

**A Christian Riposte to the Challenge of Atheism Part Two:
A sermon given by Rev'd Richard Sewell at St Mary's Barnes June 29th 2014**

A couple of months ago, a member of our congregation asked me if I would preach a sermon about how Christians can respond to the challenge of atheism. I did as asked and the sermon seemed to strike a nerve. As a result I felt it might be useful to give a follow up sermon and this is it.

I think one of the key points that I wanted to make last time was that whilst it is worryingly common to hear people suggest that science has disproved religion, that it is fundamentally, a category error. Science takes things apart to understand how they work and religion tries to bring things together to explain what they mean. If we can accept that, and I believe that we should, then we can allow each to go about its own important business – they are complimentary and it is not a matter of choosing one way or the other: science or religion.

So I'd like to think a little more about how religion and particularly the Christian faith answers the challenge of atheism not as a scientific challenge but as a coherent and vital way of providing meaning in the world. The real challenge of atheism is not about science but about whether or not there is any meaning and underlying purpose to life. The atheist says there is not, but the religious believer says that there is. For the believer, it feels as if there is a toxic cocktail of factors that makes being a believer today a most difficult position to hold to – as if religious faith were a pariah on society that a civilised society should seek to expunge from itself. Faith is commonly ridiculed or condemned and often misrepresented in order to show that it is ludicrously irrational and a dangerous hindrance to a properly civilised society.

This week I have been reading *Atheist Delusions* by David Bentley Hart who is an American theologian from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The book won various awards when it was published a couple of years ago and it is very interesting and very intellectually stretching. He contends against the idea peddled too cheaply by the Rottweiler atheists such as Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens – sometimes referred to as the “Four Horsemen of the non-Apocalypse” that Christianity is and always has been an anti-intellectual, superstitious, pile of mumbo-jumbo that has consistently held back the advance of science and human progress. Indeed they would condemn all religions under that judgement – they are completely non-discriminatory in that sense. According to this theory, Christianity was a regressive force from the very beginning. Compared to the intellectual brilliance of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the religion of the early church was narrow and limited and led its adherents into infantile perceptions of humanity in thrall to a divine father-figure that prevented human flourishing. This reading of history then claims that Christianity only survived its inauspicious beginnings because a corrupt Roman Emperor, Constantine adopted a form of Christianity for purely political reasons but inadvertently gave it a status that assured its success across Europe and the Middle East. However, once the Roman Empire collapsed, Christianity and hence The Church was left as the dominant force in Europe and ensured that what followed were the Dark Ages of regression. By these account of history, it was only the white heat of the Enlightenment that enabled Europe to shake off the shackles of a corrupt institution keeping the populace in moral and political servitude so

that it could emerge into the bright uplands of the scientific and intellectual advance of the Age of Reason.

Hart does an amazing job of dismantling this idiot's guide to the story of how Christianity ruined the world and why every vestige of it that survives til today should be expunged from our culture and society. His encyclopaedic knowledge of the ancient world enables him to expose the numerous fallacies in the argument which has gained far too much credence in popular history. Instead of this misinformation, Hart shows how the Christian gospel transformed the moral and spiritual consciousness of Western humanity.

He argues persuasively that Christianity introduced a revolution in the way individuals and society should be understood which has gone on to underpin many of the cherished ideals of Western liberal democracy. First and foremost it is the idea of the importance of each and every individual as a child of God which Christianity affirms, that provides the foundation of the principle of human rights today. It was for this reason that early church fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa vehemently opposed slavery on the grounds that no one could presume to own another person who carried the imprint of the image of God upon themselves. Sadly individual Christians and the institution of the church failed to live up to their highest ideals but they are hardly unique in that.

It is, of course, the same argument that has recently been raging in the media over whether Britain today is a Christian society or not. To affirm that it is, is not to suggest that the majority of people are Bible-believing, habitual attenders of the local church who avidly consume each and every statement of the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Pope. Rather, it is to point out that our political, legal, educational and ethical infrastructure has been framed around Christian convictions about the nature of individuals and human society. For, whilst Christianity's belief in the value of each individual challenged Roman society's hierarchy of importance with the rich at the top and the poor in oblivion, it still managed to balance this with a strong sense of corporate life and mutual accountability.

It might be most accurate to say that Britain is "post-Christian" in that Christianity no longer plays the central part in our national life in the way that it did but it is still the foundation on which our nation is built and should be valued and affirmed rather than further marginalised. The problem we face today in a society which risks turning its back on its Christian heritage to shape our society's framework, is that without that balance between the individual and the corporate enshrined in Christianity, we are becoming dangerously preoccupied with the needs and rights of the individual as the ultimate (perhaps sole) good. This results in the obsession with each person's right to choose without hindrance or interference. Atheism is exactly the right philosophical framework to dignify this individualistic obsession because it is atheism's foundational contention that there is no ultimate good and no over-arching meaning. Therefore it is absolutely right and proper that each individual should be free to choose their own way without reference to any higher value. It is a recipe for a society that privileges elites, worships the content of our shopping bags and ascribes to the practicalities of "the devil can take the hindmost" except that they don't believe in the devil!

Christianity and other world religions are far from being beyond reproach for their ethical shortcomings – none of them are perfect and all of them are a long way short of ideal. But they do have a sophisticated system of checks and balances for aspirations and forgiveness

rooted in values that have stood the test of time and can be adapted to different contexts. Jonathan Sacks the former Chief Rabbi, in his book *The Great Partnership*, notes how lightly ancient Greeks took the idea of suicide. For Stoics, Cynics, Sceptics and Epicurians, suicide was a perfectly legitimate assertion of human freedom. He notes that our current context shows some similarities to the mood of that time. Life itself becomes each individual's right to take or leave as they wish and no one should prevent the time or manner of doing so.

The meaning that religion gives to people is a sense that there is such a thing as morality which should be a guide to how to live. This is not the same as the increasingly popular ethical dictum for a secular society: "Do what you want as long as you don't think it's likely to harm anyone else". Christian ethics on the other hand are founded in a belief that there are certain things that are holy, sacrosanct, non-negotiable, lines drawn in the sand. Prime amongst these are the value of life itself which we see as belonging to God (1). The meaning that faith offers is to see our lives within a much bigger context – how our lives are interconnected with others and also with a creating and sustaining God who has made us from his love for the purpose of loving him and all that God has created.

Whilst the new atheists peddle a view of religion which see it as toxic in the way that it introduces moral guidance principles beyond a simple litmus test of what is good for me is good for everyone, in practice there is no way of judging except the judgement of my personal opinion because there is no external reference point. The Judeo-Christian faith has at its centre the concern for the poor, the vulnerable and the destitute and the excluded. It goes without saying that Christians have ignored those guiding principles far too often but you would have to be phenomenally ignorant not to acknowledge that it is those very injunctions that helped to spread systems of health care and education wherever the church became established for the benefit of all and not just for other Christians. Part of the essential meaning that faith gives is that the purpose of existence is to demonstrate practical care for other people.

Yet Christianity is far too readily treated as if it was only really useful to society in providing a moral code for its adherents. In reality the moral framework arises of what comes before – the sense, the belief, the conviction of the love that we feel from the God who created us and that we see demonstrated in his Son, Jesus Christ – his life, death and resurrection. It is this that drives the Christian life. In this way, Christian action arises not out of a sense of duty or obligation but from gratitude. Gratitude for what God has done for us is a far more effective motivator than is doing what we believe we have been told to do.

If Christianity is marginal to our national life and becoming ever more so then all of us who call ourselves Christian should take a long hard look at our own lives and how we cherish and live the faith. There are far too many committed Christians that are reluctant to show that their faith is vital to their identity in any public way. And there are way too many people who say that they value what the church stands for in society who make no practical commitment to support the church or to be part of it in any consistent way. If we regret that Christianity is being pushed to the fringe of our society then we need to take more responsibility for bringing it back into the mainstream.

Here in Barnes we have every opportunity to do that. We have a church that sits in the centre of community and that can draw people in and send them out to serve Christ. We need to have that sense that Christ is the rock on which our lives are built and then allow

the knowledge of God's love for us to shape our lives to serve God and the people of our community. In the end it is the actions of Christians that gives credence to our beliefs and not simply our words. Atheists may believe that they have the faithful on the run but we must rededicate ourselves to the service that we are called to in Christ and ensure that we are confident to give a good account for our beliefs.

(1) See Sacks p 153

Suggested reading

The Great Partnership by Jonathan Sacks published by Hodder & Stoughton

The Origin of the Species by Nick Spencer published by Bloomsbury

Reason, Faith & Revolution by Terry Eagleton published by Yale

Why There Almost Certainly is a God by Keith Ward published by Lion