

On Being a Christian in a Secular Society

by Robert Harris

What follows is an account of why I became a Christian in a secular society, what kind of Christian I am and what aspects of Christianity are important to me. It began in response to a series of meetings I had with my Vicar and a few other members of my Parish Church to discuss our respective 'spiritual journeys'. I have since expanded it considerably whilst omitting some of the more private autobiographical details.

We are living at a time in which Anglican Church attendances in the UK are believed to be declining dramatically. From the publication of the 2011 UK Population census it is predicted that by 2030 those attendances will have dropped by 58%. Of course, this is only a prediction, but if proven true it does raise some fundamental questions concerning the role of religious faith in our 'secular' society. Much of the decline can be attributable to the cultural and demographic revolutions which began in the 1960's but its roots go far deeper. Is there a future for Christianity in Britain? Is the Christianity of today a mere lingering relic of the superstitions of the past, doomed ultimately to extinction? Or will it survive but take on a radically different character? Our mainstream churches are said to be emptying. Some people wonder if all the expense of maintaining such beautiful buildings can still be justified if they can no longer serve their intended functions. Why the loss of interest?

It is in this light that I offer my own testimony as a lay Anglican communicant. I may be wrong, but my general observations suggest that lack of interest in religion has struck deep roots in our country; and yet there is a growing hunger for 'spirituality'. The kind of reader I have in mind is a non-churchgoer who feels that hunger and who would step inside, but is put off by the thought that in order to qualify for admission she or he would be expected to believe impossible things, like virgin births and bodily resurrections of the dead. I for one would gladly welcome such a person into the Christian fold, so long as they can in some way bring Christ or Christian values into their lives. I want to show that this can be done without worrying about theological concepts they find puzzling or incomprehensible. But I would also respect the possibility that the Christian path is not for them. Seekers must choose the path they find the most congenial and stick to it. Christians discipline their lives on the teachings and example of Jesus Christ as they are written down in the four canonical Gospels of their Bible. To anyone interested or curious enough to want to read on, I will say this: regardless of your stance on religion you are a friend.

Despite the supposed decline, which is easy to exaggerate, Christianity is far from 'dead' as some people assume. It continues to thrive in many parts of the world. In fact I have recently come across evidence of an upward trend, almost as dramatic, but mostly, it has to be said, in the more 'charismatic' churches. Our own local churches seem to be faring well. The religion is almost 2000 years old now, and yet billions of people world-wide remain church-going Christians. So unless you believe they are all in the grip of some kind of collective delusion, there must be something in it. But it took me a long time to commit myself to it because my education has fostered in me a critical and questioning mind. Because the first part of this account is largely concerned with the intellectual problems I had (and still have in part) with traditional Western forms of Christianity, you may find its tone and content negative and even hostile, but please be patient. I suspect that those problems are shared by many others.

So a word of caution: I am an open-minded, liberal Anglican. Religious conservatives may dislike some of the things I say. I respect their feelings but must be true to myself. My main area of dissent is the way I see the Bible. I have to say in all honesty that the traditional belief that the Bible is God's unique Word or Revelation of His ways to Mankind is something I find increasingly problematic. To put it another way: I do not believe the Bible to have been 'inspired' by any external deity, simply because I do not believe in external deities. Rather, I see the Bible as a human response to the Sublime Mystery that dwells at the heart of life. It is a record, not of the mind of God, but of a particular ancient people's relationships with the Divine, written by men. They saw the hand of their God guiding the events of their history. This does not devalue the Bible at all in my eyes; nor does it diminish its authority or undermine its salvific potential. Nonetheless our increasing knowledge of the origins of that motley corpus of texts that we know as the Bible makes it impossible for me to see it in any other way than as a document of a small Bronze Age community's creative struggle to make sense of their existence. Their struggle for understanding is also our struggle. Divine revelation is a continuing, expanding process and it comes in many surprising ways, including the ways we read the Bible today, which is (or should be) different to how it was read in the past. That, for me, is what makes the Bible so enduringly relevant.

Another possible area of dissent is the way I see Jesus Christ. I see him not as a deity in human form but as a figure emerging from a world-wide wisdom tradition: *Sophia Perennis*. That tradition reaches at least as far back as the Vedas and the Upanishads of ancient India and is a vital strand that runs through the Old and New Testaments as well as non-Jewish and non-Christian spiritual traditions. The word 'Upanishad' means to sit close to a master (teacher) as Jesus' twelve disciples did. To put it into Biblical language, the Christianity I embrace emphasises the *Imago Divina*: the Genesis affirmation that we are created in the divine image. We each have a spark of God in us. Christianity is a means through which our God-like potential can unfold so that we reflect God in our ordinary, everyday lives. But for this to come about we must be willing to 'die to our old self', which entails a stripping away of our cherished illusions about ourselves and the world with its false values, that we may stand 'naked before God', open to receive the gift of 'eternal life' (self-sacrificial life in the Spirit) that only God can give. It is the way of the Cross.

Christianity is therefore much more to do with the way we live than about believing certain things. And that way is very demanding. Religion is a sensitive subject and I have no desire to upset anyone. However, I speak not to those already confirmed in the faith but to those who are hovering on the fringe yet are uncertain about the belief aspect. I say to them: don't worry too much about that. I share your uncertainty. You can be a good Christian without believing the world was literally created in six twenty-four-hour days or that natural disasters are signs of God's wrath. What really matters is not our assent to creeds and doctrines formulated seventeen centuries ago but our willingness to follow a way of life that is conducive to a *transformation* of the human condition from one of selfishness to kindness, from hard-heartedness to compassion. We need more people in the world today who are willing to embark on that momentous journey.

If your notions of Christianity are derived from Victorian hymns, memories of Sunday school, street evangelists or the kind of literature that fills the shelves of the average 'Christian' bookshop you may find some of my views surprising. Similar views have already been expressed by others, such as Bishop John Robinson, the author of *Honest to God*, so they are not new. The wisdom Jesus embodies is timeless and universal: it extends beyond the doctrinal parameters of any one specific religion to embrace all of humanity. It is present at the heart of all the World's authentic spiritual traditions, even though their outward forms differ and are self-contained. But if you seriously want to approach it from a Christian

perspective you will need to familiarise yourself with Christianity's core document: the Christian Bible. For Protestants that usually means the King James Bible or its modernised versions. The Catholic Bible, though essentially the same, includes additional writings. The Orthodox Churches have their own canons. For today's Christian, reading the Bible demands a critical and open-minded, yet ultimately devotional approach. In what ways can this ancient collection of scriptures help us, living in the complex world of the 21st century, to grow spiritually and morally? Working on this is a lifelong undertaking and presents its own difficulties because of the Bible's antiquity and its vast temporal and cultural distance from us.

Let us be honest about this: the Bible belongs to another age, pre-scientific and radically different from ours (externally, anyhow). It is a world that is in many respects alien to us. Its authors did not have us in mind when they wrote the texts. They knew nothing of what we now know about the universe. My approach to reading the Bible, as I have said, is one that breaks away from tradition by rejecting the notion of its *uniquely divine* or supernatural origin but which still accords it a high regard. I have wrestled with this question for a long time and have come to the conclusion that it was *not* God-dictated or God-inspired, whatever was believed in the past and is still believed by many Christians today. I say this because beliefs that religious texts are divinely authenticated and therefore inerrant have led to so much human tragedy. Inspiration in the Bible wells up from the depths of the human spirit, which I see as the true dwelling place of God.

To some, what I'm saying here might seem like heresy; it would appear to undermine the very foundation of the faith, and if it bothers them I recommend they read no further. No doubt they would show me biblical passages in refutation of this claim; I know some of them. However, two centuries of biblical scholarship demand such an approach; we cannot turn the clock back. The Bible was written by human beings for specific cultic, communal and ritualistic purposes. We now know that its stories and legends are rooted in ancient Middle-Eastern beliefs, ceremonials and oral traditions spanning a wide area from Mesopotamia and Persia to Egypt. The problem for today's Christian is working out how this set of ancient texts can somehow still speak to us and our concerns in a rapidly changing world. They do indeed, I can testify to that, but you have to work hard at them. You have to distinguish between what they may have meant to the communities for which they were written and what they mean for us today. But it's worth the effort. I am convinced that faith is not won without a struggle, and that fearless probing, honest reflection and intelligent questioning can open the way to deeper and ultimately more satisfying ways of being Christian (or shall we say *Human*) in the modern world. If you are happy with this, then you are most welcome to read on!

My underlying thesis is that a viable Christianity for today must show that it nurtures a caring and compassionate way of life, and should downplay those elements of belief which for many people in this critical and scientific age no longer make sense. The way of Christ is the way of love, not of unquestioning assent to a belief system. If believing the things Christians are supposed to believe in helps many people to become more compassionate, caring and unselfish, all well and good; if it doesn't then there's no point in bothering about them.

I have no intention of trying to convert anyone: that is not my idea of what Christians should be doing. I long for peace, amity and understanding in a tragically divided and troubled world, and they are not achieved by going about trying to win converts. Nothing puts people off more. It's no good saying things like 'Jesus loves you' to a non-Christian. Such language is likely to come across as cloyingly sentimental, abstract and meaningless in the face of

actual experience. The only effective form of evangelism I know of is by example. Don't preach the love of Christ: *be* that love.

There is, however, one thing I do accept as an article of faith: Creation (or Evolution if you prefer) has a purpose. It may not have, but I believe it has. Innate in every living form is an urge to realise to the full its own essential nature. Thus an oak sapling wants to grow into a fully-developed oak tree. It wants to manifest all those qualities of 'oak-ness' that are there in potential. It doesn't ask why. All it wants is to become a perfect oak tree - not an ash nor a sycamore but an oak. We humans also long for the fulfilment of our human potential at the very deepest level. But unlike our oak tree, which is wonderfully complex structurally, we are endowed with a consciousness that creates all sorts of difficulties for us. We are relational beings in a way that trees aren't. Our self-consciousness, along with our need to live in social groups makes it much harder for us to fulfil our human potential. We share, along with all living forms, the instinct to survive, and that is in itself a time-consuming struggle. Yet merely to survive is insufficient- we want to flourish, to become as fully human as it is possible to become. Not to achieve this makes us unhappy, or at least discontented. Of all the animals we are (probably) the most self-conscious, and while that is an enormous privilege it comes at a great price. We are beset with obsessions and compulsions, deceptions, illusions, impulses and fears of every kind. The lust for power, control and domination, to say nothing of our tribal instincts and the brute competition for resources, makes it hard for us to live together in peace and harmony. There is a perversity in our nature which it seems we find difficult to handle. This is an obvious platitude. What attracts me to the *Sophia Perennis* tradition is that it sees a way through. Its great insight is that all these problems arise from false beliefs about ourselves and our world. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition this illusion is called 'sin.'

In any church you will come across the word 'sin' very frequently. It's a word I don't particularly like; it has an old-fashioned, patronising ring about it and is over-used in my opinion. Yet is there an alternative? It's a concept that demands very close examination. It has been defined in so many different ways. The Genesis myth of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise-not to be taken literally, of course – is to my mind one of the profoundest stories of all times. It is mirrored in history and in every person's life. The most common theological explanation I have come across regarding the eating of the forbidden fruit is that it is an act of pride and self-assertion: Man wants to be God, to usurp, as it were, God's powers. As such, the 'Fall from Grace' as it is sometimes called, is both a curse and a blessing. It is the stimulus for all human endeavours. Without the metaphorical 'fall' we would never grow up and realise our human potential. But with it comes the capacity for wrongdoing as well as an awareness of our mortality. Pain, struggle, toil and eventual death are our existential realities. Religions have evolved to cope with this basic human predicament. They promise, if they do not always fulfil, a way out.

I have often observed how uncomfortable and embarrassed some people feel whenever I bring up the subject of religion. They seem threatened or affronted by such talk. So the longing for wholeness and human flourishing which religion is meant to foster is redirected in ways that often fail to deliver in the long term. Christians- now a minority group in a country that was once wholly Christian- may regret the loss of a clear set of guiding moral principles by which society may conduct its affairs. Secular Humanists who think hard about such matters would argue that this may not necessarily be so; the Humanist Society is working on just that and I have great respect for them. I'm very close to being a Humanist myself. Where I differ is my contention that reason, vital though it is, can only take us so far. We cannot overcome the evil in us and in society merely by thinking harder and looking for better material solutions. History shows this over and over again. For all the great merits of

our democracy we have yet to discover or rediscover the *spiritual* wisdom that carries us through the darker aspects of modern life, our alienation from nature, the strains and stresses of the workplace, mass unemployment, urban overcrowding, homelessness, ageing, the poverty trap, increased terrorism and civil unrest, fear of a global catastrophe - the list is endless. Looking for better material solutions to problems is, however, an important part of the quest.

Christians may complain that their faith is being squeezed into a tight corner by the relentless juggernaut of secularisation and multiculturalism, yet I'm afraid they must accept a fair share of the responsibility. Christianity is being forced to change its image and face head-on the challenges of today. That was the message of Vatican II and of many thoughtful churchmen and women, Catholic and Protestant. Our world needs the liberating power of Christ's teaching and example more urgently than ever. But we cannot turn the clock back and pretend, as the Christianity of the past did, that Christians have a uniquely privileged access to God. In a religiously plural society thoughtful Christians now know they must broaden their understanding of the Christ event so as to embrace not only their own tradition but those spiritual traditions that have different labels; indeed the whole of Humanity, whatever their affiliations, theist, agnostic or atheist. In other words, they must take an imaginary and creative leap away from the religious exclusivism and narrowness of their Christian past that has done little but reinforce boundaries and barriers, and be alert to unfamiliar resonances. This requires great magnanimity and generosity of spirit.

This is a frank, honest, personal account. I am a layperson and it merely represents my own views, not necessarily those of fellow-Christians or any of the established churches. I admit they are contentious in places and would hardly expect, nor desire, everyone to agree them; they are in any case fluid and open to revision in the light of fresh insights and correction by those wiser, more intelligent and better informed than me. However, I would ask that they be respected. Love it or hate it, Christianity, as I have said, is not a single, uniform, monolithic system (anything but!); it takes a huge variety of forms, some of them unfamiliar to many westerners. It is as subject to historical evolution as is any other aspect of human culture. There is current of opinion these days that implies it is no longer tenable in this day and age to believe in God and yet be a scientifically well-informed person. Some would even go as far as to say the sooner religion is eradicated from society the better; we have come of age, we no longer need it. 'Religion is the opium of the people' proclaimed Karl Marx over 160 years ago. We could say the same today about the cult of wealth and celebrities. People opposed to religion usually see only its negative aspects, and reduce it all to superstition, simple-mindedness, infantilism or wishful thinking. This is understandable in many cases, but I say they are gravely mistaken, and such philistine opinions must be challenged, which is partly what I am setting out to do.

Undoubtedly there are cults, sects and practices that exploit the vulnerable and immature and are not worthy of serious commendation. Many bear the label, "Christian". They often attract a large following and some are downright dangerous. I know this through direct personal experience. Others try to keep their members at a childish level of development, demanding unquestioning obedience. I suspect that many people turn against religion because they see it as the breeding ground for intolerant attitudes that in some cases may not rule out acts of violence. It is easy, especially in the light of recent atrocities, to point a finger at religion and accuse it of fostering a defensive 'us versus them' mentality on the basis of those aberrations that reach media headlines. In some fundamentalist circles this is undoubtedly the case, alas, and it is so entrenched it may be impossible to eradicate. Fundamentalism (in the sense in which I use that slippery word) is something I steer clear of. In my understanding it is a fear-ridden, anti-intellectual, black-and-white world view that brooks no compromise whatsoever

with those who see things differently. It is present in all the major religions (with the possible exception of the Baha'i) and even outside of them. It is the root of many of the world's troubles. The kind of Christianity I and my Church follow is sane, modern, reformed and integrative; it responds fearlessly and intelligently to the challenges of today. That Christianity makes no exclusive claims, has nothing to do with magic or superstition and is respectful of all who hold different beliefs, learning from them even if it doesn't share them.

Christianity has its own (mostly archaic) vocabulary that can baffle outsiders. The word 'spiritual' for example, is a term that is used loosely both inside and outside of traditional religious circles. It is extremely difficult to define. This is because a spiritual sensitivity is not something one can easily convey to people who don't consciously feel it. Spiritual is not the opposite of material. It's not just about otherworldly, 'religious', 'heavenly', ghostly things; it is all-embracing. Put simply (if inadequately), spirituality is the joyful awareness of being one with the whole of life. The word 'spirit' comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath: the breath of life. According to Genesis, it is that which God breathed into Adam. Spirituality is to do with how we respond to the Gift of Life. It is what we all deep down, hunger for. Often it is those who have experienced loss, disappointment or deep suffering that most readily hearken to the call of the Spirit. I shall do my best to show that having an open-minded religious faith is perfectly reasonable and not something one should feel embarrassed about.

To be Christian you are expected to believe in the existence of something or someone called 'God'. And that God is supposed to have 'made' us with all the connotations of a skilled manufacturer or craftsman. Now it is precisely this word 'God' that constitutes perhaps the greatest source of difficulty for the sophisticated modern mind, steeped as it is in scientific concepts that have cast doubts on the existence of a creator God. It was certainly so for me. Christians know when they hear or utter that word, what it means to them. But too much God talk can be a real turn-off for those outside of the fold. God wants this or doesn't want that; demands this but disapproves of that. I'm an adult and I really dislike such patronising talk, which I hear too often in Christian circles. Is there a God? If so who or what is it/he/she and in what sense may we apprehend such a reality? Outsiders may well be put off by God's representation in the Bible and by most Christians in an anthropomorphic (humanised) way, by use of the masculine pronoun, 'he'. One of the greatest obstacles to my becoming a Christian in fact was the way in which the religion tends to portray God as a kind of invisible Father figure, *external* to ourselves, who thinks and feels in ways analogous to us. If you 'believed' in 'him' you went to heaven, if you didn't you went the opposite way. I thought that to be Christian one had to believe in such a god. If you did you were in; if you didn't you were out. And I didn't.

Perhaps this was the image you were brought up with if you were born into a Christian home. But you may be surprised to learn that not all Christians today take such concepts literally. Beliefs of this kind invite atheists' criticism with good reason. Indeed, I have a sympathetic understanding of the atheist's position provided it is the outcome of honest reflection and sustained logical thinking and not just a manifestation of ill-considered or ill-informed prejudice towards religion (as it sometimes is). There are people inside and outside of the Church who affirm that it is possible to appropriate Christian values into one's life without accepting the 'God' bit. This is perfectly feasible. There is enough ethical material in Christianity to enable us to lead better, more loving and more caring lives whilst rejecting the 'supernatural' aspects, like virgin births, angels, demon possessions, miracles and bodily resurrections of the dead, etc. Alain de Botton, in his book, *Religion for Atheists*, presents a humane and well-argued case for it. It is one of a number of publications of this kind that have recently found their way into the popular 'spiritual' book market. They obviously meet

a rising demand. Botton is clearly concerned with the spiritual and moral welfare of humankind, frequently borrowing from the principles, rites and myths of all the great religious traditions whilst eschewing their ontological premises. It is a thought-provoking book which is well worth reading. The author is acutely aware of the negative effects of our post-modernist estrangement from all that once gave hope, assurance and comfort to millions, and offers positive, creative and life-enhancing ways of reducing the resultant angst. Although an atheist he is yet deeply critical of the dehumanising effects of contemporary secularism and pays homage to those religious institutions that confront this very problem. To me, though his philosophy still fails to address our human needs at the deepest level. I'm afraid I for one can't do without the 'God bit', nor, I suspect can most Christians. The book is written from the materialist or semi-materialist world-view so firmly entrenched in today's culture and does not seem to consider the possibility that alternative ways of apprehending reality may be just as valid. (To be fair, as its title indicates, it is addressed to readers who more or less share the same outlook).

Faith is not about clinging to a set of beliefs that may or may not be true. To have faith is to trust in our inner source of insight and guidance. Experience shows us the way. When we speak about 'God' we are not really referring to a 'person' or an entity outside of us, not a being among beings, not even a Supreme Being, simply because such language cannot escape the net of relativism, and God cannot be so circumscribed. There is no such being as a literal 'Father in Heaven' looking lovingly down at us from the sky. Such language is only metaphorical and analogic, because we human beings cannot conceptualise anything that lies outside of our space-time conditioned experience. And yet there is obviously something-some factor, principle or creative power that gave us our life in the first place. It may indeed be Love. I don't know for sure; it contradicts experience; but it is to this that I commit my life.

I am fully aware that theology, which is nothing else but human God-talk (such as this), cannot hope to overcome its limitation as a language, a system of signifiers that breaks down when faced with what it struggles to signify: the ineffable. Hence it lays itself open to widely variant and often contradictory interpretations. But language is all we have; so we are forced to make do with it as best we can. This is why religious language, like poetry, is by its nature indirect and allusive, that is to say symbolic, metaphoric and analogic (which is at least one good reason for not confining it to the literal). Such language works by engaging the imagination and alluding to a Reality beyond itself. There is a verse in a lovely poem by George Herbert which exemplifies this:-

A man who looks on glass
on it may stay his eye
or if he pleases through it pass
and then the heavens espy.

Early years

One reason for writing this testimony is a wish, *as an insider*, to share with you some of the major objections and difficulties I had towards Christianity before I committed myself to it. But first, a preamble: When I was very young I believed in Jesus and that he loved me. I'm not sure where that came from since my family were not churchgoers, and my father – a thoughtful, kind, highly principled man who loved his family-was a self-confessed atheist. He had no time for religion; it was all superstition and hypocrisy to him. Hence I was not baptised. But I was brought up in a Christian country. We sung Christian hymns in school

assemblies and our religious education was entirely Christian. I have vague memories of going along with my sister to a Sunday school affiliated to I know not what church (this only lasted a short while) and as a boy scout I attended church parades. My mother did go to church when she was single, so perhaps she thought it was good for her children to have at least a rudimentary religious upbringing.

As I grew older my belief in God disappeared along with my belief in Santa Claus. I simply couldn't reconcile the cosy concept of an almighty yet loving, interventionist parent God with the brute realities of suffering and cruelty in the world, realities in which not even innocent children are spared. I had learned enough of history and all its horrors to make it impossible to believe in the existence of such a benign Father figure. That God simply disappeared in my life. I derived more spiritual nourishment from immersing myself in nature and the countryside. I recall an occasion when on a boy scouts' camping expedition and feeling homesick I wandered off alone, down into a deep wooded glen, along which flowed a clear, sparkling stream. The sun shone through the translucent green leaves making dappled patterns. The stream was clear and transparent, dancing and glinting merrily where the sun caught it and hiding itself where it meandered into dark, mysterious shadows. The place was magical. It was my little Eden, my secret hideaway, my Shangri-la. I was filled with wonder. Where did that stream come from? I wanted to find its source. Did it come bubbling out of the ground or did it just seep out? From then on I wanted to discover the hidden source of all things. I was in the midst of beauty. I no longer felt separate from my surroundings but intimately connected with them, as though One Life streamed through us all. That powerful early experience has never left me. Church and Bible had nothing to do with it.

The Mystery of Life

It struck me then, as it has done ever since, how strange life is. Why does anything exist at all? Why do I exist? Why do you? We emerge from the Darkness of the Womb only to return to the Darkness of the Tomb, and our brief lives are often fraught with pain, conflict and suffering. Is there a purpose to it all, and if so what is it? The people around me didn't seem to be much troubled by such questions. They got on with their lives apparently oblivious of the mystery in which we are immersed. During my early adult life I experienced bouts of depression and a low sense of self-esteem. I was blessed with a loving family and had many friends. I enjoyed walking, cycling, travel and Youth Hostelling. And yet I was a loner, rather shy, often out of touch with what was happening around me and feeling alienated from my society and its prevailing commercial, money-obsessed culture whilst pretending to go along with it. This engendered a split within me- a divided self. That's not easy to live with. My atheism gave me no solace, but could see no alternative. Deep down something was pulling me in a direction opposite to the one I was being pushed into- career, ambition, wealth, and so on. That perhaps explains why I drifted from one unsatisfactory job to another until I joined the Civil Service. All I really wanted to do was to find a meaningful direction in life, one that would harmonise with my growing powers of reason and intellect. But I didn't know how and where to focus it.

Being brought up in a predominantly Christian country (well it was then) it was perhaps natural that I would expect to find it in a church. Unfortunately I tried one that was rather off-putting. This was my first obstacle. It turned out to be one of those charismatic, Pentecostal kinds of church. The congregation were welcoming and obviously sincere in their faith. But I felt embarrassed by their clamorous, over-demonstrative spirituality. This is no criticism. It

was their way; this was how they expressed their faith. They were good people and it obviously meant a lot to them. I admired their simple devotion and willingness to undertake charitable works—a great plus. But it was not for me. I rather hoped there was more to Christianity than this. I wanted something that engages the brain as well as the emotions.

Problems with the Bible

And now the second obstacle: the Bible itself. I was assured that it and it alone gave the answer to life's meaning. It was, so I was told, God's Word, so it had to embody the Truth, the Whole Truth and nothing but the Truth. You couldn't argue with it. I gave it a try. I found it difficult, enigmatic and confusing, full of contradictions and inconsistencies. What does it mean these days to call it the 'Word of God'? We know so much more now about its origins and history and the ancient world from which it arose than did our ancestors, and this had put a damper on what I was led to believe was its uniformly God-inspired authorship. We know for example that the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or 'Old Testament') was the work of numerous anonymous scribes, not Moses as was formerly believed, and that material from disparate sources of different ages, originally transmitted orally, was combined piecemeal by editors (an educated elite, probably all men). They drew upon myths and legends that were part and parcel of a shared ancient Middle Eastern culture, not confined to early Israel, adapting them for their own purposes. For example, a Mesopotamian cylinder seal has been discovered depicting a Garden of Eden, complete with man and woman, a seven-branched tree of knowledge and a serpent, that predates the Genesis account by almost a thousand years. Also the remarkable similarities between the flood stories of Genesis and the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* indicate that they both drew upon the same sources. The Genesis account may have been written by the Jews of the Babylonian exile who had direct contact with the host culture. Flood myths were common in Egypt and the Middle East. They go back much further than Genesis, right back indeed to the Sumerians in the late third-millennium BCE. The accumulation of evidence that the Bible authors drew consistently on a shared Near-eastern pool of literature and mythology is now overwhelming.

What is more, the apparent similarities between Christ and the Indo-Persian sun-god Mithras seemed to me to be more than mere coincidence. According to some historic records, (so we are told), Mithras in one of his manifestations had twelve disciples, was a great wandering teacher, performed healing miracles, sacrificed himself on a cross for world peace, was entombed in a rock, ascended into heaven, was known as the 'Good Shepherd', 'the Way the Truth and the Light' the 'Redeemer', 'Saviour' and 'Messiah'; he was born of a virgin and was identified with both the lion and the lamb. His religion emphasised baptism and a form of Eucharist. Of course we have to be careful not to push these comparisons too far without further supporting evidence; there are important differences as well. Things are never that simple! But it does give us pause for thought. To what extent was the Hellenized Christianity of the 4th century influenced by the ancient cult of Mithraism that was widespread and popular in Rome during the age of the great Church Councils? To add to the confusion, there were other god-human figures in the ancient world that also bear strong resemblances to Christ. These are matters that I think my 'Study Bible' should have at least acknowledged. But its commentaries are silent about all such cross-cultural influences.

An associated problem was that the Biblical texts are rooted in an ancient civilisation whose world-view was so vastly different from ours. It was a polytheistic world dominated by

fertility rites involving animal sacrifices and offerings. Those rites were presided over by priests who mediated between the god and the people. This, I think, was the origin of kingship. Priest-kings were very powerful figures indeed. They were believed to be sons of God and legends of their divine-human births were commonplace. Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece provide many examples. Kings were believed to have divine powers and to be protectors and saviours of their people.

I found some Biblical passages to be absolutely morally repugnant. For example, would we put homosexuals to death today? That's what the Bible says we should do (Leviticus 20: 13). Would we stone disobedient children? No. However, read Deuteronomy 18:21. I made the startling discovery that in the Hebrew Bible ('Old Testament'), Yahweh (God) was no more than a local tribal god, interested exclusively in his 'chosen people' and was virulently hostile to their adversaries. Indeed he could without any moral qualms whatsoever order his chosen ones to 'kill every man, woman, child, infant, ox, sheep, camel and donkey of the Amalekites'. (1 Samuel 15: 1-3). So much for the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill'. There are plenty of other examples that make one shudder. If even God fails in His commandments how can we say with integrity that these are His words? Even today there are people who believe God is on their side, conveniently available to fight and win their battles for them.

This is how I saw it: The biblical authors wrote to serve the religious needs of their own peoples and not ours, which they obviously could have known nothing about. As a minority people constantly under threat from neighbouring aggressive superpowers, life for them was cruel, brutal and insecure; sudden death or captivity was a real possibility and so they created a god in their own image that would take a personal interest in them, deliver them from their painful predicaments, enter into a Covenant with them (which, being human, they had broken too often) and set aside for them a broad swathe of land which they could call their own. If they obeyed his commandments he would reward them, but if they disobeyed he would see to it that their more powerful enemies would overtake them and deliver them into exile. Eventually that god would evolve from an anthropomorphic tribal god, jealously storming and raging amid fire and cloud, into a universal creator-god. That, indeed, was a very great step forward, but a vengeful God is not one I care to worship.

Many texts were written during times of acute national or tribal crisis such as the Babylonian captivity of the Jews and destruction of their great Temple (586 BCE), the Jewish repression under the Seleucid King, Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175-164 BCE) which led to the Maccabean rebellion and, in the case of the New Testament, the traumas of the Jewish uprisings and the destruction of the Second Temple by the Imperial Romans (66-70 CE). The religions of Ancient Israel and Judea appear to have grown out of such traumas and upheavals; this perhaps explains their prophetic and often apocalyptic nature (as distinct from, say, the Classical religions of Greece and Rome). Their religious writings were intended for use in their own communities. What relevance, I began to wonder, might the Bible have for us today, over and above, say, Homer or Shakespeare? Do we really still need it to live a good, decent life? Does it really deserve the privileged status it has enjoyed for nearly two millennia?

There was the additional problem of translation. The Bible has been translated many, many times and as always in translation something is lost. Meanings change or become distorted and translations are seldom without bias. Texts may indeed be corrupted, re-edited and tampered with. And it should not be forgotten that before the age of printing they were hand-copied, with all the possibilities of mistakes being made. Every act of translation involves an interpretation. Different versions of the Bible in English, for example, have distinct renderings; therefore meanings differ subtly from version to version. If we really want to get

to the heart of those sacred writings we ought to learn to read them in their original languages: Old Testament Hebrew, Aramaic and New Testament Greek. Even so, the earliest surviving texts are still but copies of earlier ones that are lost to us.

Problems with Christian History

Now the third obstacle: Christian History. That history corroborates Jesus's frequent remarks that his disciples never quite understood him. Tragically the Bible's insistence on lovingkindness, hospitality, goodwill and seeing God in one's neighbour or in the stranger was all too conveniently ignored. Instead, no sooner were the pacifist Christian communities liberated from persecution by an edict of the Roman Emperor Constantine than the religion was hijacked into the service of a brutal militaristic empire-not much different from the hierarchical domination structures Jesus and the Hebrew Prophets were up against! During the era of the great ecclesiastical councils of late antiquity (4th to 5th centuries) the Christological doctrines with which we are familiar, such as the Holy Trinity and Christ's human/divine nature were forged in an atmosphere of rancour and disputation. The degree to which rival bishops (mitred politicians urged on by their emperors) quarrelled with each other over doctrinal niceties leaves us breathless. Why, I wondered, should I worship a Christ that was created by those men?

Overall, the Church, especially the Latin Church, grew to be enormously rich and powerful; and as usual with power came corruption. In their anxiety to ensure strict uniformity of belief, some popes resorted to measures that were cruel in the extreme. They denounced as heretical anyone who saw things, or was perceived to see things, differently; and many 'heretics' were savagely punished. In the course of time popes came into conflict with emperors and kings, rivals in power. At other times they kept an oppressive, rigidly hierarchical power structure going through terror, torture, burnings and the threat of hell and damnation; sanctimonious cruelty characterised periods of inquisition. The means by which the inquisitors forced confessions out of innocent people were sickening and repulsive.

On top of this, the New Testament's demonizing of the Jews of its time, especially their religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, led to the tragic and indiscriminate demonizing of *all* Jews, with sporadic outbursts of anti-Semitic mania. The Crusades against Islam, a great conveyer of learning and civilisation to the backward West for which we ought to be extremely grateful, have left a festering wound. Then there were the insane and deeply tragic conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in the wake of the Reformation, and their anachronistic repercussions in Ireland. The Bible has been used to justify slavery and apartheid. With the expansion of the European empires and colonies, Christianity and imperialist ambition were co-joined, often to the detriment of the distinctive, colourful religious cultures of the colonised peoples, disparagingly dismissed as 'heathen'. Virulent anti-Semitism, misogyny and homophobia have darkened the history of the Church and their shadow has not entirely faded in some quarters even today. To make matters worse we have the recent scandals of sexual abuses committed by some celibate priests towards children and young people, along with the attendant institutional cover-ups. It is not surprising that so many people have turned against the Church and religion.

This of course is a one-sided view of the Christianity of history. It most certainly has its noble side. It has inspired acts of great compassion and selflessness too numerous to count, and was a powerful civilising force during times of savagery and barbarity. Nonetheless, its darker aspects must be acknowledged. One of the most important lessons Christianity has had to

learn through its long and chequered history is actually foundational to its own teaching: humility.

Problems with Christology

Now for the final and most formidable obstacle of all: Christianity's extraordinary claim that around 2000 years ago in ancient Palestine there lived an obscure wandering Semite called Joshua or Yeshua (Jesus in Greek), the son of a village carpenter, who turned out to be no less than God Himself or God's 'only begotten Son' who of his own volition 'came down from Heaven' disguised as a mortal human being, born specifically to share in our humanity and 'die for our sins' in accordance with some supposed Divine Rescue Plan. Who was this Jesus? Did he really exist? None of us have met him in his embodied form. Therefore we cannot know what he looked or dressed like, how tall or short he was, or the sound of his voice. That privilege was reserved for a very, very tiny proportion of the human race. If by some magical means we could transport ourselves back in time and place and encounter him in the flesh we may receive a shock. He may not look at all like the way artists have commonly portrayed him or how we fondly imagine him. Given his ethnicity, his complexion would probably be dark and swarthy, but who knows? His personality may be totally at variance with our expectations, too. If the Gospels are to be believed, he had a formidable side to his personality. He would certainly be well educated by the standards of his time, especially for a man brought up in a cultural backwater like Nazareth. His many references to the Jewish scriptures indicate that he was highly literate, steeped in the Torah, therefore a member of an educated class, not just your average artisan, fisherman, shepherd or peasant. But he would obviously be a man of his time and culture and would know nothing about aircraft and television or the DNA molecule and the genome. There is no evidence that he questioned the morality of the slave-owning economy of his age, which he simply took for granted. All we know about him is what we read in the New Testament (apart from a brief, tantalising, reference in Josephus), particularly the four canonical Gospels, and they are not reliable as objective historic sources.

How can we be sure that the words put into Jesus' mouth by the Gospel writers were really his own? How can we be certain that what the Gospel authors say he did, he really did? Was he an individual or was he a composite figure? The author of one book I came across in our local library argues (unconvincingly) that he may never even have existed: he was an invented figure, based largely on Moses (or Mithras, or perhaps both). These troubling questions began to haunt me. The earliest Gospel, Mark, was written at least 40 years after the events it narrates; and all four had to rely on folk memory, word of mouth and possibly written testimonies now lost to us. Could it be that what we read about Jesus in the Gospels was largely (or in part) fabricated out of material found in the Hebrew Scriptures to further the writers' political or devotional agendas in the face of fierce opposition? The numerous references to Old Testament 'prophecies' suggest this could be so. Are the Gospels little more than propaganda intended to convince Jewish sceptics that Jesus was the true Messiah and reassure the wavering converts? Might they say more about their authors and the times in which they were written than about Jesus and his time? A case could certainly be made out for this, given the political turmoil of the period. We know just how unreliable human memory is, with its temptations to elaboration and distortion. Numerous scholars since Albert Schweitzer have devoted their entire lives trying to uncover the real historical Jesus, in the vain hope of unearthing his own authentic message, stripped of all the accretions and mythologizing that followed after his demise. Members of the Christ's Jesus Seminar are still

engaged in this pursuit. Yet in spite of all the enormous research that has gone into it, there is still no agreement; he remains as elusive and mysterious as ever.

I believe, very strongly, that the Jesus of the New Testament *is* based on a real historical person and that he was someone who stood out in his community as an extraordinary man, a reader of hearts and souls if ever there was one. There are places in the Gospels that reveal a distinct and credible human personality. They cannot be mere fictions. How could a man who obviously made such a profound impression on all who met him have not existed?

But was he more than just a man, as Christians claim? Was he really God or God's 'only begotten' Son incarnate in a human form? Were his birth, mission, death, resurrection and post-mortem appearances before his friends *literally* part of God's plan of salvation for 'fallen' humanity? To my rational, 21st century mind Jesus, if he really existed, was a man not a god, a flesh-and-blood human being, who was born naturally, by the union of human sperm and ovum, like us all, despite what Matthew and Luke tell us. But I say this reservedly and with due reverence. We see all this through 21st century spectacles. The deeper one plunges into the Christian mysteries the more they subvert our logical, common-sense ways of seeing things. A contemporary analogy, perhaps, is in the strange and complex world of Quantum Science.

The idea that Jesus was born specifically to act as a human substitute for the Paschal (sacrificial) Lamb of the Jewish *Yom Kippur* would have been attractive to his followers, but would have astonished him. This is something his later devotees made of him. They linked him with the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and their 'transgression'. And *this* was the crux of my problem with Western Christianity. The notion of Jesus as a divine rescuer, paying the ransom price for our own 'transgressions' inherited from Adam and Eve, through his death on the cross smacked too much of a bailout to my mind. This is something that belongs to history, what people once believed. The Church's obsession with original sin was a real turn-off, especially when it was identified with the entirely natural instinct of procreation. All it does is breed guilt. If there is one Christian slogan I really detested it was this: 'Jesus died for our sins'. What's that supposed to mean?

Seeking alternatives

It became obvious to me that Christianity's source document, the Bible, exhibits inconsistencies because it is a *human* creation—a varied collection of ancient writings stitched together and spanning over a thousand years. It didn't float down from Heaven. It wasn't mediated by God or angels to passive scribes. It is 100% a product of its times and cultures. The more I studied its history the more I questioned its status as a Divine Revelation. I found this very troubling because I supposed that for *all* Christians the Bible is uniquely and unequivocally the inspired Word of God. My reasoning told me it is not. How could I profess to be a Christian if I did not believe the Bible came from, or was uniformly 'inspired' by, God, that it was God's revelation of Himself to humankind? What was I to do?

Well, like many in my generation, I became interested in Eastern religions. I learned to meditate. I explored oriental philosophies and religions and found in them depths of spirituality untouched by and unknown in the narrow Pentecostal church I had rejected. They were peaceful, and they were profound. Moreover, they seemed to harmonise better with the rhythms and cycles of Nature. I found *some* New Age Spiritualities very attractive. There is something to be said for those neo-Pagan religions that celebrate Nature and accord equal value to the masculine and the feminine principles. In common with many of my generation

during the Beatles era of the Sixties I practiced Transcendental Meditation. I entered (or at least tried to enter) stillness and silence. I read Paul Brunton's *Wisdom of the Overself*, which greatly influenced my thinking. I joined the Theosophical Society and a Yoga group. I discovered in Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism spiritual treasures hitherto unknown to me. They appealed to me for their lack of dogma and respect for all living beings; no such respect could I find in traditional Christianity. I was to discover, too, rich veins of spiritual wisdom in Judaism and Islam, especially Sufism. Might not Christianity hold similar treasures?

My return to Christianity

Why did I return to Christianity in an age that is said to be *Post-Christian*? Why *Christianity* in particular? Why not Buddhism, Sufism or Advaita Vedanta? The fact was that I could no longer shop around in the hope of finding whatever spiritual path appealed to me most. Taking bits from this and bits from that eventually leads nowhere. The time had come to make a firm commitment. My return to Christianity was part of my quest for wisdom. I returned to it shortly before I got married, and I came to it not because of some dramatic, Road-to-Damascus, 'born again' conversion, but because it has a long, well-established pedigree and our cultural heritage is Christian. In other words, I was born into a Christian country and believe in its values; and it is in the Christian fold that I feel most at home. I daresay if I was born into an Islamic country I would be a Muslim.

The Religious Quest formed a component in my undergraduate studies with the Open University. It was then I began to take a close look at the Christian contemplative, or mystical, tradition. That for me was the real turning point! I was fascinated by such figures as the Desert Fathers, Pelagius, Evagrius, John the Scot Eriugena, Bonaventura, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, Dionysius the Areopagite and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Those authors belonged to an ancient and venerable mystical tradition known as the *apophatic*, meaning that God or Ultimate Reality cannot be conceptualised or caught in the net of language; the best those 'mystics' could do was to employ the language of negation and paradox. Rather than referring to an external, humanised and gendered deity, the *word* 'God' became a *symbol* for the Source or 'Ground' of all things, the Great Holy Mystery, before which the most appropriate response is silence. Just as I was beginning to doubt if Christianity was really for me, I discovered depths I never believed existed. A major obstacle had been removed.

I supplemented my reading with contemporary studies by Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Keith Ward, Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong and others, in the Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic traditions. Beyond these I read books on Christian Mysticism by such eminent authors as Evelyn Underhill, Bernard McGinn, Grace Jantzen, Thomas Merton and Oliver Davies, and studied mystical texts. I joined the Eckhart Society and found companionable and like-minded people in it.

It came as a welcome surprise to me that there exists within the mainstream churches a current of progressive Christian thought that doesn't demand slavish adherence to the superstitions and belief systems of the past, and which really makes sense to me. It warmed me back to the Church, only this time it was the Church of England. I was baptised along with my then infant daughter, and afterwards confirmed. I was surprised to learn that my own vicar took his lead from the writings of Don Cupitt, a radical and controversial 'non-realist' theologian, whose ideas I have some sympathy with. Despite her shortcomings and innate conservatism (common to all religious establishments), what I value about the modern,

reformed Anglican Church (ours at least) is her openness and inclusiveness. Conservatives, traditionalists, liberalists and progressives all have a place in it. I regard this as the sign of a healthy church, even if it does generate internal tensions (although I feel saddened on behalf of women priests still being denied entry into the higher offices of priesthood).

I have sung in the choir, served on the PCC, led prayers, given a few sermons (addresses) by leave of my vicar, and once led an Advent quiet day based on the practice of *lectio divina*. I was even approached by my vicar asking if I might consider training to become a non-stipendiary priest, but this never materialised. I love the liturgy, the church building, the music, the atmosphere and, above all, the fellowship. We have a superbly well-trained choir. It feels good to be a member of a great and noble, if flawed, institution. My family and I have made many friends there; indeed it feels like an extended family. A bonding of love and mutual caring exists that one rarely finds in secular human gatherings. This is what makes it so special. We have a strong community outreach, which includes interfaith connections with nearby Islamic, Sikh and Buddhist centres. Those connections are important to me. I also welcome the time given over to spiritual growth and silent prayer. I have discovered within the Christian church (on the whole) a rich and satisfying way to self-transcendence.

Re-affirming the Bible

Since the Bible is the foundational document of the Church I am, though my church life, becoming more and more familiar with it. I now see how shallow my initial reactions were. Here is a book (or rather a collection of scriptures that only became the book we are familiar with seventeen centuries after Christ) that has influenced the course of European and World history tremendously, for good and for ill, and has inspired some of our finest art, architecture, music and literature. More than that, it has nourished and enriched the inner and collective spiritual life of millions upon millions of people. It is a book that wields enormous power. It embodies some of the most beautiful and sublime passages in all literature as well as some of the oddest (like talking donkeys). It simply cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to today's world. True, it can no longer be held up as a yardstick against which all truth-claims are to be measured, as it did for our Christian ancestors - it is not, in our modern sense, a scientific, historical or philosophical treatise! Neither does it have magical or supernatural properties; it doesn't prophesy future events. One can no longer quote proof-texts to support any claim. There is nothing in the Bible that can 'prove' anything. Its authors were not supernaturally inspired or dictated to by an external God as was formerly believed. Rather they were responding passionately and creatively to the Great Mystery that dwells at the heart of life and which they were struggling to make sense of through their own often harrowing experiences.

The Bible is not the ultimate answer to life's problems. It is not *the* solution to the riddle of existence. Its primary purpose is to effect a *spiritual and moral transformation* in its readers. It is concerned with the transformation of the unruly, ego-driven ('sinful') human person into a loving, caring and self-giving one-someone who brings light into a dark and troubled world. In symbolic terms, Adam, the natural man becomes Christ the God-man, the Light of the World. God is present in the interactions between the text and the careful, committed reader. The universal wisdom the Bible embodies should not be cast aside simply because we live in a more rational, scientific, analytical age that seems to have lost its sense of the *mysterium tremendum*. Through the power of its stories, parables, symbols and metaphors and the sheer beauty of its poetry it alludes to the presence of a Reality beyond itself-the Divine Mystery in

which we live and move and have our being. It is in this way that the Bible is, for me, the 'Word of God'.

Re-affirming Jesus Christ

For those hovering on the verge of Christian membership but who find their 21st century intelligence getting in the way it may be helpful to distinguish between the man Jesus and the Christ of Faith. The Gospels, like all Biblical stories, need not, and indeed *should* not, be read as though they are factual, eye-witness accounts for their deeper truths to come through. This is clear in the texts themselves. For example, it is highly improbable that the mutually conflicting nativity stories in Matthew and Luke relate to real historic events but I see them as true in a much deeper, more spiritual sense. I doubt, along with many others, that Jesus the man was really born in Bethlehem. That was inserted so as to put him in the royal line of David. There was no virgin birth, no angelic messenger, no inn, no stable, no manger, no shepherds, no guiding star, no wise men from the east, no flight into Egypt; all that is part of the Christ legend, a beautiful story enshrining truths that connect intimately with us all. There are good reasons, based on historical records and internal biblical evidence, why the nativity stories cannot be taken as historic fact. The authors clearly drew upon Jewish scriptural models that relate the stories of providential births, such as those of Isaac, Moses, Samson and Samuel. The notion of Mary's virginity, for example, may well have stemmed from a mistranslation in the Greek Septuagint of a Hebrew word that simply means 'young woman'. It is found in a 'prophetic' verse in Isaiah (7:14) that Matthew, familiar only with the Septuagint, quotes. Also, some very ancient mythologies (recorded in Genesis) involving sexual intercourse between angels (divine beings) and human females to produce a race of giants may have played a part. Belief in virgin births, signifying some form of miraculous divine intervention was common in the ancient world.

But all this is scholarly pedantry: we are not obliged to take the nativity stories as literal historical events to appreciate that they are essentially about adoration and devotion to the highest human value of all: Love. The infant Jesus symbolises the birth of Love in the human heart. And love is as vulnerable and as tender as a new-born baby. Every little detail in these wonderful, if over-sentimentalised, stories, including Mary's virginity, is of profound significance. There is such a richness of associations to be found in them. It has come as a welcome relief to me that faith does not require, still less demand, that we take them to be objective accounts of what really happened a little over two thousand years ago! The same has to be said of any Biblical story. All such stories are essentially *spiritual allegories*, not objective history as we understand it, although they do in most cases reflect actual historical events. Their primary purpose is transformative. This is not always made clear to would-be converts who think that to become Christians they would be expected to believe such things literally.

Jesus may have been one of those wandering holy men common in that region who practiced exorcisms and psychosomatic healing. In the Gospels he is sometimes addressed as Rabbi - a Jewish teacher. In certain respects he can be compared to the Sheikh in classical Islam. He may have received a Temple education at Jerusalem or at least in his local synagogues. Like the Buddha, Jesus was fully awake, whereas humanity at large was, and still is, half asleep. His divinity *was* his humanity; they were one and the same. To be fully human is to be fully divine. They are not mutually exclusive. It may be blindness on my part, but I'm convinced that regarding the Christ event as an external God's response to the 'transgression' of Adam

and Eve has seriously distorted its meaning right through the centuries (I stick my neck out here). For the greatest part of two millennia the dogma of Christ as the Divine Rescuer has woefully obscured the dual purpose of his mission: to reform the Judaism of his time and to reawaken us all to our *own* divine nature. Christians in the West are not always aware that powerfully influential theologians such as Augustine of Hippo who promoted an extreme form of the doctrine of original sin based on a passage from one of Paul's letters, were men of their time; they were influenced by their own culture and by what was going on around them. In the case of Augustine it was the sack of Rome by the invading Visigoths and the siege of his home town Hippo by the Vandals, both terrible experience for him and his contemporaries. Little wonder that he held such a pessimistic view of human nature. (This is not to denigrate the profound spiritual insights of this truly great mystical theologian).

Before I read Cupitt and other liberal theological writings my scepticism over what for centuries has been held as the central Christian dogma in the Western Churches was a source of deep uneasiness to me as an Anglican Communicant. I have struggled with it for a very long time. But now it matters little to me from a spiritual perspective whether or not the stories of Christ's Passion and Resurrection (or his miracles come to that) are records of events that really happened *in the way the Gospels tell them*. I'm not saying they are false testimonies-far from it- but that either way it makes little difference to me personally. I take a more Jungian line. My understanding of the Christ event is that it is archetypal. It highlights the limitations of human reason; we cannot get our heads round it, so it's best left as a Divine Mystery. What it symbolises for me is the costliness yet ultimate triumph of an all-forgiving and self-sacrificial Love that heals and gives life to others. A non-literal, wholly symbolical interpretation of the Christ event may be just what is needed if we are to attract educated and intelligent outsiders into the Church, for whom this central doctrine of Christianity constitutes a stumbling block.

Whatever we make of it, for me the word 'incarnation' carries a powerful resonance. The Word is made flesh. Divinity enters into human form, becomes intelligible to us and participates in our finitude, our suffering, our humanity. And it honours the body, something that the Church of the past, fearful of our sexuality, shied away from, with disastrous consequences. The world of form and matter, culminating in the embodied human person *is* the Divine Incarnation. What makes Christianity so meaningful for me is that the story of Christ is, in a very real sense, *our* story. It is essentially a love story that includes us all. His birth, wilderness experience, temptation, crucifixion and resurrection are not just events that may or may not have happened to a particular individual two thousand years ago, but are all part of our personal and collective redemptive history. The Christ figure symbolises the Christian's solidarity with all of suffering humanity. Looked at this way, the man nailed to the cross is you, me and every man and woman born in the service of Love to our fellow humans. The deeply moving Easter story is really about the spiritual transformation of us all, the shrinking of the tyrannical human 'ego'; our growth into maturity, compassion and wisdom *in this life*. That is what I mean by 'archetypal'. Indeed, the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelations, read this way, is a story about us and our relationship with that unimaginable Source of all life which Jews and Christians experience as Love.

Jesus, the historical Jesus, was above all a champion of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. Probably that's why he was hated by those could not relinquish their power. In *their* eyes he was a religious and political subversive who flagrantly disobeyed the letter of the Jewish laws laid down once and for all through Moses by the God of the Holy Covenant, but which in his compassionate eyes were being applied too literally and rigidly. He was a dangerous threat to the status quo and therefore had to be put down in the cruellest and most savage way possible: the Roman way. That was not part of a Divine Plan of Rescue, not a

literal consequence of Adam and Eve's eating of a forbidden fruit. Jesus was not born specifically to undergo that ordeal as a 'ransom' or substitutionary payment to redeem our wickedness. To me this idea can only be interpreted metaphorically. What it really does is expose our darkness in all its nakedness-what terrible things we do to one another. Jesus suffered just as many other good people suffer by the wanton cruelty, selfishness and ignorance of their fellow-humans. It was the manner in which he accepted his fate that demonstrated how God-centred he was. So clear was his vision that he could see that his crucifiers could not have acted otherwise than the way they did. In the midst of his terrible suffering he could yet ask his 'Father in Heaven' to *forgive* them. He was able to endure his ordeal because of his *unconditional* Love for Humanity. In this lies the true *possibility* of atonement: he set an example to us all of what true love really means. In effect, he was saying, 'if I as a fellow human being can forgive so completely and love so passionately even those that persecute me so can you.' There is nothing magical or supernatural about taking on the mind of Christ. But the price of such love is high.

A Religion for Today's World

If I am wary of fundamentalism in religion, I am even more critical of the assumptions and values of modern, or post-modern, atheistic secularism. It could be argued that secularism has had a liberating effect on society compared with the stuffiness of religion with all its mores and restrictions. This is undoubtedly true and we must be thankful; it is one of the welcome legacies of the Enlightenment. It has led to a much freer, more open, and more tolerant Western society. But it leaves a gaping hole in our spiritual lives. A sense of emptiness and meaninglessness haunts our capitalist-consumerist way of life which people desperately try to fill. The negative consequences of pure secularism are more widespread and devastating even than that. We continue to wreak damage on our beautiful, fragile Earth because we no longer see it as a divine gift, to be cherished, not exploited. The present vogue for spirituality (often distinguished from religion) is a symptom of a growing awareness of the appalling consequences of our neglect. But spirituality has become privatised and subjective, a matter of consumer choice, hence in its way part of the problem. I'm not sure if it is making any real difference (only time will tell). Injustices and inequalities still reign on our sad planet and for all our ingenuity we have yet to rediscover the ancient wisdom that would enable us to overcome the misery and suffering we see all around us, not by setting out to change the world but by seeing it in a new way. That wisdom must be preserved. Religions such as Christianity properly understood and sensitively administered affirm that there is an alternative, saner way of living one's life to the lunatic one we are currently pursuing, one that can indeed offer genuine hope of universal and lasting peace, or at least a more just social order. *I strongly believe that a society that has lost its sense of the sacred and the holy is in dire danger of destroying itself.* For me, being a Christian is not about believing a load of scientifically unsound propositions but about following a particular *way*, one that seeks to restore wholeness to broken lives. When John's Jesus says 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14:16) he is *not* being exclusivist; he is *not* saying that the *only* path to God is via the sacraments of the Christian church and that unless you are a baptised, card-carrying Christian you're definitely out of the running, but is advocating a way of life whose truth is discovered in the living of it.

John's Jesus says: 'I have come that they may have life, and to have it abundantly' (John 10:10). That is the crux of his mission. Therefore anything done in his name that diminishes the life in another is diametrically opposed to his teachings. Sadly, institutionalised religions

have a strong tendency to do just that. Having recently read Karen Armstrong's autobiography, *The Spiral Staircase*, in which she recounts the psychologically damaging effects of seven years spent as a nun in a strict Catholic convent, this point has been forcefully pressed home to me.

Death and the Afterlife

The 20th century has been witness to a major paradigm shift in mainstream Christianity: it has become much more focused on this world. Heaven, Hell and Purgatory have taken a back seat. Does this mean that modern, reformed Christianity now rejects belief in an afterlife? In its traditional forms Christianity often gives the impression that preparation for the life to come is really what it is about. Jesus's promise of Eternal Life has for centuries been interpreted or misinterpreted to mean a continuance of *one's personal* life beyond the grave. There will be a Day of Judgment in which the righteous or repentant will be admitted to Heaven and the unrighteous or unrepentant committed to everlasting punishment in Hell, so the old story goes. One major casualty of the secular onslaught on religion is belief in a hereafter. Can such beliefs withstand the march of science, especially biology? In John's Gospel Jesus says a remarkable thing: 'those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world shall keep it until life eternal' (John 12:25). In what sense may we interpret the expression, 'life eternal'? Is it really to do with a continuation of one's personal life beyond the grave? Or is it more to do with how we live *now*; whether we choose to live a renewed life in the spirit, freed from the taints of sin and ego, or to carry on with the old way of enslavement to them which leads only to a kind of death in life?

The way that Christianity has been portrayed for centuries is of a religion concerned almost exclusively with the life to come. Its orientation therefore is towards the future, to some hypothetical other-worldly destination, but not with the here and now. Perhaps that is the real reason why Christianity spread so rapidly. Life on Earth was a daily grind, full of toil, disease, pain, misery and suffering. Death was an ever-present reality in people's lives. The promise of Eternal Life gave them hope for a better life to follow, in which 'every tear will be wiped from their eyes'. Most of us probably feel that if there is no prospect of surviving death then this brief life, with all its tragedies, sorrows and sufferings, is a monstrous charade, very cruel, without justice, meaning or purpose. Even now, probably the majority of people who take to religion do so because living with that other possibility in mind is too hard to bear.

But the mystery of life and death is a dark one. Will we be reunited in heaven with our loved ones that have gone before us? The only honest answer I can give to anyone who asks me if there is life after death is that I do not know. Does anybody? Those who have had near-death experiences perhaps? Some might say, isn't life after death something all you Christians believe in? Isn't that what Christianity is really all about? I say no. It's more about how we live now. There is no place called Heaven which we go to after death if we are good. Neither is there a place called Hell if we are bad. Heaven and Hell are realities indeed: but realities in *this* life that may or may not intimate what is to come in the next. They are states of mind, conditions, if you like, of the soul, not locations. There is no evading the fact that we are all destined to die and we don't know where, when or how. Is our personal life so important that we would want to carry on living in the same way as we do now? Isn't that precisely what Jesus warns us against? He sacrificed his own life for the sake of others, and wants us to follow him. Eternity is not somewhere else. It embraces life as it is right now, not as it might be in some other imaginary time and place. If we paid enough attention to what Jesus is really

saying we would realise this. The danger of going through life worrying about whether we shall go to heaven or hell is that it can easily degenerate into a selfish, immature and exclusive concern for one's own private salvation. It diminishes the importance of dealing with the problems of *this* life, and that is really what we should be doing. Grown-ups do not need the expectation of rewards or the threat of punishment to be actively working for the common good in this world.

Caring for the dying and the bereaved is, however, a vital part of Christian ministry. As we approach the autumn of our life the question of what may happen to us after death, let's be honest, does begin to loom. We wish we knew the answer. Unfortunately death is a taboo subject in our noisy, bustling secular society. One symptom of this is the widespread fear of silence. The prospect of our own death is an awful thing to contemplate. It is the moment when we realise that we are not, after all, in control. We are helpless before it. It is a terrible farewell to all we hold dear. Concurring with the materialist world-view for the sake of being ruthlessly 'realistic' will not do. This still-fashionable world-view would have it that we are alone in a morally indifferent material universe and the awful truth of this must surely come home to us on our deathbeds. From its own perspective the assumption that death signals nothing but our extinction makes complete sense. At death our heart, our blood circulation, our breathing, our brain and all our bodily functions cease; what is left of us that could possibly survive?

Materialists could, of course, be right. Many people these days believe so. But are we not more than just our bodies? Religions owe their existence to the intuition that there is indeed something *more* to reality than what our limited senses reveal. Even science concurs in that. Faith is trust in that 'something more'. Beyond the transient, the ever-changing appearances of things, one senses, especially in deep meditation, a subtle Presence that somehow exists beyond the limitations of space, time and matter. This is not theoretical but experiential. In the tradition of the *Sophia Perennis* to which Jesus belonged it is identified as the serene, witnessing, experiencing 'Self' that transcends the personal self (that little empirical self I identify as 'me' and not someone else) but is never separate from it. It is *eternally* present in the background of all our life experiences as a silent witness. Some idea of what I mean may be had by contemplating one's personal history through the portals of memory. We are not as we were as a child; our body, mind and personality have changed through time. Our body today is not even the same body it was a week ago. Old cells are dying and being replaced by new ones. Yet our essential Self has not died or changed. It is the hidden Witness to everything that happens in our life. Something immortal in us is simultaneously creating, experiencing and interpreting a facet of the cosmic life through us. That 'something' ever eludes us, because, being the knowing subject it cannot by any act of will be turned into an object for our investigation. The intellect cannot grasp it nor can it be described in any language. Yet without it our existence would be impossible. It is *that* which survives the death of the body, as it must. Christians call it the soul. Vedantists call it the *Atman*. Buddhists call it the *bhudda-nature* or Ground-light. Being beyond time it was never born nor can it die. It is our link with the Eternal. In Christianity it is symbolised by Christ's resurrection. Jesus returns to the Father, that is, to the 'place' where he came from and where he has always been and always shall be. That is our reality also, our true home. Such sublime concepts of life and death if taken seriously as I believe they should must radically influence how we live our lives now. If we live our lives fully, wisely and compassionately we should not fear death. Let me quote these beautiful words of St. Paul: 'No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.' (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Here indeed is a ray of comfort for the bereaved and the dying. Death is but a stage in our on-going spiritual journey. I believe it to be so. Having said that, I think it wiser to live well now rather than be over-concerned about our post-mortem destinies. Better to think that my life will have made a positive difference to those who live on after me. If we strive to live a good life in the here and now our future existence beyond the grave (if any) will, I'm sure, be taken good care of.

Faith is not Certainty

I sometimes wonder if the word 'Christian' is too narrow and exclusive a label for someone like me to wear. Perhaps I'm more a philosopher than a religionist. There are times when I feel that churches and religious organisations tend to be too closed in on themselves, too easily caught up in their own internal affairs, like an exclusive club. Rather than concentrating on ways to raise people's consciousness to an awareness of God's presence in their lives they get bogged down in internal politics, worrying over peripheral matters such as the ordination of women or gay priests. Here is yet another reason why people turn away from the Church. Indeed the Church often gives the impression that its main functions are to regulate society and defend its *status quo*. Whenever Christianity becomes 'Churchianity' it is a sign that it is losing its way. However, all this seems remote when in the presence of beautiful music or in silent prayer or at the Eucharist or in the fellowship of the congregation and clergy it is possible to experience the presence of that mysterious something we call God or the Holy Spirit. We carry this flavour into the outside world. This is what Church means to me.

There can be no certainties about God or anything. Faith is not about certainties. Nor is it about faith *in* something. The Greek word for faith is *pistis*, which refers to an inner attitude of trust and commitment. *Letting go* and *letting be* are the two key watchwords. And that could mean letting go of all we ardently believe to be true, even our most cherished beliefs and convictions. It could mean going beyond Jesus, beyond Church, beyond religion and even beyond the God we think we know.

An open-minded faith is always to some extent agnostic. I am repelled by claims to absolute certainty. This is why I couldn't cope with an Alpha Course. The question of why the universe exists and why we are here is, when it comes down to it, unsolvable through our limited human reason alone. That is the sixty-five million dollar question brilliantly answered in Douglas Adam's *Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which reads like a Zen *koan*. We are in the midst of a mystery no human mind can comprehend. Maybe we should just leave it at that. Yes, it is violent, cruel and unpredictable, like earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and tsunamis that are completely indifferent to the tragedy and suffering they cause. But it is also very wonderful. So wonderful and so finely, *intelligently* organised that I cannot by any stretch of the imagination believe it to be the accidental result of blind material processes; it is too purposive for that. I marvel at the beauty, variety, forms and structures of all living things on our amazing planet. Indeed the whole universe is wonderfully ordered. There is a living, creative, purposeful Intelligence behind it all, of that I am convinced, and we are a part of it. The whole cosmos is on course, I feel, to an unimaginably glorious destiny. Innate in every living organism is a powerful urge to carry on living, and to reproduce its own kind. This tells me that life is very important indeed if Nature goes to all that trouble to preserve it. But this is a statement of my *faith*, not necessarily about how things really are.

Saying 'Yes!' to Life

Meister Eckhart, one of the profoundest thinkers in the Christian mystical tradition, conceived a most liberating idea: *sunder warembe*- 'living without a why'. Here is what that great man says:-

There is nothing so dear or desirable as life... Why do you eat? Why do you sleep? So that you live... but why do you live? So as to live...Life is in itself so desirable that we desire it for its own sake.' (Sermon185).

Eckhart's spirituality is a spirituality of the here and now, the ordinary and the everyday, sane, relaxed, cheerful and abounding in humour. It's my kind of spirituality. It closely resembles the great Zen Buddhist ideal of mindfulness and detachment. All anxiety about our spiritual goals and objectives, our God seeking, our quest for happiness or holiness, all of which arises from the ego, simply drops away. Eckhart unmasks the hidden egotism and idolatry of what frequently passes as religiosity, a dangerous thing to do in his day. It was probably why he came under the suspicion of the authorities. No matter what sort of person we are, he is saying, or what faults and failings we may think we have, our lives are precious because they belong to God. We don't have to justify our existence by striving to be someone or something we are not, or by inventing reasons for living any more than a rose or a butterfly does. The meaning of life is in the living of it. Our life flows from the Eternal as a priceless gift. It's great to be alive! Let us then renounce our egoistic strivings, our fears and our worries, our belief in our inadequacies, rejoice, give thanks for this wonderful moment that is **now**, and be glad!

God as Love

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est' (where there is compassion and love there God is). These are the words of a famous *Taize* chant. I believe that the core spiritual values of love, charity, reverence, wonder, kindness, forgiveness and compassion are all that really matter, not blind conformity to creeds and doctrines. These values are common to all the great religious traditions. But if those religions degenerate, as they often do, into a means of social control and preservation of their *status quo* they will have lost their way. If they fail in their mission to heal a sick, fragmented world, fail to contribute to a better life for others as well as for me they have no value whatsoever. *Healing* is religion's true objective, the restoring to wholeness of broken lives, not the production of a compliant, superstitious, infantile, guilt-ridden and fearful community. Over-zealous religionists tend to become fanatical with terrible consequences. We all know how dangerous some religious cults are, even those that call themselves Christian. They do immense psychological and spiritual harm and there is no love in their manipulative and exploitative leaders. They reveal their true colours when one of their members tries to leave. I speak from experience. True love, however, makes no demands, is not coercive and leaves the person who is loved free to be simply his or her self.

Seeing God in all things

Paul wrote that ‘the invisible things of God are known from the things that are visible’. It is not fashionable in our modern secular society to regard the manifest universe as a sacrament of the Sacred. Maybe we would all benefit if this profound *theophanic* insight was restored. Seeing the Divine in everything- in you and me and the birds singing in the garden is, like my wooded glen experience, what love is about. When we can stand awestruck at the sheer beauty, wonder, mystery and even terror of Creation without trying to explain it away we have made a real breakthrough. William Blake once wrote that everything in life is holy, and how wise he was. What a different world it would be if we could all see this, or at least act *as though* it were true. Then we would be more careful to treat each other with respect and reverence and not engage in mindless warfare and strife that never seems to end.

Religious Faith in a Troubled World

All this must seem like pie in the sky to those who are embroiled in the struggles and pains of living. Life is indeed trying and difficult. Illness mental and physical, dementia and old age, loneliness, depression, loss of meaning, trauma, tragedy, bereavement and stresses of all kinds are the lot of most of us. Some people experience exceptional tragedies. There are no simple answers to why life should be like that. Injustices reign, and this is one of the most painful lessons life teaches us. We live in a brutal world. Good people aren’t always rewarded and wicked people punished. Often the reverse is true, at least it seems that way. Following a spiritual path certainly doesn’t free us from suffering, troubles, cares and responsibilities. It is not escapism. But the deeper our spirituality the more we can bear them, and the more we can understand and help others in their distress. One develops a kind of inner detachment, strength, serenity and peace that carries us through. But it is a slow process and the cost can be high. If I’m honest, I’ve come nowhere near to achieving that lofty ideal!

Faced with what seems like universal sorrow and suffering we may cynically despair of following *any* ideal. Man’s cruelty to man and animals is a melancholy and persistent theme throughout history. We may start out in our young lives full of idealism and optimism only to be met with a wall of opposition that seems impenetrable. We may desire peace and harmonious human relations but there are those who don’t. That there is a dark aspect to human nature is stating the obvious, and, at the risk of sounding preachy, I am convinced that there can be no spiritual or moral progress unless we own up to it and face it *in ourselves*. We have to accept that it is the world we actually live in and that we, every single one of us, are part of that world. Evil is a real and terrible force. This is why the Bible insists on repentance. One of the most profound artistic installations to have appeared in the Tate Modern Gallery in recent years was Miroslaw Balka’s *Black Hole*. This consisted of a giant grey steel structure with a vast dark chamber into which visitors could freely walk. Underlying the chamber were a number of allusions to recent Polish history including the Warsaw Ghetto and the trucks which took victims away to Auschwitz and Treblinka. Black holes are awesome cosmic phenomena with a gravitational pull so strong that anything that gets sucked into them-even light itself- can never escape. In Balka’s *Black Hole* the darkness visitors entered was almost absolute, but they entered trustingly, knowing they would walk back into the light. Tragically, that never happened to the victims of those terrible Nazi killing factories.

Breaking down barriers

Every day we walk into the darkness of an unknown future. This is true of each one of us as well as of all religions, including Christianity. Already there are numerous signs that spiritually awakening people are bursting the barriers of institutional and doctrinal religions. What really matters is not our clinging to a tradition but a change of heart and way of seeing things. We need to see the world with new eyes. If all we do is take the Sermon on the Mount into our hearts and *live it* what a difference it would make.

There are many people doing good things in the world who do not belong to a formal religion, and many others who do. A great army of Christians, their hearts filled with the love of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit are doing wonderful work in the world. They gain their inspiration and strength from their faith. Equally, there are others who are finding spiritual nourishment in non-Christian ways. There are spiritually awakened people around today- inspirational men and women such as Anthony de Mello, Amoda Maa Jeevan, Thich Nhat Hanh and Eckhart Tolle who are proclaiming Christ's message in modern, albeit non-biblical, terms. The Dalai Lama, Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi, the Sufis of Islam and numerous others add to a wealth of inspiration and wisdom we can draw upon. The mere fact that many of them belong to non-Christian traditions is no reason to reject them. Only those with closed hearts and narrow minds would do that. Each in their different ways proclaim the same truth as Jesus did two millennia ago: that there is ultimately only one 'I' and that 'I' is what we call God, though in other traditions it is given different names. This, they tell us, is Self-realisation: that *we are nothing other than God* (or Ultimate Reality) because there is *only God*. This is *not* the same as saying we are God; we are contingent beings. But we each carry deep within us a spark or ray of that Divinity which interfuses everything. We are to God as sunbeams are to the Sun or as waves are to the ocean. Another memorable image is one that Jesus gave us: the vine and the branches.

The question therefore is not whether there is a God but that there is only God. This is the great insight of the *Sophia Perennis* tradition. But we only know God through the ways in which we give of ourselves to others, through our human encounters; or, if we are sensitive enough, through communion with great music, art, poetry and natural beauty. Otherwise all this talk about there being only God is mere theory. The greatest task facing us these days is to break down the barriers, religious or otherwise, that we human beings have erected against each other and rejoice in our diversity ('blessed are the peacemakers'). Each one of us is a unique expression of the Divine: the 'I AM' of Ultimate Reality. All the great world religions, however much they differ outwardly, originate, I believe, from this same metaphorical 'Ground'. In the course of their history their message inevitably becomes distorted, perverted, ossified or otherwise muddied unless new life is breathed into them. Religions are but provisional. They can stifle as well as liberate. Once we reach this level of insight we won't need them.

The Enabling Power of Hope

This may be an unorthodox view but it is what I mean by being Christian. We live in a world of such complexity that we may feel helpless in the face of all its problems. It seems highly unlikely that human nature in the mass will change much in the foreseeable future and it is

both naïve and futile to expect an imminent Utopia. History teaches us that most utopian dreams (such as Marxist Communism) turn into nightmares simply because individuals cannot be coerced into the conformity and obedience such idealistic programmes demand.

Yet the Bible speaks of a ‘new heaven and a new earth....where death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.’ (Revelations 21: 1-4). Its optimistic, overriding message is that evil cannot prevail, and that its ultimate destruction is guaranteed. This is the Christian hope. It is not a vain hope. If it were then the religious quest is indeed delusional, merely a disguised form of egotism, infantilism and wishful thinking. Our difficulty is that we can’t see the whole picture. Things do change for the better, though usually at the great struggle and self-sacrifice of a few awakened individuals. People like Martin Luther King, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Kathleen Raine and Mahatma Ghandi are true visionaries: they make changes happen and are the great healers of the world’s wounds. Through their self-sacrifice they have made a real difference to the lives of many. There is reason for hope in the young people who yearn for a better world. This was made clear to me only recently when the US President Barack Obama addressed a large assembly of young students in Belfast. A young female student, just 16 years of age but centuries old in her maturity and wisdom read out her prize essay, calling for peace, reconciliation and the breaking down of barriers in a divided and troubled world. Having been born in a city that knew hatred and violence at first hand she was a true beacon of hope.

We can’t all be at the forefront of world affairs. But we *can* do something about ourselves. We can strive within our small circle of influence to be bearers of peace, love, kindness, hospitality, gentleness, compassion and goodwill in a world torn apart by hatred, corruption, greed, exploitation and violence. Jesus affirmed that we have it in us to do that; indeed it is His greatest commandment that we love one another. That puts the onus squarely on us. And if God really is a God of Love our transformation is ultimately guaranteed. We would then treat members of other faiths with respect, sensitivity and understanding instead of perpetuating a situation of mutual antagonism with belligerent assertions that only ours has got it right. Religions are after all but human creations; it is absurd to claim that any one has a monopoly of truth. This is as true of Christianity as of all the others.

The Power of Prayer

Our world has become dangerously polarised between hostile fundamentalisms, whether ideological or religious. The world is becoming more and more restless, not only in the Middle East and Africa but everywhere. Violence is on the increase. We demand justice (vengeance) on the perpetrators, whom we paint as evil, yet are blind to the defects in ourselves. The tabloid papers ruthlessly exploit and abet common prejudices and proffer simplistic answers to extremely complex and difficult issues; yet their readership is high (which doesn’t argue well for democracy). I am frankly sickened by the hypocrisy by which they presume to judge others and capitalise on people’s misfortunes. We are all deeply conditioned by our society and its dubious values. The popular media, enhanced by a sophisticated technology and supported by mass advertising, is an extremely potent instrument of such conditioning. So deep is it that we are normally unaware of the subtle means by which we are being controlled and manipulated to the advantage of the rich and powerful.

The world is desperately in need of redemption. The choice that confronts us is stark: we must either embrace the ideal of human brotherhood and sisterhood combined with respect for all creation or else perish in a hell of our own making. This means that as adults we must take on and share our responsibilities towards each other and all living beings. We may think we can do this by our own unaided reason, but unfortunately history and human experience demonstrate time and time again that we always fall foul of our best intentions. If there is to be salvation it must lie in putting our trust in that Greater Power that gave us our existence in the first place. That Power is not remote from us; it is actually present in the depths of our Humanity. There is a beautiful line in the Koran which reads: 'I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known. So I created the World in order to be known.' If God is Love then Love invites a reciprocal response. As God loves us, so we love Him. To love God is to love all Creation, and to love means to *care for*. This is why prayer is important; *as a spur to action* it nurtures and develops the right psychological disposition for bringing out the more loving, charitable and unselfish side of us. When we pray for others we are affirming our solidarity with them. Life is not ours by right. It is not something we own; we did not create ourselves. It is a gift given freely and gratuitously; it may be taken away from us at any time, so isn't it right that we should prayerfully offer up ourselves in a spirit of thanksgiving and praise to the Giver - that is, by simply enjoying the gift, respecting one another, and not wasting it in futile squabbles and resentments?

Each one of us is placed in a unique situation. The world is huge, daunting and intimidating. We can only operate within our limited spheres of influence. But we can resist those forces outside and within us that contribute to such disastrous states of affairs as the destruction of the rain forests, the exploitation of the poor, and cruelty to animals and children. Tremendous strides have been made in the realms of international legislature towards justice, human rights and the protection of the weak and vulnerable but there is obviously still much to be done. There is so much sadness and injustice around us. It is often a heart-breaking struggle to win justice in the face of ignorance, exploitation, hatred, prejudice, greed, corruption, fear, apathy and general human perverseness. But to remain in blissful ignorance of how cruel, greedy and exploitative systems operate is to collude with evil. This is one reason why a liberal education is so important. School education should be much more than mere preparation for the realities of the workplace, important though that is. It should encourage informed and radical questioning of our current values, attitudes and assumptions.

If more of us would honestly and courageously examine our motives and set aside a little time each day in practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer, silent meditation, self-restraint, loving-kindness and generosity, it could make a huge difference. They have a beneficial rippling-out effect. Christ and all the sages of the *Sophia Perennis* tradition show us the best and I believe only way out of the mess we are in: the replacement of fear by love.

Faith: A Matter of Trust and Commitment

Once we put our trust in the God of love that dwells in our hearts we are more likely to act wisely and compassionately without losing our sense of humour. Spiritual knowledge is heart knowledge. A loving and compassionate heart is by far our best authority. In the symbolism of the Eucharist, or re-enactment of the Last Supper, we become, as it were, reformed in our 'Lord'. We take in His body and blood, that is, His wisdom-nature. Together we share in His symbolic resurrection. The Eucharist is a communal act of re-remembrance (putting our broken parts together again) and restoration to our original wholeness, to a condition as it existed

before the metaphorical ‘fall’, only made infinitely wiser by our passage through a whole range of human experience.

Today we are living through a technological and communications revolution undreamed of even twenty years ago as I write. But I’m convinced the revolution our world so desperately needs is a spiritual one. Everyone needs to know what it means to love and be loved, *unconditionally*. Our very survival as a species depends on it. Let us then strive as best we can as flawed human beings to create a more harmonious presence within it. We do this most effectively through prayer, meditation and compassionate action: through tapping into those eternal wellsprings of living waters that cleanse and purify us, and restore us to knowledge of who we truly are: radiant beams of the living God. Given the current state of the world, isn’t it at least still worth a try?

This is my testimony, and this is what I affirm. I extend the hand of peace and goodwill to all my readers.

Robert Harris

Appendix

Books that have inspired me

I am a bookish person and have many books on religion and spirituality. I also know that books can only get us so far. Too much reading and exposure to competing ideas can leave us utterly bewildered. But there are some books that are not only helpful but genuinely inspiring. Here is a sample of those I personally have found to be so:-

The Holy Bible

The Bible I normally refer to is the New Revised Standard Version published by Oxford University Press. It is a very readable translation of the King James Bible with all archaic words eliminated, confusing word orders corrected and English words that have changed in meaning over the years updated.

Updating and modernising 17th century texts does have its down side. It’s like doing the same thing with Shakespeare. Much of the beauty of the original prose, largely that of William Tyndall, is lost and subtle meanings compromised. It’s worthwhile getting hold of an unrevised King James Bible if you can and making comparisons.

To read the Bible adequately you need guidance. A *good* commentary is invaluable. If you can afford it and have room on your bookshelf I would recommend the *Oxford Bible Commentary* (Eds. Barton, John & Muddiman, John. OUP: 2007). There is a paperback edition you can buy in Waterstones that is not too costly. It is a scholarly compendium that covers the whole of the Bible in close detail together with the Apocrypha and Extra-canonical early Christian literature. It is the work of many contributors, specialists in their chosen subjects. Here is a lifetime’s study for the really dedicated!

A much shorter introduction that is both readable and fascinating is Karen Armstrong's *The Bible: the Biography* (Atlantic Books, London, 2007). Armstrong has written many books on religion (not just Christianity) and is a renowned expert in the field. In this book she offers a detailed, source-based overview of the development of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament along with their historical, cultural and intellectual backgrounds. She explores the different ways in which the Bible has been understood and appropriated down through the centuries and writes with sensitivity and discernment.

Another book I find very helpful is Marcus J. Borg's, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally* (Harper Collins & Harper San Francisco, 2001). Marcus Borg is a distinguished American professor of religion who is also a committed Christian. He shows how the modern crisis of faith is rooted in the misinterpretation of sacred texts as historical record and divine dictation, and opens us to a fresh perspective that engages with our modern scientific and critical way of thinking whilst meeting our deepest spiritual needs. Aware that the older ways of reading the Bible literally no longer persuade, he advocates a new way that is alert both to its original historical meanings and to what it means for us today. He calls this approach "historical-metaphorical".

The Oxford Book of Prayer (Gen,Ed. George Appleton : OUP 1988)

This contains some wonderful, inspirational prayers collected from all over the world and from every spiritual tradition. Its breadth encompasses prayers from African religions and the Sioux Indians of North America. The final section of this rich anthology is devoted to prayers towards the unity of mankind.

Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008)

I treasure this little book. Compiled by J. Philip Newell, former warden of Iona Abbey in the Western Isles of Scotland it draws on the insights of the Celtic Christian and Jewish traditions. It is essentially a practical manual designed to be used daily, both morning and evening. It offers prayers for each day of the week, following a set pattern: silence -opening prayer-scripture and meditation – prayers of thanksgiving and intercession – closing prayer. It contains reproductions of Hebrew illuminated manuscripts with an interesting commentary on them.

Aram Cara and Eternal Echoes: Exploring our Hunger to Belong (John O'Donohue. Bantam Books 1998)

I met the late John O'Donohue during an Eckhart Society Annual Conference and fell immediately under his spell. John was an Irish poet, scholar and former Catholic priest with a remarkable gift of storytelling and penetrating right to the heart of what it is to be human in an alienating society. The Gaelic expression *Aram Cara* means 'Soul Friend'. John was a poet of the soul. He came from a beautiful part of Ireland and this was reflected in the beauty he saw all around him and deep in the human person. He was himself a beautiful person-I can vouch for it. Reading his books is a healing and transforming experience.

The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind- a New Perspective on Christ and His Message (Cynthia Bourgeault. Shambhala, Boston & London, 2008)

This book was recommended by our Vicar, the Reverend Martin Henwood. Cynthia Bourgeault is an American Episcopal priest, teacher and conference leader. Her approach to Jesus and the Gospels is refreshing and distinctive. She situates Jesus squarely in the worldwide wisdom tradition, *Sophia Perennis*, as I do. What is so interesting is that she begins with a quotation not from the Bible we are familiar with but from a Gospel that is not one of the four 'canonical' Gospels: *The Gospel of Thomas*. It was discovered at Nag Hamadi in Egypt along with many other Christian scriptures that were excluded from the Bible in its present form. Bourgeault demolishes stereotyped and preconceived ideas of what Christianity is and offers radically new insights which we can explore and take further. She divides her book into three main sections: The Teachings of Jesus, The Mysteries of Jesus and Christian Wisdom Practices. In the third section she offers some invaluable practical guidance on Centering Prayer Meditation, Lectio Divina, Chanting and Psalmody and Welcoming. A book I would warmly recommend.

We Walk the Path Together: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh & Meister Eckhart.

(Brian J. Pierce, OP. Orbis Books Maryknoll, New York 2005.

This is a beautiful book, full of the deepest wisdom and humility. The Dominican friar Brian J. Pearce brings the great Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh into dialogue with the 13th-14th Dominican preacher and mystical theologian, Meister Eckhart. Father Brian celebrates the common ground shared by Christians and Buddhists, whilst respecting their differences. Some idea of the flavour of this exploration may be gained from the chapter headings: Magnanimity, Mindfulness and the Eternal Now, The Breath of the Holy Spirit, The Water and the Waves, Jesus and God: "Coming Home", Christ: "The Amazing Grace of God", Suffering, Compassion Born from Suffering, The Tree of the Cross and Love in Full Bloom. There is a concluding chapter: 'A Journey and a Begging Bowl'. I would strongly recommend this book to anyone concerned with interfaith understanding and who is serious about deepening their spiritual life.

The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying (Sogyal Rinpoche. Rider 1992)

Although this is not a Christian book it is the most profound and compassionate source of inspiration on the subject of living and dying I have ever come across. I have yet to find a Christian book to equal it. Sogyal Rinpoche is a Tibetan Buddhist master who draws upon the wisdom of his tradition. He never understates the awful realities of death and dying but shows that they are nothing to be afraid of when properly understood. With heartfelt sensitivity he introduces us to the practice of meditation, the nature of mind, karma and rebirth, compassionate love and care for the dying and to the trials and rewards of the spiritual life. He is as much concerned about living as he is about dying and sees both as aspects of One Ultimate Living Reality. It's a lovely book to have in the house, one to turn to at times of crisis.

The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda (Du Boulay. Orbis Books 2005)

This is a moving story about a French Catholic Benedictine monk who went to India to deepen his spiritual life. He made several visits to the famous ashram at the foot of

Arunachala Mountain where he met Sri Ramana Maharshi and Swami Gnanananda two renowned Yogi Masters who made very profound effect on his spiritual life. He adopted their austere and simple lifestyle, founded his own ashram, and wrote extensively on Vedanta and Hindu-Christian dialogue.

God of Surprises and God in all Things Gerard W. Hughes (Hodder & Stoughton)

Very readable; Hughes speaks to the confused, disillusioned and despairing and helps us to discover the God of Love that is present in everything. I once met him at a conference in London and he was an engaging speaker with a sparkling sense of humour.

Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons and Commentaries Bernard McGinn (Classics of Western Spirituality series. Paulist Press)

An excellent introduction to some of Eckhart's most important sermons and treatises by the world's leading authority on mysticism. Not for everyone perhaps but for those with a taste for the mystical and contemplative it is richly rewarding.

God is not a Christian: Speaking Truth in Times of Crisis Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Rider Books, 2011)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is an exemplary Christian and a great human being. I met him and his wife a few years back at Southwark Cathedral when we sang in the choir. He led a splendid congregation, nearly all of them Black Africans. His warm and compassionate personality really shone out. His book with its intriguing title consists of excerpts from various sermons and addresses in which he shares his thoughts on a wide range of subjects: tolerance and respect, forgiveness, justice and human rights and the challenges of sexuality and race relations. His overriding message is that we are all God's children.

Carl Jung: Collected Works (various publishers)

Finally, I derive great inspiration from the insights of Carl Jung. His theories of the unconscious, radically diverging from those of Freud, are founded on the unspoken assumption that we are essentially embodied spiritual beings, so that they marry well with my way of thinking. His theory of universal archetypes has helped deepen my understanding of the Bible as well as many other manifestations of human culture.