

# Religious Insight

Tony Windross describes why it was only when he came to see religion as ‘self-evidently a product of the human imagination’, that he decided to become ordained.

In one of his ‘wee stories’ Billy Connolly describes the first time he encountered the freezing conditions of the North Sea, with his mother urging him on from the relative safety of the Aberdeen beach. The water temperature was horrendous, and he soon realised there were all sorts of biting and stinging creatures who were perfectly at home in it – which made him (painfully) aware just what an alien environment he was reluctantly entering. As he put it ‘*We don’t belong there ... We’ve got no f\*!#! business there. The things that live there don’t like us ... When are we going to take the hint – we are not f\*!#! welcome.*

Which is not a million miles from what it’s sometimes like being a non-realist vicar in the Church of England. Operating in an environment where others feel completely at home. On good days, just about tolerated. And on less good ones made to feel ‘*not f\*!#! welcome.*

I’d been put in the church choir as a boy, by my religiously non-church-attending parents. But when adolescence arrived, other attractions took over. And there then followed some 20 years of ranting and railing at religion from the side-lines, on the grounds it was all too silly for words. This was long before Richard Dawkins ventured into such territory – but I had people like Freddie Ayer and Antony Flew to keep me company, as I did my best to juggle the day job of school teaching, alongside studying for an external London degree in Philosophy. My early enthusiasm for the clarity of the Logical Positivist position on religion (albeit one that most of its proponents had by then long since abandoned) gradually gave way to a far messier and more nuanced quasi-Wittgensteinian approach, as mediated by the saintly D Z Phillips.

There was no Damascus moment when the scales fell from my eyes. But a slow realisation that the price of intellectual closure (in any

direction) was a loss of intellectual integrity. Certainty invariably comes with a large price tag attached, which meant the world became a whole lot more complicated – and worse was to come. It was 1984 and I somehow got to hear about a series to be broadcast on BBC television, under the title *Sea of Faith*. Talk about serendipitous timing! I watched the series and devoured the book, quickly followed by *Taking Leave of God* and *The World to Come*. Utterly amazing stuff.

I’d never heard of Don Cupitt before – but he changed everything for me. Not so much thinking-outside-the-box – as slinging-the-box-over-the-side altogether. He dared to ask the questions I’d barely allowed myself even to formulate. And (in true Socratic fashion) had the courage to follow the argument wherever it might lead. If he was correct (and most people, of course, thought he wasn’t) it apparently *was* possible to ask the most radical questions, and still take religion seriously. Possible to take religion seriously, in other words – without having to believe that there is some sort of Being/Be-ing/ up/out there (wherever ‘*there*’ might be).

Once I felt able to ask religious questions in a religious context without let or hindrance (and not obliged to try and twist my understanding into some kind of doctrinal straitjacket) – I was potentially in a position to re-engage with religion. I had no idea if it would ‘work’ – and that was a real concern. Would I feel a hypocrite, taking part in religious services – but from a completely different perspective to everyone else? Would all the old antipathies to the silliness of religion come flooding back? With considerable trepidation I tested the water – and found (somewhat to my amazement) that I could swim.

The framework and structure that religion provided was a lifeline. I needed it (and indeed had always needed it) and could now begin to

make use of it. Which was why, not long afterwards, I began to explore the possibility of ordination. It was an idea which didn't make much sense back then – and still doesn't, 35 years later. But it felt mighty real at the time – and indeed it still does.

Which goes to show that the business of religion is a whole lot trickier and more interesting than most people think, with church insiders (as well as those who reject the whole thing) often giving the impression that they've got it all sewn up – most of it, anyway. But a moment's thought would (surely?) show that if religion really *is* about wrestling with the most profound questions that human beings can struggle with – the sort of thing that poets and painters and composers and novelists and philosophers spend their lives agonising over – it's just plain ridiculous to imagine that it could ever be remotely straightforward.

If we're to try and engage with such stuff, we need all the help we can get – including (maybe *especially?*) the resources that religion (at its best) can offer. *That's* what I was missing in my years away from the Church. And the circumstances under which I found a way back in, were little short of – miraculous?

Not surprisingly, it was something of an uphill struggle to convince the Church of England that I was just the sort of person they'd like to have on board. Because the whole thing made such little sense to me – I found it hard to make a persuasive case to anyone else. But after a host of trials and tribulations, I was eventually accepted for training. And three years after that, I was ordained. Because my theological position put me *way* out on the margins (not so much beyond the fringe – as beyond the pale), my plan was to remain in teaching, and operate as a non-stipendiary minister, doing churchy things at the weekends. Which is what I did for 4 years. The opportunity then arose for me to take on a full time clerical appointment – and (once again, with considerable trepidation) I decided to take the almighty risk of seeing if my theological position could survive in a full-time church setting.

Somewhat to my surprise (and a lot of other people's astonishment) – it did – and has done for over 20 years. But it's not been an easy ride –

and has come at a considerable cost. Because I see things differently from everyone I encounter in church circles, it's difficult (verging on impossible) to find kindred spirits to share things with. Maybe that's only to be expected? Maybe non-realist vicars were bound to be only ever a blip, a temporary aberration, soon to be extinguished by natural selection? Maybe the very idea of allowing open and totally honest ongoing conversations about religious questions, is so anathema to the institutional Church that it could never be permitted to continue?

But none of the journey might have got underway in the first place without the arrival in my life of the blessed trio of Ronald Pearse, David Paterson and Stephen Mitchell. They were the ones who got the SOF movement off the ground – and received no end of vilification for their pains. And SOF made all the difference in the world to me.

The first Conference was in July 1988 – and I vividly remember the sense of excitement, coupled with a frisson of danger. It felt as if we were members of some illicit society – and many of the clergy present were worried in case their attendance became known to their parishioners or bishop. It's difficult to overstate the value of being able to meet with like-minded people in an open and trusting environment. Difficult also to convey the feeling of beleaguerment that was felt at that first Conference. The world of religion can be (and often is) a hostile place for those not in the mainstream. And the vitriol that the movement engendered in its detractors showed just how vicious a place the Church can be.

Counterfactuals are always problematic – but without the support of the fledgling Network, it may be that I would never have pursued ordination. Who knows? But the fact that it existed meant I wasn't alone in my wanderings (and wonderings). And whilst no one could undertake the journey for me, I knew that there were others who saw things in roughly the same sort of way as I did – and some of them were even vicars! But I've yet to find another member of the clergy who can claim to have found a way into the Church as a result of Don Cupitt (although he certainly helped some of them to remain afloat within it, by throwing them an intellectual lifeline).

Right at the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein spoke of his philosophical work as a ladder – a means to an end – which can be dispensed with once it’s served its purpose. And for many people SOF is like that. They take what they want from it – and move on. But it’s vital that this oasis in the religious desert continues in business – because there’s a continual stream of desperately thirsty travellers in need. I’ve got all Don’s books (apart from the one published only in Chinese!) but am not constantly re-reading them. They were a ladder I used, and all the time we’re finding (and climbing) new ones. The analogy breaks down, of course, in that we still keep returning to previous ladders to do the odd bit of scrambling. But the point is, we shouldn’t get stuck on any single one.

My religious energies are not (and never have been) spent peddling a non-realist position. It underpins my particular take on the world – but there are plenty of other perspectives that people find helpful. I’m not (and never have been) an evangelist for SOF – but am more than happy to talk about it, if the opportunity arises.

What matters, I’m convinced, is not what goes on in people’s heads, but what goes on their hearts. And that’s because Ethics always trumps Theology. *How we live* is far more important, than *how we think* (which is why I’d much prefer the company of a compassionate literalist, than some of the angry non-realists I’ve met). I pay far more attention, in sermons or articles, to the Social Gospel (a useful – albeit dated – term that focusses on such things as equality, fairness, and generosity of spirit) than to radical theology. Not

because the latter is unimportant – but because religion is a supremely practical business, and is judged by its fruits. I never rubbish understandings of God that don’t work for me – but set them alongside ones that I find more congenial. I don’t think it’s like that now, but at some points in its history SOF has taken on more than a passing resemblance to the *Four Yorkshiremen* – with people competing to see just how *little* they believed. An understandable reaction maybe – but not one to be commended.



Mary Magdalene sees Christ as a gardener. Attributed to Girolamo da Santacroce (c.1480 – c. 556). Philadelphia Museum of Art

Over the years, I’ve been invited to speak to a variety of groups and conferences, and have managed to upset people wherever I went! The traditionally religious because I didn’t believe what they believed – and traditional atheists for the same reason. A large part of the problem is to do with the way most people conflate Belief and Faith. The first is not within our control – whereas the second one is. Given that Belief (or lack of it) is our response to a

particular set of information, there’s little point in arguing about it. If I don’t happen to be persuaded that Jesus walked out of the tomb on the third day (and could have been photographed doing so, had the technology been available) – there’s no more to be said. Not believing that, doesn’t make me a bad person. But in many people’s eyes, it disqualifies me from being a Christian (still less a vicar!). Which to me is ludicrous – as well as scandalous. What’s far more interesting (and far more important) is the way a Resurrection Faith is the same (in practical terms) whether the Empty Tomb is understood literally or metaphorically.

My working assumption, for all practical purposes, is that everything is horizontal and this-worldly. That may or may not be the case – but it gets me through the day, and I don't lose any sleep over it. I haven't got a clue if there's anything the other side of death (or even if such an expression has a meaning) – and neither has anyone else. Plenty of people *claim* that they know (with some saying confidently that they'll 'carry on' – and others saying, equally confidently, that they'll be totally extinguished). But no one really, actually, genuinely *knows*. And so the wisest position (on this, and indeed almost everything else) is a gentle agnosticism. There's no shame in owning our ignorance – and no virtue in pretending otherwise.

Religion provides me with a structure and a vocabulary, not to help me 'make sense' of the world, but to help me engage with it in a way that feels more satisfying than any of the alternatives I've come across. To put it in those terms is unlikely to persuade anyone who doesn't already take religion seriously. But that's the way it is. My interest is not in trying to get anyone else to think

along the same lines that I do – but to encourage others to explore religious questions (the 'Big Questions') as openly and as honestly and as fully and as generously as possible.

I see religious faith as self-evidently a product of the human imagination – and that includes each and every religious concept. But to say that 'God' is a human creation, is to say nothing about the ontological or epistemological status of whatever it is that the word 'God' is pointing towards. The only reality we can know is the one right in front of our eyes. Everything else is mystery. Unknown and unknowable stuff – which if we take it seriously enough, is bound to elicit awe and wonder. Religion helps me to recognise and respond to that, by reaching the parts that other things cannot reach. Which is why it's infinitely worthwhile putting up with whatever biting and stinging come along.

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Tony Windross is the Vicar of Pevensey, Sussex. He will be a key speaker at the SOF Annual Conference in Leicester 21<sup>st</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> July.



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Journalist, *New Humanist*, *Times Higher Education Supplement*,

## Tony Windross

Vicar of Pevensey, Sussex  
Author of *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith*

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