

The Apostate's Creed
A pilgrimage beyond belief

Ben Whitney

By the same author

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(Humanist reflections on the Psalms)

Finding the Way

(A reinterpretation of the parables)

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A priest felt he was losing his faith in God so he went on a pilgrimage to Rome to rekindle it. He visited St. Peter's, the Vatican and even managed to gain an audience with the Pope himself. As the priest waited in line he carefully rehearsed the question he would ask and anticipated the no-doubt inspirational answer he would receive. When his turn came, he knelt at the Pope's feet and said: "Holy Father, I fear I am losing my faith. What should I do"?

The Pope replied: "Pray every day; abstain from carnal thoughts; do good to others, recite the Creeds, follow the example of Mary and the saints and marvel constantly at the beauty of God's creation". Then the old man leant forward and whispered in the priest's ear: "If all that fails, do what I do. Fake it."

(source unknown)

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Summary

Can you still find some truth in the Christian story, even if you don't believe in a God?

This book is an exploration of some phrases from the Apostles' Creed by someone who does not believe it. After an introduction to my personal context, there follows a brief historical scene-setter. Where did the Apostles' Creed come from? Who wrote it and why? What is it trying to say?

But I then want to take the statements of the Creed on into whether they can still mean anything to people like me today who are in search of a new kind of spirituality. I start from an essentially rationalist and humanist perspective which sees all religion as a human language about the life we know here and now, not as a door into a greater reality that is somehow 'beyond' us.

Much re-interpreting will be involved but you are welcome to share in a personal pilgrimage that is, literally, 'beyond belief'.

PROLOGUE

'The great myths show that when you follow somebody else's path, you go astray. The hero has to set off by himself, leaving the old world and the old ways behind. He must venture into the darkness of the unknown, where there is no map and no clear route. He must fight his own monsters, not somebody else's, explore his own labyrinth, and endure his own ordeal before he can find what is missing in his life. Thus transfigured he (or she) can then bring something of value to the world that is left behind.'

Karen Armstrong

"The Spiral Staircase", Harper (2005)

This book is an exploration of some phrases from the Apostles' Creed by someone who no longer believes in what they say – hence the witty title! (I'm amazed that no-one seems to have used it before). After an introduction to my personal context, there follows a brief historical scene-setter. Where did the Apostles' Creed come from? Who

wrote it and why? Many books about it miss this out entirely.

My first task is to understand what the compilers of this and other Creeds thought they were doing *at the time*. All religions have a human story behind them and everything we now assume to be an integral part of them was at one time created from new. I am very interested in Christian history and would like to know a little more about the background and processes which led to these particular statements and convictions that we now more or less take for granted as the essence of Christianity.

This might sound as though it will lead to some wrestling with complex Greek or Latin terms and dull debates about obscure-sounding distinctions, the significance of which is now entirely lost. I promise there won't be too much of that, but no-one should jump immediately to their own interpretation of what the words say. We do first have to examine the original text as best we can. This is essential for all study of ancient writings. (See '*Updating the Map*' for a way of approaching the Bible in this way.

It too is human literature, not some 'magic' book that fell from the sky).

But then I want to take the statements of the Creed on into whether they can still mean anything to people like me today who are in search of a new kind of spirituality. I do not believe there is 'a God' or a 'supernatural' reality beyond us. This life is all we get. I start from an essentially rationalist and humanist perspective which sees all religion as a human language about life, not as a door into a greater truth that is outside of us. I am not, in any sense a believer. But I am an explorer faced with the same questions that religions claim to answer. The journey may be similar but I have a different map, even if it contains many of the same landmarks. Much re-interpreting will be in store but I will try not to confuse my own ideas with those who came before me.

One of my companions on this journey, (though I don't know that he would have wanted to come, had I been able to ask him!), is the veteran New Testament Professor C.E.B. Cranfield. I have used his little book '*The Apostles' Creed*' (Continuum,

2004 edition) to try and ensure that I do at least some justice to the mainstream beliefs that the Creed is affirming. His book is useful in places, and does at least include a very quick look at its original historical context before moving on to an exposition of each phrase.

But it perfectly illustrates the difficulty that so many of us have in engaging in any kind of discussion with people of faith. When looking at the meaning of belief, he first quotes the German theologian Karl Barth: *'There is no man (sic) who does not have his own god or gods as the object of his highest desire and trust, or as the basis of his deepest loyalty and commitment'*. Fair enough. Most of us have things we believe in and trust to be true. Few people put their faith in nothing.

But then Cranfield gives the game away with what he writes himself. *'The decision that has to be made is not between having a god and not having a god. That choice is not open to us.... The choice to be made is, rather, between believing in the one true living God, the only real God, or believing in one or more of the false gods, behind all of*

which looms in the background the ultimate idol, each man's or woman's ego.' (p.9).

I'm sorry, but this is staggeringly arrogant and unhelpful. Only his God, apparently, is real and has nothing to do with bolstering our fragile human egos. (That is so evident as a feature of organised religions!) There is no justification offered for such a position; we are just required to accept it. He has discovered THE truth; the rest of us are simply running after selfish false trails. We are pursuing only human inventions; he has somehow been able to encounter the only source of actual Divine reality.

I have news for him. *All* gods, including his, are the product of human thinking and understandings. Any claim that a God 'exists' and what 'He' is like are claims created and perpetuated by us. God is a theory and, in my view, an increasingly unconvincing one. Faith in 'Him' is not a non-negotiable proven fact but an opinion like any other. Religions, and their gods, did not exist until we created them.

All religious doctrines, including the specific articles of the Christian creeds, have

to be seen for what they are – attempts by men (almost entirely by men) to explain their lives and the world we live in, by reference to (a) what they *already* knew to be true as human beings and (b) an assumed supernatural explanation for what they could not otherwise explain at the time.

This will be a frequently-repeated theme in what follows. Religious beliefs are an attempt to understand ourselves and our world, but expressed entirely in human words and activities. A 'religious' experience is only a human experience that we have defined as a religious experience. Even if there were a God, how could we encounter 'Him' except through our human senses? Prayer goes on in our brains and is expressed through our mouths. The Bible was written down by human hands. Any sense of the 'Divine' comes through the human; every time and in all cases.

Religions, like music or art, therefore reflect their own specific contexts, times and places, not all knowledge and experience ever gained or ever to be gained. Many would claim that we have to submit to some kind of Scripture in order to understand

ourselves. But the idea that my life now can be understood by using only the insights of those who knew nothing about me is nonsense. I have to do my own work, just as they did, but not necessarily using only the same tools or reaching the same conclusions. Just as Mozart did not know about Vaughan Williams and Turner knew nothing of Picasso, the compilers of the ancient faiths did not know about all the forms of human self-understanding yet to come.

Of course those who have walked this way before us deserve to be studied and understood and their insights listened to. But their discoveries cannot be fixed for all eternity. We now have to express ourselves in new ways because of what has happened since. If no-one's taking much notice of the religious perspective any more, maybe the problem is with the message and the messengers, not with the audience.

Much Christian talk, especially of God, no longer speaks our language. The 'truths' that the Creeds traditionally affirm are not those we need to hear. But life goes on; human experience still presents us with

challenges and choices. Is there another way to think that may begin in the same place but which takes us to somewhere different? This may then lead to a new kind of believing; new kinds of truths in which to place our trust as rational human beings.

For me, this still has to be done within the Christian tradition, because that's where I started from. But, just to be clear; I do not count myself a Christian as others use the word and I do not claim to be travelling in hope of becoming one. I do hope that at the end of this little adventure I can keep my slender hold on my Christian heritage, but I am not expecting a conversion experience along the way.

This is a personal pilgrimage *beyond* belief. I am, and I am sure I will remain, an atheist. This may sound as though my mind is closed in advance, but the whole journey didn't start from here! So can there be a meaningful dialogue between Christianity and a conviction that there is no God? Many would say not but my thinking so far suggests that another interesting exploration is in store. Why not let me know what *you* think when you've shared in it with me?

1 TRAVELLING, NOT ARRIVING

I have spent my whole life, or at least the last 45 years of it, wondering whether there is any truth in the Christian religion into which I was born and raised. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my parents for a secure and stable childhood and church was just taken for granted as an integral part of it. My father was a Baptist Minister, though he became increasingly disillusioned towards the end of his life and, like many others of his generation, eventually found a more purposeful vocation in teaching.

My mother, who never had a 'proper' job, was a dutiful Minister's wife until he died and also wrote books of talks for the endless women's meetings that were commonplace in the Free Churches in those days – perhaps they still are. My older brother became a keen evangelical. Christianity is clearly in my genes.

For a short time, after my father's sudden death, I too became a Baptist Minister because it seemed the right thing to

do back then. But I never really managed to reconcile the questions raised by the theology and church history that I had studied in my training with the simple and sincere faith of the people to whom I was supposed to be ministering week-by-week.

In the end I decided that they believed far more of it than I did, so I gave up on ministry and eventually on attending any church at all except now and then. I'm sure there are many clergy who have similarly 'lost their faith'; who just keep going through the motions, unsure of what it all really means to them, but I could not do that.

When people say, as at least one very special person in my life often does, that Jesus is real to them and that they find a strength from their knowledge of God and have a sense of His plan for their life, I really have no idea what they are talking about. Such a conviction is entirely outside my experience. There is nothing like that going on for me. My life is down to me. I try to respect where they are coming from, but I have never been there. Life brings what it brings. I wouldn't actually want there to be a

God of this kind even though I can easily see why others may find it a comfort.

Part of this reticence is an intellectual struggle. The claims of religions often make no rational sense and are built on extremely flimsy foundations now that we have discovered how to analyse and investigate them like any other human activity. Much that is said to be 'true' in most churches is based on little or nothing that can sustain such a conviction once you ask a few simple questions. A great many Christians have never done this questioning for themselves and have put their faith in what they have been told, or in what they 'feel', without ever subjecting it to any genuine testing, other than using what 'the Bible says' as 'evidence'. I cannot do that.

But my concern is also about morality and, in particular, humanity. The debate we need to be having is not only about whether religions are true. We should also be asking if they are good for us. For centuries religions equalled morality. They showed people how to live well – or they claimed to. In practice, their followers often ignored what they were taught; many of them doing

what they actually thought was right, whatever their priests said. This often produced a deeply unhealthy cycle of reinforced guilt and conditional forgiveness, underscored by the threat of eventual judgement which, understandably, worked pretty well in keeping the faithful in line, at least nominally.

Those who want to insist that all our deepest human insights come from some 'other' dimension of truth, outside of ourselves, are making an assumption, not stating a 'fact'. Religions, of any kind, are no longer the only choice in town. We have come of age. Other lifestyles and value systems are now available. Their alleged insights often make no moral sense to me, let alone their basis in reality, even if, as a sociologist and an extremely amateur historian, I am interested in their story. But being interested in a religion is not the same as believing in it. Students of war do not necessarily advocate it as a solution to our problems.

Christianity has, of course, been enormously influential on our culture, and therefore on me as an individual. It has

brought us many good things and many good people have found a meaning for their lives within it. I have always enjoyed studying what those who have gone before me have said about God (theo-logy), even though I am sure that this is all the product of human thinking. Religions are a way of interpreting our experience that worked for centuries and in less enlightened times. But they don't work now, or not for me and for millions of others like me. That doesn't make us bad people. In fact, quite the reverse may be true.

As the 2011 UK Census shows, we are gradually embracing a secular world-view, largely as a result of scientific explanations for things that used to be attributed to Divine intervention. Twice as many people indicated that they had no religion as was the case 10 years previously, though most people not allied to any other religion did still assert that they were 'Christian'.

But this was largely because of the way the question was worded which assumed you had a religion of some kind unless you specifically opted out. Other more in-depth surveys show that the overwhelming

majority, even of these, don't actually believe any of Christianity's doctrines or feel any need to worship its God or be part of a Christian church. They're just saying that they are within that particular cultural tradition, or that they identify with that heritage. So do I, though I wouldn't personally use the word to describe myself and I wish more people would have the courage of their non-convictions.

Even saying that you try to live a 'Christian' life might only be about being a 'nice' person, or treating others as you would like to be treated yourself, (though that is an essentially Jewish idea, re-interpreted by Jesus, according to the gospel record). In many people's minds it probably means much the same as being British – the two just go together.

Although it has always been bubbling away in the background, it has only been in the last few years that I have returned to any conscious reflection on matters of faith. I acknowledge that there is a sense in which I cannot let it go. There are those who would maintain that this is evidence for the 'Hound of Heaven' who will not let go of me! He is

still pursuing me, despite my best endeavours to get away from Him.

Such an idea of a God who is not really interested in the real me, only in the 'me' He would like me to become, is pretty unattractive and only reinforces my sense that I would want nothing to do with Him even if He were there. It is not that I would like to believe but cannot. I prefer to see this process of reflection on where I have come from as an integral part of the journey of life – as long as I am alive I will want to go on exploring its full potential and discovering ways to make sense of it. My past informs that, but I am not tied to it.

That process of self-analysis is what a religion should be for, so it's not surprising that our paths still cross from time to time. But I am no longer convinced (was I ever?) that the traditional formulations of faith show us where we need to go. They may ask many of the right questions, but their answers now lead us up blind alleys that do not help us to be fully human. Perhaps it is time we learned to live without them and found a new kind of faith, primarily in ourselves.

In my three previous books of 'humanist spirituality' in response to the Christian tradition, I first explored how the voices of the Psalmists may go on speaking truths about being human, even without a God to hear them. I then reflected on some parables of Jesus and how they might yet be of value in working out how best to live together, even if he wasn't the actual 'Son of God'. I will come back to this discussion later in this book.

And, in a slightly more substantial way, I considered how the whole Bible might still be worth reading, if only as a record of the human understandings that lay behind the writings. You can take a God out of it and there is still something worthwhile left – of course there is. Because the Bible is human literature, written by real people in real situations. It is 'our' story, told by us.

The focus this time is on one of the ancient Creeds or belief-statements that lie at the heart of Christian doctrine but which date from hundreds of years after Jesus himself. They are still based on the New Testament, which is much older than they are, but they also reflect a very different

world as the church became more organised and hierarchical, well beyond its original Jewish context.

Some elements of the Creeds are not therefore strictly 'Biblical' but that's exactly what you would expect as human understandings evolve. (I just don't think that this process stopped centuries ago as conventional believers do). Like the Bible, the earliest Creeds also have a very human history. They were usually hammered out in no-doubt lengthy all-night sessions of representatives from across the various Christian communities, rather like a communiqué at the end of an EU summit or a Church of England Synod!

The final statements often represented a compromise between different views, or were left ambiguous on purpose so that everyone could assent to them. Some have a very complex background in which a particular assertion is being made deliberately in order to outlaw another. Inevitably they reflect the very different world-view from ours within which they were created.

I do genuinely wonder what people today think they are saying when they repeat them in worship and whether they find any problem reconciling the words with what else they know to be true. To me there is often a massive dissonance between what is assumed to be true in church and the way we live the rest of our lives. Perhaps it doesn't matter much to them but I personally think it should!

The 'Apostles' Creed' was nothing directly to do with the apostles (original disciples) of Jesus, though there were claims made in antiquity that each of the 12, (presumably not including Judas Iscariot), had contributed a phrase. This has absolutely no validity. This particular Creed is one of a series of statements of the rudiments of Christian faith that span several hundred years after the events surrounding Jesus' life and death. Much of the material reflects older Creeds but, unlike, for example, the 'Nicene' Creed, (which doesn't actually come from the Council of Nicaea in 325), the Apostles' Creed cannot be dated to a specific event or time.

It is often credited to St Ambrose and the phrase was first used in a letter he wrote about 390. But he may not have been referring to all the assertions that are now included. It may not have had the form in which we now know it until around the 8th century and it is thought to have emerged primarily in the border areas of France and Spain, primarily under the patronage of Charlemagne who died in 814.

The Apostles' Creed does not grapple with some of the theological complexities of the other Creeds, including, for example, the exact nature of the relationship between the Holy Spirit, Jesus the Son and God the Father. For this relief, much thanks! These are such difficult and esoteric arguments, that there is really very little point in getting bogged down in them, important though it is to be sure that we have not simply imposed our own view of what the words must mean.

I have chosen this particular Creed partly to facilitate my title and partly because it is widely accepted as a statement of the basics, especially across the Western (Roman) tradition. It often forms the basis of vows made at baptism or on entering into a

formal commitment of church membership. It is essentially a set of required convictions; not so much designed to settle major disputes this time as to enable those not previously acquainted with Christianity to see what all the fuss was about and to provide agreement about who was 'in', (and, just as importantly, who was not).

The Apostles' Creed therefore provides an historical starting-point for this stage of my journey. But as a non-Christian I want to take it on into new territory. I want to ask if we can now make *new* 'spiritual' definitions based entirely on a non-'religious' interpretation: in effect, a 'humanist creed', but built on Christian roots (rather than any other religion or philosophy) because that's the family in which I belong, at least to some extent. The aim is to go beyond my doubt and lack of faith in Christianity, in order to find a new kind of truth within something more sustainable.

I may be an apostate, but, as even Cranfield might recognise, I am not a total non-believer in anything. I still have faith in things; I still have a value system and a moral commitment to the good of humanity.

Like everything else we believe and experience, this too does not come from outside of ourselves but is part of ourselves. So is there anything in these ancient understandings that can still help me?

Perhaps there are insightful truths behind the assertions, or new truths are now available, unknown to those that went before, that we can now rely on instead. Perhaps these can still form a framework for a system of belief, even after the specific doctrines have been found to have feet of clay.

Statements of religious faith are not always as explicit as the version I will use in what follows. Creeds are still at the heart of Anglican and Roman Catholic worship, at least in theory. But to participate at all in virtually any church you first have to declare that you have read and will observe the rules – interested enquirers who want to start somewhere else, or to bring new truths to bear on what religion has to offer, are not necessarily welcome.

Most conservative and evangelical churches pay scant attention to anything that looks like ritual, but nonetheless they

have clear doctrinal statements of their own which can be even more prescriptive and exclusive. Sometimes the whole thing operates on a series of assumptions and moral statements about what it means to believe if you want to be part of it. If you doubt this, look at the creeds imposed by most evangelical Christian Unions in our universities, or the 'Alpha Course' which has decided what the answer is before it asks the questions! Openness to new ideas is clearly not encouraged. It's all about getting people 'on message'.

Whenever I am in a church I am always made to feel very uncomfortable if the sermon or intercessions assume that I have certain values just because I'm there. Praying for the defeat of any move towards gay marriage or being asked to contribute to a collection for the conversion of the Jews would be two recent examples. How can anyone claim to know the mind of their God in such minute detail? Is it not possible to be a Christian and take another view?

This is just an example of the unwritten 'creeds' which can be immensely influential, whatever kind of church it is. In contrast to

the spirit of enquiry that was prevalent when I was a theology student, it often looks as if believers are expected to have closed minds and clear convictions. They have come to be told 'the' truth. That's what 'having a faith' usually means. But other kinds of spirituality might look rather different.

Normally, not only is this particular statement said to be true, but as a result this one isn't. Faith is so often about absolutes; about nailing your colours to the mast. Having anything to do with 'shades of grey' is frowned upon (in more than one sense!) Only groups like the Quakers or the Unitarians leave it up to more individual interpretation and have no defined creed to which participants are expected to adhere.

This more strident approach to faith is often said to be increasingly popular, at least at the margins of the overall picture of religious decline, because it provides certainty in an uncertain world. It clearly works for some. But it is basically a lie. People are being told things as 'facts' that are only opinions; they are being given assurances that no-one is actually qualified to give. Claims are often made that cannot

be substantiated by anything other than themselves. Most moral and other questions are nothing like so clear-cut in the world that I live in.

So does a search for any kind of belief system inevitably end in an assertion that you are right and others are not? To some extent that must be so. My lack of belief in a God is a belief that I believe to be right! I do not think that *any* conviction is as good as any other. For what it's worth, my own test is how much it accords with other elements of known reality. I cannot believe the frankly unbelievable. It must, however, be possible to disagree without being disagreeable; something that religious people (and others) sometimes seem to find difficult.

Credo may simply reinforce a not-entirely healthy desire to reassure ourselves, or may be used to prop up distinctly human structures of authority that are designed to keep things the way they are. At their worst they come down to mere selfish reassurance; a wall to protect us from anything that might suggest we might be mistaken. Psychoanalysts would have a field

day with such obvious evidence of much deeper insecurities.

I have no time at all for those believers whose smug superiority that they alone have grasped the truth seems to greatly outweigh their compassion and common humanity. Thankfully such an approach will only ever appeal to a small minority in an open-minded society like ours. The rest of us are happy to be on the outside because we have seen through it for what it is. Saying something from a great height or in a loud voice does not necessarily make it right.

Religions and their spokesmen have often got things wrong. This is only to be expected given that we have created it all. Pointing to the violent excesses of our crusading and imperial past or to the significant decline of faith in the last 200 years does not disprove God, any more than many Christians' undoubted good works or a lively church can be used to prove Him. All religions' own inherent weaknesses should, however, make believers act and speak with some caution, especially when it comes to questions of universal truth and morality.

I and many others find it increasingly difficult to take lectures on how we should live from those whose beliefs seem to lead them primarily to values that promote human unhappiness and a frequently oppressive judgmentalism. (This was my own experience when re-marrying after divorce, for example, though thankfully not from all Christians. I think a Cathedral blessing 'trumps' a parish church refusal in this context!) All traditional ideas of a religion are essentially prone to the same old problem, or that's what it often looks like from where I'm standing. They are led by those who seek to control the believers, not to liberate them. They know what's what and that's that.

Creeds define the boundaries and keep everyone in line. They rarely seem to set people free. My quest is not for any kind of replacement experience of this kind. I may be looking for a new understanding of believing, but I do not seek a new kind of religion to go with it. I am not expecting to find anything approaching certainty.

I fully accept that even a conviction that there is no God *may* be wrong, though there

is little or no 'evidence' to suggest otherwise as far as I am concerned. The Credal statements are supposed to encapsulate the very essence of faith; but they are as much about 'assent' as 'faith; just asking us to agree to certain things, not really explaining *why* we should do so.

But surely a commitment to a particular way of life has to have real substance day-to-day, not just be based on a set of familiar clichés that we keep repeating because that's what we have always done and we don't like the thought of the alternative? What do the statements actually *mean*, and is the meaning the same now as it was 500, 1500 or 2000 years ago? And, crucially, what practical difference do they make to the way we live?

This is not 'faith seeking understanding', (St. Anselm 1033-1109). That implies that faith is the given human starting point and then we have to find a way to make sense of it in the 'real' world. If anything it is the opposite. I start from 'truth seeking faith': 'This is what I know to be true in my experience: can I find a way of expressing at least a form of Christian belief within it'?

I am happy to go on trying to make some sense of the particular story about life that comes to me through Christianity, and primarily through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, rather than looking to other religious or philosophical traditions that are less familiar to me. In that sense, this is still a search for a form of humanist 'Christianity', if not as the word is usually understood.

Despite the Creeds, we each have to work it out for ourselves; it is a huge mistake to see a religion as doing it all for you. The question Jesus apparently asked his disciples was 'Who do *you* say I am?', not 'Here's who others tell you I am or what it says about me in a book; take it or leave it'.

I am a genuine partner in this adventure, not merely lost in ignorance until I am shown 'the' way. I cannot alter the facts about the modern world as I understand them, or change the way I believe it is right to live, in order to fit in with a predetermined set of rules. It has to be the other way round. Life as I know it is the starting point; the choices involved in being human are where we must begin. Any

faith then follows – if it works. That’s the way it’s always been.

But why did the ancient writers assert what they did? Is there any value in their direction of travel? I do not believe them as they stand, nor do I believe *in* them as the only way forward in deciding how best to live. But there looks like some useful work to be done if I am to reach any kind of destination, so let’s get on!

2 ULTIMATE IMPOSSIBILITIES

*'I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.'*

The Apostles' Creed begins, of course, with a God, as (virtually) all religions do by definition. Most civilisations throughout recorded human history have believed in and worshipped gods of some kind; from the celestial projections of the Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, to the spirit worlds and polytheisms of many Eastern and African belief systems and the shared convictions of the 'People of the Book': Jews, Christians and Moslems.

The human need to find a meaning outside of ourselves which explains the way things are appears to be almost universal – at least until relatively recently. It may seem rather self-opinionated to suggest that we have only now seen through it all. For many this ends the argument about 'a' God behind it all, but just saying it is no longer convincing.

The quest for a God begins, as it must do, with us. Religions always fit their cultural context; they make sense sociologically. The ancient Egyptians didn't worship David Beckham! They began with what they knew. Even earlier, people worshipped the moon and the sun or at least had a sense that what they could see in the heavens was much bigger than they were and was therefore worthy of their submission. Gods had to be appeased and given what it was thought they wanted in order to avoid future disaster.

The physical world seemed an awesome and frightening place; even more so when we had little or no control over its excesses of climate, disease and natural phenomena. Most of all, death is inevitable. The human individual can obviously feel somewhat insignificant by comparison and religions met the desire for order, meaning and structure. Hence the need for a Creator, or even a whole army of them.

To me, in my time, the beauty of the natural world, like the heavens, declares the glory only of itself, not of a Creator. It no more needs a supernatural explanation to

make it worthy of admiration and value than does a Rachmaninov piano concerto. That would not have been enough for most of those who lived before me. But these 'religious' interpretations are still all *our* insights, not a discovery of a pre-existing truth 'out there'. It's obvious when you think about it.

Think through with me a couple of examples from within the Judao/Christian tradition. Any claim that a God created the world in 7 'days' requires a system of days to be *already* present before such an idea can be taught or believed as a way that a God works. The days were a neutral 'given'; then given an additional meaning as part of the human understanding of solar system and the development of a specific Jewish cycle of work and rest. Other civilisations created other cycles, other 'weeks' and other gods; just as the Egyptians created a god that they thought controlled the Nile. It still flooded anyway, just as part of the way the world was.

Genesis chapter 1, (or chapter 2 which is older), are clearly not scientific accounts of the way things came about. Given that there

was no sun until day 4, 'days' 1-3, as we understand the word, could not have existed. The story 'proves' nothing. The ancient writers already had days to use as a metaphor for creation over time, so they used this to hang their beliefs upon. They may even have been using 'day' in the same sense as the text that talks about a day being 'like' a thousand years from God's perspective, never intending it to be taken 'literally'.

So they devised a creation myth that fitted in with what they *already* knew, (or, more likely, borrowed it from elsewhere and adapted it). 'Our world is like this and its deeper significance for us is this'; not 'this is what was previously true before us and so this is what we therefore have to believe'.

The ancient myths of Adam and Eve and their descendants are the same. They reflect the already-existing reality that human beings had the unique power to make moral choices; the threat from natural predators, competition for scarce land, conflict between tribes etc. Just as previous civilisations had done, the ancient Jewish writers then transferred these elements of the *human*

community onto the cosmos. They came up with different answers; not for them a set of capricious deities but One Creator directing it all for a greater purpose, but the process is exactly the same as before.

The compilers of the historic faiths just could not conceive of a value for their own existence other than as a result of the action of some higher Power beyond themselves. 'What is Man?' asked the psalmist. Well, in truth, not much; but that's not a very happy thought. So they created an explanation. Their personal value came from being part of a greater plan. Mankind cannot have created itself and built its own world to live in; so how else could it all have come about other than through the direct activity of an over-arching, pre-existing God?

Well now we know how it all happened; or we have a pretty good set of theories that go a long way to providing solutions to these age-old questions that were not available before. A God, or a whole collection of them, is/are not necessarily required. Maybe the Universe just is. It doesn't have an explanation of this kind. We are just on our own and have to *make* some sense of it all.

We might like the idea of a 'first cause' or a deeper purpose but perhaps it all happened for no underlying reason, well before all gods, religions and the human beings who created them existed. Can there be a Creator who was not Himself created? What caused God? Aren't we still left with something from nothing? A spontaneous God is on offer; so why not a spontaneous Universe instead?

Many people find this idea of creation from nothing difficult to accept. A scientist friend of mine who is also a Christian says it makes no sense from within his perspective where everything has a relationship to everything else. If the physical world contains explanations, causes and effects within it for the way things are, how can its own existence have no cause, no explanation?

My response is that it does have an explanation; it was created from nothing - like me. I did not exist until I was conceived and born. You can trace the mechanics of my existence back to the actions of my parents but you won't find 'me' waiting there! The potential existed, but not the

reality. I came into existence from nothing; I did not exist before; I will not exist again one day. Only the conditions that enabled me to come into existence were already there, then I arrived from nowhere. Like the Universe. QED- sort of!

Arguing otherwise leaves me with so many other unanswered questions. Religion in any form, as it belongs only within the later stages of the human story, is just a few thousand years old. The Universe is staggeringly old by comparison. I have walked on basalt columns at the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland that are at least 60,000,000 years old, possibly older. The Earth is probably about 4,500,000,000 years old; the whole known Universe has been around for about 13,000,000,000 years.

What was the One God doing during all those noughts if His primary focus in making the Universe is us? As a species, we are an extremely recent arrival on the scene. What was the point of all those millions of centuries that came before us? And much much more than our Earth is involved. It's now thought that there are many as

17,000,000,000 planets that are much the same size as ours, just in our galaxy, let alone what there might be in others.

Perhaps we are just the latest in a long line of Divine projects that have also kept Him busy in countless other Universes of which we are unaware. If so, why should such a big God be so involved in such a minor enterprise as our human history, which hardly scratches the surface of time, when He has all the rest of the Universe at His disposal? Or, if we are unique in getting His attention, why us? Why here? An eternal God who, after aeons of doing nothing, suddenly became especially interested in planet Earth and its temporary residents, just seems one impossibility too many.

Conventional Christian faith assumes that the whole of creation was designed for the purpose of a God to reveal Himself to us in His Son in this particular corner of it billions of years later. (We'll come back to some other questions arising from this idea in chapter 3). We are at the centre of everything. To me that idea suggests a much more over-inflated idea of our own

importance than merely asking whether we may have got it wrong before.

No doubt many would say it's all a mystery and we're not supposed to understand it. After all, we are talking about God here, or trying to, and at least the size of it all suggests there is much more to it than we can possibly know. But a God, or gods, behind it all is only one possible explanation, albeit a rather attractive one to many people - as long as it's your God that turns out to be the right one.

Isn't it strange how human communities always seem to have encountered the gods that favoured them in particular? Yahweh is all for the Jews, Jesus for the Christians and Allah for the Moslems. They each see it as being chosen; isn't it rather more likely that they have done the choosing? And that, of course, is a key part of the problem. These theories about very different gods that are always on our side cannot *all* be right, even if there were actually only one God behind everything.

Each human spiritual tradition believes that it has got to the heart of the matter, but they don't all come to the same conclusions,

even within the same religion. There is a wide variety of personalities to choose from: gods that enter into the full riches of human sexuality to gods that seem to regard the whole idea as a terrible uncontrollable mistake. Gods that are constantly intervening to influence what goes on, to gods who are utterly above human comprehension. How can I possibly know which one to believe in?

If you are to accept a God as the explanation for the way things are, don't you also have to reject the claims of those who make other irreconcilable claims about Him? So do you simply choose the 'God' that makes most sense or that you like the sound of? Or are you effectively stuck with the one that happened to hold sway in the culture and community into which you were born?

The overwhelming majority of believers stay within their inherited tradition. If I had been born elsewhere perhaps I would now be trying to have this debate in the context of an entirely different religion. I never chose western Christianity as my starting point; I was just given it. How handy that it

turned out to be the right one! That sounds like the ultimate postcode lottery.

Maybe, it could be argued, there are many paths up the same mountain and so on. But can there possibly be more than one true understanding of the one true God, all of which are equally valid, no matter what they each claim to know about Him and however much they vary from one another? It makes no sense to many modern minds.

This is not merely a semantic debate. The meaning of the word 'God' is where we have to start, but it is not the end of the matter. Some understandings of God are utterly unacceptable to me. If the God of the Christians is also the God who took delight in the slaughter of whole tribes and nations in Old Testament times, or the God of the Nazis, the apartheid regime, ISIS and the conquistadors, then you can most certainly keep Him. He's just pretending to love us in Jesus if He is also capable of sanctioning such cruelty.

'Him', of course, is a loaded concept before we even start. How odd that the one God really is a perfect fit with the patriarchal Jewish, Christian and Islamic communities

who worship Him! His Fatherhood is just like ours, only better. At least more polytheistic religions found room for a wider variety of deities. But it's patently clear where all these ideas come from – us. Our ideas of what we mean by 'God' are a reflection of what we know; they always have been.

Perhaps God evolves. He's not as cruel as He used to be, at least in the modern C of E version! But now we really are in the realms of nonsense. Surely it's only the *human* ideas that have evolved? Our understanding of ourselves no longer needs to seek the reassurance of a tribal god who will put us first. It is time to reinvent the idea of a God that we created in the first place, but at least now to be more honest about it and admit what we are doing. Like Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov, I would even say that we have to do so. It is a moral imperative to rid ourselves of the monster He would otherwise have become.

The compilers of the Creeds had no such worries. Theirs was a three-decker Universe and that was that: a flat earth with God above. What was below was a matter of some debate in Jesus' time, but you wouldn't

want to go there! It had crystallised into at least some form by the 8th century, though many of the images that believers often take for granted, (even if they don't really believe them), are later even than this, not part of the original Christian package at all.

If, as we now know, the images are all wrong, then perhaps the very ideas behind them are too. But it really matters. If there is no God, then no redemption of the gulf between us is required. No redemption, then no Son of God is needed to make it happen, and so on. If there is to be any hope for a better world, it must be found elsewhere; this God story is not the heart of it. This is the key issue that Theists seem to have difficult grasping. They keep talking to us as if we are still living in the 8th (or the 1st) century.

The whole doctrinal edifice falls if there is no God of the kind they thought then, or if the claims for His existence are no longer intellectually or morally convincing. We have found a freedom to work it out for ourselves that makes religion irrelevant. We are not likely to 'come to church' just for the sake of being there if we think the whole thing is

founded on a mistake. There are other kinds of social clubs on offer if that's all we want.

We won't see *why* we need to accept Jesus as our 'Saviour' if we don't believe we have any need to be 'saved', just because there is claimed to be a God who will be angry with us if we're not; (or who loves us and wants us to love Him – take your pick). There is no point in singing hymns or praying to a God who is not there to hear us. It's the supposed reality of a God that no longer means anything; it's not just a selfish desire to stay in bed, wash the car or go shopping on a Sunday morning instead.

For what it's worth, I would like to see the church putting rather more emphasis on demonstrating its God, or at least entering into a dialogue about Him, not just assuming He is there. That's where your Creed starts. Go on then; convince me! Why should I believe it? Is there anything more to it than just what you say? I hear plenty of talk about God, but I am none the wiser about *why* you are so sure that He is the 'answer'.

The truth test of any belief is what difference it makes to life. The track record of religions and the life of many

contemporary churches are both frankly unimpressive when it comes to demonstrating that a God is in charge. They give ample evidence of the human influence on what goes on there, so on what basis do you claim that there is anything else behind it all? The church is so clearly a human organisation like any other. Quoting the Bible as the source of it all, or just your own feelings, hardly ends the discussion. The counter arguments are rarely explored, or they are just set up as an 'Aunt Sally' to be knocked down again.

My guess is that genuine obstacles to there being a God aren't taken seriously because of a fear that there might actually be some truth in them. The debate might upset the faithful and, perish the thought, it might even make them question whether they really believe it either. I am asked simply to take the existence of God as matter of 'faith', but outside my normal processes of decision-making and human experience. Religious people really do not seem to understand that many of us cannot do that, not, at least, with any integrity.

All I see is human beings believing what they choose to believe and telling me I should do the same. If there is a God, much religion entirely fails to make Him real. This is not about asking for allegedly supernatural inexplicable events that will blow our socks off. I can get that by watching *Dynamo!* That approach used to work in the past: so much was unexplained that a God could be used to fill in all the gaps. It was a God (or gods) who grew (or destroyed) the crops, cured (or sent) diseases and who controlled the future. No it wasn't. We know now that the world doesn't operate according to a Divine whim like that. So what does He do?

I cannot start my own creed with a God, so what goes on in most churches will therefore always be pretty inaccessible. I have to start with *us*, as religion has actually always done. All talk of God is a conversation with ourselves. It cannot be anything else. I don't believe there is Anyone else of this kind out there, but even if there were, all our knowledge of Him/Her/It/Them comes through our human perceptions.

But, Theist, talk to me of our shared humanity. Show me what really matters to

your God in the real world. Actually, rather than talk so much, listen. Because I exist. That I know. There may well be 'spiritual' truths to be discovered, but they have to be found *within* the human condition, not outside of it. It's not asking me to have an inexplicable and irrational faith in something impossible that will get me interested. It's whether or not what you call 'God' can be a new dimension to my current reality.

It's a bit like the irritating way that whenever I ask someone to help me with a computer problem they either do it for me or just tell me things I don't understand. I want them to *show* me and to do it *with* me. Just telling us there's a God doesn't help. Maybe what you attribute to a God I can still affirm as true even if it comes from us – like the importance of caring for one another or the need for forgiveness when we make mistakes. 'Worshipping' is not my priority; living well – being fully human - is.

Faith has traditionally been about asking people to adopt an alternative world-view from the one that we see day-to-day. That used to work when life was essentially nasty, brutish and short. But, guess what? Life is

pretty good! Human beings are frequently magnificent, not fundamentally flawed in everything they do. And when things do go wrong, it's down to us to sort it out.

Of course we don't get everything right. Later chapters will have to address that. But we are not a total disaster. We can love, laugh and be kind and generous to one another. We have conquered so much that used to bind us. We can be happy with ourselves and live life to the full. Millions do. Show us your God as interested in all that and we might start to take some notice.

The Universe is awesome and deserves my respect, but in and of itself. We don't have to create a God to give our lives meaning. We too can be like gods, finding ever new dimensions to what it means to be human and making a difference while we have the chance. This is not a search for selfishness but a path to freedom. We have the ability to create something new, or to mess it all up. Even if there is no God, there is always a need to live up to my full potential and to find a deeper and more wholesome humanity. Let's talk about all that. This much I believe.

3 KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

'I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary..'

The Incarnation and the Trinity have never made much sense to me, nor, I suspect, even to many who identify themselves as Christians. God is our Father but He is also his own Son, and He exists as a Spirit. Jesus was a real human being who died just like we do; but he is still alive somewhere else now. Indeed, the Son always existed as a part of God from the beginning of time, even before there was a man from Nazareth called Jesus benJoseph.

Actually his name would have been much more like Joshua. Hebrew has no vowels. 'Jesus' is an English version of a Greek translation (Iesous), not the original Hebrew/Aramaic word that he would have recognised himself. We'll let that issue pass, though it is slightly worrying that we have been calling him by the wrong name for

2000 years. The Holy Spirit is God too, but is not the Father or the Son as well. God is One, but three. That's the official view but who actually understands it? Not me for sure.

I always used to explain the Trinity as being like molecules of H₂O which can appear as water, steam and ice but apparently that is not 'sound'. The image of one family comprising different individuals is sometimes used but I'm not sure that's right either. Doesn't that make God a kind of sub-committee? Does it help that I have been a father, son and husband – and all at the same time? But I'm sure there is supposed to be rather more to it than that.

There is evidence to suggest that those who wrote the Creeds found it just as much of a struggle to be clear about what they meant. Did they really need to bother? The Trinity is a very late doctrine, and, perhaps surprisingly, you won't find the actual word in the Bible at all. It was essentially designed to outlaw the Arian 'heresy' which said that Jesus was less than God. A God who makes Himself known in three different ways was not considered to be enough, though that

idea, if there were a God, at least makes some sense to me.

What they ended up with was a God who is in three *persons*, (though perhaps 'personalities' is a better translation), but there is still only one God; there is one 'essence' that they all share equally. I have heard massively complicated sermons on all this and at least tried to read some pretty complex books, but I confess I am none the wiser. How many people in churches on a Sunday, I wonder, have the first idea what they are affirming at this point? Perhaps the concept just doesn't make sense and we can't actually make it do so any more.

Much of the difficulty comes from the idea that a God can have a 'Son'. I know what a son is; I am one and I have one. (I've also have a step-son but let's not go there!) Once you start to say that God has a Son *in the same sense* as we do, you end up tying yourself into all kinds of knots. The image, quite clearly, is another example of how beliefs about God are driven by the human understandings and experiences that were there beforehand.

We don't know what the word 'son' means because God had one first to show us. We know what the word means from our here and now lives, and *then* we have tried to make the relationship between Jesus and God a bit like the father/son relationship we already have. But it doesn't really stand up. Or at least we should never see it as anything more than a metaphor, not a statement of literal, and certainly not biological or physical, fact.

The whole concept is obviously heavily influenced by its social context – not least the repeated emphasis on maleness, reflecting the societies that devised these beliefs and the importance of sons within them. Can you even imagine the idea that God might have had a baby girl at Bethlehem when She wanted to save the world? Or that the Trinity is as much 'Mother, Daughter and Holy Spirit' as the usual way of expressing it? Jesus was certainly male; but the eternal 'Word', that he is supposed to be as well, cannot be.

A God cannot be male as we understand the word and no-one should find such a statement in any way controversial. If you

do, haven't you simply fallen into an entirely understandable human cultural stereotype? The exception to the usual emphasis is the title sometimes given to Mary as the 'Mother of God', another concept that cannot possibly make any logical sense and contradicts every other claim about the pre-existing Unity within the Trinity. She may have given birth to Jesus; she cannot possibly have given birth to God.

There are some 'givens' before we start. Jesus of Nazareth, whose existence I am happy to affirm, was a real human being, not a demi-God masquerading as a human being. This too was an early heresy that the Creeds were designed to reject. It is not enough to say that he 'appeared in human form'. He was as human as I am, not something else that just looked like a man.

It is a distortion to believe that he was some kind of superman who didn't feel pain, who knew the future and had no faults or weaknesses, though I suspect it is very common to see him in that way. The suggestion that he alone was 'begotten, not made' or was 'without sin' is therefore untenable. If so, he wasn't human. Saying

that he was genuinely human also means that he was mortal: made in the same way; born to die, just like everyone else, (see chapter 4).

If Jesus was actually some other kind of Being temporarily 'sent' from elsewhere – the second person of a Trinity that had existed as part of God since the very beginning and who only *became* a human being for a while – then we are talking about a very complex idea. Two Jesuses - one human and finite and one Divine and eternal? This is totally beyond my comprehension and clearly not what was intended to be claimed by the Creeds.

If this cosmic Jesus is an integral part of God, was the committee one down while he was on Earth? Where was Jesus for the billions of years before he 'became' a human being? Where is he now? 'With God' does not answer the question, it only adds to the difficulty. If he had to be born like me to get here, how did he get back there? This might all sound rather flippant but the idea has to make sense if we are to be expected to believe it.

And, of course, we have to find a way of explaining *how* God could have had a Son if we are to see the idea as a statement of literal fact. Gods do not have children; or rather, the monotheistic Jewish tradition was created in deliberate contrast with the other gods on offer at the time who allegedly sired children all over the place. Their God was never meant to be like them.

The gospel narratives in Matthew and Luke did their best to fill in the gaps after the event, but they really don't add up and they are not even consistent with each other. Much of the later tradition is based on a mistranslation of the Old Testament text in Isaiah about a 'virgin' bearing a son who would be the future Messiah: 'Emmanuel' or 'God with us'.

It's almost mainstream now to accept that this never meant a child born without sex. In a late Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, the word '*parthenos*' was used to render a word that just means 'young woman' in the original. This translation of a translation was then used for the later versions. Some contemporary Bibles even show this, at least in the margin. And, of

course, it wasn't actually written about Jesus in the first place.

More importantly, a woman made pregnant by a Divine Spirit does not produce a human being. A child, who has no genes or DNA inherited from any human person except his mother, would not be human. Jesus was not some kind of clone. This is the stuff of science fiction, or at least of mythology, not real history. Like all religious language it cannot be taken literally.

It doesn't even work as a literary device. If Joseph was not Jesus' father then Jesus of Nazareth was not really of the 'house and lineage of David' or 'born of Jesse's line' as he has to be in order to be recognised as the Messiah. That's the whole point of the events (which are impossible to date to the same time as each other) that supposedly led to him being born in Bethlehem, even though the family actually lived in Nazareth.

So you then have to invent a kind of back story about how Joseph came to be seen as his father, even though he wasn't. But if he is not, there is an inherent contradiction at the heart of the nativity stories which entirely undermines the

fulfilment of ancient prophecies that they are trying to demonstrate.

Let's face it; the churches might be fuller than usual at Christmas but few people really believe it all or even understand what it is that they are singing about. It's a good story, though quite a lot of it: stable, innkeeper, donkey, cattle (lowing or otherwise), snow, holly, ivy, kings etc. isn't actually there in any of the gospels. But how can it possibly be literally true? It's an atmosphere to embrace, not a blunt instrument to hit the faithless over the head with.

Again, like the idea of a God, we are usually asked just to accept all this, not to try and analyse it. But that really won't do. We created all this complex theology about a pre-existent Son of God who required a one-off suspension of all natural processes in order to be 'born' as a man. So why must we always be stuck with it? Maybe it's time to start again.

The significance of Jesus for genuine believers is in what happened at the end of his life, not at the beginning. Christians got along very well without Christmas for

centuries until the mid-winter Roman festival of Saturnalia provided a useful peg to hang it on. The first Christians, who didn't even have the gospels to read, knew nothing of these stories. They weren't important to who Jesus was for them. A miraculous birth was not required, so why do we find it so difficult to let it go?

The whole infancy narratives, (and there are others that didn't make it into the Bible), have the air of hagiography – writing Jesus up after the event. Paul makes no reference to them to try and prove his case for who he was. Who was there at the time to keep a record and why didn't the first person to write about him, Mark, or indeed Jesus himself, ever mention his miraculous birth? Even his mother seemed not to remember how it had all started once he became a man. Forgive me, but if you've been told by angel that you're pregnant by God's Spirit and going to have His Son, I don't think you'd forget it.

So, can we drop Christmas but keep the Incarnation? Could a God become a man some other way? Well, He could I suppose, if He existed. But it seems very likely to me

that Jesus had no sense of 'Sonship' until his baptism by John the Baptist and he began to speak publically about his mission to change and challenge the Jews. That's about a thirty year gap. Until then he was just the son of a carpenter.

This was surely when he started to see himself as having some kind of greater purpose in line with the previous 'sons of God' (with a small 's') who are a frequent occurrence in the Old Testament, not a unique creation. The kings had this title among others. Sons of God were begotten *after* their birth, not before, (e.g. Psalm 2 v.7). That strikes me as much more understandable, even if I don't myself believe in a God as they did. The whole 'Son of God' idea probably builds on this. This, of course, is all a heresy but at least it makes sense!

I have much less to say about the idea of a Holy Spirit – God with us after Jesus had gone back home. So not with us before then? Or is God always best thought of as a Spirit? I really have no idea. Sometimes it seems like Christians think more of this God than they do of the Father or the Son. The

whole 'charismatic' movement, which, like all fads, now seems to be on the wane again, led some to put so much emphasis on their feelings that they risked losing all hold on the facts. Anything attributed to such an external source must be regarded with some suspicion as far as I am concerned. It's a human experience like any other, whatever you call it. If there is a spirit that gives life a meaning, it is part of me, not of a god.

Edward Wightman (a Baptist from the same town where I used to be a minister!) was the last man burnt at the stake in England, in Lichfield marketplace in 1612, for denying the Trinity. But it was illegal not to believe it, or at least to say so out loud, until 1813. Terrible things have been done in the name of this highly dubious doctrine. But why did it matter so much? What's the point of being asked to believe in a triple-headed God like this?

It became so important because of what Jesus was subsequently believed to have done by dying. For conventional faith it has to be God who did it, not just a man, so Jesus has to be God. Which brings us to the real point of both the Incarnation and the

Trinity in the eyes of those who came up with these beliefs. *Why* did they believe that God did all this? Can we now identify the same need, but a different solution?

The answer has to be in people's existing sense of the world's and their own personal brokenness. This was the human problem to be solved. They then created a theology about a God putting it right. Again, we start with what we know, not with a so-called 'truth' that means we then have to adjust our view of reality in order to make it fit. The reason why God was believed to have had a Son, who was also a part of Himself, was to make 'atonement' happen; to put things right between us and Him. But maybe that's not really the issue.

These are big Christian ideas which are probably lost on many of those who are still hanging on in there. But believing in God is not just about a cosy feeling that He is with you to help you through life's many difficulties. It's not even that Jesus provides you with some comfort that he has been there too. It's that without him, you're toast! There is no hope without Him. God in Jesus has healed an otherwise permanent and

unhealable wound in the human condition. I am tempted to say that if this isn't what you think it's all about, then you're probably no more a 'proper' Christian than I am.

I'll come back in chapter 4 to some of the difficulties with this whole issue. At this point, I want to ask myself some more searching questions rather than just throwing them out at other people for a change. Granted that I can't believe that this whole cosmology of multiple Godheads is real, can I at least identify with the problem it was designed to solve? Not, for me, a broken relationship with a God, but certainly a broken relationship with one another.

We need to go back again to the very beginning of the story. The insight of the ancient writers of the early chapters of Genesis was that human relationships, and our relationship to the physical Earth, were both less wholesome than they could be. Life was a struggle and the human community often turned upon itself; man against woman; brother against brother; farmer against farmer; nation against nation. That still rings true.

As was noted in chapter 2, the story begins with Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel etc., (obviously not actual individual people, unless the whole human race is built on incest, but representative stereotypes). These ancient myths, like the Tower of Babel, are all about falling out with each other and failing to look after our world properly.

The fractured relationship with God comes in later as the explanation for why things were as they were, given that a religious understanding was about the only one on offer in pre-scientific times. I want to stop before that point. To affirm the importance of what we can be at our best, not only of what has gone wrong. If we still need an atonement, (at-one-ment) it is between us and other people and between us our natural environment.

Nearly everyone would say that they derive their greatest happiness from their families. That's where we give and receive love, for the mutual benefit of all. If a model of 'sonship' is at the heart of it, then perhaps we need to begin by affirming the significance of our closest relationships. The

family was the nearest analogy that the old theologians could find when they felt the need to go beyond what they could see to find some other source of hope.

Like the whole of this journey, this now has to be understood in the light of what we know about ourselves. The idea that relationships are good for us makes sense to me. 'It is not good for a man to be alone'. But this has so often been turned into an oppressive exclusivity based only on our own kind of family life.

The heterosexual and nuclear model is not the only way that people have found personal fulfilment or lived as families. To enable everyone to find a place we now have to accept a greater variety than many people of faith seem happy with. But within that diverse human activity there are countless examples to be celebrated of people finding love being given to and received from another person. Maybe that's as 'Sonlike' as we can ever become.

But of course that's only half the story. The old writers were correct. Human relationships are also difficult to get right, perhaps increasingly so. Our modern world

sometimes looks much more broken than in the past, but I suspect it is just that we are much more honest. Women, children, sexual and racial minorities etc. were treated with disrespect for centuries and nobody much cared.

I really do not believe the world was a better place at any time in the past than it is now. It is much the same, perhaps more compassionate than ever. The moral temperature of a society does not seem very closely related to how much people identify with a religion. Indeed history suggests that religions have been just as much the cause of human unhappiness as offering a path towards its solution.

There is always a need for healing. A God who 'became a man' at one point in our history does not now seem to be the way that most helps us to do things better. But good relationships and a wider desire to see the oppressed set free, the sick healed, and so on, still rings true as an agenda that I don't want to turn my back on. A God where a relationship of love within Himself is at the centre of things does not make much sense to me; but a world like that? – that's a

different story and we need to go on telling it.

And what is true at a personal and emotional level is true for our relationship with the environment. God's people have sometimes been somewhat cavalier with a world they considered sinful and material. This is also less true nowadays, but there is no need for a God to tell us that we should be taking better care of it.

Failing to tend the garden properly was the whole reason humankind and God fell out according to the Genesis myth. Looking after the earth is an essential element of our humanity and there is much that needs to be healed if we are not to destroy it long before its time. We can do more than ever, but the risks are so much higher as a result.

It's just not necessary to create a convoluted theology or an 'inconceivable' idea of a Divine Trinity to commit to making the world a better place or ourselves better people. If I am still anywhere within the Christian church, perhaps I too am an Arian, or a Humanit-arian! Jesus is enough for me. We don't actually need a God in the conventional sense at all. There is no hope

for a modern mind in relying on an external Deity to put things right. That's a key reason why the Christian story no longer grabs us. We have to do it for ourselves. 'Love came down at Christmas' says the old carol. I beg to differ. Love was here all the time and still is. We just have to find it. (I'd say 'Love is all around' if others hadn't got there first!)

'God is love' says the New Testament, again placing a human emotion into a cosmic context, but then making the claim that we can only know of love because God loved us first. That's plainly not the case. Love we know about. God is a speculative reinforcement of our deepest *human* insight, but the love was already there. The idea of a loving God comes from our own capacity to love one another. It's a part of us like everything else.

So it's up to us to make this part of ourselves 'incarnate'. That is our hope and a reason for living, not that a God will do it for us. It is *like* being the best son or daughter, brother or sister, husband, wife or partner that I would hope to be. Living like that can make a real difference and is good for us. This much I believe.

4 THE FOOL ON THE HILL

'He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried

I first started to write this chapter a few days before Christmas 2012. At the time, the news was dominated by one story; the shooting dead of 20 children and 6 adults at a school in Connecticut by a deranged young man with an assortment of high-powered weapons that were owned by his mother, the first victim of his spree. Inevitably it has faded from our minds, but Christmas will never be the same again for those families or for that small community.

Not that such an event is rare; it was the third school shooting that year in the USA, and there have been plenty more since. (Incidentally, the churches are certainly fuller there than they are here and 97,000 people are shot in an average year. Yes, that's right. 97,000). But it would have been mentioned in thousands of churches over the following days. Many genuine prayers were

said for the victims. Good Christian people agonised at the pain of it all.

Some, given the timing, will have drawn a comparison with the slaughter of the innocents that, according to Matthew, followed the birth of Jesus. This would be understandable and has some point, even though King Herod's massacre almost certainly has no factual basis and is not evidenced in any other historical source as far as I am aware.

It is just one of the many symbolic elements within the birth narratives, designed to show how Jesus of Nazareth was like a new Moses who would challenge the kingdoms of this world, not operate on an entirely different 'spiritual' plane away from the messy worlds of power and politics. Just as Pharaoh reacted to God's activity on behalf of his 'chosen' ones with the killing of the first-born, so did Herod.

Many believers will have asked, if not always out loud, how their God could have 'allowed' such a thing to happen. Some will have blamed a 'devil. Neither response is a solution for me of course. Human beings are entirely responsible for such behaviour,

whether it's the lack of gun control, the result of fragmented families or whatever causes people to sometimes lose all sense of reason and become madmen. There is no God or devil who we can hold to account for such insanity. It's just part of the package, like love, sunshine and Chopin.

If I had been preaching that weekend, as I used to do every Sunday, I would have spoken especially about the teachers. Schools rather than churches are my world these days. I can still recall the day in 1996 when Thomas Hamilton walked into the primary school in Dunblane and killed 16 children and their teacher. I vividly remember how the children in the Sunday School I was connected with in those days lined up in tears to sign their names in a book of condolence. I had never been more proud of them.

There was a similar, if less destructive event in the city where I now live around the same time. There, as in Connecticut, the bravery of a young teacher saved more children from being injured and almost certain death. Terrible things happen every day, every hour, every minute. Like

everyone else, I can only make myself aware of some of them.

Without doubt, at least one of the teachers in this particular outrage deliberately surrendered her own life in order to save some of her pupils. She locked them in a storeroom and went back towards the shooting to try and save some more. She then put herself between the gunman and a group of 6 year-olds who were cowering in a corner and died protecting them.

I am staggered by such a sacrifice and not at all sure I could ever hope to do anything like the same. I have no idea whether she was a Christian, quite possibly she was. But of course it doesn't matter one bit. There is no greater love. 'Inasmuch as you do it for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do it for me', irrespective of the person's religious motivation. End of story. All other considerations are irrelevant.

Alongside this wholly inadequate tribute, I might well have talked about Jesus. Not, as in the sermon I actually heard that week, using the USA massacre just to prove what a cruel and wicked world this is and that you had better put your faith in him as your only

hope, rather than wallowing in the sentimentality of the stable. (That'll encourage them to come again next year!)

For me, the death of Jesus is a paradigm of self-sacrifice: a demonstration of love for others that joins Christmas to Good Friday and makes the actions of those teachers a genuinely 'sacramental' moment. I saw exactly the same truth in the picture of the three women caring for the soldier killed outside Woolwich barracks, just as other women did for Jesus at the cross. We saw it again in the humanitarian response by local people in offering help to those who couldn't get home after the Manchester Arena bomb. These signs of human compassion in the face of such cruelty gives me more hope for humanity than a million evangelical tracts demanding that I be 'saved' ever will.

Many might consider such self-denying actions foolish and pointless but they are surely evidence of a much greater wisdom about the way things are? Part of the lingering attraction of Christianity is the unjust human death that is at the heart of it and the response that it still evokes, even in me. It's the usual supernatural meaning that

is placed upon the death that I cannot affirm. This was not a transaction between a God and Himself. It was a barbaric act of human wickedness – within which we have to find some hope or meaning if it is to be anything more than that

The key point about the figure at the centre of this particular human death is that he was indeed a victim of *our* inhumanity. This I share with conventional believers. We killed him. The cross is a symbol of death, and of the particularly savage way of doing it by crucifixion, not an item of fashion jewellery. This event 'earths' all spirituality in the reality of the human condition in a way that still makes a connection to me, at least on one level.

The cross is such an enduring symbol in early Christianity that there can be no doubt that this really was how Jesus of Nazareth died. There would have been no reason to invent such an embarrassment and it could have been easily disproved if it did not happen and he actually died in his sleep as an old man. Most religions go for myths that build up their central figures; they don't

portray them as a condemned and broken man dying on a rubbish dump.

Jesus' death fits with what else I know to be true about life: good people die, often unjustly. That's a fact. This event makes other deaths of the same kind more significant and worth something. They reinforce the value of his and he illuminates theirs. This all gives the deaths a meaning as they deserve and shows that those who fail to be fully human don't have things all their own way.

But I simply cannot accept what was done with this death afterwards. I don't believe the real Jesus has anything more to do with the subsequent Christ of the Church than he does with the eternal second person of the Trinity that I failed to find in chapter 3. This later Christ-figure is solely the creation of a community who were up against it and needed a reassurance of their own survival.

Jesus was, for them, the longed-for Jewish Messiah, even if not in the way that was anticipated. As they too faced the reality of persecution, the need for a Saviour who would rescue and reward the faithful, took

over from the memory of the fool on the hill who chose death rather than compromise. This was an inspiration to those who came after him, and to me, but they added a dimension of meaning that I just don't believe was there at the time.

The Roman historian Tacitus writes about how the bodies of Christians on crosses were set alight to provide flaming torches in Rome during the reign of Nero. They were said to be responsible for the fires that almost destroyed the city so he devised a particularly cruel punishment in response. This is the reality of crucifixion that came to dominate their memory of Jesus and turned the message about him into something wholly original.

Building on a reinterpretation of Old Testament texts, a whole new understanding of the death of Jesus was constructed which was certainly not what the original scriptures meant. This is where all the emphasis on Jesus being a sacrifice for our 'sins' comes from - again, a direct *result* of the human experiences that came with being his follower, not the driver that created them. The cross does not feature in the original

Messianic promises. But New Testament Christianity took the old prophecies and transformed them into something else.

The context was entirely different once the story left its Jewish roots and hit the Greek-speaking world where the original Messianic expectation did not exist. Now we had a new Jesus, a Christ. It's the same word as 'Messiah' in Greek but doesn't have the same meaning. 'Salvation' now became the focus, not a hope for liberation as before. Now Jesus' death was all about God doing something, not the Romans, but is there any basis for such a conviction? Only by creating something new that wasn't there at the time.

Jesus of Nazareth died because he chose not to keep quiet about the way the religion of his day had turned into an oppressive and exclusive club that had totally distorted what he believed his God wanted for the world. He was a convenient scapegoat and it suited all those in power to offer him up, as so many have done with others since. (The massive irony is that the church that bears his name has so often done exactly the same over the subsequent years).

As the Creeds actually make explicit (but then ignore), he died not because of any supernatural pulling of strings, but because he upset the Jewish establishment who persuaded a weak Roman governor to have him killed to keep the peace. This is the true historical and factual reason for his death. It happens all the time. There are Pontius Pilates all over our modern world. Any response has to begin there. Perhaps it should end there too.

I have to accept that I wouldn't even know about this Jesus had it not been for the later Christ of the Church. Without that continuing story his execution would be just one more name in the catalogue of human misery; just another death. The New Testament chronicles how his followers, or more accurately, new followers who hadn't been there before, created a new understanding of his death that took the experience on to a whole new level. I suppose I should be grateful to them.

But were they justified in doing so? That is a monumentally significant question. Now the news was all about a Jesus who was God – a claim he never seems to have made for

himself at the time. (You can't use John's gospel as 'proof' that he did. Every responsible scholar agrees that it is not a reliable source of Jesus' own words. Just look at the literary style compared to the other three. Jesus spoke Aramaic in stories and pithy one-liners, not carefully-crafted Greek expositions that go on for three chapters. It's just not Jesus of Nazareth talking).

So did they make an entirely different 'Jesus' out of this particular death that wasn't there before, or did they come to see what was really going on behind the scenes all the time? It has to be one or the other. I am utterly unconvinced by the claim that Jesus' death was actually some deliberate pre-arranged contract in which a God exchanged His 'Son' for the guilt of the rest of us. That would mean that the whole human reality that led to his death was entirely incidental; just a cover story for God's higher plan.

There are so many levels at which this is frankly unbelievable and, more importantly, I really do not see how such an understanding of his death helps us. The

killings go on. The world does not become a better place as a result of this Divine act, let alone the sheer intellectual impossibility of a God having to separate Himself into both priest and victim on this particular sacrificial altar. Such imagery might have made sense in the Middle East 2000 years ago. It means nothing to me in contemporary Britain.

Christians also affirm that the only hope in this situation lies in its uniqueness. This was a 'once for all' event that changed the relationship between us and God forever, (assuming, of course, that we believe that such a gulf actually exists in the first place). The death of Jesus is entirely different from all other deaths, because Jesus is different from all other human beings - he is also God.

In contrast, I would say that the only hope is in the fact that he is the *same*; that Jesus and me and the victims of the holocaust and the Connecticut teachers, *and* those who do the killing, share a common humanity. Otherwise anything he did does not relate to a mere mortal like me. The hope comes in the light that such an event

spreads into my own experience, not that it is uniquely different from it.

Despite the tragedy of such deaths, the world is not a universally awful place. Quite the reverse is true according to what Jesus had to say about the reality of his God to be found within it. The executions are balanced by the human self-sacrifices; the selfishness by the generosity; the oppression by the willingness of some to put others first rather than themselves.

The human Jesus shared in this too. He did not sail serenely through Gethsemane knowing that God was holding all the cards on his behalf and all would be well in the end. My guess is that he was as petrified as anyone else would be when confronted by a murderous mob. If he was somehow above it all, what would his death have to offer us, assuming, as I do, that this is not about a God at all but just about ourselves and how we treat one another?

We are fortunate that from our modern perspective we can discern the factual basis behind the later elaborations. This was nothing like so available before the insights of historical research; it's a pity that so

many religious people today take no notice of it. They effectively miss out the first three gospels, which were *not* primarily about the later Christ at all, and jump straight to John and Paul, passing over much of what the real Jesus stood for along the way.

There is little or no evidence within the synoptic gospels that suggests Jesus' underlying intention, and which made it all worthwhile, was to save me from my sins. Jesus' focus was on the kingdom; the rule of his God on earth there and then, (see chapter 5). His teaching was about that, not about himself.

There are certainly signs that he came to see his death as of some greater significance. Given the Messianic expectations that were around at the time, it seems likely that he believed that by following his path to the end he would usher in some new age – a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies which clearly meant so much to him. (We must never forget that, whatever we have done with him since, he was a Jew himself. Jesus was not a Christian!)

It may just be possible to believe that there was something else going on *as well*, but not *instead* of the historical reality. Both explanations are the product of human activities. The question is, which one now speaks to us with any meaning? Jesus as the victim of *our* inhumanity or as the tool of a God who just used him and those around him for some greater purpose for which we are not really responsible? The edifice of later religious interpretation only gets in the way of the actual meaning as far as I am concerned.

So I cannot, of course, believe that a personal resurrection can be some kind of hope for the future out of all this disaster, or not at least in any literal sense. The 'resurrection of the body' is absent both from my pilgrimage through the Apostles' Creed and my journey through life. Death is the end – how can I possibly believe anything else this side of it? Any kind of 'afterlife' is just another human theory and not a very convincing one at that.

The New Testament writers' attempts to describe the indescribable again fall back on statements that, like the birth narratives,

don't really work. Did the resurrected Jesus still have a physical body that could only be in one place at once? The empty tomb and the encounter with Thomas suggest so. If so, what happened to it? But the stories are inconsistent.

The risen Jesus also seems not to have been immediately recognisable as the same person as before. Some of those he met didn't realise who he was. He 'appeared' in locked rooms or suddenly disappeared from view. These images cannot all be reconciled. But that's OK because that's all they are; just human creations to try and express something much deeper.

Is it essential to believe in *any* kind of resurrection in order to see his death as having value for us? I don't think so. The hope has to be found *within* the death, not by somehow passing over to it to something better. The good news the disciples first affirmed was in seeing the present in a new way, not in a longing for some distant reward somewhere else.

My life will be over when I am dead and I do not believe that it was any different for Jesus, the real human man from Nazareth.

Surely the words that were reported as spoken on the cross tell us that he too saw his dying as an ending? 'Into your hands I commend my spirit.' 'It is finished'. This is certainly a fulfilment, a completion; but not a transition to some other kind of existence. That has to be entirely speculative.

This is not to deny that Jesus' first disciples, and his followers today, have some genuine experience of his continuing presence, but it is a feeling; an activity of our brains like any other - like love. An intangible sense of someone there, but an entirely human one nonetheless. When they began to discover that his death was not the end of their story, it was *as if* Jesus was still with them.

Others who had never known Jesus then came to believe the same, but those who had actually met him disappear from the story almost immediately. The Christ of the Church is a different kind of 'reality', not restricted to those who had actually been with Jesus of Nazareth.

As before, it can only be a continuing metaphorical presence that they affirmed, based on their human experience. A 'real'

one that requires ascending bodies and seats in heaven cannot be a meaningful truth in a world of scientific rationality, for Jesus or for anyone else. Dead men do not walk and to make Jesus the only ever exception in history really does not help us anymore. The same cannot possibly happen to me.

But there are other kinds of meanings to be found. My father lives on in my life today; I have been enormously influenced by many people who are no longer alive. Nelson Mandela will live on forever as far as I am concerned because of the difference he made. Hope does indeed spring eternal. Magnificent victories can come from what looks like total defeat. Joy comes in the morning, at least sometimes. All of this is a kind of resurrection, if not what Christians usually mean by the word.

If I am asked 'Does the death of Jesus make any difference?', I think I can say 'yes'. It makes a difference to my understanding of tragedies like the Connecticut shootings. I still find Good Friday an immensely moving day, but Remembrance Day and Holocaust Memorial Day should be just as significant. Words like

'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows?' still touch me at a deeper level than most things do. They are indeed ours; a part of us from which there is no escape.

Others have called that 'sin'. To me it is just the worst of which we are capable which sits alongside the best. Take either away and we would no longer be human. The killing of Jesus - it's interesting that we don't normally use that phrase; it wasn't just a death - brings home a reality about the human condition that must not be ignored. There is a truth here, even if it is not about somehow changing my eternal status with a God I do not believe is there.

So I still want to be the foot of the cross in some sense, acknowledging the significance of this particular death, if only as a representative of all the others. Many many people, much greater than me, have also given their lives in equally cruel circumstances. There is no deliverance from such things, not here and not for those left behind when all of this is over, but they can be put in their place. The first Christians came to their own conclusions about this

particular killing; I just cannot share them because I start from here, not from there.

But by still telling the Jesus story, if without all the doctrinal trimmings that came later, I am recognising the importance and value of life and acknowledging that suffering, especially of the unjust sort, is simply inescapable and has to be given some meaning. In what happened to Jesus I can see that sadness, cruelty and death are an integral part of what it means to be alive, but they are not all there is to say.

The cross is an enduring symbol of all that and I still want to identify with it as a vindication that all such deaths are not entirely pointless. The death of Jesus helps me to make some sense out of my own life and out of this world's gross injustices. There is no God to do that for me. Perhaps this all seems foolish. But his death still matters and I want to go on recognising the reality of it. This much I believe.

5 A QUESTION OF JUDGEMENT

'He will come again to judge the living and the dead...'

If you were able to tell Peter or Paul that there were still Christians in an obscure north-western corner of the former Roman Empire 21 centuries later, they would certainly be immensely surprised and probably not a little disappointed. They would not have anticipated that we would all still be here.

The first Christians very quickly turned their eyes to the immediate future, rather than only retelling the stories of the past. Jesus had spoken in apocalyptic terms about the coming of the kingdom; that there were those listening to him who would actually see it. So they believed that something dramatic would happen imminently to change the way things were; within no more than a few years, possibly even within their own lifetimes.

What was expected to happen next became the dominant theme of the New

Testament, especially in the early writings of Paul, parts of the synoptic Gospels (that came after, not before Paul) and the later writings of the Johns who wrote the fourth Gospel and the book of Revelation. Jesus would be coming back. The imagery quickly became concerned with the end of things as we know them, not with a world that has carried on pretty much the same ever since.

Given the persecution that the Christians received almost from the very beginning, initially from the Jews but primarily from the Romans, this emphasis on a future hope of something radically different is hardly surprising. Again, it entirely fits its social context as religions always will. The belief grew out of the experience.

The faithful were dying; surely that couldn't be right? Hadn't Jesus promised that they would be redeemed? How could this be if they were already dead and buried? There must be some final event pending that would put it all right and make sure that the bad guys got what was coming to them. God's sense of justice demands it.

This is Inspector Javert's dilemma in '*Les Miserables*'. Good (as defined by his own

values) must triumph, if not in this world then at least in the next, for his life to have meaning. 'Honest work, just reward; that's the way to please the Lord'. But as the Cross and all those other deaths like it surely show, it's not true. Things are altogether more muddled.

Bad things happen to good people, and vice versa. I would argue that we can find a real sense of liberation once we accept that's just how things are. We don't need to create a God to tidy things up. But for those who do believe it, a strong sense of mutual reassurance that we have backed the right horse may be all that keeps the demons of despair away when the going gets tough.

Then as now there were those who formed themselves into semi-secret societies or underground movements and waited for the coming 'rapture'. Others took up arms against the occupying forces to try and hasten the end times or gave up sex and distributed all their property to others because they believed they would no longer need it where they were going. Such groups were common in the 1st century world and

the early Jewish Christians quickly found a home within such an environment.

The problem is, it didn't happen. And it never will. I am as confident of that as I am about anything. This was not, in the view of most scholars, ever the kind of crisis that Jesus meant. Even by the time of the Creeds this had become a distant expectation, not a present reality, except as reinterpreted to focus on the eventual destiny of each individual. Centuries had passed without Jesus' return and the early convictions had to be revised in the light of it.

There may well be an end to things one day; everything else in the Universe is finite. But there is absolutely no meaningful basis to any claim that it will be 'soon'. It has, after all, been 'soon' for 2000 years according to those who still turn to the New Testament for simplistic predictions of what is about to happen. History is full of groups who sat and waited.....only for nothing to happen. Some see the current conflict in the Middle East as a sign of a coming Armageddon, but they are surely wrong. There are a few who are actively hoping for it; they are positively dangerous.

Terrifying, world-shattering, cataclysmic events have occurred right throughout history; tens of millions have died in holocausts, plagues, famines and natural disasters. Atom bombs have been exploded and global wars fought. Tyrannies have risen and fallen again. The world has been littered with crucifixions. God's name has been repeatedly mocked. And we are still going strong.

Only a massive change in the Universe along the lines of the one that brought it all into being will end it all again, and even that might only be in our small corner. Maybe it will happen sometime. But there is no logic in believing it's about to happen now, given the thousands of millions of years that have gone before us. It is one of the most irrational elements of faith to suggest otherwise, though I can see how some people might be still be attracted to it, if largely for psychological reasons.

Maintaining the fiction of an imminent final judgement used to be almost the sole preoccupation of organised Christianity. At first it was that graves will be opened, Jesus will 'descend' and you'd best be ready. Then

people were told that they had better believe before it was too late for them personally, even if the world went on without them. Graphic illustrations of eternal torment took pride of place in ancient Cathedrals. Endless liturgies were created designed solely to keep God sweet, to intercede for the faithful and to make sure that His coming wrath was directed elsewhere.

Even believing at the very last minute would do, or you could buy the expensive 'indulgences' that would protect either you or your relatives in the afterlife. Or you had better accept every word of Scripture and invite Jesus to be your own Personal Lord and Saviour and be 'born again'; just turning up at church and living a good life isn't enough. And heaven help you if you're gay. Etcetera. Etcetera.

Of course it might still be claimed that it will all happen to me when I die, but given that my body will be burnt to ashes and scattered into the sea, I really do not see how. There will be nothing left of me to be punished or rewarded. An eternal 'soul' is just another human theory. I am intrigued that some people even now refuse to be

cremated on the grounds that they may need their bodies for some future resurrection. Have they ever seriously thought about the impossibility of such an idea?

Of all the claims of all the religions this is the most deceitful and thankfully most people, even many of those who believe at least some of the rest, have let it go. This understanding of a Judgement Day should be left where it belongs – in our more superstitious past along with burning lakes of brimstone, goblins and little red devils with very sharp tridents.

However, what we must *not* let go of is the need to make decisions about how to live or begin to think that it no longer matters. There is a judgement to be made, but this side of death not beyond it. These decisions, and the responsibility for making them, belong to *us*, not to some external Deity.

Many people of faith assume that we can only know anything about human values because they come to us from a God. The most common response I have to my own position is 'If there is no God then there is no right or wrong laid down and anything

goes'. I have never understood this. Why do the most important things about us have to come from somewhere else? Does my ability to enjoy music, or my appreciation of beautiful scenery and the warmth of the sunshine have to come from a God? Can they not just be part of me; part of being alive?

Similarly, when deciding about how life is to be lived, it's actually *our* sense of justice that is in play here. The notion of a God who will ride over the horizon like the cavalry coming to the rescue of the beleaguered wagon-train was an entirely understandable response to powerlessness, but it reflects *our* natural desire to see right prevail, not some expectation that has to come from Someone else if it's ever going to happen. Like everything else, it's down to us.

Never forget that we have created these so-called 'God-given' standards in the first place! Where else can they have come from? This is the point to which I keep returning. Everything we claim to be true about a God; every scripture and religious book that has ever been written, every commandment ever

observed or religious experience ever felt, every temple and church ever built and every creed and moral code ever taught has been created by us.

So we can change our understanding of them. Indeed we have to do so in the light of our evolving human knowledge, just as we no longer teach our children that the sun goes round the earth or that there are fairies at the bottom of the garden. What is it about religious ideas that makes them exempt from this process of greater enlightenment? Science has moved us on but God has stood still. It makes absolutely no sense.

When it comes to medicine, we embrace the new with enthusiasm. We no longer need be the powerless victims of illnesses and diseases. We can take them on and even beat them thanks to the insights of recent discoveries. But when it comes to religion and morality we are told that we are stuck forever in the understandings of a different age, subject to a judgement based on the standards laid down centuries ago in an entirely different context.

A God and His ways are not the source of our wish to build a better world or our

desire to see good prosper; they are a reflection of that desire within ourselves. That's why people have written such ideals into virtually every religion there is. We have traditionally put these sentiments onto a God in order to validate them, (though ironically the consequences have often been dreadful injustices perpetrated in His name), but we no longer need to do so for them to be 'true'.

We got there first, *before* the religions we then created to reinforce what we wanted to see happen. This is so important to the debate about believing. Justice, truth, love and so on are not Divine characteristics that we can't possibly hope to live by. They're not values that have to be imposed upon us. They're *our* characteristics in the first place and the religions we have devised are designed (by and large) to promote them because we know that they are good for us.

Certainly, as the previous chapter made clear, we are also competitive animals who have the potential to be as brutal as the rest of nature can be. But we also know that the way of everlasting conflict doesn't actually make us happy. It is in everyone's best interests for the human community to get

along together and to challenge the things that divide us. Why can't this just be part of a 'natural' law rather than a supernatural one?

Personally I see the truth of this, in part at least, because of what Jesus of Nazareth had to say about the 'kingdom', along, of course, with others who have spoken of similar ideals and lived them out where they happen to be. No one religious or philosophical tradition can claim an exclusive insight here, but Christianity is the one I know most about so that's where my thinking is still directed.

Nearly everyone agrees that the 'kingdom' was the dominant theme of Jesus' message before the church turned him into something else. There are signs that he came to believe that its 'coming' was somehow bound up with his own death, but it is only later interpretations that reframe his message entirely in terms of a personal salvation dependant on a particular faith in him or on some unspecified 'second' coming and Final Judgement when all will be revealed.

It was for him a kingdom (or, better, an 'on-going rule') of his God, but that does not mean that what he had to say is irrelevant to me. The words change; the insights behind the words may be more enduring. We used to explain many things by reference to a God that we now explain in other ways. But it still rains just the same, however we understand its cause. Religion is a way to explain what goes on anyway, not a different kind of experience that is only accessible to those who have some secret insight that the rest of us haven't found. You say tomato. I say a reddish fruit that grows in greenhouses and tastes great on a pizza. Same difference when it comes to eating it.

But his was a vision of a God like no other before; and it was not primarily about a heaven or a world away from, or after, this one. Most of the time Jesus specifically avoids talking about what we might now call 'religion'; neither does he look to churches, priests or creeds for his inspiration and examples. He talks about life; human life, real life - people, jobs, relationships, farming and so on. He invited (not told) his hearers to open their eyes and look again at what

was going on around them and see it all in a new way. The rule of his God was to be found there.

This is no 'gentle Jesus meek and mild'. Being nice to everyone doesn't get you crucified; there is an inescapable challenge to be faced here. But the results of this judgement are not what most people would have expected. This is a Jesus who belongs as much, if not more, to people like me than to those who claim to be his spokesmen – to outsiders, sinners, doubters and those of very little significance to the holy powers that be. Religious people beware!

A good place to look for more about all this is the whole series of parables that appear in Matthew's gospel, chapters 24-25. (For more about my understanding of Jesus' use of parables, see the Introduction to *Finding the Way*). It's well worth getting a Bible out if you have one and reading them through – Matthew is the first book of the New Testament (in the traditional order), though not the first to be written.

Matthew's gospel, like the others, has to be approached with some caution as it sometimes reflects the needs of the early

church for which it was written, rather than necessarily preserving exactly what Jesus said and meant a generation or more earlier. Their own current persecution is almost certainly the context to which he is referring, not only that of Jesus. But we have to work with what we have and this is as close as I can get.

The stories are set in the context of the coming of the 'Son of Man', (e.g. chapter 24 v.37). No-one quite knows what this title means. It is only later thinking that assumes that Jesus was necessarily referring to himself. Matthew almost certainly thought so. But the term comes from the book of Daniel, a late Old Testament book that was already contributing to the general apocalyptic climate at the time. In its original context it was certainly not about Jesus, but he may have identified with the figure, looking back.

His use of it may have had something to do with the vindication of past Jewish martyrs or the term may have been adopted by Jesus as a kind of code by which he could criticise the occupying Romans without them realising its significance. There is little doubt

that he was heightening a sense of *immediate* crisis. The whole dramatic point is that no-one can tell when great decisive events will happen. The kingdom moment is now. These teachings are about a feature of *present* reality; not merely a future hope.

The basis of this existential moment of judgement is also entirely unexpected. No-one can predict the timing, or the outcome. Each day is a day of judgement. It is ever-present. We could say that each day is a 'second coming' if you want to hold on to such a belief. Doesn't the Christian believe that Jesus is constantly inviting them to walk with him, not standing in the distance beckoning while they catch up? Surely your God's rule is already here?

And his conclusions, right throughout his parables, turn most usual religious convictions on their heads. The sinners see this reality in advance of the righteous people. People are not in the Temple when the moment comes; they're in the fields or on their housetops. Those who are welcomed to the King's side are those who were so busy doing good that they didn't even realise the significance of what they were doing.

Their motivation had absolutely nothing to do with God as far as they were aware – they just did it.

To Jesus' original hearers these were all (not very) veiled attacks on the priests and the interpreters of the law who had turned the whole religious enterprise into a kind of 'self-preservation society'. When it was supposed to be all about being a 'light to the Gentiles'; about breaking down barriers not creating them; about setting people free, not tying them up in doctrinal knots and only letting them go if they could recite all the right passwords first.

That way is not evidence of the rule of God, as Jesus understood Him. That is the more selfish side of ourselves against which we need to be constantly struggling. The judgement is all about whether we have also discovered the 'signs' of the kingdom and expressed something else; something more fully human that draws out our true potential and enables us to make the world a brighter and a better place, not just to stand in condemnation over it. That's what's at stake, and the religious leaders of Jesus' time, he said, were rubbish at it!

Those who are big on judgement days, especially the Big One waiting around the corner, seem to me to have entirely missed the point. It is a depressing fact that the more 'religious' you are and the more you talk about Jesus as your 'Saviour', the more it seems to lead you into a conservative morality and an attitude of criticism towards those who are different from yourself. This seems to me the very opposite of what Jesus talked about. Indeed it is the failing for which he was so hard on those of his own time who claimed to know it all.

I am still a regular church-watcher and the sociologist in me still finds the organisation interesting and its sometimes convoluted ways of behaving entirely fascinating. It can often look like an utter irrelevance; just a club for people who like that kind of thing. On the other hand, at least vicars, priests and bishops now seem to have something to say about the real world rather than arguing only over the contemporary equivalent of how many angels can dance on a pin-head.

But why is nearly everything they say always so negative? It's like the story of the

bishop visiting a church and an old man telling him he's been coming there for over 60 years. 'You must have seen some changes in that time', says the bishop. 'Yes' replies the old man, 'and I've been against every one of them!' Their judgement is always hostile. The world is going to hell in a hand-cart. 'Secularism' is destroying us. Change is always for the worse. Nothing better ever comes from what was there before. 'We're all doomed'!

I could choose any number of examples, but gay marriage has been in the news again recently. Many Christians are massively hung up about sex. It sometimes seems as though there is nothing else that matters as much to them. Poverty, starvation, wars, the abuse of children or destruction of the environment; none of these are in the same league as what two consenting adults get up to in the bedroom every now and then.

As God never changes, we must, it seems, keep to the 'Biblical' or 'traditional' view of marriage forever. Those who want to argue for something different to reflect our much *more* enlightened times are roundly condemned or warned of the dire

consequences of their sinful ways. Society was obviously much more healthy when men were in sole charge; when wives happily stayed at home to have endless babies and no-one ever had an affair or was attracted to someone of the same sex. I would love to know exactly when this time was. Actually, we already know. Never.

Marriage was a desperately unhappy business for millions in our culture in the past and often still is. Any model based on the way men behaved towards their wives years ago would be a huge step backwards. In practice it was shot through with hypocrisy and deceit and sometimes with sexual violence and repression. If its relationships based on love you're holding up as so important, I would strongly suggest you take Jesus' advice and look around you before you rush to judgement.

A few people of the same sex reinterpreting what we now mean by 'marriage' in order to meet their own particular circumstances, hardly threatens civilisation as we know it. It might even have the opposite effect and provide some new models of loving commitment from which we

could all learn a lesson. And it's the same with so many other issues. The knee-jerk Christian reaction is to be against it, because it comes from the 'world' not from their God or their scriptures. But maybe they are in for a surprise. Maybe the 'world' is where the real hope is coming from. The 'kingdom' is there, at least according to Jesus

There might actually be some other sources of truth to be found among us that will get us closer to where we need to be, or rather, give us a clearer understanding of where we already are. This is another reason why religion can so often seem to be irrelevant. All it ever seems to say to us is how hopeless we are without it. Well, I hate to disagree but there are ample signs that we still have all kinds of values as part of our humanity which may be even *more* like the ones religions are supposed to be about, not less.

'Judgement' is not about getting ready for a future cosmic event in which Jesus will leap from the clouds and come up to people like me and say 'I told you so'. Neither is it about scaring me into a social conformity that suits some powerful elite on pain of dire

consequences when I am dead. I am absolutely convinced that neither of these ideas was uppermost in the mind of Jesus. They are entirely about what we have done with him since.

Of course this is my own interpretation and many wouldn't share it. As I have already discussed, if you take the whole New Testament into account the emphasis about Jesus clearly changes. I can't call myself a 'Christian' because I respond to him in this way. (I actually have no wish to do so). But I am struck by the emphasis that appears to me to be there at the start and which is very different from what I hear or see in many of the churches that bear his name.

As I will try to explore a bit further in the next chapter, it seems you can't have a religion without a church. But I wonder if you can live life to the full and face each moment of judgement as it comes without either of them! I reckon that you can, though being part of a community always helps. This too provides a way of living that has at least some integrity with the founder of a faith that seems to have moved very far

away from where it was when he began it all.

I acknowledge a need to be constantly evaluating my life and what really counts within it. I have to make decisions and choices on a daily basis and need to do so with integrity. A healthy *self-judgement* is continually required as a benchmark. There is absolutely no room for complacency and not just anything goes. That would be immature naivety and self-indulgent sentimentality, unsupported by an often messy reality.

But my humanity is there to feed my search for what is right, not only to lead me astray. That's where the resources for our 'spiritual' journey have always come from, and which can sustain me in where I am going. Many religious values have in fact lost sight of what we are capable of becoming. I genuinely think we can often do better without them. Of course, that will always be a question of judgement, but this much I believe.

6 CALLED TO BE SAINTS

*'I believe in the holy catholic church.. (and)
the communion of saints.'*

I have borrowed this final chapter's title from one of my mother's books, (who herself borrowed it from the New Testament). At this point the Apostles' Creed moves onto my territory or at least a bit closer to it. This is not a statement of faith about a God, or His Son and what He did, or about the Bible and what it claims to be true about the past, present or future. Those who recite the Creed are asked not to look heavenward at this point but to look at each other.

In contrast to all the rest, it is saying that we believe in ourselves; it's about believing in human communities of which churches are supposed to be exemplars. At last, something positive about our humanity. And it doesn't say 'I believe in kings, politicians or the editors of newspapers'; not even bishops! Looking at our own context, and in line with all those saints who have gone before us, 'church' is the one thing

about us that we can put our faith in. Well, maybe!

The 'catholic' church being referred to here is not, of course, just the 'Roman' Catholic denomination, though that was the only Western church at the time the Creed was written and the word may still cause some confusion. All Christians in this country were RCs once, until Henry VIII decided to set up his own alternative church and make himself the head of it so that he could grant himself a divorce. (What a delicious irony given the attitude of some clergy to those whose marriages fail today).

The church's own history, just like its beliefs and scriptures, reflects an entirely human enterprise, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else. It's important to remember that your historic cathedral or Norman C of E building in the village centre would have been an RC church for the first 500 years of its life. The Creeds are, in that sense, 'Roman' Creeds, though that might not be very comfortable for some of those who still affirm their belief in them.

I have been into church buildings where the whole inside was once facing in the

opposite direction; alterations that reflected the fashions and politics of the time, as well as strictly religious preferences. Churches are mirrors of our human journey, not just our 'spiritual' one and change has always been a part of it. Sometimes that's involved a complete about turn – hold that thought!

'Catholic' in this sense has the same meaning as when we describe someone as having 'catholic' tastes. They enjoy lots of different things. The church is one, but it has room for variety within it. It is not a statement about authority; about agreeing to be subject to the control of hierarchies and leaders. Churches should demonstrate 'catholicity', which I understand as meaning that there should be room for everyone. A diversity *within* the unity. That's what believers are saying they believe in.

As the Creed reminds us, there is also a solidarity with those who have gone before and the church's early history is especially instructive here. 'Christianity' began as a small Jewish sect, in and around Jerusalem. The writer of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that they shared things in common, met for meals and worship and supported those who

had been widowed. Some would say that this was the church's finest hour, a kind of new Garden of Eden, but it didn't last for long.

Judaism was already a pretty diverse community. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were hardly on speaking terms, but at least they retained a sense of being part of the same tradition. Then there were the groups we know as 'Essenes' and Zealots; more separatist and radical in their rejection of both the Roman occupation and the official worship in the Temple and who tended to do their own thing in remote locations. The Dead Sea scrolls are almost certainly an insight into their semi-monastic way of life, based in a community at Qumran near the western shores of the Dead Sea.

The Jesus sect fitted pretty well into this version of catholicity for a while. His disciples may have been consciously chosen to reflect this variety. The followers of 'The Way, or the 'Nazarenes' as they were known to start with, probably carried on going to the synagogue, possibly even alongside their new communal practices. Perhaps 'ordinary' Jews in particular were attracted to them, as a contrast to the rather stiff formalism that

Jesus himself had also apparently found so unsatisfactory. His followers were, after all, mostly those from outside the conventional establishment.

Within a few years, Jesus groups sprang up further north - though we don't know how exactly they got there or who was responsible for this expansion - to Galilee, Damascus and, crucially Antioch, then the capital of Syria and the third most important city of the Roman empire according to many scholars. This is where they were first given the nickname of 'Christians'.

This was also when the sect started to engage with non-Jews; Gentiles. For some it seems that this pushed the tolerance of diversity too far. Gentiles were different; not any part of God's 'chosen' people. The Pharisee Saul was despatched to sort them out having already taken at least the role of spectator in the stoning of Stephen for going beyond what was acceptable.

As we know, Saul saw the error of his ways on the way there. He became Paul; the gamekeeper turned poacher and the rest, as they say, is history. But over the next few years as the Gentile world started to

embrace the message about Jesus, there was still a massive debate going on within the young churches about how far things should go.

Acts suggests that the Jerusalem church and Paul frequently fell out and they had to work hard at finding some kind of reconciliation. They organised at least one summit for Paul and James, (described as Jesus' 'brother', who seems to have taken the lead role, not any of the former disciples), to agree how to work together. The results weren't entirely conclusive but Paul more or less won the day and his wider vision was accepted. But his letters to the churches around the Mediterranean are frequently about the arguments that continued among and between them.

Did you have to be a Jew first in order to become a Christian? Were the Jewish Christians somehow better than the rest? What about circumcision, the food laws or still engaging in other religious cults at the same time? Did Gentile Christians have to accept all the Jewish scriptures and live by all the requirements of the Mosaic Law? And what about those interested enquirers who

just wanted to be semi-observers but without actually committing themselves? Did that really count as belonging?

Like the much later debates about the Trinity, these were not just polite discussions between academics. Paul can be strident in his criticisms and although we have only his half of the correspondence, it is clear that they didn't always take much notice of his advice and had to be told again! By the time of the book of Revelation, the writer is even more critical of the churches' failings.

Once we get to the Creeds, people were being condemned for heresy or excommunicated all over the place. Most of the 4th century was taken up with the Arian controversy about Jesus' relationship with God. Bishops were removed from office and exiled, strong letters sent and more argumentative meetings held, all over whether or not the Son was of 'one substance' with the Father. The idea that the Son was part of the created order was supposedly rejected by the Council of Nicea in 325, but the dispute ranged on for years.

It was clearly a very mixed picture. 'How these Christians love one another', wrote

Tertullian. It is thought that no irony was intended despite all these disagreements; they genuinely did also provide a model of mutual love and support, not least in the face of unjust executions and deprivations. But when you look at Northern Ireland, or the way some traditionalists have behaved towards radical theologians or those of a different sexuality, modern observers can't help at least a wry smile at such a statement.

We often talk of the church as a 'body' – some might say it's almost a corpse but that would be uncharitable. A key part of New Testament teaching is that, like a body, the different parts have to accept each other and work together. No one part can say to the others: 'I'm the most important so I don't need you'. It is an inter-dependent community, bound together by a mutual acceptance of their *differences*; not only a collection of like-minded individuals. 'If the body were all eyes, how would it smell?' Terrible! (Boom. Boom).

My response to all this would be to say that churches have to be communities that are blurred round the edges and as diverse

as possible, not stridently defending 'the' truth as they see it and insisting on everyone signing up to that single path as a condition of entry? That way, in my opinion at least, lies oblivion.

I honestly do not think that many churches can survive in our culture, except as a meaningless refuge for those are frankly wholly out of step with reality, unless they adapt to our changed and more questioning context. They have to be more 'catholic' and accept a greater range of responses to the questions raised by our existence. If they stick with 'This is true and only we are right', nearly all of us will not want to join in.

We are not going to believe it just because someone in authority tells us that we should. More and more people are simply not interested in or attracted by such certainties and we will increasingly leave religion behind in our search for a more enlightened humanity and new kinds of spirituality. This kind of self-interest group is not the kind of model that many thinking enquirers will find attractive.

It is a relatively recent idea that the Christian community includes only those who

have made a 'commitment' and is open to 'members only'. A small sect may well have great integrity, but how does it survive? Despite my own non-conformist past, where this approach tends to be the emphasis, I now find the idea of more openness and far less certainty to be also much more creative, as well as being much more honest.

After the very early days, Christianity was not largely spread by individual conversions. That would never account for its rapid growth. It became a by-product of empire once the Romans became more tolerant, (though it was probably never *the* official religion as some have claimed). But a more integrated religion seeking to make some real difference to its wider society has to be very different from a small group intent only on its own common needs.

Considerable compromises are required, but in return, far more people get to be part of it and the church gains greater influence. This was the trade-off that institutional western Christianity chose to accept once Emperor Constantine signalled his changed attitude towards it. Its expansion into the modern world outside Europe is also

explained in much the same way. It 'worked', though whether Jesus of Nazareth would recognise it as anything to do with him is an entirely different question.

Again, this all just illustrates the human nature of the whole enterprise. What it meant to be 'a Christian' was very different when whole nations become Christian because their king or leader embraced it. Entire families and tribes were now included, but by mass baptisms, not because they each made an individual decision. It had much more to do with boosting the numbers than any genuine engagement with issues of life and faith.

This overlap between church and nation suited the church's leaders very well, but it also had its downside for those who dissented from the majority view. Now the Christians were in danger of becoming the oppressors. Until about 150 years ago there was virtually no alternative to being at least a nominal member of the C of E if you wanted to go to University in this country. Even Baptists and Roman Catholics were barred, (as well as women and Jews). What glory days these were!

Certain businesses had a religious 'test' before you could work there or checked whether you came to church as a condition of you keeping the job. Being seen in the pew on a Sunday at least now and again was effectively part of the contract. No doubt people just played along with it because they had no choice, but it also meant that religion became a part of people's social identity. It may have had little or nothing to do with what they actually believed but at least it provided a context that gave their lives added value.

Whole parishes and those who live in them are still the responsibility of their local C of E church, not just the regular attenders, at least in theory. How many 'church' schools contain only actual believers, among the children or their parents? They are not really 'church' schools at all. 'Schools with a Christian ethos' is a much fairer statement, except for those proposed Free Schools, for example, who wanted to insist on a commitment to 'creationism' as a condition of entry. These have absolutely no place in a modern school system in my view. The debate about religious 'extremism' shouldn't

look only at the Moslem community. There is no place for any such narrow-minded attempts to restrict the meaning of 'education'.

Sadly churches often look like they're in competition with each other, not part of one shared community at all. Given that it's a human thing, it's all a bit of a blurry mess, but perhaps that's better than the walls being so well-defined that it's hard to get in. In practice, churches tend to want it both ways. When there's a Queen to be crowned, a war to be remembered, a Royal Wedding or state funeral to be held, the whole nation suddenly becomes the focus. The church relishes its role at the centre of things, and the power and influence that still goes with it.

Army chaplains; hospital chaplains; chaplains to Members of Parliament: suddenly we're all included. The doors are thrown open to those who probably don't believe a word of it at any other time. Church and state become virtually indistinguishable; everyone is welcome and little is demanded in return. There is no

expectation that everyone must actually believe anything before they can join in.

At other times churches and church leaders seem to want to separate themselves and expect the rest of us to fit entirely into their agenda rather than them fitting into ours. The ridiculous argument that the Archbishop of York picked with the National Trust about Easter eggs is a classic example. 'Eostre'; is actually the name of the pagan goddess of Spring. The word doesn't just belong to the Christians. And of course eggs are nothing to do with the religious beliefs anyway!

Or there is only one right moral stance on the issues of the day, usually based on an extremely partial and selective reading of the Bible. Unless you know Jesus 'personally', or much better still, don't know him yet but would like to, you cannot be accepted. Or maybe these are two different kinds of parallel churches – 'catholic' indeed, but not quite in the sense that was intended.

As an almost outsider, it seems to me that many Christian churches have become their own worst enemies. They have become so focused on getting people in on their

terms that perhaps they have failed to see that we are already there! We are all members of the same human race with convictions, values and principles – are churches the only place where good can flourish? Shouldn't they be places where we can *all* be at our best, at least if some other religion hasn't claimed us first? But so much of what goes on is either unspeakably dull or mind-numbingly crass and superficial.

The biggest problem, of course, is the beliefs; the doctrines. It's what I am asked to affirm, formally or informally, before I can get in that keeps me away. But I admit I still rather miss the sense of community, even after all these years. So at this point on my pilgrimage, as I approach a kind of ending, I am in search of churches that are not so focused on their statements of faith but which can still provide a model of a shared humanity. Places where we can have a genuine debate, not a one-sided conversation in which I have to do all the listening.

I accept that this is a big ask, though I suspect that many people in 'ordinary' churches up and down the land are not

necessarily there for the theology or because they really have a personal relationship with Jesus or are entranced by the reality of God in their lives. Their feelings about the vicar, or the choir, or how warm it is are probably just as, if not more, important. It may just be a habit. That all has value.

It would be easy to be cynical about this, but I accept that they are still finding something worthwhile. The people there are entitled to my respect, as long as they can accept me as an equal, if different, human being. My worry is that so much orthodoxy seems to lead in the opposite direction; to set us against each other not to explore what we have in common.

But there are undoubtedly some genuine 'saints' there, most of whom wouldn't recognise the label. Most churches have a long tradition of philanthropy; schools, hospitals and so on, though that largely reflects the fact that church and state were virtually the same until relatively recently. Much good work still goes on, if sometimes from a religious motivation that can suggest a slightly hidden agenda. I have long been frustrated by those who looked down on the

'social gospel', as if making a difference in the world is somehow not part of their God's 'real' intentions.

Some of the activity is still the perpetuation of particular moral standards that 'the world' is seen to be eroding. As discussed in the previous chapter, I am not particularly impressed by that approach which can come down to little more than an attempt to impose what you think is right onto everyone else.

I am though impressed by those who are willing to lose themselves in selfless work with those on the margins, often for little or no reward, including more bums on seats. In some areas it is virtually only the churches that remain to provide the sort of safety-net that the state no longer provides. They may open for the homeless or befriend the lonely. We ought to be thoroughly ashamed to see people carrying food parcels for distribution to poorer families as they go into church on a Sunday morning. Changes to benefits suggest that we will need even more of this in future so churches clearly still have their uses!

There are, of course, plenty of 'saints' in other places too. 'Childline' couldn't operate without volunteers. Neither would your local hospice or air ambulance be there when you needed it without those who give their time for free. We still do voluntary work in huge numbers. The 'Big Society' may well have been an empty political gesture designed to cover up the loss of properly-funded local services, but as a description of millions of people's involvement in the mutual care of others it has some merit.

Many of these good people no longer feel they can find a place in any church. That's fair enough. We have chosen to stay outside to some extent. Many would say their time is better spent in doing something more useful instead and I wouldn't argue with them. All I ask from those who do still see church as a place they want to be, is an understanding that we are all co-travellers on the same journey, not that some people own the only accurate map and the rest of us are hopelessly lost without it. It is actually about the kind of people we will be; that is all that matters

The church, as its history surely shows, has little to be superior about. A touch of modesty here; an openness to new thinking there; an acceptance that your sexuality or your marital status is not necessarily the most important thing about you as a person; that's all some people want. Pulling up the drawbridge and keeping the faithful safe inside just makes us feel like attacking you!

Others start from somewhere else but people like me primarily want to be encouraged to *think* for ourselves, not to be treated only as an empty vessel into which the 'real' truth can be poured. I have something to contribute to this process. I am a unique human individual, not a problem for you to solve. I don't want to be spoon-fed, patronised or told what I ought to think or do. I am a grown-up. I have put away the things of childhood. Perhaps we can still help each other to be fully human and to find a kind of sainthood together. Our mutual sense of community can be a blessing to the world. This much I believe.

EPILOGUE

Where am I at the end of all this? I genuinely believe that I am like many people in our western culture: intellectually and morally unconvinced by the conventional claims of the Christian faith, but not entirely persuaded that we no longer have a need for any kind of 'spirituality', personal or corporate. Life still has to be understood; choices still have to be made.

Some would say that we have plenty of other sources of advice to guide us and should just leave the whole human edifice of religion behind. We have the media; literature of all kinds; other secular philosophies; our sense of 'conscience'; each other's insights etc. There are many ways of living available and all of them can be made to work. As Professor Cranfield acknowledged at the start, (though he didn't think much of their choice), few people claim to live by no kind of creed at all, even if they have never consciously sorted out what it is.

But I think I still want to give the Christian story a go, at least now and again.

As long as we remember that's all it is: a human story about ourselves, not a revelation of some eternal and unchanging supernatural straight-jacket. This, of course, immediately puts me outside the community of the faithful in the eyes of most of those who are firmly within it, but not outside the wider *diaspora* of those who are still interested enquirers.

I try to attend some local networks for radical and free-thinking Christians now and again. I cannot in all conscience affirm the formal or informal Creeds required elsewhere or be a full member of any Eucharistic community. But I can suspend my disbelief for a couple of hours and, to borrow a metaphor from Don Cupitt, allow the 'sea of faith' to wash over me for a while and then see what is left when the tide recedes. I can use the time to reflect, repent and renew myself. But that can only happen in a setting where there is space for my questioning humanity to be expressed, not if all I'm required to do is agree with everything that is said and done by those at the front.

Cathedrals are one of the few traditional Christian places where those who normally

treat religion with general indifference can still find a home. They are bucking the general trend of declining attendance, mainly because they are able to offer a diversity beyond the capacity of most local churches. They are far less at risk of becoming just a mutual-reassurance society for the faithful alone.

'My' cathedral, (as I like to call it) has been a part of my life on and off for over 30 years – a secure hold in a changing world. Not that it is old-fashioned; far from it. It moves remarkably with the times while retaining a sense of the mystery within the aesthetic beauty of its liturgy and superb uplifting music. It is essentially a theatre and, just as I can immerse myself in Shakespeare for an evening, what goes on there, reflecting a range of human insights and understandings stretching back over centuries, can still provide a stimulating context for our shared contemporary experience.

It is an inclusive and welcoming place, undemanding of assent to get in and always friendly. You can just 'be' there without any pressure. There is plenty of physical,

intellectual and emotional space to celebrate life and its many complexities. I can see that the person of Jesus permeates its activity and he has to be taken especially seriously. That is something (someone?) that I still want to affirm, if without all the later paraphernalia of faith. I am still exploring what it all means and where it will all end but that will have to do as a place to rest for now.

If you have found this pilgrimage interesting, please let me know. Any questions or comments, or invitations to join you in discussions can be sent to:
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