

A Christian Riposte to the Challenge of Atheism Part One:

A sermon given by Rev'd Richard Sewell at St Mary's Barnes May 18th 2014

You cannot have failed to notice that over recent years Christianity, and indeed all religions, have come under a concerted attack from a new breed of atheists who seek to portray religion as a vestige of past ideas and practices that people should now have grown out of. This feels pretty uncomfortable and sometimes it can appear that the faith that has shaped and still underpins the essence of our values and culture is seen as marginal or even an unacceptable way of living and being. However, I am not one of those who believes that Christians are oppressed and more or less persecuted here in Britain. That is an unhelpful exaggeration. However there are ways in which the public expression of faith has become scorned by some and in some cases the practice of faith ridiculed as simply superstitious and superfluous in modern times.

Of course the religions of our time have not exactly done a great job in demonstrating the beneficial contribution that faith can make to today's world. The most obvious examples of this are acts of terror committed by radical Islamicists – 250 girls kidnapped in Nigeria, bombs in Kenya or a murdered soldier in Woolwich. All of these have been justified as belonging to a religious programme of resistance and revolution. But Muslims are not alone in showing the negative and destructive side of religion.

The apparent inability of Catholics and Protestants to live together in peace and mutual respect in Northern Ireland fuels the belief that religion brings division and prejudice into otherwise enlightened societies. The Vatican's continued opposition to use of contraception even when HIV/AIDS is prevalent and our own church's slow move to equality for men and women and refusal

to accept LGBT people in the church without repenting, all fuels the belief that religion is a vestige of the old world and its reactionary, superstitious ways which should be expunged in favour of a rational, tolerant and open society in which individuals are allowed to make whatever choices they wish to so long as they don't infringe the rights of others.

This view is often rooted in a claim that the discoveries and advance of science have more or less discredited all the beliefs of religion. A ridiculous polarity is set up between science and all its knowledge on one hand and religion and all its supernatural mumbo jumbo on the other. It's disturbing to hear my teenage children report these views from friends in their respective church schools they attend as if it had been demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that "science has disproved Christianity"!

The militant new atheists whose names will be familiar to you: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, A L Grayling et al write in almost all the national newspapers and regularly produce tv pieces and books, continue to describe Christianity or any religion in utterly disparaging terms. Thankfully often these people are so totally lacking in grace and good manners that many people are driven away from their extreme ideas by their objectionable behaviour. However, that doesn't prevent damage to the integrity and value of faith from being done. As Christians we all too often watch this from the side lines feeling misunderstood and desperately hoping someone will counter the purveyors of anti-religious venom with the same confidence and articulation of our opponents (but with more grace and humour). We are left feeling disparaged and perhaps lacking the confidence to contradict it ourselves.

Thankfully there are some very good, clear and persuasive spokesmen and women for the intellectual and social relevance of religion but actually we

cannot leave this important matter of the defence of the integrity of belief to others; we will need also to do it for ourselves. Rather than simply replying with exasperation to the militant atheists, we do need to establish a bit more clarity in our own ideas so that we have our own answers to the sceptics and detractors. One of the best and most helpful thinkers is the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, who in his book, *The Great Partnership* tackles the challenges of religions' critics head on and articulates effectively a robust defence.

He argues strongly and clearly that science and religion are not in opposition to one another but are distinct and complimentary ways of looking at the world but **one** should not be discounted in favour of the other. He shows how the purpose of science is to take things apart and to see how they work and the purpose of religion is to make connections between things and to see what they mean. Science is about explanation and religion is about meaning. Healthy human societies need both but they do need to be separate. Science and religion need to be integrated and in balance. It was that great scientist Albert Einstein who said "Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind".

The fact that there have been and there still are so many scientists who have a living faith is ample testament to the fact that the two are not in unavoidable opposition to one another. However, people of faith have sometimes done a very good job of giving the impression that science is a threat to religion and that religion has all the answers that anyone could possibly need. A literalist or fundamentalist view of the Bible lies at the root of that approach and is never more problematic than in an interpretation of the Genesis creation story – or rather we should say 'stories' because there are two creation accounts: one account is from a cosmic perspective and the other from a more intimate

human perspective. But when either or both of these accounts are used to offer an apparently accurate description of the origin of the universe, of earth, life on earth and the existence of humanity then a religious view is meat and drink to the knock down arguments of the militant atheists.

If science and religion are allowed to operate within their own spheres then they can be in perfect harmony. Science can provide answers and explanations for what can be observed and analysed in our world and in space but there are things it cannot do and it should not seek to do so: It cannot explain the purpose of life – why we are here. It cannot explain the value of telling the truth or the crippling power of guilt. It cannot offer a vision of a peaceful and just society and it cannot offer an adequate account of the transformative power of love and forgiveness. All of these are in the realms of religion – not exclusively, because psychology and sociology have things to say about these elements of human experience but they neither require nor exclude a religious perspective. And they cannot and generally do not claim to, have the final word on these areas of life.

Religion and science are not opposed to one another; religion is contradicted by atheism. But unfortunately the way some atheists have framed the argument (and we have allowed them) they have convinced too many people that if you see the value of science to provide the explanation of how the world comes to be as we observe it to be, you will not need any reference to religion, faith or spirituality.

And so it is atheism that we really need to contend with and counter. Nick Spencer (of the Christian Think Tank *Theos*) has just written a history of atheism from a Christian perspective entitled 'Atheists: The Origin of the Species'. In this he tries to show the constructive elements of atheism in

former times and the rather mindless destructiveness of it in our own. He says that atheism today all too often misses the point that religion is far more a pattern for life than a set of verifiable propositions.

This chimes with Jonathan Sacks's view that the Abrahamic faiths (Jews, Muslims and Christians) all seek to understand the purpose of life and the nature of life by telling a story – a story that takes place in history and has historical elements but isn't always seeking to be the historical truth but is aims to convey the ultimate meaning and purpose of everything. And to assert that there **is** an ultimate meaning and purpose for humanity, and for individuals i.e. you and me and all of us. It makes a bold claim: that at the root of all life there is One who has created life and that this Creator has created us to be in a living connection with him.

The Abrahamic faiths tell the story of a Creator God who communicates with his creation through revelation and in the unveiling of a pattern and way of living. These patterns invite people to live a life oriented towards God and dedicated to being a force for good in all that they do. The revelation of all three differs in many ways but they are alike in the revealing and in the calling. The Christian story puts God's action to reconcile and restore all people to himself through Christ and we are invited to follow Christ so that we can live in his grace and let him be our pattern for living. Christians then become part of the story and we are invited to let our story entwine with The Story.

If the essence of religion is to connect things together and explain meaning and purpose then we Christians do need to be clear about how things are connected and what the meaning of our lives is. This will be the subject of sermons to come in the next few weeks. So do look out for those if you feel I haven't managed to deal with all the important questions this morning!

Atheists of former eras such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell were more honest than atheists in our own time in acknowledging that the underpinning idea of the rejection of God as a concept is despair; because without a Creator and his loving purposes, it has to be accepted that there is no underlying purpose. It is just a matter of living our lives according to whatever lights we decide will guide us. In contrast for people of faith the underpinning idea is hope because we believe that through the events of global history and in our own small lives, God is working his purposes out. If we look for them there are signs of his grace and love and this is where the big story and our stories become connected. We see the ways in which what we do and how we live can fit a wider purpose to contribute to the salvation and welfare of the world and its people. Faith says that what we believe, what we do and how we live matters and in time we will be judged before God's merciful throne for all these things. We are called to let our story serve the purposes of God's great story – to connect us with others past, present and future: to love without regard for our benefit and to love without discrimination to reflect in our small way God's own love towards us. We believe that the founding principle of all creation is God's generous and forgiving love and this is the foundation for all human living. Science has nothing to say about that and is no threat to it. They meld together in perfect harmony. Biological determinism on the other hand cannot comprehend it and seeks to destroy it. We should take courage in the articulation of our faith and the guidance and strength it gives to individuals and to communities to enable us to deal with the challenges of modern life that can lead everyone all too easily to despair. Our message is a message of hope and that is a priceless gift to the world.