be it family, local or wider religious community. When people have come to me with concerns about a member of their family whom they fear perhaps becoming fundamentalist, they also note that that the individual concerned is becoming somehow more remote from the family and less connected to the mainstream of their community.

Janine: We also encounter fundamentalism in science; particularly the view that science renders religious truth superfluous or just plain wrong. How for you do religious belief and the scientific world view fit together?

Fergus: I suppose I see them to be different approaches to similar issues: again in terms of George Lindbeck, different 'grammars'. The writers of the Genesis accounts of creation were expressing theological truth. They were not seeking to record observable phenomena. To what extent we can re-image the cosmos, taking insights from both science and religion (as in the work of someone like Richard Tarnas) may continue to be a challenge. Within all this, in my view, God can be seen as the ultimate locus of energy in a world constantly recreating itself.

Janine: Why is it that you think even scientists become 'fundamental' in their views, by which I mean the view that science is the only form of truth.

Fergus: Well this is a complex subject but I think it is again about meaning and purpose. If scientists gain a definite sense of purpose from asserting that scientific law is the only truth, who knows, perhaps they may become fundamentalist about it?

Janine: Do you think religious relativism (by which I mean the idea that all religions are versions of the truth and none the truth) could actually be unhelpful to interfaith relations?

Fergus: I fully accept people's desire to emphasise what is held in common to the end of greater cooperation and mutual understanding. However, I think the longer term solutions may be better found through accepting and working with difference. What I think is important is to have a reasonable awareness of one's own position and how it came to be (most people on the planet belong to the tradition into which they were born). Only then one can interact with and learn from others with one's own self constantly growing and changing thereby.

Janine: In other words understanding your own religious position is the first step to knowing yourself and therefore both honouring and transcending it when interacting with others? I take it from what you have just said that you do not think the idea of a perennial philosophy will resolve differences between religions?

Fergus: The perennial philosophy is interesting in a number of respects, but the moment you say that the different religions are to be seen in terms of that view then you are in effect saying 'you ought to see it this way'. So, constructive as the idea of the perennial philosophy may be, it would be difficult to imagine how it could actually resolve difference as it would promote a single view of how to do so. It would virtually become its own religion. Good old human nature would surely kick in and before long, hey presto, you would have The Temple of The Perennial Philosophy with the first schism about a generation down the line. 'Are you a conservative perennialist or a liberal perennialist? You don't mean you're one of them?' - and back to square one we would go. No. 'True to self and open to others' is my own hope and prayer for where we may go on all this.