

**Three articles by Richard Harries which appeared in the Church Times are reproduced below.**

**I**

**Christian life in a sceptical age.**

**“In the last days there will come scoffers” ( 2 Peter 3,3)**

When I was a curate in Hampstead nearly 60 years ago there would, like today, be only a small minority of the local population in church on a Sunday. I could assume, however, that most of those I met in the streets had some familiarity with the Christian story. That is no longer the case. Now there is widespread ignorance and indifference. The 1960's was a truly revolutionary decade in which a number of good things happened but it did see a great turning away from traditional institutions and values, including the church. We now have the third, or perhaps fourth, generation of people with little or no Christian formation.

Linda Woodhead suggests that most people today are simply indifferent to religion. People are busy working, trying to survive or bring up families. Leisure time can be filled with all manner of amusing things, pain can be mostly managed and now even the way we view death is being changed, with celebrations of a person's life rather than a ritual for grieving. There seems a strange diminution of life's strangeness, less sense of what W.H.Auden called “the baffle of being”.

There is also a great ignorance of the Christian faith, with very little being taught in schools or at home, so that many people have no idea for example what Easter might be about. But there is also, for understandable reasons, a very widely held mistaken view of God. God is the underlying, self sufficient and eternal first cause of all secondary causes. He is not a thing in the world of things. It is not true, as is the case of finite objects, that the more of him there is the less of us. Rather, the opposite is true. This brings us up against the

limitations of all religious language and the great difficulty of helping people see what it is for God to be God.

However, in addition, for a good number religion now has a bad name in a way that did not apply when I was a curate. People may not have been religious but most would have thought that on the whole religion was a good thing. Now, partly as a result of Jihadism, in the minds of some all religions are tarnished and associated with violence.

Furthermore, because of the attacks of the new atheists who work on the false assumption that all Christians are fundamentalists Christians tout court are assumed to be anti-progressive literalists, and religious claims are met with incredulity. Then of course there are the gross sins of the clergy over child abuse. The climate is often now a hostile one. Religion is a bad thing or, at best, one to be scoffed at or ignored.

Apart from all this in the media the central significance and huge influence of Christianity in our history and culture, our art and literature and music is time and again ignored. It is simply whitewashed out. Recently there were two exhibitions about Ruskin the great art critic and champion of Turner. Ruskin was a deeply Christian man whose faith was fundamental both to his understanding of art and his appreciation of Turner. This religious element was totally ignored in both exhibitions. This is a typical example of a now widespread attitude.

For these and other reasons it is now very difficult for Christians today to get a serious hearing. Some 50% of the population say they have no religion, and there is a higher percentage than this amongst young people. This is the default position in our society. How should we respond to this?

First, some historical perspective is helpful. Jonathan Swift in his satire justifying the Christian faith in the 18<sup>th</sup> century assumed no one of sense actually believed it but argued it was good to keep it going to soothe children to sleep at night. The Duke of Wellington at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century said that no power on earth could save the Church of England. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was

not a single orthodox Christian amongst the leading political elite of the time. As a result of the new seriousness brought about by World War II there was a mini Christian revival, with ordinations to full time stipendiary ministry in the late fifties running at seven or eight hundred a year. That started to fall away dramatically later in the 1960's. But the point is, whether the times are propitious or unpropitious, to use Eliot's words, we are called upon to bear witness.

In our time we are called upon to do this in a highly sceptical culture and we have to weigh fully the implications of this.

The late, great Donald MacKinnon used to call apologetics the lowest form of Christian life. By that I think he had in mind those apologists who push the case for Christian faith without really taking on board the seriousness of the objections to it. That said, I believe a form of apologetics should be the sub-text of every form of Christian communication, sermons, talks, conversations. By this I mean that every utterance should bear in mind that there will be questions in the minds of the hearers which should be addressed. I do not mean heavy apologetics, like a course on science and religions or the problem of suffering (though this is good to do at times) but a sensitivity to the times we live in and the fundamental doubts that are in the air. Here, as in so many things, my hero is Austin Farrer. The reason for the extraordinary lasting power of his sermons is not just Farrer's deep faith and their literary elegance. It is that they came out of long, hard thought in relation to the fundamental criticisms that people were making of the faith at the time. The sermons come across as relaxed, almost conversational, but in each one of them it is some real issue of faith that is in fact being addressed, even if this is not explicitly stated. There is, in each one of them, said C.S.Lewis, that out of which other men would make a whole book.

The crisis facing the church in our time is the dismissal and disdain of a sceptical culture. It is no good talking about new forms of mission or different styles of church if this is not faced. People simply do not

believe what is being put before them, for a mixture of reasons, many of them very understandable. This means that every Christian communicator, priest or lay person, must be a subtle apologist. They must be aware of the sceptic's questions, have thought long and hard about them and be able to address them in simple, accessible language. This does not require great philosophical expertise but it does mean understanding the nature of faith and the role our own experience plays in this process, subjects which I will address in my next two sections.

## II

### **Coming in from the outside**

“I will give them a heart to know me that I am the Lord” (Jeremiah 24, 7)

Nearly half the population today say they have no religion, with proportion amongst young people today being even higher. As I argued in the first part, there are also huge barriers in our culture to getting a serious hearing for the Christian faith.

“Cultured despisers” of the Christian faith are not a new phenomenon. When T.S. Eliot converted in 1927 he told his scholar friend Paul More that until then he had never met a Christian. By that he presumably meant a Christian in the intellectual circles in which he moved. Most of that circle met his conversion with a mixture of disbelief and derision. In the late 1950's, when I was at Cambridge the scene was more positive. There were major figures, such as Eliot himself, and W.H.Auden, which set an imaginative Christian faith near the centre of our culture. There were also some heavy weight Christian philosophers holding their own, even if they did not make much public impact. Now there is a very strong musical contribution from Christians like James MacMillan, Arvo Pärt, the late John Taverner and others, but no comparable Christian literary influence.

However, assuming for the moment that there is a genuine enquirer before us how can she or he best be helped? They have no knowledge of God and doubt very much whether there is one. Like any sensible person they would like some rational grounds for belief. But before this can even be considered it is essential to explore what it is to know anything or anyone, let alone God; what is technically called epistemology.

First, knowing an individual is interactive. We know there is sand on the beach just by walking on it and looking at it. But when it comes to a living organism knowing involves some kind of engagement with what is known. I know my dog not just by its looks but because it greets me in a friendly manner and sits, or does not sit, when I ask it to. Knowing my dog is an interactive process. It involves not just the mind but the whole person as a determining, directing agent. It is, if you like, volitional. It engages the will.

Secondly, knowing is evaluative. What we know is never known as a bare fact, but as a reality that has some value. I see an old stick on the table. I decide to put it in the garden waste bin. Then I notice it has a flag attached to it and realise my granddaughter has been playing with it. I don't just throw it away. I ask her if she wants it. What I see before me shapes how I value it and how I value it directs how I treat it. This evaluate process is built into language itself. We ascertain what is before us only in and through language. I don't see an object and then give it a name. I see it already as a particular thing and that thing has value built into by the very use of the name that comes to mind when I see it. And this value means it has some kind of claim upon me to treat it in a particular way. I recognise that the lumpy bundle in front of me is not a pillow but a baby. That act of recognition immediately calls forth a response of care.

The Christian claim is that there is a first cause, eternal, and self-sufficient, of all secondary causes. "the maker of all things visible and invisible" as the creed puts it. On the basis of the epistemology outlined earlier we can know this reality only as part of an interactive process and this process involves an evaluation. This in turn involves

the recognition of a claim. If God is the creator of all things, then he is one who by definition makes a total difference to us. We know him only as my creator in a process of engagement. We cannot know the existence of God as bare fact. There is no such thing. We can know God only as God, that is as one in whose light life looks totally different. And that difference makes a claim upon us. We are creatures dependent for our existence on a reality other than ourselves.

Although for much of Christian history that would have been a first step to belief in the reality of God I believe it does no such thing today. “It is not God I don’t belief in, Alyosha”, says Ivan in *The Brothers /Karamazov* “Its just that I return him my ticket”. “I can never believe in a scheme of things in which children suffer” says Dr Rieux in Camus’s *The Plague*. We cannot assume that a first cause of all that exists is good. It could be hostile or indifferent. When C.S. Lewis’s wife had cancer, he went through a period when he felt there was a malign force behind the universe. So although all knowledge, including knowledge of God is an interactive process involving evaluation, we cannot assume that just because God is the creator of all that is, he is good. If he is not, an attitude of rebellion or revolt may be the appropriate one.

At this point a very personal question arises. Am I glad I exist, exist as the particular person I am, despite my limitations and failings? Am I glad the day lies before me? Is it a gift for which I am grateful, or a burden to be born? And even if, in old age, life does seem something of a burden am I glad that I have lived? If we can answer yes then we have gone some way to suggesting that the creator of the universe is good, and the claim this makes upon me is one of gratitude. But this is of course not enough. We are too aware of the daily horrors in the world as a whole to rest content with a personal answer, however deeply felt.

Here, I believe, it is essential to call upon the Christian proclamation. For the God in whom Christians believe is not just a first cause, but one who has come towards us. First shaping the Jewish people into a

community that reflects his will and purpose and then, in Christ, opening out the divine life to the whole of humanity. God is not just a static fact to be noted, but an outgoing presence interacting with his creation at every point and forming a people within it. We are those people; people with a message to share and an invitation to offer. The only God is a God who goes out to us, comes alongside us in Christ, and invites us to share in his life. In the end knowing God is inseparable from hearing and responding to the Gospel. This, like all knowing, is an interactive process. Like all knowing it involves an evaluation. It is a recognition that the one who is set before us in word and sacrament is good: all good, our true and everlasting good. That is why God is our God, who by definition makes a total difference to our lives.

This Christian proclamation is uttered by people, people who believe it to be true in their own experience. And this raises the whole question of the appeal to personal experience, which I will be considering in my final section.

### **III**

#### **The appeal to personal experience**

##### **“O Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34, 8)**

What role should personal experience play when faced with a sceptical enquirer? I believe that, even if you feel your faith is rather weak and faltering, it is still crucial. I deliberately talk about personal, rather than religious, experience because the latter can create all kinds of false expectations. It might conjure up in the idea of visions, or voices or claimed answers to prayer. These may indeed be part of a person's experience but the phenomenon I am concerned with goes wider than that and may be of a much less dramatic kind.

When listening to a religious person talking about their faith the sceptical mind is likely to make two responses. First, what is being described are certain feelings or states of mind, which can be perfectly well understood in psychological terms. They have no

evidential value for anyone other than the person who has experienced them. Secondly, granting that what has been experienced might be very fulfilling and desirable, that is no evidence that the beliefs with which it is associated are true. It could be argued that other beliefs, say forms of meditation rooted in another faith or no belief at all would have similar effects in terms of personal well-being. Indeed that is just the case today, when different forms of meditation or mindfulness are being conceived and practised in secular terms. So all the sceptical mind can do is listen respectfully to an account of a person's Christian experience and note that that this is indeed how they see and feel about things. It proves nothing.

Yet, that having been said, the appeal to personal experience remains crucial to any Christian defence of belief in God. This is for the reasons outlined in my second article on how we come to know God at all. There it was argued that all knowing is interactive and all knowing is evaluative and this applies no less to knowing God than it does in knowing human persons. We can know God only by personal engagement and, moreover, personal engagement with one who is by definition our true and everlasting good. So the invitation expressed to the enquirer is to engage with their supreme and surpassing good, and if that is accepted, goodness will follow them all the days of their life, to echo Psalm 23.

It is important to note, however, that this appeal to personal experience should not be put forward as evidence for the reality of the truths as claimed. For the reasons set out above, this is not likely to be convincing. The personal experience of a religious believer will be set out not as a proof, but as a *description* of what it means to believe. If we can know God only by personal interaction with one who by definition makes a total difference to how we understand life, then the believer will draw on their experience to describe the nature of this difference. They will describe what it is to believe, how they see life differently, the blessings they receive from it. The purpose is quite clear, simply to let the other person know what it is to believe, what it feels like from inside. What it actually means.



We are told “Be ready at any time to give a quiet and reverent answer to anyone who wants a reason for the hope that you have within you.” (1 Peter, 3,15) That reason is not a philosophical one. It is a personal one. It is a testimony: a description of the life of faith which may very well include a description of how they came to faith in the first place. It will not be a series of rational arguments though rational considerations may well be part of the experience that is described.

The believer, for example, might describe how, from their point of view, life has a given meaning and purpose, in which we are invited to share. How they, like every human being, has a value and purpose within that story. They will show how both the experiences of moral duty and of beauty now make sense, because these experiences have their origin and rationale in a reality whom St Augustine addressed as “O Thou beauty most ancient and withal so fresh!” and whose supreme goodness comes to us not just with an allure but a moral imperative. They will say how this God comes close to us in Christ, saving us from our own self-destruction and giving us each day as a gift and an invitation to follow him in doing his will. In the light of this everything falls into place. The universe seems a rational place, the product of a wise and good purpose. The different aspects of life fit together in a coherent and consistent way. The great challenge to this is of course the existence of evil and so much suffering in the world, which never goes away and for which there is not final answer. But a Christian lives with this on the basis of life in Christ crucified, risen and coming in glory. But everyone’s experience will be told in a different way.

Such a description might or might not make any impact on the sceptical mind, but the point is that they will have been given the meaning of what it is to believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The bare phrase, “faith in God” will have been filled out and given some substance. They will know what it is to believe.

Whether they come to believe is not within our power. It can only happen as the Holy Spirit touches their heart and as their heart is open to being so touched. Faith is in the end a gift.

In my first article I highlighted the difficult, highly sceptical culture in which we live and in which Christians are called upon to witness. I argued that every Christian utterance, sermons, talks, conversations must bear this in mind and seek in subtle ways actually to address, rather than circumvent the real questions that exist in people's minds. This does not mean heavy apologetics, though there is a place for that, but simply being sensitive to where we actually are as a culture.

In my second article I suggested that exchanging allegedly rational arguments with believers misses the point. All such arguments leave the issue open. We can and should remove misunderstandings, but the real way forward is by engaging in discussions on how we know anyone. I suggested that all knowing persons is interactive and evaluative and from this evaluation claims arise. This applies to God as much as to humans. And this pushes us to the role of personal experience that I have explored here.

“Taste and see that the Lord is good” says the psalmist. The role played by an appeal to the experience of the believer is to try to describe what that means, what it is to believe. This is to give a reason for the hope that is in us. In the light of that hope we can describe how things fit into place and make sense; how we are sustained and nourished and blessed.