

The Church is for Sceptics Too

Tony Windross argues that there's no reason why a non-supernaturally-based religion can't be accepted by even the most sceptical.

I've been in SOF since it started back in 1987, and I've been part of SOFIC (Sea of Faith in the Churches) since it started in 1998. Both networks have helped support and encourage me, and for that I'm *hugely* grateful (and I can't *not* mention with enormous gratitude Ronald Pearse, who was the driving force in SOFIC, as well as a pivotal figure in SOF). I've served as a SOF Trustee for two terms of office; I've contributed reviews to the SOF magazine; and my leaflets, for many years, were used as SOF publicity material. I'm saying all this to show that I'm a SOF-er up to my neck – and well remember the first SOF Conference, when the clergy there were so worried it might leak out that they were involved in such an outfit, that the list of those attending took on the status of a classified document.

It was an exciting and edgy time, a time when we felt like a renegade organisation, a time when it seemed just possible that we might begin to make some sort of difference to the church. But that was all long, long ago. Long before I was ordained, in fact – which itself was something of a miracle. And what is even more of a miracle (and I'm using that word advisedly!) is that, nearly *thirty* years after all the fuss surrounding the original SOF television series and book (1984); and nearly *twenty* years since Anthony Freeman was ejected from his Staplefield parish (1994) for writing the book *God in Us* – I'm vicar of one of the largest and most glorious medieval churches in the south of England, whilst being an 'out', out-and-out SOF-er (and I *did* mean to say 'out' three times then!).

There was something bizarrely and surreally appropriate about the way the 'Freeman affair' erupted *in the very same week* that I was ordained by the Bishop of Chichester. So at precisely the time he was accepting me into ordained ministry, he was showing Anthony the door. Truly (and very fortunately) a case of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing! And just as (a year later) I was being priested, Anthony was handing back the keys to his vicarage, and being ushered firmly out of the diocese. But neither

Anthony, nor I, was to blame. The fault lay squarely with Don Cupitt: Don was the person who showed me that it was possible (albeit tricky!) to be as sceptical as you like – whilst still taking religion with absolute seriousness. At least for the moment I'm still in there, playing the part of a gadfly, fighting the radical corner.

I need to stress that it's not a case of having (in my 20 God-less years) been a sceptic – and then coming to see the light. It's a case of having been a sceptic – and *remaining a sceptic*. But (and this is the key to everything I'm going to say) not allowing that reality to get in the way of full participation in the life and worship of the Church. *Of course* it's a paradoxical position; *of course* it's unpopular; *of course* it's very much a minority taste; and *of course* it's difficult to explain. But it is what it is – and the simple fact of my occupying the role that I do, has been a source of encouragement to many – as well as a scandal and an offence to very many more.



St Leonard's Church, Hythe

For a long time now I've been talking about '*belonging without believing*' – and it was therefore pleasing when Brian Mountford chose that as the subtitle of his latest book. I'd found it odd that what seemed blindingly obvious to me, wasn't being picked up on by anyone else. But Brian and I are in very different places. He's a liberal and although liberals are not flavour-of-the-month in the increasingly- (and barmily-) Evangelical Church of England – the bile they draw forth, and the condemnation they invite, is as nothing compared to that which is heaped upon the shoulders of Radicals like me.

So it's not at all surprising that there are hardly any radicals in the ranks of the serving clergy. Not only is it very much a minority position anyway – but most of the clergy seem supremely untroubled by the issues that the awkward SOF types are constantly wrestling with. In addition, there are practical considerations to be taken into account – in that those who speak out, stand a chance of either losing their job and their house – or at least losing all hope of future advancement. Bishops don't like troublemakers, and those who ask awkward

questions (and upset people by doing so) – cannot under any circumstances be deemed to be a ‘safe pair of hands’. Much better, from an institutional (and managerial) point of view, to have clergy as dull and as smiley and as orthodox and as anodyne as possible.

And who can blame them? Most bishops haven’t got the slightest idea why anyone with radical tendencies would want to become ordained – or why, if such unnatural tendencies came later, they didn’t simply do the decent thing and resign. But then it’s probably a mystery to most bishops, why pretty well all reasonable people want nothing whatsoever to do with religion. But that’s the way it is – and for very good reason. Most public spokespersons for religion seem either half-witted or seriously weird. Which is why the default setting in our society (among the intelligentsia anyway) is that religion is guilty until proven otherwise – and there’s no expectation that this is ever going to change.

looking for ways in which religion might not bore and embarrass ordinary intelligent people

Because of my personal route into faith, I’ve always had a particular interest in those who want nothing to do with religion. I was one of their number once, and still share pretty well all their objections. The only difference (and it’s a pretty key one!) is that they see the objections as problematic – and I don’t. My claim (and it’s a pretty ambitious, as well as outrageous one) is that it’s possible for anybody (well, *almost* anybody) to be able to make *some* sort of sense of religion – provided they come at it without too many preconceptions. And this means looking for ways in which religion might not bore and embarrass ordinary intelligent people. It’s not a matter of beginning with their objections and showing why they’re mistaken (which is what most defenders of religion do). But of beginning with their objections, agreeing with most of them – and showing why they don’t actually matter.

To try and do anything like this is guaranteed to upset pretty well everyone. The ardent atheists will see it as a weasel-words-attempt to have your cake and eat it – by trying to hang onto religion without taking any of it literally. Why not (they will ask) simply admit that it’s all a load of nonsense, and be done with it? The staunch religionists on the other hand, will see it as thinly-disguised atheism. Why not simply admit that you’ve lost (or never found) your faith – and leave the Church in peace to the privileged few who’ve still got it?

The place where we need to start – is God. For as long as I can remember, other people managed (and manage!) to cope with God much better than I could (or can). In fact (if I can put it this way) – *it was God that stood between me and religious faith!* Religion kept going on about it, but I couldn’t make any sense of the idea. God did this; God wanted that; God said this; God thought that. It was bizarre stuff, but lots of people seemed to be able to cope with it. Was I peculiar in some way? Was I lacking a sort of religious sense, in the way that someone might lack a sense of smell?

God was, apparently, a supernatural (and religious insiders invariably fail to appreciate that when that word is used, most thoughtful outsiders switch off, as it sounds completely and utterly barmy) and invisible person, with immense power and knowledge. He (it was always a he) was everywhere (but nowhere in particular – and therefore, presumably, nowhere at all), knew everything and everyone, and could do everything (except apparently things like stopping people being sad, or tortured, or swept away in tsunamis). He loved everyone (but not to the extent that he arranged things so that parents didn’t watch their children die in agony), but because he was also righteous, would ensure that everlasting punishment followed death, not just for those who have been well below the required standard in this life, but also for those who chose (and apparently belief is an act of will) not to believe in him. It’s an odious and insane picture – and it’s not surprising that I could do nothing with it – in the same way that many today can *still* do nothing with it.

Religion is (or should be) that area of human cultural life that focuses on the Really Big Questions; the things that matter more than any others. But instead, it usually ends up becoming an inward-looking refuge for the intellectually- and socially- and psychologically- and emotionally-challenged. One of the problems, of course, is that hardly anyone is prepared to spend the time and effort necessary to take religion with the seriousness it deserves. Most of those outside take it at face value, see it as ridiculous, and therefore (understandably) decline to consider it further. Most of those inside take it at face value, cling to it gratefully – and decline to consider it further. The result is that neither its detractors nor its proponents engage in the subtleties that have the potential to yield such rich returns.

A moment’s reflection would show just how ludicrous such an approach is, given the way that people with a genuine interest in (say) Wagner or Milton or Eliot wouldn’t dream of ducking the effort needed for a full appreciation of their works. But in religion (apparently), the mindless binary approach rules: it’s either right – or it’s wrong; it’s either absolute (and unquestionable – and probably *literal*) truth – or

it's a pack of lies.

Philosophy has been defined as 'an unusually stubborn attempt to think *clearly*'; and in similar fashion religion might be understood as 'an unusually stubborn attempt to think *deeply*'; or 'an unusually stubborn attempt to wrestle with the Big Issues of Life'. *Of course* it's possible to wrestle with them in non-religious ways: many people do. But given the size of the undertaking, it makes sense to use whatever materials there are to hand, including the efforts of people across the centuries – which is what the religious heritage is all about.

It may be that those materials are so soaked in outmoded ways of thinking and untenable assumptions, that they simply *can't* bear the weight we want to put on them – because they require so much translation and reinterpretation that doing so does such violence to the original authors' intentions that it becomes a matter of dishonesty. That *may* be where we end up: but it's worth at least starting with the possibility that we might be able to salvage *something*. Even from the idea of God.

it's all about taking the stories – *as stories*

Because we're the sort of creatures that we are, we tell stories that make us feel at home. All societies have done it, and we're still doing so. The stories are often called myths – and far from meaning they're not true, they're the truest things we've got. Although humans are meaning-seeking (and hence myth-making) creatures, this doesn't/needn't entail any supernatural dimension. And therefore although most educated people can no longer accept the supernatural side of religion, there's no reason why a non-supernaturally-based religion can't be accepted by even the most sceptical. It's all about taking the stories – *as stories*. It's about seeing them as expressing truths which are worth bothering with, in the same way that Shakespeare's plays are seen as expressing truths that are worth bothering with. We've seen the plays before – but go and see them again, because we keep getting stuff from them.

The beauty of the idea of myth is that it has the potential to free us from much of the negativity and energy-sapping unpleasantness of the Fundamentalist-Liberal debate. Myth is the truth that has the potential to set us free from the poisonous, clique-ridden acrimony that contaminates so much church life. *The extraordinary thing, though, is that it doesn't actually matter at all, whether or not we think there is a God 'out there'*. The only thing that matters is whether (say) the Christian myth is something that grabs us or not. All that matters is whether the Christian myth helps us

to live fuller, more generously loving lives: the ontological/epistemological status of the stories is neither here nor there.

I've long since given up on any ambition I had to find Absolute Truth (or anything like it). I see religion as a means-to-an-end – with the end *not* being *some-sort-of-grasp of some-sort-of-truth* (probably meta-physical in nature) but something far more practical and down-to-earth : maybe something like 'good living'. That, of course, begs a whole multitude of questions. But (for me, at least) it has to involve a sense of connectedness with all that is – especially with the human world. And this means it includes, on the one hand, the entirety of aesthetic and spiritual experiences; and on the other the entirety of ethical concerns. The combination of these two constitutes the totality of what it is that makes us distinctively human creatures – which is why I see religion (at its best) as a key way of helping us realise our human potential to the fullest extent.

Our society, apart from isolated little pockets, has no interest in Christianity, and even less in the Church. We need to ask whether anything significant would be lost if all the churches were closed. Is there any point in trying to rescue the faith from the clutches of the mindless and the frightened, who need it to get them through the day?. In *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (p.141) Don Cupitt comments:

No doubt such people deserve comfort. But it is not in the long run healthy for the church that they should be so dominant that they virtually have the place to themselves.

Whenever things become especially unpleasant, with people lashing out at anything non-bland and even marginally intelligent, one can begin to lose heart – although I did find some comfort when I read that the Archbishop of Canterbury would not be allowed to preach in some evangelical churches, on the grounds of his 'heretical liberalism'! So why carry on, in what is an unequal and surely hopeless struggle? Why bother to try and make relevant texts from 2000 or more years ago?

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The questions are especially pressing for radicals like me. They/we have to work that much harder to reinterpret the language and the stories, and many of them also have to work that much harder in drawing a veil over their true positions, for fear of frightening the horses – and the bishops. All the time they are struggling with almost everything the institution says

and does, out of step and out of favour. No wonder there aren't that many of them around! The easiest thing would be simply to walk away – but to do that would mean abandoning the Church to the fundamentalists and other conservatives, who would then have even freer rein to mould it into their own likeness – which means, of course, to exclude those who aren't like them.

The American philosopher of religion, Loyal Rue, began his remarks to the 1989 SOF Conference in the following way:

The Church is *precisely* what the Church *says* it is, and the central proclamation of the Church is precisely what the Church *declares* it to be. (This means that) if all the intelligent, informed, and moral people were to leave the Church, then the Church would be left in the hands of those who are stupid, ignorant and wicked, in which case the central proclamation of the Church would be whatever stupidity, ignorance and wickedness declared it to be.

He went on:

If intellectual rigour leaves the Church, then the Church will be left in the hands of stupid people. If tolerance leaves the Church, then the Church will be a haven for bigotry. If peace makers leave the Church then the Church will become an instrument of war. If feminists leave the Church, then the Church will remain a source of unjust discrimination. And so on.

He was writing during the presidency of the first President Bush, at a time when the New Right was beginning to flex its muscles, both in religion and in domestic and foreign policy. Things have moved on a long way in the years since, and the dangers are now even greater. If outsiders like me have the energy and the determination and the sheer bloody-mindedness to hang on in there, and do what we can to keep things as open and as accessible as possible to the thoughtful and uncommitted, then that's what we ought to continue to do.

It's time for the Church (and all who sail in her) to grow up – but for many, the Church is a means of preventing precisely that. Which is why they fight tooth and nail to stop such dangerous ideas spoiling everything. And then wonder why people find it hard to take us seriously! Let's set ourselves the ambition of giving those who currently have no time for religion, a different and rather more challenging narrative to chew on!

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Spem in Alium

I have never put my hope in any other
but you, God of Israel

Listen
It goes round
It rings
from voice to voice
on the beat and off
like lines of silk
meanderings
of parallels and opposites
that gather to organic knots
of chord and discord
to silence

We journey on again
inside this fine embroidery
as forty different threads
go in and out on the frame
of the steady pulse
of four beats in a bar

One then two singers
and then another few
throw backwards and forwards
the glittering ball of sweet polyphony
and more and more join in until
we reach the monumental final
where everyone is crying NOSTRAM

Our song
Ours
Listen

Words fail me
I have never put my hope
In any other but you, Music

Janet Simon

Spem in Alium is a forty-part Renaissance motet by Thomas Tallis, composed circa 1570 for eight choirs of five voices each. The motet, sung by the Chapelle du Roi, can be heard on You Tube at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fblQrlwY_bg

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Cicely Herbert writes about *The Joys of Singing* on page 27.