

WALKING WITHOUT GOD
In Search of a Humanist Spirituality

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First published by York Publishing

June 2011

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SUMMARY

In these nine short essays, together with an extended introduction, Ben Whitney uses verses from the Psalms to explore some of the big questions that religions are about: life and its possible meaning; suffering; forgiveness and the right ways of behaving towards one another.

What if you are drawn to the Judao-Christian story but do not believe in a supernatural God? Our universal human experience still requires us to find answers to these same questions. If you take God out of the equation, what are you left with?

These essays in an experimental 'humanist spirituality' are intended to stimulate and encourage both those who have a religious faith and those who do not. The journey may not always be comfortable, but anyone is welcome to walk along for a while and see where it leads.

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Starting from here

I was brought up to be a Christian. Church and Sunday School 3 times on Sundays. Youth Club, Bible Classes, summer camps; the lot. My father was a Baptist minister, if of a slightly unconventional variety, who grew increasingly disillusioned with that denomination's sometimes rather conservative theology and eventually became a full-time school teacher. My mother wrote books and booklets rather like this one in style (though not in content) for personal devotional use and to provide talks for the endless women's meetings that she seemed to lead or attend.

My brothers and I played services when we were young and competed to add up the hymn numbers during my father's sermons. We had massive church teas, with plain and fancy cakes, and played silly games in the evening. It was all very safe and I am grateful for it. The person I am now is inevitably partly the product of my parents. Thanks to them, Christianity is embedded deep within my psyche and will always be a part of me. But now that I am become a man, well actually almost 60, I have generally put away the things of childhood. It is about time.

A personal religious faith still has to be acted out in the real world, but does not always seem entirely comfortable there. We are an overwhelmingly secular nation with a rational scientific culture, despite the trappings of past ecclesiastical influence and authority. Prayers might still be said before each day in Parliament, but when it comes to the votes, MPs use their common sense and reason, or at least do what their party leader, not God, tells them to do. Juries weigh up the available evidence before they decide if someone is guilty of a crime; they do not ask God for inside information. We do not believe that God decides who will win the FA Cup, or obviously Stoke City would win it every year, and they never have!

There is some residual religious sentiment around of course, especially at Christmas, but much of it is superficial and superstitious, and given that less than 5% of people regularly attend a church, it would be nonsense to describe our nation as 'Christian'. In many of our towns and cities there are probably more Moslems and those of other faiths anyway. Does all this mean that the precious things of my childhood are dead, even if they won't quite lie down?

Religion, including the Christian version of it, is about the 'big questions' in life; or it should be. The church can sometimes seem rather different: money still has to be raised and buildings repaired; there are 101 petty arrangements to be dealt with in any organisation. I understand that. But I am really only interested in these big questions - life and its possible meaning; suffering; goodness; forgiveness; hope. In short, how we can put right what is wrong between us and live life to the full? These issues haven't changed that much in the three thousand years of the Judao/Christian tradition and they are still the key 'spiritual' or religious questions that seek to get to the heart of our existence. But the context within which we now address them has changed beyond all recognition, especially in the last two hundred years.

Because I, and millions of others, no longer believe in a supernatural 'God'. There, I've said it. To be honest, I probably never have done. It just does not make any sense to me. There may be other ways of defining the word 'God' that I will come back to at the end of these reflections, but I am a post-Darwinian and there is no way to put the genie back into the bottle. The world does not work at the command of a God in the way that was assumed to be the case for centuries. Basically, it runs itself, by natural processes and through chance. No God is needed to fill in the ever-diminishing gaps in our knowledge and understanding. I did have something approaching an adult faith for some time, though it was always full of doubts and questions and many of those around me probably saw through it. For a few years I even followed in my father's footsteps and once wrote a small book on prayer that some people said they found helpful. But I could not affirm it all now.

So I cannot with integrity engage in worship of or prayer to a Someone who is not there, though I am happy enough to be a participant-observer now and again, as long as I am not required to join in too much! I am pretty sure there will be others there like me, wondering whether they really believe it all. Such is the wonderfully inclusive nature (by and large) of the Church of England, that I also occasionally attend and always enjoy Sung Evensong in the Cathedral which I can see at this moment from my window. It is an aesthetic delight and invariably uplifting, though I do not join in the Creed or ever participate in Communion. I am watching from the boundary, not actually on the field of play.

I am an extremely limited amateur theologian in that I have learnt how to talk a little about God, but I recognise that is not at all the same as believing in Him. If God must be some kind of Other Being who became a man called Jesus of Nazareth who was put to death on a hill outside Jerusalem about 2000 ago, and who then rose again to a new kind of life, then I just don't think it is objectively true. Exactly what those few words mean, and how they possibly could be true, is far from obvious anyway and the overwhelming majority of people in western society do not believe it either.

I do still find the story of Jesus' life intriguing, such as we know it, and much admire the things he is reported to have said and done. His teachings deserve attention even from people like me. The gospel accounts were written later of course by those who now believed certain things about him so they are not to be trusted as any kind of impartial record. But there is much to reflect upon in his life, though Jesus too was bound by the understandings of his time, rather than ending the discussion on all matters forever. Even if the 'incarnation' was literally true, then Jesus could only have known what others knew in his age and culture. He cannot be in every way 'like us' but also some kind of timeless divine superman with secret powers.

However, I suspect that Jesus has been turned into something he never intended to be and that many subsequent claims made about him are based on misunderstandings, such as taking things literally about his birth and death that were never intended to be seen in that way. I acknowledge that this is a massive statement to make and of course I try to respect those who have come to a different conclusion – I just don't share it. The whole theology based on a 'salvation' through Jesus to secure our eternal future, but only for those who believe certain things about him, is particularly impossible to believe. This sometimes appears to be the sole business of religions, not this life at all, which, to me, puts the emphasis in entirely the wrong place.

I do not therefore believe in any kind of after-life, good or unpleasant. My sins, or rather, the less wholesome things in my life, are a problem to me now and then, but I am not so self-obsessed as to believe that they will have any lasting significance once I am dead. If there was a God, I am sure 'He' would have far more important things to worry about. There was a very long time when I was not here; millions upon

millions of years. There will be a time relatively soon when I will not be here again; and maybe millions upon millions of further years still to come after that. I am a mere speck in time in a massive universe. That's just the way things are. This is it.

I have studied the Bible more than most people, both as an academic discipline and in a pastoral context, which at least makes me useful in a pub quiz team! But as is evident from what I have already said, I do not believe that the Bible, or any other religious text, is God's 'Word' for all time and therefore beyond contradiction. We don't, of course, have any of the originals, only copies, so any claims about what it is saying have to be made with great caution. What we call the Bible is a collection of hugely diverse documents spanning hundreds of years with many human authors, most of whom are unknown. It is interesting as a historical record, and often instructive, but, like every collection of books, it was all written for its time and parts of it have worn better than others. None of us would dream of actually allowing all of its ancient assumptions to control our daily life in detail, whatever some may claim. It's more like 'guidelines' than a Code!

So, do I have anything Christian left? I think I subscribe to the view of religion put forward by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) in *The Essence of Christianity*, though I am not certain I have entirely understood him, given the book's considerable complexity. Basically, we have created God as a way of making sense of life, not the other way round. All religions, all scriptures, all creeds and all churches are man-made. This is a true statement even for believers, unless they claim to have had some direct supernatural experience of God; though even that claim is still mediated through their human perceptions. It cannot be any other way. Religion is a human activity so any 'religious' experience is dependent on us understanding it as such.

'God spoke to me in a dream' is only saying 'I dreamed God spoke to me' with the words in a different order. It still means the same, despite what might be claimed to be the greater significance of the first way of putting it. The Christian religion, or any other organised faith, did not fall from the sky. It was created, developed and taught by human beings. It has a human history that we can trace. All that we know about its past, we know through other people's witness. People who claim to be in direct contact with God are deluded, if not dangerous, and it is not what most believers

actually think. They are, rightly, too embarrassed to make such a claim and most religions counsel against it.

This is in no way intended to suggest that all such beliefs are of no value or somehow fraudulent because they derive from our human experience alone. Faith communities bring much that is good to the table, in the past and today. Feuerbach saw religion as 'man's finest expression of his ideals'. Maybe so, at its best, though I wouldn't necessarily go that far given its record in practice. I am not aware that anyone has ever been slaughtered in the cause of promoting a particular style of music or been subjected to an Inquisition by poets!

Music, poetry, art, love and much more besides are equally capable of moving us to tears and penetrating our hidden depths. Listening to the slow movement of Chopin's 1st piano concerto is as intense a religious experience for me as any other. There is so much inspiration on offer in Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen's Sunday morning show on Classic FM that I feel no need to be in a church instead. The sublime quality of the music, entirely written and performed by human beings, if extremely gifted ones, is testament to our massive potential for moving beyond the mundane into something more profound.

For I am more than mere flesh, bones and blood; I have a 'spirit', a 'uniqueness', a 'personhood' or some other such word, (though I do not believe I have a 'soul' in any conventional sense). Religious faith should be a means through which we grapple with and express our deepest emotions, not, as it sometimes seems, a way of repressing them into a set of rules and regulations. The questioning; the reaching-out and the creation of a God to reach out to, are entirely understandable and without them something good about us would have been lost. As Socrates said, life is meant to be examined. But a religion is only the means we have created to do it, not the end in itself. Perhaps it is time to move on, as people of faith have always done. Human self-understanding, or 'enlightenment', if you like the term, is the goal. I am still on the religious quest to uncover the deeper insights about my human reality, but I have to travel without a God. The journey is itself the destination.

It is in this context that I turn to the Psalms. They are about the 'big questions', at least here and there. The Psalms are the most obvious examples in the Jewish and Christian scriptures where we are at the centre and do most of the talking. They

speak from the human heart, often with great emotion. They are therefore likely to be more fruitful for the uncommitted enquirer than those parts of the Bible which are said to be the voice of God on earth and all we have to do is to listen and obey.

You will not find much emphasis in the following pages on critical exegesis of the Psalms' original context, no doubt much to my University tutors' horror if they were aware of it. To be honest, most of it would be guesswork anyway as we know so little about their origins. I am not interested in necessarily staying true to the writers' actual meaning at the time, even if we were able to establish exactly what it was. I am working from translations of translations, (primarily the Liturgical Psalter in the 1980 Alternative Service Book), so I am not even close to the 'original' in either language or time. Some of it is frankly incomprehensible, given the intervening years, without a detailed knowledge of Hebrew and Old Testament history and geography. (Stephen Fry chose 'Moab is my washpot' as the title for his autobiography. I would probably go for 'A stranger in Meshech').

The Psalmists do often speak from a position of rather smug superiority. That's when religions can start to lose their way as if they are the centre of everything and beyond all contradiction. The writers, likely to have been mostly state and Temple priestly employees with at least one eye on both keeping up morale and their jobs, are frequently uncharitable towards those of a different nation or faith. The constant refrain, of course, is that their community's uniquely special relationship with God sets them apart. Everything else has to be understood in relation to that. Such a stance is only to be expected.

But every now and then it is as if the mask slips and the writers also ask some pretty searching questions. My father, to whom in a way this work is dedicated long after his death, used to challenge those who asserted that Jesus was 'the answer' by saying, 'Yes, but what is the question'? A visiting preacher was doing a children's talk one Sunday morning. 'What's 2 plus 2?' he asked. 'Jesus' said a small boy at the back. 'Jesus is always the answer in these talks, whatever the question is!' Of course, God is usually the answer where the Psalmists give one; a solution that worked for them, if not for me and for millions like me. But I am still very interested in the questions. That is our universal point of contact. We share a common humanity and it is a greater understanding of that humanity that is my purpose here.

There are plenty of other places I could and do look for resources to aid my thinking about life. Religion is not the only way that we have tried to make sense of it all. Psychology has given us fundamental insights into who we are. Science has obviously made a massive contribution to understanding our world and its truths cannot possibly be ignored. For others it may be philosophy and more obviously humanist ideologies. My first experience of critical reflection was as a sociologist, trying to understand the human condition by studying the various groups to which we belong. Churches are a rich source of such analysis! But there are meanings to be had all over the place.

At this point I am returning to my Christian roots to see what emerges. Faced with so many possibilities, is it appropriate to call out as the Psalmists did, not in my case to a God, but still in order to express our innermost human feelings? Is there such a thing as a 'humanist spirituality' which can get to the heart of who we are? What happens if you set the insights of modern secular humanism, which to me are intellectually and morally inescapable, alongside elements of the Judao-Christian tradition which have also had significant influence in my formation as a person? This may not be an easy task, for me or for those who choose to travel with me. I am turning to the Psalmists by way of experiment, but I expect them to lead me not only by still waters but also onto rocky paths. I love country walking and a good day out contains both.

I have written this little book, I hope with a touch of gentle humour, largely because it has been rattling around in my head for years and it needed to come out! I have published it because I hope it might be of some interest to others on the same journey, perhaps even those who do have a conventional faith, as well as others who start where I do. I hope it might stimulate new thinking in the reader, individually or, better still, in groups. If you want to stay where you are, or go only where you have already been, you will probably not find what I have to say very helpful. You may even find parts of it too challenging, for which I can only apologise. Unlike some other writers on religion from a humanist perspective, it is not my intention to offend or in any way to disrespect anyone's beliefs. But I hope that you will be encouraged to think things through a little more and, even if we end up having to disagree, I hope we can do it without being disagreeable!

But it may be, and I throw this in at the start without having any clear sense of what it really means or where it might lead, that true faith is actually about letting go of God altogether. Like the journey from childhood to adulthood, spiritual maturity may be about moving from dependence to inter-dependence; from relying on a parent for your identity to having enough confidence in yourself to live together well. We cannot always hold our father's hand and eventually we have to cross the road alone, and help others to do so. Didn't someone say that it is only by losing your life that you can find it? Well perhaps it is only by losing your current God that you can find out what you truly believe.

1 Why are the nations in tumult?

Psalm 2 v.1

There can't be much doubt about the continuing relevance of this question, though the sharp-eyed reader might have noticed that I have quietly passed over Psalm 1 with its criticism of the 'ungodly'. Time to put my hands up in surrender right from the word go, and not for the last time either! The Psalmists, at this point, and at many others, no doubt seeking to celebrate victory over some enemy or other, inevitably saw their own nation's faith in God as part of the reason for their success. Whether being 'ungodly' as a way of life is quite the same as being 'unGodly' (with a capital G) in the sense of not believing in a supernatural deity, is an issue we will come back to. The question wouldn't even have occurred within a culture that assumed His existence. But given that those who believe in a God clearly do not have a monopoly on right ways of living or necessarily behave well all the time, and that those who not believe in a God are clearly not all inhuman axe-murderers, it requires a little more reflection. I'll save that up for later.

So, back to the disunited nations. Psalm 2 picks up similar questions to those raised in Psalm 1. The world was, and is, a dangerous and conflict-ridden place. I am lucky to live near the National Memorial Arboretum just off the A38 in Staffordshire. It contains a stunning circular centrepiece recording the names of all those British service men and women killed since the Second World War. New names are being added as I write and there is plenty of room for more, as no doubt there will need to be. Equally moving is the nearby German cemetery on Cannock Chase where thousands of those counted as our enemies are buried, their graves lovingly tended and beautifully kept by volunteer parties of young people from both countries. There is no more inspiring place to be when the late August heather covers the site in a purple glow.

Looking through any quality newspaper will highlight where the world is still in conflict. We are currently fighting wars on several fronts; in Afghanistan and against terrorism. Countries across North Africa and the Middle East are rebelling against their corrupt and undemocratic leaders, sometimes with our active support, though there is a growing fear that this may simply mean the replacement of one tyrant by another, as has so often been the case before. There are even stirrings of renewed

violence in Northern Ireland of which we had hoped to have seen the last. It was ever thus.

So why so much tumult? The surface reason in the Psalm is because the nations are disobeying God by their rebellion. Their dreams are 'vain'. That's actually quite hard to reconcile with the fact that throughout history God has frequently been used to justify the struggle against repression by those with an entirely legitimate cause. How do we know which dreams are vain? At many points in the Biblical story God is clearly on the side of the oppressed and the rebellious. And how many times has at least the name of God, or Jehovah, or Allah, been used to justify the violence, even when it was not in any sense 'just'? There is always a danger that, once they become victorious, nations begin to behave irresponsibly, forgetting the God who might actually have been on the other side and therefore critical of people like them! In most conflicts the name of God is invoked by everyone. All of which suggests to me that it is better to leave Him out of it altogether and dig a little deeper.

There are clues towards the end of the Psalm. There is advice for the world's rulers beyond simply submitting to God. Kings should govern with wisdom and not a little caution. They shouldn't begin to believe their own propaganda but retain an element of self-criticism. I wasn't alone in seeing the whooping and hollering following the execution of Osama bin Laden as somewhat distasteful. I am sure he was a very bad man and the world is better off without him, though I doubt he was much of a threat by the time of his death. But conflict goes on as much because the victors think they are right as because the oppressors continue to oppress. Both are dangerous and add yet more fuel to the fire.

The roots of all this conflict lie, of course, in us. The nations rage because we do, whether leaders or not. There is an undeniably competitive streak to our nature, reflecting our genetic origins and the need for survival. It is probably more acute in those with greater power because of the higher stakes involved and the closer public scrutiny they are under. I certainly wouldn't want an army of reporters and TV cameras watching my every move. But little generals strut about with just the same aggressive attitude all the time.

I love watching football but the bigoted xenophobia of many of those in the stands around me is terrifying. I just do not understand why people, (I have to say mostly

men), are so angry all the time. 'Calm down dear, it's only a game', except, of course, that it obviously isn't. Something much more important is at stake; their identity, their masculinity; their self-confidence as an individual. They are so wrapped up with their team that defeat on the pitch becomes a personal insult. Perhaps it is a war substitute, appealing to the same 'no surrender' spirit that war requires and for which there seems to be no shortage of takers. Road rage would be another example where the car becomes some kind of protective weapon which allows us to behave in ways we would not dream of doing face-to-face.

It is tempting to think that human fulfilment lies in nailing your colours to one particular mast and defending that above all else. But 'My country, right or wrong' can never take us where we need to go. No country; no political view; no moral standard; no religion, is ever always right. This might all be a bit messy and be seen as weakness, but digging trenches and then hurling insults, or worse, at each other, will only prolong the conflict. Why are the nations, or the individuals in them, so often in tumult? Because we like it that way; baddies in black hats; goodies in white ones. You are wrong and I am right. It seems to meet a deep human need for reassurance in order to mask our inner uncertainties. But that way leads only to yet more division and loss, when we should be emphasising what will help us grow together. Perhaps a little more humility all round might not be such a bad idea.

Psychotherapists tell us that dealing with our inner conflicts is essential for our emotional wellbeing. It probably goes back to the loss of security we experience as very young children which has to be put in its place if we are to grow up and become our own independent person. Some people, it seems, never get over it and have a deep-seated anger and frustration that dominates their conscious or subconscious personality. The discipline of dealing with what feeds our insecurities, rather than encouraging our search for harmony, is central to almost all religions. Others find it through reflection, study, conversation and 'talking cures'. Inner turmoil tears us apart and destroys both us and the relationships of which we are a part. In a world that is capable of a great many interpretations, differences are unavoidable and we cannot hope to get it right all the time. There is bound to be conflict between us. But it can be managed; with God if you wish, but equally as far as I am concerned, without Him.

2 What is hu(man)ity?

Psalm 8 v.5

Here's a question that gets us to the heart of it. What on earth is it all about, this crazy life we're all living? Who are we? What is the point of it all? What are we here for? Enough, enough I hear you crying. Perhaps many people have never consciously thought about it but we have all sought to find an answer, even if we have never explicitly asked the question. In a nutshell; what is the meaning of it all? I may have news for you – it doesn't have one.

The Psalmist, naturally, thought differently. For him, humankind and our physical environment could be defined only in relation to his God. 'You have made him the master of your handiwork' (v.7). God up there; something awful down below and us in the middle. Contemplating the incredible vastness of creation, even if at the time it was limited only to our tiny world and its sun, could only lead the writer to conclude that man was the next best thing to God Himself; in charge of all creation on His behalf; master of a physical world designed for mankind to dominate; the pinnacle of His creative work and just a little below the angels. The sons (and the daughters) of God.

It worked for hundreds of years. But it doesn't work now. We know what the Psalmist didn't know. If the whole physical history of the world is the height of a room, we don't even reach the top of the underlay. We are not the Masters of the Universe, just one race, on one planet, in one solar system set among billions of others. If we imagine that the Universe revolves around us, we are seriously mistaken.

Talking of rooms, a devout man died and went to heaven. St Peter showed him around. First they went to a room where everyone was holding a jumble sale. 'That's the Anglicans'. Next, to a room where a raffle was in full swing. 'That's the Catholics'. Then to another where a group were earnestly engaged in silent prayer. 'That's the Methodists'. Then St Peter led him across a courtyard to a building far away from all the rest, along a long corridor and down several flights of stairs to a room where enthusiastic singing of choruses could be heard. 'That's the Evangelicals. They think they're the only ones here!'

So it is with the Universe. 'The thing about space is that it's big. I mean really big'; (in the immortal words of Douglas Adams in 'The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy'), and we have no idea who or what else is out there. There isn't a home for little children above the bright blue sky, just a lot more space. This watery planet has a million others like it, or not like it, we don't know. But we do know that we are incidental to creation, not essential to it. It could, and did, get along perfectly well without us. There was a world before us as a species and there will be a world long after we are all gone, unless you believe that God is about to wind it all up pretty soon, for which there is absolutely no evidence. The human centrality that the Psalmist took for granted is unsustainable.

So what is humanity? Not much is the only answer possible. Quite valuable to us at the time of course. But in the great scheme of things? Next to nothing. To suggest some deeper divine purpose to my tiny life is a statement about my own importance that I just cannot make. Even if there is a God, He may be rather busy somewhere else right now and I just have to get on with it without Him.

So how does that make you feel? Depressed or hopeful? Creating the illusion of our value, at least in the eyes of a God, might seem reassuring, but I think I would rather be free. If God did somehow create us for His own purposes, then the human journey becomes a process of discovering what that purpose can be. It's all about living His life rather than mine; His Plan. And then you die! So let's hope that the purpose is about more than we know so far. You can see why there was a need for it. Millions have barely scratched the surface of human existence. They are gone before they even knew they were alive. What was their purpose in this great designer's scheme? Cannon-fodder for heaven, or for something worse, according to whether or not they got the chance to do whatever you have to do that makes the difference.

But if there is no set purpose; no prior meaning; no Plan, then life becomes an adventure in which every moment becomes purposeful, not just the bits that fit the script. The fact that so many get so little of it is a matter of profound sadness. I have certainly been one of the lucky ones but value is not only about the length of life. In a wider context it is always staggeringly brief anyway. It is much more about what you do with it, especially if you get a decent chance. It all becomes worthwhile. I was

born to sit here at this moment in front of this laptop. Yesterday I was born to have tea with my grandson. Hopefully tomorrow I will have been born to watch my preferred cricket team get the runs they need for victory. What is this life? A glorious opportunity for living so make the most of it while it lasts.

I actually think this was what Jesus believed. I don't refer to Jesus all the time in these reflections because he is so central to those who have genuine faith in him that I do not wish to appropriate him to my somewhat unconventional views. But was his life about fulfilling the purpose for which he was conceived, and over which he never really had any control because God was pulling the strings all the time? Or was it about discovering what his personal meaning might be; a much more open question, and then making a decision over whether or not he would do it? Either the Garden of Gethsemane was a charade, acted out for the benefit of the watching disciples before the inevitable conclusion that was actually unavoidable. Or he did actually have a choice? It could have proved too much, and, forgive me, he could have chosen a quiet life with Mary Magdalene instead.

I have to say that I personally have a great deal more respect for the path Jesus took if the second scenario is closer to the truth. Obedience to an external will that you know will all work out well in the end is nothing like as commendable as making a choice and sticking to it no matter how tough or uncertain the way ahead. I would rather be a mere human being, without the inside knowledge of where it is all going because of, or in spite of, me. Freedom from God makes life more personally meaningful, not less.

But I accept that I do not count for much in the great scheme of things. Each human life is not 'sacred'; it is valuable for itself alone not because of what it is derived from. For me, seeing our humanity only as a pale reflection of a Divinity makes it less precious than if it exists in and of itself, however brief that existence might be. It might make us feel better to think we each have an eternal significance. I can understand where the idea comes from. But it cannot be true.

There is no need to become depressed about this any more than I need to spend every waking moment worrying that it might be my last. What is woman? She is everything she hopes to be. She is imagination and skill and insight and compassion and generosity. She is love and pain and joy and sadness. She is music and poetry

and art and literature. She is science and languages and wonder and amazement. She is, in short, everything that is good about being alive, so let's get on with it!

3 Why do you stand far off O Lord?

Psalm 10 v.1

I have never been to Auschwitz. I am not sure I could cope with seeing the very spot where so much inhumanity was acted out. Others who have been there tell me that it is a deeply moving, silent place and that they feel enriched by the experience. I have been to the Jewish museum in Prague and seen enough TV programmes to have the merest sense of the awfulness of it all. Not believing in God does not make you hard-hearted and selfish, though the Psalmists might have erred towards making that assumption. Maybe the non-believer is more inclined to feel frustrated that such injustice goes on without apparent intervention by the God whom others claim to be so sure about. Dreadful violence and suffering is often perpetrated in His name. If God is claimed to be both good and all-powerful then why doesn't He put a stop to it? It's a criticism that deserves to be addressed.

Of course, many greater minds than mine have considered this question before and most from within both the Jewish and the Christian tradition have concluded that God was indeed at Auschwitz, experiencing it for Himself. Not actually far off at all but up to His neck in it. The Sidney Carter song 'Friday Morning' explores the same issue in just a few words, as powerful as any deep theological argument: 'It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me; I said to the carpenter a-hanging on the tree'. The Christian's trump card is that it was indeed God Himself on that hill of execution. So maybe He couldn't intervene where Jesus was concerned in order to make the point, but couldn't He do something more constructive to stop all the rest? Omnipotent but incompetent; not much of a God when the murderers are at your door.

Understandably, the Psalmist reveals a very human self at this point. To paraphrase: Why does God allow the wicked get away with it all the time? Even the believers doubt God's usefulness, if not openly then 'in their hearts'. It is not surprising that faith may fail in such a situation. He gets no further than calling on God to 'do something'. 'Surely you see the trouble and sorrow you look on?' I am sure many know just how he feels. After the earthquake and tsunami that devastated much of the east coast of Japan in 2011 and led to thousands of deaths and a potential nuclear catastrophe, even the Pope expressed himself somewhat mystified by how

God 'allows' such things to happen. If he doesn't know then I guess most of us can be forgiven for not being able to square this particular circle.

For some believers a less involved far-off God is actually required if the world is to be allowed to work. Their God started it all off, like a watchmaker, but now sits back and lets it run, warts and all. Surely this is just as awful to contemplate as a God who could intervene but doesn't? 'All my fault but don't blame me!' It is a huge and positive step into what being human is all about to understand that we are on our own in this world, if alone together, not subject to the whims of some other Being. Would we really want it any other way? As there is no all-powerful Being called God who is presiding over it all then at least He is off the hook for me. He 'allows' nothing. It just happens. Why is God far off? Because we live in a world of infinite and at least semi-random possibilities and not in one under any external direct control. We are free human beings, not robots.

We can do without an interventionist God just as much as an indifferent one. Imagine for a moment what life would be like if it were true; if there were a God who did, or did not intervene according to some rule or other that it was not my place to know about or understand. It would be entirely His call because He is God. Life would be a nightmare. If you add in the Psalmist's hope that God might be persuaded to act differently by constant requests, like a less than industrious MP, then the whole idea becomes utterly obscene. It would lead to this child being allowed to live because we asked Him nicely, but not that one. This war might be stopped, or, more likely, result in victory for our side if God agrees with us, but not that one. The tsunami would not strike here, but somewhere else. We would need to organise mass pray-ins, (which some have actually suggested), because that's the only way God might be moved to zap somebody else. It's the very worst kind of scenario and belongs solely in the realm of science fiction. If that is your God then I'm afraid you are welcome to Him.

Perhaps a bit of a caricature but many people's belief in God comes close. There can be no faith in a God who could change things but doesn't. The Psalmist couldn't conceive of such a solution but things have moved on since then. Much more is under human control than he thought. But he is also expressing a more universal sentiment that bad things shouldn't be allowed and that bad people shouldn't be allowed to get away with them. At this point I can only agree.

I will consider elsewhere the question the Psalmist raises about where the good and bad things come from. Here he is interested in justice, and so am I. Not revenge, that's different, but our natural wish is to see wrong things put right. But it's not God we ought to be criticising for failing to do it; it is ourselves. The whole thrust of the conventional spiritual journey is to seek justice, or 'righteousness' as the Bible often puts it. It's all about a personal lifestyle, not about shifting the responsibility onto an absent God like we do with the Council or the police. 'They ought to do something about it'. No, we ought to. I ought to.

I might not have been to Auschwitz, but I have been to Robben Island, just off Capetown, where Nelson Mandela was held captive for 17 years until his release in 1990. It was a privilege to stand at the entrance to his cell, to walk in the exercise yard where he had sheltered from the blistering sun and exchanged a few secretive words with his fellow captives. Surely one of the greatest men of the twentieth century? Why? Because he never shirked from recognising that change would only come about in South Africa when individuals stood up to be counted, starting with himself. And then, just as importantly, when the chance finally came for him to make a difference on a massive scale, he did it with a humility and a gentleness that was deeply impressive.

I am sure he must have cried from his cell for God to 'do something'. In times of isolation he must have felt all the lonely agony of the Psalmist as the oppression of his people seemed to show no sign of ever ending. But it all comes down to us if we want to make the world a better place. Expecting a God to do it for us is just a cop-out. Nelson Mandela came to see that talking to the enemy was the only way forward; quiet diplomacy, not the dramatic intervention of an external God to change the course of history. We have seen something of the same in Northern Ireland where, I have to say, from my personal experience, too much sense of God seems to be an obstacle to reconciliation, not a way forward. Perhaps it actually helps to take God out of it. He is far off, in the understanding of the Psalmist, or not there at all as I would put it, because if He weren't, we would be tempted to run away from our own responsibilities and leave it all to Him!

4 Cleanse me from my secret faults

Psalm 19 v.12

'Confession', they say, 'is good for the soul'. It is certainly at the heart of Christian worship. Virtually all traditions expect that before approaching God the believer should undergo a process of self-examination and acknowledge the things, said, done and not done, that might be a barrier. Some take this further than others. It always used to irritate me that Baptist services often began with the notices. We only got around to acknowledging something approaching our 'manifold sins and wickednesses' after we'd dealt with the far more pressing problem of sorting out the arrangements for the Christmas Fayre! Other traditions perhaps give it too much prominence in ways that seem to perpetuate an unhealthy sense of guilt and which reinforce an entirely male authority structure that looks increasingly out of place.

The Psalmist's emphasis at this point is on seeking resolution of his 'secret' faults. It will probably be just as important to focus on the blindingly obvious ones! Baptists are big on prayer meetings, which, I have to say, did not always bring out the best in me or those with whom this rather embarrassing ritual had to be shared. 'If he uses that word once more, I'll scream' as someone once whispered to me. I was once taking part in a meeting where a worthy brother, moved by Jesus' story about the Pharisee and the poor man, thanked God that he was not like that Pharisee, unable to see the faults that were obvious to others; i.e. that he was grateful to God that he was not like other men, the very failing for which the Pharisee was criticised in the first place! Once we'd sorted out the string of negatives, the irony was not lost on some of his companions, even if it was on him.

The advantage of the non-conformists' way of doing these things is that no intermediary is involved in this process. In a congregation that affirms the priesthood of all believers, forgiveness, such as it is ever expressed, comes from one another. Indeed, on reflection, I am not sure that an appeal to God is even involved, making it a short step for me to affirm that the Psalmist's desire for cleansing is best addressed to those whom he has wronged, rather than to God. You can even leave God out of it and it still 'works'.

Those of a more Roman Catholic theology or with a narrower view of priesthood could not of course agree. Not only must the forgiveness be communicated through

an intermediary – and not just anyone can do it – it must be the forgiveness of God that is declared, or there's not much point in it. The stakes are also somewhat reduced if, like me, you do not believe that our individual eternal destiny is somehow bound up with the way we have behaved beforehand. This is the great hold that religion - human-made, remember, in my understanding – may continue to have over us. The granting, or not granting of future forgiveness can become an issue of power; over our lives and even our deaths. Extremely dangerous in the wrong hands, as the history of the Church has surely demonstrated? It is not only the church of the pre-Reformation period which has sometimes appeared to abuse this extremely privileged position.

The Psalmist is no doubt worried that his secret faults, which perhaps he is not even aware of, might count against him in some final judgement. If that were true, then, like Dad's Army, surely 'We're all doomed'! I may be condemned for something I didn't even know about or even just because I was born at all and in the wrong place. The whole doctrine of 'salvation' - what God is said to have done in Jesus - is designed to address this. 'Don't worry; God will sort it out at the end, like Poirot, but only as long you believe in Him'. Roman Catholics and Protestants have each prepared for this eventuality in different ways. But relying on God to pull a rabbit out of the hat when you confess your sins and receive absolution at the last minute, or putting your faith in Jesus because you believe that he will get you to the front of the queue, are both equally dubious, in my humble opinion at least.

What we need instead is to receive, and to offer 'cleansing' here and now, especially between those whom we love and who love us. I do not believe that there is a God who keeps the score of all our wrongs. But I know that I do exactly that, about myself, and about other people, and that there are things in my own life and the lives of those closest to me that I regret or that I wish had been different. Those little failings, resentments and injustices all add up and affect the way we behave towards each other. I would be healthier and more loveable if those things were no longer there. I am in danger of lapsing into Alan Bennett's parody of a vicar: 'Life is like a tin of sardines. There is always a little bit in the corner you can't get at. Is there a little bit in the corner of your life? I know there is in mine!'

But I hope you get the point. Cleansing comes from putting things right with each other. It can't wait. I genuinely believe that we don't need a God to do that. Indeed, leaving it to Him is entirely wrong. Thinking it will all be resolved, one way or the other, when we die is seriously disabling and dehumanising along the way and we are much better off without such an idea.

I am not so bothered about the long list of petty misbehaviours which religion has sometimes emphasised as the most important. Despite the Psalmist's emphasis on secrecy, I am not particularly interested in what adults get up to in the bedroom as so many seem to be. The Church of England seems to be forever in danger of tearing itself apart over the issue. Sex, so often equated with sin and dirtiness, has been a rich source of religious intolerance over the years. Being divorced still seems to be viewed by some as unforgiveable while far greater ills can be safely left in the Confessional. People make mistakes; get over it! I have met too many people unable to forgive themselves for some past misdemeanour. I don't see why religion should add to their burden.

The things that tear us apart and which leave us with a genuine sense of needing to be cleansed are the abuse of one another, not whether some activity is currently on the banned list. This is a reciprocal arrangement, as in the Lord's Prayer. It is just as important to give forgiveness as to receive it. Cleansing comes from both the wrongdoer and the wronged being able to close the book and move on. I would dare even to suggest that it is in this mutual forgiveness that we are 'saved' and that in its denial we are condemned to a living hell. If redemption can't happen and either party is left with the unresolved memory, then a great deal of human unhappiness results. Whether this wholesome activity is the 'grace of God', or human beings behaving at their best, might be up for discussion. But either way it is obviously what is good for us.

However, there is a problem for people like me here. Some of those whose forgiveness I would like to receive and who would help me to feel more 'cleansed' as a result if we could sort it out, are no longer in my life. I don't know where they are. Some have died. There are several people I would like to go back to and apologise for the way I behaved towards them. There are other people who I would like to treat me in the same way but from whom I am now estranged. The lines of

communication between us are broken and I suspect the issues will always remain unreconciled. All I can do is to let the past go. I can easily see why a God is needed to fill this particular gap. In His absence it's probably a good idea to stick to the idea of always treating others as you would like to be treated yourself. Otherwise, you never know when the opportunity to put things right may have gone forever.

5 My God, my God; why have you forsaken me?

Psalm 22 v.1

If you are still with me, you will probably think you can anticipate my response to the Psalmist at this point. 'If there is no God, He cannot forsake us, so what's the problem?' True, in a sense, but of course it doesn't stop us feeling abandoned. It is a remarkable tribute to the church that these words, said by at least some of the witnesses to have been among the very last spoken by Jesus, were not expunged from the record. The sense of utter despair and perhaps the companion feeling that he had been wrong after all – that this was not what he thought his God had intended – makes even someone with my degree of scepticism accept that there is an authentic record here that cannot be entirely ignored.

Abandonment is integral to human experience, with or without a God. The Psalmists could not imagine coping without their God. 'The fool says in his heart: There is no God' (Psalm 53 and elsewhere). OK, I have to part company with them at this point. I really don't think it is so foolish, even if the conviction that there is a God clearly still brings people immense comfort in times of despair and personal loss. But the insight of the atheist fool might be the one that brings us most personal benefit in the end. The best sermon I ever preached was on a Good Friday that also fell on April 1st. I started with the Beatles song about the Fool on the Hill and the wonderfully imaginative idea contained in 1 Corinthians 1 v.25 that our ideas of wisdom and foolishness are often topsy-turvy. Fools have a long tradition of speaking the truth.

But back to the original Psalm. If I had to bring my twenty-first century mind to bear on this particular Psalmist I would say that he was depressed. His physical body was in ruins (vv.14-18); his self-esteem was at rock bottom (v.6); he had lost all sense of purpose and direction in his life (v.7-8) and wasn't sleeping too well either (v.2). Anti-depressants would no doubt have helped if only they'd been invented but he bravely works through his distress by the end and at least feels confident in his God. Some of us don't have that final refuge available which, I will try to convince you, is actually a good thing. In the end, good mental health is about coming to terms with inevitable abandonment. We are on our own and what a gloriously liberating fact that is. The one inescapable fact about human existence is that people will leave us or that we will leave them first. It's called death and there is no escaping it.

Lest it appear that I am being unsympathetic to genuine human suffering here, I had better make it clear that I speak not from any position of happy fortune which has spared me the losses and despair of others. Depression is no stranger to me or to other members of my family, even to the point of needing hospital treatment. My father died when I was in my early twenties; my older brother died not that long after while still a young man with a wife and three children. My personal relationships have been a mixed blessing over the years, with much to celebrate but with at least one devastating abandonment from which I thought at times I would never recover. This is all entirely normal not exceptional. That's the point. The human deal is temporary. 'All flesh is grass'. Or, in the words of Tim Rice and the guys who were in Abba; 'No-one in your life is with you constantly'. Nothing, and no-one, lasts forever.

The religious reaction to this tough reality of feeling forsaken has often been to seek and to offer consolation through what comes next. The idea of an after-life in which we will again meet those who have been dear to us is the most obvious example. Of course we don't like the thought of our loss being forever and are reassured by the thought that there will be no tears in heaven. But the concept is shot through with difficulties. Some of the highlights of my brief pastoral ministry came from the privilege of conducting funerals, usually for people who hadn't been near a church for years but who still turned to the local chapel to sort it all out when the time came. I have to say that in many cases the widows in particular were rather hoping that this was the end! That sounds cynical but the reality of many relationships is that they are less than wholesome and the idea that they might go on for an eternity not much of a comfort.

Conversely, the hardest funerals were those for non-Christian loved ones of believing survivors; partners; parents; children. The pain of their loss was sometimes compounded by a fear that they would not see the loved one again if such a blessed future is dependent on a faith which they knew their relative did not have. Christians tend to fudge the issues at this point for genuinely compassionate reasons. After all, who can claim to know the mind of God - there is a solution to this mystery which we cannot comprehend. Well, maybe there is. Or maybe it is better just to let go of this potentially divisive idea altogether.

I was never able to resolve this conundrum. People still expected you say all the right things. It was one of the many reasons why ministry was not for me. Should I go through the liturgical motions because that's what it said in the book and affirm an everlasting life for people to whom the whole idea was an alien concept, just because that would make those left behind feel better? Or should I gloss over those bits of the service that talk about what happens next and emphasise instead what a good bloke Jim was and how much he'll be missed down at the bowls club? I veered towards the second because it had more integrity for me and for 90% of the people at the funeral who didn't really believe in everlasting life either. But it always felt a bit like cheating.

The fragility of life, and of the relationships on which we depend to live it, is understandably a source of great sadness for some. Tragic things happen to the best of people. But that's it – they just happen – no-one sends them. It's just chance. Some friends of mine have just lost their son in a freak accident at the age of 25. No God targeted them or their son for such an event. Sadness is part of the package of being human; the other side of the wonderful joy we get from those that we love and who love us in return. You just can't have one without the other. Grief at our abandonments is not an illness; indeed it is positively healthy. Being unable to let the person go is fatal.

I think of this most when I see some of the parents of children who have been murdered; sometimes they are still unable to move on, even after fifty years. I once took a funeral for a little boy who had drowned in a canal in suspicious circumstances. He was almost certainly pushed in by older children but it could never be proved. His poor mother never recovered from her unresolved anger and the guilt she felt because she wasn't there to protect him. The loss dominated her life until she herself died, quite literally from a broken heart. But in the end the bedroom has to be redecorated, not kept as a shrine. There has to be an end to things; even to very precious things.

The only way to avoid such pain is to keep other people out. We can build a wall around ourselves if we like. We can even wall ourselves up with a God who we have turned to for comfort in the face of the messy inevitability of human relationships. The natural tendency is to believe that at least He will still be there even if all others

fail. But in my experience at least, you can't be close to anyone without living with the risk, and the almost certain reality of them not being there one day. Might this be true even of God? We have to let go. No loss, no love. Those of us who have no choice but to embrace a post-modern reality that cannot put Him back again, may be fools. But we may have unwittingly stumbled onto the clue to life itself.

6 Blessed is he that considers the poor and helpless

Psalm 41 v.1

'Imagine there's no heaven; it's easy if you try', wrote John Lennon in a song that is still enduringly popular. He imagines a world in which right things are done and people live well together, not because there is some supernatural obligation involved, or because it will be to our eternal merit in the end, but just because it is the right thing to do. The prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola, shockingly misquoted and abused for party political purposes when Margaret Thatcher took office, says something similar. Obviously the context is different. St. Ignatius is concerned that people should love others because it is 'God's will', though the desired end product is pretty much the same as for me and John Lennon. But they should do it solely because of the rightness of doing it, 'not for thought of any reward' except knowing they have done it. We should seek justice for those who are experiencing the injustices of life. Even if there is no heaven, or no God.

It is one of the more depressing aspects of contemporary culture that being a 'do-gooder' has become a term of abuse. We are often suspicious of people's intentions and immediately wonder what their hidden agenda is. Of course it can have a down side; some people are pretty determined to do good to others and the rest of us had better be grateful! But the world can surely use as much goodness as we can muster? Justice; rightness; translate it as you wish, demands that we roll our sleeves up and get stuck in. And our compassion needs to be shown as much towards those who don't seem to deserve it as to those who do. Genuine goodness does not discriminate.

Many of the most heroic attempts at making the world a better place, including but not exclusively, many of those carried out by Christians as part of their personal response to Jesus, are about pushing out the boundaries of our compassion, beyond the easy targets. Charities for animals and most of those for children, though not all, can usually rely on receiving generous public support. But why bother with drug addicts; drunks; the homeless; child abusers, the feckless truants and those who do not help themselves? Some would say that it's probably their own fault anyway and they don't really merit consideration in our new 'Big Society'. It seems we are still keen to distinguish between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor; a concept which the Welfare State was supposed to have relegated to history's dustbin.

The Psalmist has a rather different perspective and Jesus also seems to have taught that the poor and the helpless in particular were at the centre of what he called the 'kingdom of God'. This is when we are closest to the historical Jesus, whatever the church has done with him since. He looked to some very unlikely examples to shame the supposedly religious elite who thought they had God in their pockets; prostitutes; tax-collectors; poor and insignificant old ladies, even those from outside or very much on the margins of the Jewish chosen people. 'The kingdom of God' is like this, was Jesus' frequent refrain. Then he told a story about everyday life and left his hearers to join up the dots.

It is an interesting phrase that bears some reflection and, just to confuse things a bit, it may not always appear to mean the same thing. But it is one of the most common phrases in the New Testament and so must be at the heart of what religion is supposed to be about. Sometimes it is translated as the 'kingdom of heaven', (largely because even writing the word 'God' was considered a blasphemy). This version might suggest that this kingdom is somewhere else; not on earth. But the whole thrust of Jesus' teaching appears to be the opposite; including in the Lord's Prayer. The rule of God on earth, or 'the right way of living' in my understanding, is what matters. And the greatest test is how much difference we make to those who most need it, who are not necessarily those who appear to most deserve it.

This is often what led the great pioneers of social reform, and many ordinary people since, to do what they did for prisoners, slaves, the sick and so on. Where would our society be now without them? There is a tremendous Christian legacy here for which I am extremely grateful. Here the secular and the religious often blur, not perhaps in terms of underlying motivation, but by agreement over what is best to uplift the human spirit. People of faith do not have a monopoly on goodness but they have often been the first to the barricades. There are a few Christians who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use, but most are very much the opposite. In the end what matters more – the things you believe in or the things you do?

So where does this leave those of us whose motivation does not include serving a God? Well I hope no-one sees us as being on the other side. The Psalmists were often tempted to see the 'ungodly' as part of the problem, not the solution, but I can't agree. No doubt many bad people have no faith. But neither do many good people.

They still wear themselves out in good causes or even in extreme circumstances, give their lives for what is right. The argument sometimes used against us is that we cannot know what is right, or good, because we have no-one to teach us the way. But we have plenty of people to teach us, not just those from within one tradition. I am as inspired by Gandhi as I am by Martin Luther King and by many others of no faith at all.

I am happy to affirm that there is natural sense of justice within us – a conscience, if you like. Part of our humanity is a sense of what is right and wrong for us.

Translating that into practical action can be difficult and that's where religion usually comes in to give us the details. The danger is that the rules then take over and it becomes all about following them. It should be all about outcomes; it's by the 'fruits' that we should judge.

So can you have ethics without God as well as religion without Him? How would we decide whether a particular action is right or wrong? Well, it depends! Often we just 'know', but in general I am a utilitarian. What is good is generally what works out best, not necessarily what a commandment, a rule or a religion requires. A pioneer of 'situation ethics' said that sometimes you just have to set aside all your principles and do what you know is right. There is a great deal of truth in that.

In particular, it seems right to keep to the Psalmist's principle that the outcome of any action should be what is best for those who have least, not best for those who already hold all the cards. If that challenges some human ideologies or political perspectives more than others, then so be it. I was often accused of muddling religion and politics when I tried to get people to make the connection between their faith and what was going on around them. It is, of course, impossible to avoid doing so. The Psalmist certainly had no such worry.

Whatever you believe, or don't believe, does it make a difference to the way things are? Well, of course it must or what is the point of it? And, in particular does it make a difference to those on the margins? It is a blessing to seek what is best for them. Or, as the secular utilitarian would put it, it is in everyone's best interests. If you are a person with no religious faith, you still have a social obligation to fulfil. If you are a person of faith, don't take my word for it: Read the gospels!

7 Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked; from the throng of evildoers Psalm 64. v.2

Since I gave up masquerading as a Baptist Minister and drifted away from anything approaching active church membership, I have earned my daily bread by supporting schools in dealing with some of their more complex pastoral responsibilities: non-attendance, special needs, family breakdown, domestic violence and, above all, child abuse. The abuse of children is probably the most abhorred behaviour in our culture, worse even than some killings in most people's eyes. Sexual abuse in particular rightly arouses very strong emotions, though not all of them are very helpful in dealing with it. Some reports of the most high profile cases, especially those carried out by children on children have, in particular, failed to appreciate how the sins of their fathers, and even their mothers, are so often to blame. I am fundamentally opposed to the very idea of an 'evil child'.

The abuse of children is utterly unacceptable behaviour and although I have often argued for the need to understand it and find out why it happens, it can never be condoned, excused or ignored. Sadly it is not that unusual; it is certainly more prevalent than the known statistics suggest, affecting as many as one in six children according to confidential surveys of adults about what happened to them when they were younger. As the Psalmist says, it often involves a conspiracy, these days usually via the internet. It is entirely understandable that he asks to be kept safely away from it. Adult domestic violence is just as prevalent. Deliberate harm of another individual, by definition in my philosophy of life, is a denial of our common humanity and an assault against us all.

Yet there is a strange contradiction here. Look through any tabloid newspaper and you will quickly see that it is dominated by the activities of the wicked. We love it! The editors, and their readers, can't get enough of an abduction or sex scandal. Such stories sell masses more papers than usual and they plaster as many pages as they can with as much detail as they can possibly find, even if they have to make it up. As I write we are close to the anniversary of the abduction of Madeleine McCann, (never 'Maddy'; that was just an invention by the press because it fitted into the headline more easily). I grieve for that sad family, because, quite frankly, any of us might have made the same fatal mistake of assuming everything would be OK, because it nearly always is. Of course her parents wish they could turn back the

clock and must long that their precious child could have been kept hidden from such cruelty. Only the heartless can fail to hope for her safe return.

The words that both the Psalmist and the papers use are interesting. Is there a difference between 'evil' and 'wicked'? - allowing for the fact that young people now use the latter as a term of appreciation, or they used to, it's probably out of date by now! To me, at least, the word 'evil' brings in an allegedly supernatural dimension that 'wicked' does not. Wicked people are bad; evil people are somehow possessed by some force beyond themselves. The tabloids mostly use 'evil; even 'pure evil', which seems a rather odd combination. Does it matter? Well, yes I think it does.

Where does evil come from? Even the non-religious person will usually say 'the devil' or at least some malevolent external force that can somehow take over a human being – the idea is extremely popular in films and TV series. Many Christians will give the same explanation, seeing life as a battleground between the powers of good (God) and evil (the devil). I am not sure if the same shift from an abstract idea to a specific personality works so well in other languages, but you can easily see what has happened in English. Evil is an alien invader, to be resisted and which threatens the essential goodness of the world without 'him'.

The trouble is, that isn't what the Bible says, or not all the time, if that matters to you. This is about as close I get to anything approaching biblical criticism but we need to go back to the very beginning, or pretty close to it according to the writers of the early chapters of Genesis. There is no devil in the Garden of Eden. The idea that he is there by implication, represented by the serpent, is an entirely later concept. Other ancient religions, Zoroastrianism for example, have a mythology that there is a constant cosmic battle going on between opposing spiritual forces, but it's not there in Genesis 3. It comes in later, partly under the influence of those other religious ideas. Certainly it was prevalent by the time of Jesus, which shows how believers have always been willing to re-interpret their scriptures as things change.

The serpent is part of the creation, not an outsider. The staggeringly powerful message of Genesis is that evil comes from within. We are not possessed by it. It is possessed by us! The ancient writers saw bad things as a consequence of human disobedience following a golden age that didn't seem to last too long. Of course I don't believe there ever was such a time. Life before 'the Fall' would have been

something else, not life as we know it now. But you can't escape your genes. The contemporary reality, then as now, is that human beings are tempted to do bad things and they do them. There is no-one else to blame, easier though that might sometimes feel. In the myth, Adam and Eve typically tried to blame each other, but that won't wash either. They each made the choices; they each take the consequences.

Christians affirm that the only way out of this tricky situation is through personal faith in God's action in Jesus to set us free from our 'sins'. I don't feel the need to take that step and I'm not convinced it is a solution anyway. It didn't need God to get us into this mess and I'm not sure we should rely on Him to get us out if it. Evil still prospers whatever you believe about Jesus. We still have to deal with it and what it is doing to us here and now. It can't wait for some future resolution. The Psalmist was content to hide away from it. I want it to stop.

Which brings me back to child abuse. It has always gone on though we've only recently acknowledged the fact. In respectable Victorian Britain city businessmen stopped off at a child prostitute on their way back to their home in the suburbs where the family both stayed together and prayed together. We used to expect the victims of abuse to just put up with it. Not anymore. We are facing up to it at last. We are training professionals to be more aware of what's going on, to recognise the warning signs and be ready to listen and respond. We are telling children that they don't just have to keep quiet for fear of what will happen if they tell someone they trust, no matter what lies their abuser may have told them. We are helping adult 'survivors' to put a name to the experiences that have ruined their lives and put the wrongdoing in its place. They are more powerful than their abuser. With help, they can be the winners and don't have to spend the rest of their lives in fear. We are helping abusers face up to what they have done and to change. Wickedness, we must at least always hope, can yet be redeemed before it is too late.

I don't believe in a God who is responsible for all this healing activity. It's our doing and we should be proud of it. Even if I did and saw Him as the source of all the love, compassion and kindness in the world, I still wouldn't counsel anyone to let Him deal with it in His own good time. You have to deal with it. I have to deal with it. I

sympathise with the Psalmist in wishing he could put his hands over his eyes and make the nasty man go away. But it's not enough.

8 Where O Lord are your loving kindnesses of old?

Psalm 89 v.50

Nostalgia is not what it used to be! As I get older; certainly losing my hair, and when becoming 64 is just around the corner, I might be tempted to look over my shoulder like the Psalmist and think that my best days have gone. I used to ask the older people in my church never to start a sentence with 'In my day...'. It was still their day. They were still valued members of the congregation, though equally, we all need to recognise that the way we have done things before is not necessarily the way things should always be done in the future. I think my generation will be different when we get to old age. No bingo and carpet slippers for us. I shall expect Sky Sports, the internet, malt whisky and a very pretty nurse. Plenty to look forward to!

People often seem to believe that things were better in the 'old days'. For many, the past is not just a 'different' country, but a safer one; a refuge into which it is tempting to retreat when the going gets harder. I suppose that's why we all love costume dramas so much. Maybe we like to look back because death is getting ever-nearer and it's time to take stock. Maybe it's just because that was when older people were in their prime and they see that as evidence of God's greater blessing then, rather than just the natural cycle of life. But I'm not convinced that the past was so wonderful. In general, 'never go back' is pretty good advice. I always prefer to do walks between two different places, not circular ones. That way it is never best to retrace your steps, whatever seems to lie ahead, because I'm being picked up at the other end and the only way home is forwards.

When were these glory days to which so many long to return; when God was with us and all was well? Probably for about 20 minutes in the 1950s! Sociologists tell us that every generation has had its problems. True there was perhaps a more obvious sense of community then and life was certainly less complicated. But was it really better when families not only shared outside toilets but had to live with their in-laws? Poor but happy? I doubt it.

Religious people tend to look back to a supposed time when the churches were fuller, marriages lasted forever and everyone knew their place. In fact, churches were nearly always built to outdo the church down the road and could hold far more people than ever went to them, or many only went because they had to. Many

marriages were a loveless sham and people only stayed together because the couples, or at least the women, had little or no choice. And the First World War put paid to the social contract between the classes. It also finished off millions of people's faith in God, from which the church has never recovered.

Why does all this matter? For me, the Psalmist raises another important question here. Is there any hope for the future, or are we all going to hell in handcart? Is our personal meaning to be found only in the past or is the best yet to come? There is certainly a strong feeling among some that things were better when there was less argument about God and He was more or less taken for granted. The current Pope, in particular, seems to have identified 'aggressive secularism' as on a par with Al-Qaida in terms of its threat to our wellbeing. I am far from sure that harking back to a time when God was supposedly more central is anything other than merely wishing that everyone still agreed with those in charge and did as they were told!

Of course there is much that is wrong today. I've spent too long trying to help sort out the disasters that family life can become to have a rose-tinted view of endless social and moral progress. The First World War finished off this idea as well. No society is perfect. We meet lifestyles and values now that were previously unknown to respectable God-fearing people. TV and the blurring of social groups have led some to believe that sex and drugs and rock and roll will be the death of us all. We are a very different kind of society than we were 50 years ago. More multicultural, more diverse, more free. Perhaps also more honest. But there's no denying that we are also less at ease with ourselves and that there are many casualties of our freedoms who think that their lives lack value, purpose and significance.

Faced with what the sociologists might call this sense of 'alienation', the Psalmist is tempted to look back to better days. The Christian solution to this sense of dissatisfaction has often been to encourage us to look forward, but only to a better world elsewhere, in which of course I do not believe. At least we can put our hope in God if all else fails. But that idea is fraught with uncertainty and may make us feel even worse! Dr Johnson, the 18th century man of letters (and not a few words) who was born just round the corner from where I live, was once discussing this with his friend Boswell. Johnson admitted to a real fear of death. When challenged that he should surely be looking forward in hope thanks to 'the merits of his redeemer',

Johnson replied that there was little in such a response to encourage him. He could no more be sure that he would be set on the right hand with the sheep than on the left hand with the goats! I know how he felt.

I am far more inclined to look for signs of hope in the present rather than rely on God to compensate me later for a life in a hope-less world beforehand. Isn't this what Jesus did in the parables? It seems to me that there are endless things to encourage us without longing for a happier human past or a glorious heavenly future. We have kept Europe free from the sort of carnage that our grandparents and parents had to go through. We have made huge strides in medical knowledge and the ability to prevent and alleviate painful suffering and illness. We may not yet have made poverty history but fantastic work to improve people's lives is going on all over the world, every day. I never cease to be surprised by the quality and compassion of so many of our young people who, whatever you read in the papers, are not all lazy good-for-nothings. I would far rather be alive now, and be alive here, than in so many times and places before.

Where are God's loving-kindnesses? Well they may not be in evidence only among those who still give Him the credit, but they are certainly still there. Public attitude surveys show that an overwhelming majority of people still think they have a duty to support their neighbours. Millions of people volunteer. We are nothing like as selfish as is sometimes claimed. Just because the church doesn't run things anymore that doesn't mean they aren't still being done. The hospice movement would be a particularly fine example. Churches might well be a good place to start looking, but don't be seduced by tunnel vision. When Christopher Wren completed St Paul's Cathedral it was suggested that a memorial be set up to mark the significance of his work. If you stand beneath the central dome and look at the floor you will see that tribute, written in Latin. 'If you want to see my memorial, look around you'.

I would recommend the same to those who feel that the glory days are gone and that love and kindness are in short supply these days. Look in some unlikely places and you will find them. That has quite definitely been my own experience. Negativity is a killer. We are so much better off remaining positive, because suddenly we start to see what we hadn't noticed before. You don't need to look to the past, the future or

even to God to be hopeful. Look first at those who love you. The evidence is in front of your eyes.

9 How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Psalm 137 v.4

The Israelites were in a mess. The whole nation, or at least the religious and political elite, had been carted off to Babylon and away from their precious homeland. Their whole identity as God's chosen people was under threat. They were away from their Temple and other holy places where essential rituals of worship had to be performed if they were to keep to their side of the Covenant. So was God no longer with them? How could they keep the faith in a culture that was entirely alien to everything they believed in? In the end it sorted itself out. They went back, though not for several generations and Old Testament scholars tell us that they did not go back with their beliefs unchanged. They returned not least with a concept of God that was much more universal and less tribal. There were influences from their 'ungodly' environment that they took with them. Religion and culture have always influenced each other, not operated in a vacuum.

But at this point the Psalmist cannot see how the dissonance is going to be resolved. Christians have sometimes asked themselves the same question and come up with a variety of answers. There is little or no dispute between us here: the committed Christian perspective is a minority one whichever side of the fence you are on. How do you keep up a Christian identity in a hostile, or at least an indifferent, society? Some have chosen withdrawal; some have adapted to fit in more. Member-based churches expect a clear personal adherence to their counter-culture. More inclusive churches may define everyone as in some sense 'belonging', whether they like it or not!

The Dean in 'my' Cathedral, (an interesting use of the personal pronoun which tells you where I am coming from), always welcomes people to what he deliberately describes as 'their' Cathedral, whether they have come to a service, for a concert or just to look round because it's raining. Some people of a humanist view may be annoyed by this and see it as somewhat patronising, but I personally don't have a problem with it. Cathedrals of old were a market place, hospital, library, rent-collection office and much more besides, not just a place for worship. They are an embodiment in stone of humankind's ancient search for a God and a place where religion and society have always met to do the practical business of living.

As usual I bring my own perspective to the Psalmist's question. How can I be true to myself and live this life to the full as religion at its best requires, but without the God that he took for granted? For many other people too, it is Christian faith that is the strange land now. We feel out of place there because we cannot accept its basic principle. Yet we are in part formed by it, just as the Israelites were changed by their encounter with the wider Babylonian culture. As I have discussed earlier, there is a huge degree of overlap between the moral values of the secular humanist and those who take the teachings of Jesus seriously as part of their personal faith. Neither can claim a monopoly on love, goodness and so much else. But I just do not, I cannot, believe in their God and sing their songs with integrity. 'Here I stand; I can do no other'. So what am I and others like me to do?

Some have tried to redefine 'God' in a way which enables them to let go of the idea of a 'Being' but still to remain within the church, even as priests and ministers. Things are much quieter on this front than they used to be, though I suspect that many of those with serious intellectual doubts are just keeping their heads down and their powder dry. It was very different in the 60s and 70s. Debates about the existence of God made it into the daily papers. Thinkers like John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich and David Jenkins, a later Bishop of Durham, were at the forefront of a public and national debate. They were trying to get us to think of God in a different way; the 'Ground of our Being' not a Being Himself. But together with those who argued for a non-literal understanding of the incarnation or a much greater emphasis on Jesus' humanity, they were generally pilloried and eventually ignored. Some of the behaviour towards them was appalling and was a major factor in my father's decision to distance himself from his own ministry. I will always respect him for it.

This re-definition of what the key word means is one way of trying to sing a more secular song within what has become the strange land of a church that adheres to a view of God that you just cannot share. I know of a few odd churches, (usually pretty odd indeed but nonetheless faithful for all that), who manage to continue to include those who openly say they do not believe in a God. The Quakers certainly offer a homeland for some. It helps people like me to some extent, but much more is involved than just a semantic contortion.

If there is no 'God' as such, then what is the point of talking to 'Him' in prayer and worship, the central Christian activity? A redefined God cannot actually do anything or make any difference to the way things are, which the words of any liturgy or hymn assume. If the way we live now is what religion is all about then let's just say so. Not believing in a God is too big a step away from where everyone else is and many have given up the struggle entirely. They would like to still be on the spiritual journey; they are still interested in the 'big' questions, but keeping up their secular identity in such an alien environment proves too much. I guess that's where I am, even allowing for my aesthetic excursions into Sung Evensong.

Except that cannot be true, or I wouldn't be writing this now but doing something else more useful instead. 25 years ago I wrote about how difficult prayer was for me and yet I needed to do it, for all the contradictions. Now perhaps I ought to just walk away and leave the proper Christians to get on with it, but somehow I can't. The church is onto something about life, even if there is no God. I still think the words of the song have meaning, even if it is no longer the Lord's song for me but one of our own creation. For some this is unfortunately seen as proof that their God is continuing to knock until my stubborn refusal to open the door breaks down in the end. I may not believe in Him, but He believes in me. I am sorry, but that is patronising, as if I don't know my own mind and God will have His way with us eventually, irrespective of the person we are.

My lack of faith in a God is not some aberration or weakness. It is not something of which I need to be ashamed. I genuinely think that we could all let go of many traditional religious beliefs and be better people for it. Many Christians effectively do that anyway. The assumptions by which they operate for an hour on a Sunday are entirely different from those that govern their lives the rest of the week. They are not singing the Lord's song in a strange land; they're singing two different songs in two different lands! I can't do that. Ultimately it is all one human reality and a split personality is not the solution.

There is one further dilemma for me, and for some others. Some of the people that I love the most have a lively, intelligent and very genuine faith in God. When they tell me that Jesus is very much alive to them I cannot simply say that they are mad or stupid. That is as patronising to them as others may be to me. I hope they

understand that my map is different but that the journey is essentially the same. God is real if you believe He is, in my understanding, because a religious experience is essentially a human experience. I do not believe He exists objectively. But it is evident that He exists existentially!

I cannot sing the Lord's song because He is not alive in my experience. But faced with the convictions of good and loving people for whom that is clearly not the case, I can only hope that travelling together is more important than walking exactly in each other's footsteps. I am a humanist not a theist, and at the same time I am still intrigued by the religion in which I was nurtured as a child. I don't believe there is 'a' God behind it all. I have to reinterpret many traditional Christian beliefs to maintain my slim grasp on the church, but not everything is lost if I substitute 'the best way to live' for 'the will of God'. I do believe that, at their best, people of faith are asking many of the right questions. I hope they can see that I may have no God, but I do have the same desire to live life in all its fullness. None of us has yet arrived; there is always more to be discovered. So the journey goes on then.

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So where are we at the end of this series of at least, I hope, interesting questions? Only the reader can answer that for themselves. But personally I have had a ball! Talk about self-indulgence! Whether or not anyone is listening, I have held forth for 16,000 words without interruption and stretched my mind in all sorts of fascinating directions. I suspect that each time I read what I have written I will want to put things slightly differently. But that's the way it works; revelation; enlightenment; insight; self-understanding, call it what you will, it never stands still.

If you would like to continue the discussion, then whether you think I have gone too far, or not gone far enough, feel free to email me via my website: www.ben-whitney.org.uk If you are still here, you must have got something out of it and I hope that it has been worthwhile. It may be that I have led you up only a blind alley and enough is enough. If this is where we part company then it has been great walking with you and, as the comedian Dave Allen used to say at the end of his act, 'May your God go with you'.