

Talk by Richard Holloway at the PCN conference in London, 8th June 2019

In a collection of essays published in 1979 called 'The White Album', Joan Didion wrote these words:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live... We live entirely... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. Or at least we do for a while. I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling.

She then describes the incident that prompted this beginning of doubt in the stories she had told herself.

I... read in the papers... the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year old woman with faded blonde hair who put her five-year old daughter out to die on the centre divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child, whose fingers had to be pried loose from the Cyclone fence when she was rescued twelve hours later by the California Highway Patrol, reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time". Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.¹

I know that feeling of uncertainty and discomfort. But my discomfort is no longer that of the believer who has to fit that incident into the story of how a good God could have come up with a universe in which that kind of thing happens every second of every day. Even when I did try to tell myself that story, I was never persuaded by the excuses theologians offered to get God off the hook. They demonstrated what to me has always been a weakness in most theological systems: the compulsion to explain the inexplicable, allied to an inability to live with uncertainty. I wonder now if this is not a consequence of the male dominance of religious systems down the ages; not that it is confined to religion. The feminist writer Rebecca Solnit coined the term 'mansplaining' to capture the experience of listening to a man condescendingly explain something to her. She attributes this well-known phenomenon to a combination of over-confidence and cluelessness, a not infrequent combination in the male of the human species. It is rife in both Christianity and Islam, both religions with a passion for over-confident explanations. That's why I always thought believing Jews were more honest about the problem of suffering than believing Christians, like the rabbis in Auschwitz who put God on trial, found him guilty and then fell to prayer.

I continue to be moved by those who believe in God like that, but refuse to play the divine explanation game. Its best expression in literature was given by Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's great novel, when he says to his devout brother Alyosha:

¹ Joan Didion. THE WHITE ALBUM. 4th ESTATE, London 2017, p.13

I want to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it was all for. All religions in the world are based on this desire, and I am a believer. But then there are the children, and what am I going to do with them? That is the question I cannot resolve...there are hosts of questions, but I've taken only the children, because here what I say is irrefutably clear...if everyone must suffer, in order to buy eternal harmony with their suffering, pray tell me what children have to do with it? It's quite incomprehensible why they should have to suffer, and why they should buy harmony with their suffering... It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha. I just most respectfully return him the ticket.²

In passing, it is worth spending a minute to think about the collision of stories implied in Ivan's outburst, because it is something that comes up again and again in human experience. The stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives often come into conflict with each other, so we either choose to live with the contradiction or we abandon one of the stories. This classic dilemma was noticed by the 6th Century Christian philosopher Boethius, who described it as a...

...discord in the pact of things,
This endless war twixt truth and truth,
That singly hold, yet give the lie
To him who seeks to yoke them both – ³

Ivan's problem was that he was unable to live with the discord and was forced to give up one of the stories he'd been told. The founding story behind his outrage is the existence of a good, all-powerful God, whose creatures we are; but within that story another story has to follow immediately in order to account for the existence of suffering in the world created by such a God. In the passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* I have quoted, we only get hints of how that justificatory story had been explained to Ivan, but it seems to have been along the lines of an 'eternal harmony' that could only be purchased at the price of such suffering. This is the story Ivan rejects not in disbelief, but in revulsion. He wants no dealings with a God who can come up with a scheme that involves the suffering of children, even if their pain is to be justified when the meaning of the universe is finally revealed, so he respectfully returns him the ticket.

This response is sometimes described as angry atheism, as opposed to the cooler, rational type of atheism that sees no point in getting upset at Someone who doesn't exist. But Ivan tells us he is not an atheist. He is a God-hater, a very different thing. Another Russian said something similar, this time a real, not a fictional one. The novelist Kingsley Amis once asked the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko if he believed in God. No, he replied, before adding: actually, it's more that I hate the bastard. Ivan was more polite than Yevtushenko, but he felt the same way and registered his membership

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Everyman's Library, New York 1990, p.244

³ Translated by Helen Waddell in, *Medieval Latin Lyrics*, Constable, London 1933, p.49

in an ancient and honourable company of believers who just want God to leave them alone.

My dilemma is the opposite of Ivan's. Ivan accepted God but wanted to keep his distance from him and the community of faith that bowed to him. I am not sure I do accept God, or how God has been traditionally defined or understood. That's one prong of my dilemma. But the other is that, unlike Ivan Karamazov, I find myself unable to tear up the ticket of my membership in one of the communities that worships the God I don't think I believe in - the Christian Church.

I tried to do that twenty years ago. I thought I'd thrown away the ticket forever. Two things precipitated my departure. The first was weariness with the theological mansplaining side of theology I have already alluded to. Faith and Doubt had always been coactive for me; they were conjoined aspects of the same reality. The opposite of faith was never doubt; it was certainty; particularly harsh, punishing certainty. But certainty was the theological style that started taking over the Anglican Church in the 1990s. A consequence of that certainty was the increasing cruelty of the Church towards gay people. It culminated in the Lambeth Conference of 1998, likened by one bishop to a Nazi Nuremberg Rally. That was the tipping point for me. It proved that the stories we told ourselves, including stories about God, can have terrifying consequences. So, like Ivan Karamazov, I handed back my ticket and walked away. Then slowly over the years I found myself slipping back into the place where my prayers had once been valid. It helped that the Scottish Church fully resolved the gay issue a couple of years ago, when it passed legislation that enabled gay marriage in church, something that the Church of England still refuses to do. Gradually, I found myself at home again, my ticket frayed at the edges, smudged and bleared, but reclaimed. So, what kind of confused story about faith am I trying to tell myself these days?

Here I want to return to Joan Didion to help me. As a writer, Didion became an explorer of what she calls 'the shifting phantasmagoria' of actual human experience. *Phantasmagoria* is a disconcerting word to use, and a writer as careful as Didion won't have used it casually. It comes loosely from the Greek for ghostly presences encountered in public spaces. It was coined to describe a kind of horror show that was designed to terrify people. It used what was called a 'magic lantern' - hidden at the back of a darkened room - that projected terrifying images onto a screen in front of a suggestible and often-hysterical audience. Didion is saying that the horror show is art imitating life, the way good art does. It represents what she calls 'our actual experience'. In this case, the fact that we live in a world in which a young mother can put her five-year old daughter out to die on a Californian highway.

I don't think the difficulty we face here is in finding a story that will make sense of an event like that. After all, the story we choose to live by may be that no sense *can* be made of it, because the universe itself makes no sense, has no meaning, is just a weird, indifferent process in which terrible things happen every day. No, I don't think our

problem is with the *differences* in the stories we tell. It's that telling stories is not what we think we are doing when we are doing it.

We all think we are engaging with *reality* as it is. We are offering objective descriptions of the way things are. We are pinning down the facts. But there is always a catch, a caveat. The catch is that while this is the truth of what *we* are doing when we try to make sense of the world, it is not what others are up to. Their efforts often *are* 'just stories', stuff they made up, comforting illusions they wanted to believe in, while our stories are 'the truth'. How well I know that game. I've played it against others, and others have played it against me. I've even played it against myself. It's a favourite game in religion and politics, the best lantern shows in human history. Even scientists play it. They don't like admitting it, but they have their own lantern show.

But who can blame us for playing these games without being aware that that's what we are doing? To use Martin Heidegger's word for our situation, we were all 'thrown' or catapulted into a universe that does not explain itself, so we are left trying to figure it out for ourselves as we go along. Here I must pause for a moment to remember that this great philosopher, who helped many of us make sense of our existence, also embraced one of the vilest stories humanity has ever told itself, when he sided with the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s. A particularly ugly detail in the Heidegger Phantasmagoria is that some of his most devoted students were Jews, including his lover Hannah Arendt, yet he never uttered a word of blame about the Holocaust that destroyed six million of them in the Nazi death camps. As the poet W.H. Auden said of W.B. Yeats, that's because Heidegger was 'silly like us.' The great thinkers and system-builders often are. That is why I prefer poets and other artists, who are content to *express* the human condition, to philosophers and theologians who grab me by the arm and insist on explaining to me what it's all about. Here's Auden writing on September 1 1939, as we plunged the world into another horror show:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day;
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.⁴

A haunted wood is a good metaphor for the universe into which, without any choice in the matter, I was propelled at birth and from which I shall be expelled at death, echoing Beckett's words from *Godot* that we are all born astride the grave. As I get

⁴ W.H.Auden. *1st September 1939. Another Time*, Random House 1940

near the edge of the trees, something in me wants to try to reconcile the contradictory stories I was told as I made my way. But that's not all I want to do. As well as reconciling and finding space for contradictions, there are some stories I want to resist. These are the stories that channel humanity's innate instinct for violence, the atavistic lust in us to destroy the stranger, the different, the other – and, as I have already tried to show, religion is one of the strongest engines of this kind of destructiveness.

I have found Nietzsche and Freud to be the best psychological guides through this threatening human landscape. Nietzsche thought that the psychic pain that overcomes us as we make our way through the haunted wood of existence requires the identification of an enemy or hate-figure on whom we can vent our vengeance for the sufferings we and others undergo. He wrote:

Every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a guilty agent who is susceptible to suffering - in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his feelings, actually or in effigy: for the venting of his feelings represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief, anaesthesia, the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind. ⁵

Freud went further and noticed that our most likely scapegoats are neighbours or associates who betray marginal differences from us, onto whom we can fix reasons for our frustrated anger. This is why some of the grimmest conflicts in history have been between communities that lived alongside each other for years, till some aggrieved person exploded a real or metaphorical bomb that blew apart centuries of tolerance. He called this phenomenon the 'narcissism of minor differences' and he said its root lay in the aggressiveness which civilization had insisted we must sacrifice for the sake of the advantages it offered, but which was always crouching below the surface, waiting for the occasion of its violent release. This is what he wrote:

It is clearly not easy for men to give up the satisfaction of this inclination to aggression. They do not feel comfortable without it. The advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing this instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness... I gave this phenomenon the name of 'the narcissism of minor differences'... We can see now that it is a convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression, by means of which cohesion between the members of community is made easier.⁶

⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, section 15.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Penguin Books, London, p.305

‘Harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression’ - unless you belong to the group that is its object at any particular moment or place in history, European Jews the community Freud had in mind when he was writing this essay in 1930. Given the right circumstances, ‘the harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression’ against a marginal community can lead to the Holocaust of six million Jews in Nazi gas ovens in the 20th century; or to the persecution of Irish Catholic immigrants in Scotland in the 19th and early 20th centuries. An example from our own day in Britain was the state sponsored harassment of the Windrush generation of West Indian immigrants, the effects of which are still reverberating in our divided country today.

When you turn to religion and zoom in on the divisions in faith communities you find the same turmoil, only here the narcissism of minor differences can be so micro-surgical it is impossible for outsiders to follow them. Let me offer an example not in a spirit of contempt but of amused exasperation at tiny differences in theological interpretation that once caused Christians to fight each other, and still keeps them divided today. The issue concerns what happens to the bread and wine during a celebration of the central sacrament of the Christian Church, the Eucharist.

Do they *become* the body and blood of Jesus or do they just *remind* Christians of his constant presence in their midst, as the main opposing theories have it? Including the two already mentioned - labelled *Transubstantiationism* and *Memorialism* - six theories are offered to define the nature of the presence. The other four are *Consubstantiationism*, *Transignificationism*, *Transfinalizationism* and *Virtualism*. I’ll leave it to you to check out the definition of these awkward words for themselves; the point to register is that within the Church to this day there are Christians who won’t share the sacrament with each other, because they do not hold the right theory of its meaning. This is the narcissism of minor differences to an absurd degree.

That said, something in me wants to understand and forgive Roman Catholics for refusing me the Eucharist and for believing that it is only valid in their masses. It shows how important the stories we tell ourselves are to our comfort in life; and why an important aspect of their power derives from the sense of superiority over others with which they endow us. Explore the stories we tell against each other and you will find this is the magic ingredient. My religion is superior to yours. Or my rejection of religion is superior to your pathetic clinging to it. We all play these games; and no wonder.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume captured our predicament:

We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent those ills, with which we are continually threatened. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes* then, become the constant object

of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence.⁷

That was Hume's version of Auden's haunted wood, this mysterious existence into which we have been thrust. No wonder we are often frightened. No wonder we tell ourselves stories to cheer ourselves up as we huddle together in the dark. Here's one of the stories we've told.

In his powerful new book, 'A History of the Bible', John Barton begins Part 4 with these words:

King's College, Cambridge, holds a 'Ceremony of Nine Lessons and Carols' every Christmas Eve, broadcast throughout the English-speaking world and imitated in many churches...As the title indicates, it includes nine readings from the Bible, interspersed with hymns and carols...At the beginning of the service there is a 'bidding'...which includes what amounts to an interpretation of the whole of the Bible in one sentence:

Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child.

The Bible...is seen here as telling a story of disobedience and redemption, of sin and salvation, of paradise lost and paradise regained, concerning the whole human race...The Bible is thus understood as a story about a disaster followed by a rescue mission, and this fits with the nature of Christianity as a religion of salvation.⁸

This is a story everyone here today will be familiar with. I want now to sketch the elements that went into its formation. And I am not thinking of its historical ingredients. I am thinking of its existential ingredients. Here we return to Joan Didion and Ivan Karamazov and the sufferings of children. What story can we tell that will make sense of their tears? If you need a picture to help you, summon the stunned and bloodied image of Omran, the little Syrian boy pulled from the ruins of a bombed out building in Aleppo in August 2016.

To telegraph centuries of theological development into a couple of paragraphs, what happened was the emergence of a story designed to resolve the problem of evil and suffering in human history, which theologians call *apocalyptic* or *unveiling*, in which God would finally show his hand. The great NT scholar John Dominic Crossan described apocalyptic as the religion of broken people who couldn't believe that God would leave them at the mercy of tyrants forever. The idea is found in a number of

⁷ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, section III.

⁸ John Barton, *A History of the Bible*, Allan Lane 2019, p.311

religious traditions, but in the Hebrew Bible its most obvious emergence is in the Book of Daniel, which prophesied the coming of one who would end the pains of the children of the earth and inaugurate a new era of love and justice.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

In the Christian telling of the story the one who was to come was believed to be a First Century Jew called Jesus of Nazareth who preached a message that challenged the way the powerful ordered the world to suit themselves. In the coming kingdom of God he longed for, their order would be reversed: the poor and the hungry would be blessed with bread enough for each day. Captives would be liberated. Enemies would be turned into friends and even those who cursed us would be blessed. Even as he hung on the cross onto which the powerful had contemptuously nailed him, Jesus expected God to act and bring in his reign of justice and peace. God did not respond. After his death, when his followers experienced his presence in a new way, they still expected God to act in their lifetime and bring in the kingdom. They too died waiting. Still the Church waits. This is how Edwin Morgan expresses it:

But he will come again, it's said, though not
Unwanted and unsummoned; for all things,
Beasts of the field, and woods, and rocks, and seas,
And all mankind from end to end of the earth
Will call him with one voice. In our time,
Some say, or at a time when time is ripe.
Then he will come, Christ the uncrucified,
Christ the dis-crucified, his death undone,
His agony unmade, his cross dismantled –
Glad to be so – and the tormented wood
Will cure its hurt and grow into a tree
In a green springing corner of young Eden,
And Judas damned take his long journey backward
From darkness into light and be a child
Beside his mother's knee, and the betrayal
Be quite undone and never more be done.

Does this mean that all Christians can do now is to go on hoping that this new way of ordering the earth may yet miraculously reveal itself, 'In our time...or at a time when time is ripe?' Is that all that is left of the Christian story? The hope that God will finally erupt into history and make all things well? Not quite. There is a hint of another way of telling the story in a fragment of a gospel that never made it into the New Testament called the Gospel of Thomas. This is what it says.

His disciples said to him: 'When will the kingdom come?' Jesus said: 'It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying, "Here it is" or "There it is". Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it'.

The new world is already here, but we do not see it. It is an underground resistance movement and we are invited to join it and use the guerrilla tactics of courage and compassion against the forces of injustice and oppression. We blow up arrogance and hatred in all its strutting contempt and cruelty. We seek reconciliation with those we have hurt and we forgive those who have hurt us. We commit subversive acts of random kindness. We mistrust power in all its manifestations. We are amused by those who take themselves too seriously. We challenge cruelty in all its forms, religious as well as political. We listen to the poets who exhort us to love extravagantly and without caution and calculation.

And that's why I remain a member of the Christian Church. I choose to live by the story of Jesus' magnificent defeat, because it forgives me my own cruelty and gives me courage to withstand cruelty in others. But I am not suggesting that how I tell the story should convince anyone else here. I am no longer in the convincing business. It's just that this now is the story I try to live by. I hope you have one as well, even if it's different or is even opposed to mine.

One last word. The fourteenth century Sufi Al-Junayd said: 'The colour of water is that of its container'. To which Al-Arabi, another Muslim seer, offered this commentary: 'If one knew Junayd's saying, he would not interfere with other men's beliefs, but would perceive God in every form of belief.'⁹ I would widen that invitation to include all beliefs, including the belief that there is no God to believe in. The fact is, we can't get ourselves out of the way when we are trying to make sense of life or find a story to live by. What we are influenced by and what we see. Water takes its colour from its container.

There we are, then. My answer to the question I began with is that, yes, I am a Christian - just not a very believing one. And I'm fine with whatever you make of it.

Sorry Ivan: I am holding onto my ticket.

⁹ John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, One Word, Oxford 1999, p.42