

Gauguin's Questions

Richard Holloway started from Gauguin's three questions and gave four responses, which he called hard and soft religion and hard and soft atheism.

When, in 1896, Paul Gauguin the painter heard that his daughter Aline had died of pneumonia back in Holland, his response was to paint an enormous canvas about the riddle of life. It hangs in the Met in Boston and you probably know reproductions of it. In the top left hand corner he slashed three questions: 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' They are not, of course, only Gauguin's questions, they are our questions. We are the only animal on the planet that asks these questions. There is not a colloquy happening in Regent's Park Zoo at the moment. The animals are not meeting to discuss the nature of being tigers or elephants or killer whales. When I walk the Pentlands with my wee dog, my head is spinning with these questions. Hers isn't. She's deeply embedded in nature, is at home in a way that I'm not, that we're not, because we've been gifted or cursed with these big brains, these neurons firing all the time. There are more neurons than there are stars in the Milky Way and that's made us an object of interest to ourselves. In us, you could say the Universe, after about sixteen billion years, is asking questions about itself. There may be other planets where there is something like our kind of life but, as far as we know, not. And certainly on this planet, while there are levels of intelligence in other animals, we can be pretty certain that they are not culture-creating creatures in the way we are. They don't develop ideas to the length of madness, as we often do.



Tigers discussing philosophy?

I want to sketch over the way we have responded to Gauguin's questions. One of the aspects of how we deal with these questions is helped by thinking of ourselves as orphans, born in an orphanage, and orphans make up stories about their parents, usually very glamorous, very elaborate stories. And it seems to me that we are orphans; we are not entirely at home in the universe. And so we have created these enormous disciplines. Science studies the make-up, the materiality, of the orphanage, philosophy helps us to think about how to live well in the orphanage. Only religion tries to get outside the orphanage to ask Gauguin's questions: 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?'

I want to sketch the different ways in which religion has answered Gauguin's questions. There have generally been two categories in which religion has attempted to answer them. One is called natural theology: we use our intelligence, our head, our rationality to ask questions about the universe. The old design arguments for the existence of God were all based on that, and you reached a kind of hypothesis, a kind of probability thing. But perhaps the more potent kind of theology has been what's called revealed theology, because, from fairly early on in our intellectual history, we humans were hearing voices. I talk to myself all the time, sometimes out loud. Certainly when I am out walking I am talking to myself. I guess we have been doing that from the beginning and it's very easy to think that the voices in your head are actually voices from outside your head. I suspect that a lot of early religion was a result of this bi-cameral mind, this idea that you are talking to yourself but it can't just be you that's talking. There has to be some voice from outside.

I want to skate quickly over four or five responses to these traditional claims that have been made that there has been a voice from outside the orphanage speaking to us about the nature of our ultimate parentage. And also the way that we have responded

**Where do we come from?
What are we?
Where are we going?**

to that voice, and very often it's dictated – a text – which is why for religions that have gone this way and turned it into a hard structure, the most potent phrase they can use is: 'It is written.' That is a very potent phrase in Christianity and in Islam and in Judaism and the sense is that it was not written by us; it was written by the finger from outside, the voice from outside, and therefore it demands obedience from us.

It seems to me that the first response to Gaugin's questions is what I call hard religion. You might have called it traditional religion but I am thinking about its modern manifestation, which is not traditional. It's *traditionalist*. And there's a difference. If you are embedded in a tradition you don't know it. It's what you breathe and think; you are spontaneously, naturally within it. It's got a kind of honesty to it. According to this tradition in its classic, original form there was a voice, it did dictate, it was written down: it is written and we therefore obey it. Given the erosions that have attacked that, the critical acids that have melted much of it, what has happened, however, is that one aspect of modernity is for people self-consciously to opt back out of *now* into *then* and that is called traditionalism. It's a very obvious redoubt, a very strong citadel in which to find yourself. Of course, that puts you on a counter-cultural collision course with modernity, with the best, as well as the worst, of modernity. It puts you on a collision course with the liberationist, emancipatory movements of our time. That is why women have such a hard time in these traditionalist cultures.

The strength of the traditionalist position is its impermeability to change, if that's what you want. It answers every question and if you are the kind of person who likes to live in that tightly ordered way, it can give you enormous security. That is why the religions in the Christian tradition that are growing are the ones that do that. They don't give an answer in the way wishy-washy liberals do. They tell you what to believe. They tell you that he got out of the tomb. They tell you that the Ten Commandments were chiselled by Moses and you had better obey them. And that of course is immensely attractive. The suspicion about it, however, is that it can very easily curve into fanaticism and terrorism. Adam Phillips is very interesting on this. Let me read you something that he wrote in his lovely little book on balance:

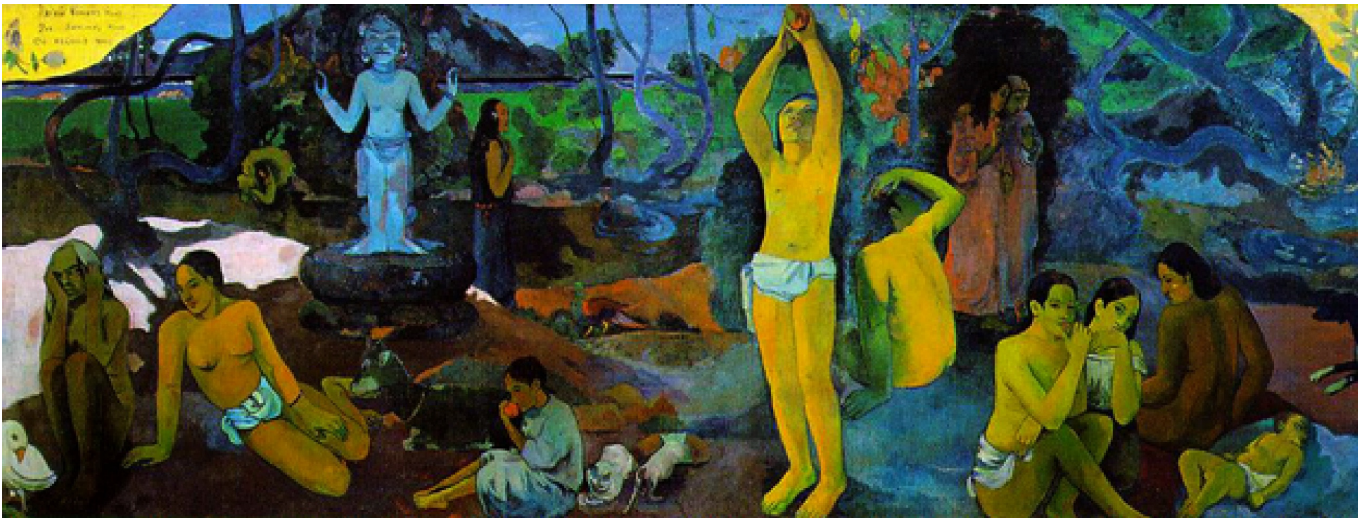
Excessive belief is called up to stifle excessive doubt. As if the fanatic is saying to himself if I don't continually prove my belief in this extreme way, what will be revealed is my extreme faithlessness, or despair, or confusion, or even emptiness. Supreme conviction is a self-cure for an infestation of doubt. We could call this excess as reassurance. Where there are excessive acts, there are excessive uncertainties.

So that's the clue. If you see someone, as we say in Scotland, 'shooting oot their neck', vehemently denouncing something, you know that they are afraid of inner emptiness and uncertainty. The classic example, of course, is the self-hating gay person. So hard religion, while it has its attractions, is also a deeply worrying aspect of contemporary culture, partly because it can result in violence. Malise Ruthven has written very interestingly about the Islamic aspects of this and what he talks about is a new wave of what he calls Abrahamic apocalypticism – end of the world stuff. It's strong in Syria at the moment. Many of the Jihadists who are fighting there are bringing in the end times. It's strong in American fundamentalist Christian religion, which is why Jerry Falwell said all this green politics is bollocks because Jesus is coming back. You've got to use the world before you lose the world, he says. So pollute away, burn carbon, damage the planet, he's coming back.

I try not to mind how people hold religion, provided the consequences are not cruel and damaging. I believe with Frank Sinatra in 'anything that gets you through the night'. A lot of people need this kind of stuff and sometimes it can be held with a sort of kindness. I think that we emancipated radicals should be gentle towards certain aspects of this, because it is one way of dealing with your orphanhood. There are some people for whom it is probably the answer. Where we need to withstand it is where it becomes cruel and persecutory.

Moving along the line again the next response is what I call soft religion. Hard religion is realist. The next bit along the continuum is what is called critical realism: 'There was a voice. It really spoke. But the receiving instrument at the human end is pretty faulty. And so be modest about what you claim to have heard and what is written. Learn to interpret it.'

That's classic liberalism, One Church of England bishop says that classic liberals listen to two tunes: they listen to tradition and they listen to today. I've recently been meditating on the Scottish aspect of this. As you know, most Scots are kind of split-minded, dualised creatures, Jekylls and Hydes. Hugh MacDiarmid, the famous Scottish poet, wrote a book on Scottish eccentrics. He talked about the Caledonian Antisyzygy, which is the capacity to hold two competing, contradictory elements within the same entity. It's classic inner duality. I experience it all the time. I'm a divided man, a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. It's particularly true of a certain kind of Scot, partly because we've existed alongside you guys in England. That's the real opposing polarity that we are struggling with at the moment. We are going to have to vote about it in a year's time. It is the ability to live with tugging polarities and somehow want to be honest to each of



them. And it is why I have a reverence towards liberals, because it seems to me that they are trying to be faithful to two good things. It makes them more adaptive. They make the hard religion softer. It can be easy to laugh at them because they are struggling to tug this great thing into modernity. It's a kind of carriage and they put a wee two-stroke motor engine on it and try to motor into modernity with it. It's easy to poke fun at them but I think there is something quite admirable about that.

In my own church, the Anglican, the Episcopal Church of Scotland, when we were debating the ordination of women, that's a classic example of how liberals work. They were tied in knots, the wee souls, because they believe fundamentally in the injustice of denying women ordination. Of course, it is manifestly unjust. But they couldn't come out and say it is wrong not to ordain them. Liberals can't do that. They have to find religious reasons for doing the right thing. And it's tough to find written texts that make it easy. We did find one. – thank God! There is a wee verse in Galatians: 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female.' Thank God! It means we can actually ordain women and we'll just ignore all the other stuff that Paul said about them as well, because that's the one he really meant! He'd had too much whisky with the other stuff and he wasn't in touch with his antiszygy. But liberals *are* and they can move on. It's a way of being faithful to an institution you don't quite believe in, but believe in enough to want to keep it around. And that is not a dishonourable vocation.

Moving right along, we come to the third slot in the continuum, which is to discover with relief that there is no outside, just the orphanage – that there was no voice except our own voice. There was a voice, many voices, but they were ours. This is our work. Religion is a work of the human imagination, a work of art. Now that does not of course necessarily mean you therefore junk it. I think, on the contrary, what you do is you interrogate it even more radically,

because it is mirroring ourselves back to us. And it is particularly important when you are doing that to look at the horrors of religion, the cruelties of religions, because what you are seeing is a projection of yourself. All that hell stuff, which evolved in the tradition over the centuries – didn't we live that in the Final Solution? If you read the Jesuit sermon in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when the Jesuit describes hell in minute detail, it sounds like the gas ovens of Auschwitz, except that in hell they do it eternally, whereas in Auschwitz it happened in minutes and it was over.

So realising that religion is a human construct does not mean that you abandon religion, it means you dig, you dive into it, because it is about us. And it is not only about our horrors and our cruelties. It is about some astonishing things. It's about the discovery of forgiveness. It's about the invention of pity. One of things that really gets to me is the strangeness of an accidental, implacably callous material universe giving birth to pity. And it did. You can almost date it – at the Axial Age, according to Karen Armstrong. Some of it appears to go against evolutionary tendencies, though I am not arguing anything from this. That's the mistake that scientific believers make. They jump from these mysteries into premises. I am not doing that at all. I don't think you can argue anything from this. What you need to do with it is stop and listen and pay attention and be amazed that in this extraordinary universe, pity, mercy, forgiveness, a passion for truth and cups of cold water and visiting prisoners, all that has also emerged and we can celebrate it.

Moving further along and what you might think of as off the religious spectrum, we come to what I call soft atheism. Strictly speaking, chronologically, it should be at the end, because it is a reaction against hard atheism and we are going to come to that in a minute. Soft atheism is the project of the new new atheists. You know the new atheists, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Dawkins and Hitchens and great people like that. For the new new atheists,

probably their messiah is John Gray. Alain de Botton wrote a book called *Religion for Atheists* and we have Brian Appleyard. These are all atheists with a lot of time for religion, because they think that religion has carried important and fundamental values through time. They understand that it is essentially a story-telling exercise and that the stories are worth paying attention to, at least as worth paying attention to as some of the contemporary stories.

John Gray is particularly interesting here. I don't go entirely all the way with John's pessimism and I was interested in the question about the possible capacity humans have to make things better, to change things. Dentistry is certainly better. The question is whether there are other elements of this strange human quest for improvement. Gray doesn't believe in progress. Let me read you a little bit from his latest book *The Silence of Animals*. One of the things that he says is that we religious people have not paid enough attention to the other creatures that we share the planet with. Genesis gives us permission to be arrogant towards them. That is why John Gray's book is called *The Silence of Animals*. A bit of him thinks it will be better when we are over and the human bit of the planet is gone. We are fast on the way to doing that. When the planet finally purges itself of us, it will still go on. So there is a sense in which someone like John Gray thinks that religious myths on the whole, the good ones like the myth of the Fall, for example, are a better guide to living than some of the scientific rationality progress myths that are being peddled by the hard scientists. He wants us to reclaim the stories we have told ourselves and to understand their true nature. What angers him is that today's secularists refuse to acknowledge that they also live by their myths. They live by their stories. This is what he says in *The Silence of Animals*:

In comparison with the Genesis myth, the modern myth that humanity is marching to a better future is mere superstition. As the Genesis story teaches, knowledge cannot save us from ourselves. If we know more than



Scald Law

before, it means only that we have greater scope to enact our madness. But, as the Genesis myth also teaches, there is no way we can rid ourselves of what we know. The message of Genesis is that in the most vital areas of human life there can be no progress, only an unending struggle with our nature.

Now I don't entirely buy that but I think it is a very necessary corrective to a number of the secular-

ising, messianic, infinite progress myths that are around. For Gray there is no outside but he is a contemplative. Let me end with another quote from him. He is calling us to godless contemplation. This is what he writes:

Godless contemplation is a radical and transient condition, a temporary respite from the all-too-human world with nothing particular in mind. Godless mysticism cannot escape the finality of tragedy or make beauty eternal. It does not dissolve inner conflict, enter the false quietude of oceanic calm. All it offers is mere being. There is no redemption from being

human but no redemption is needed.

He is calling us to pause and to look, almost to worship, to contemplate. He has made me stop in my incessant trudging round the Pentland Hills, because I am a very neurotic man and I move very rapidly and I need to cover territory, great miles of it. He has made me stop and look at the rowan berries up against a blue sky on Scald Law only a couple of days ago. I even did something I never do, I did a modern thing. I took out my blackberry and took a wee picture and sent it my American daughter because they don't have rowan berries in America, at least not like the ones you have in Scotland. So you see even atheism is religious in this sense. It is wrestling with meaning and beauty and purpose and all the struggles we have with each other.

The final shift is hard atheism, which in many ways is the mirror image of hard religion. It's hard religion that hard atheists put up to knock down when they are playing that particular Punch and Judy game. I am very fond of Richard Dawkins but I wish he would find some more examples of religion to attack. There are some very sophisticated versions and it is a better

fight, whereas the hard religionist nutters are very easy to knock down. This is where Adam Phillips is also very interesting, because Adam Phillips applies the same rubric to them as he applies to the hard religionists. He says there is something going on when there is that amount of zeal and passion for something, when you are wanting to stamp something out, get rid of it. What is going on here? Are you struggling with profound inner doubt?

Be sympathetic to all of that. It is not easy being human, because we have got these minds that ask these questions and we constantly contradict and fight with each other and especially because the answers are so ultimately unverifiable or unfalsifiable. So that is why religion is such a dodgy adjunct to the human condition. But it seems almost to be intrinsic to our nature. Even secular religion, that famous oxymoron, is not without its contradictions. Very often it's drawing on capital banked by people who believe more than it does.

That's my position. I still go to church. I'm not entirely sure why. It's uncomfortable. But I've decided I'd rather be uncomfortably in than uncomfortably out. I sit on the edge because I like to hear the stories, I like to confess my sins. And there's the building I like and that is another part of this strange aspect of the human condition. We have transubstantiated into stone the idea of beauty. We built these astonishing cathedrals and churches and temples and holy places, places that T.S. Eliot said were at the world's end. They suggest ending-ness to you, they make you ask these questions about whether there is an end of all things .and we know there is going to be an end of us, which is where I want to end this little presentation.

It seems to my that we should not only practise mindfulness but endingness. This little blue planet that I love is going to be a little black crisp cinder. I don't know how many billion years it is going to be but we know it is going to end. Everything that we have dreamed, everything that we have built, the sonnets we have written, the love we have made, the acts of compassion will be as nothing. Think what will be lost. It's a staggering thought. You can't do anything with it except stand in a kind of shocked awe. I still think it will have been worth it.

Richard Holloway is a former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. He was Chairman of the Scottish Arts Council from 2005-2010 and is current Chairman of Sistema Scotland, a charity that transform the lives of children through music. His latest book is *Leaving Alexandria* (Canongate, Edinburgh 2012).

This is an edited, shortened version of the recorded talk he gave to the London SOF conference in September.



Through the Water

The 5c Arian baptistery at Ravenna

When the Christians went down to the waters
to be born again,
they left behind the pale elders of the old testament
on the walls around,
like the black and white film of their former lives;

and their eyes, when they opened again,
looked up at the twelve apostles
holding out jeweled crowns
and Peter and Paul with their scrolls and keys,
beckoning
to the purple cushioned throne,
now theirs;

since they have given themselves
to the holy one
who stands just above them,
between Neptune, old spirit of the river,
and the stern Baptist in his wild skins,
under the dove
claiming him redeemer God,

in the rippling water
through which they see him naked,
his manhood floating proud,
just like theirs.

Kathryn Southworth

Kathryn Southworth is the former Vice-Principal of Newman University College, Birmingham. Now retired, she lives in Camden Town, London.