

Waving or Drowning?

Tony Windross reflects on what matters.

Before its abolition in 1990, the Inner London Education Authority was seen as such a hot-bed of ideological opposition to the Thatcher government, that it was surprising it lasted as long as it did. An example of its unacceptable extremism (and political correctness) was the way it banned the singing, in all ILEA schools, of the third verse of *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. The offending words, you will remember, went as follows:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.

It was a more innocent era, of course, still infected by 1960s idealism; and not yet feeling the chill winds of harsher social and economic times that were fast approaching. But where ILEA led, others followed – and the verse was omitted from every single hymn book published since the early 1980s. But times change – and maybe the verse should be re-inserted, to reflect where we are now. And that is a society where inequalities are celebrated as incentives (the bigger the better!) and where the rich need to be given more to encourage them to work harder, while the poor need to be given less to keep them on their toes.

As an Anglican vicar, I'm somewhere in the middle of all this. My stipend is £22,000 a year (or £60 a day), which isn't a bad income, and is a whole lot better than those in receipt of the (surely ironically-named?) Job Seekers' Allowance, who receive just £10 a day. I'm on *six times* what they're on, which is a pretty handsome multiple, but one that pales into embarrassing insignificance when set alongside the much-put-upon Bob Diamond, whose worth was considered to be £60,000 a day, which is *six thousand times* what they're on.

That's because each year he earned (and will doubtless do so again soon) not twenty two *thousand* pounds (like me) but twenty two *million* pounds. He's not at the top, of course, and there are plenty who are even more generously remunerated, but it gives some idea of the range:

with those at the top receiving upwards of *six thousand times* the income of those at the bottom.

I work hard – and I'm sure he works hard as well. But the question that underlies the whole pay debate concerns the legitimacy and morality of a system where some people get *several thousand times* more than others. Is this the best way to arrange our economic affairs? Is this an accurate reflection of the way different contributions within our society are ranked? Is this a fair reflection of the differing existential significance of Bob and me? First, here are some familiar words from Stevie Smith, which form the basis of my title:

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
'I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.'

Poor chap, he always loved larking.
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart
gave way,
They said.

'Oh, no no no, it was too cold always.'
(Still the dead one lay moaning.)
'I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.'

Hermine Wittgenstein told of something similar, when she was remonstrating with her brother Ludwig about the way he was wasting his talents, by teaching in a primary school. She said: 'You remind me of somebody wanting to use a precision instrument to open crates'. His reply reduced her to silence. He said:

You remind me of somebody who is looking out through a closed window, and cannot explain to himself the strange movements of a passer-by. He cannot tell what sort of storm is raging out there, or that this person might only be managing with difficulty to stay on his feet. ¹

Don't be deceived though! Although I've quoted

Wittgenstein, unlike the other speakers at the conference, I'm not an academic of any sort, and (I suspect) have really only been asked along to provide a bit of light relief. Two more quotes: One from the London cabbie, who claimed :

I had that Bertrand Russell in the back of the cab once, and I said to him, 'Well, Lord Russell – what's it all about?' And do you know: he couldn't tell me! ²

Secondly, one of David Cameron's illustrious predecessors, Lord Balfour – who famously said:

Nothing matters very much, and very few things matter at all.

Was he right? *Is* it the case that very few things matter? Matter to whom? To you? To me? Do *more things matter* to you than to me? Do *some things matter more* to you than to me? And do *some things matter more* to me than to you? How could we ever find out? How could we *measure* any of this stuff?

When we talk about 'things mattering' – what 'things' do we mean? And why does this mattering stuff – matter anyway? *Things matter* because we're the sort of creatures that we are. We're thrown into life, it's all around us, we're caught up in it, we're up to our *ears* in it, and we spend much of our time trying to make sense of it. It's probably escaped the attention of most people that this year, in addition to being (this week, in fact!) the 50th anniversary of the Rolling Stones' first live performance – is also the 50th anniversary of the Richmond Lecture, delivered in Downing College, Cambridge by the English critic F R Leavis, on the subject of the *Two Cultures?*, and it needs emphasising that his title (like mine) has an all-important question mark after it.

In the course of the lecture, Leavis asks (twice, in fact) 'What for – what *ultimately* for? What, *ultimately*, do men live by?' (pages 22-23) He immediately adds: 'The questions work at what I can only call a religious depth of thought and feeling'. Fiercely (and famously) merciless in his attack upon the hapless scientist (and erstwhile novelist) C P Snow, Leavis lampoons (among many other things) the simplistic way that Snow, in discussing religion, simply assumes that the

world can be divided into two groups: 'religious believers' and 'religious unbelievers'. Most people today (as then), would be perfectly happy with that, and wonder why Leavis was being so nit-picking. But maybe it requires an irascible and awkward individual like him to try and raise the tone of the discussion, by drawing attention to the way that religion, if taken seriously, cannot ever be anything other than subtle and (therefore) tricky. Because it's in the interstices, in the gaps, that the real stuff is (if anywhere) to be found.

So: what, ultimately, *do* we live by? Is that a religious or a philosophical question? Does it vary from individual to individual? Or are there things that matter (or *ought* to matter?) to everyone? Things like love? Or beauty? Or a sense of self-

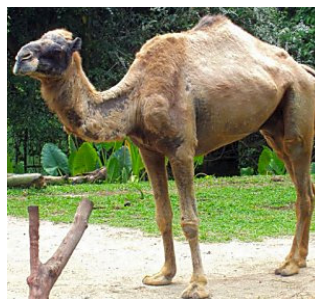
worth? Or the need to 'make a difference'? That which *is* of significance is *that which we worship* (a word which roughly means 'condition of being worthy'). To worship something means to treat it with the utmost honour and respect, hence the Book of Common Prayer marriage service requirement of the groom to say to the bride: 'With my body I thee worship'. It's the ultimate in self-obedience, the ultimate in self-giving, the ultimate in honouring. And it's what you've got to be able to do (in some sense) if you're going to get

anything out of religion – or life itself.

Wittgenstein couldn't manage it – as he made clear when he said: 'I cannot kneel to pray because it's as though my knees were stiff. I am afraid of my own dissolution, should I become soft'.³

That possibility of self-dissolution is very real, but it's a risk that needs taking, because unless and until we find something (or someone) before which we want to pay homage, religion can never be for us a possibility – and life is going to lack a profound dimension. Religion is the cultural vehicle that has been devised for the *precise purpose* of paying homage. And the act of worship involves bringing to our attention those things before which, metaphorically, and maybe literally as well, we bend the knee.

We worship all sorts of things: money, power, sex, fame, status – the evidence being the way people devote themselves to them. They're all things that can lead into murky waters. They're all things that others can (and do) claim are not worthy of such devotion. And they're all things



Through a needle's eye?
Those at the top in Britain
receive six thousand times the
income of those at the bottom.

that have the potential to give us what most of us crave above all else – and that’s control, of some sort, over our environment. The reason money is so important, is that it gives us precisely that – although if we’re educated and middle class, it’s too vulgar (of course) to think in such terms.

But it’s money that enables us to be surrounded by attractive things (rather than cheap and tatty stuff); it’s money that enables us to choose where to live (rather than be at the mercy of local authority housing departments, who may shunt us off, once we’re lucky and make it to the top of the housing list, to some depressing flat on a sink estate); it’s money that enables us to go to the theatre or the opera, or whatever culture-fests turn us on. And this is why it’s self-deceivingly cheap for people like us to pretend not to be interested in the stuff, when it’s money that means we’ve got *such power* over our lives.

We might pay lip service to the idea that the poor are blessed – but lip service is all it tends to be, as most of us have little inclination voluntarily to become one of their number – because being poor also means being powerless. And so although it may be the meek who will inherit the Earth, we’ll probably take our chances with the other lot!

This means there’s a huge disconnect between most of the people at conferences like this, and those who are struggling to pay the gas bill; people on minimum wages (or below); people who can’t get any sort of work; people who are spectators rather than participants in society; people who don’t go out much, because it simply rubs their noses in their own misery, to see just how excluded they are whenever they look in a shop window.

But – so what? Why bother with the poor? Why bother with the sick? Why bother with the persecuted? Why not just let them sort themselves out – which is surely Nature’s Way? They’re questions most of us never ask – because it’s self-evident that we *should* take heed of those who are struggling. Not everyone thinks like this, of course, as opinion polls and the tabloids make clear.

Many liberals (and, even more so, radicals like us) in the churches spend a great deal of time (and even more energy) apologising – for who they are, and for what they can’t believe. Something along the lines of: ‘I’m sorry I can’t get my head round the idea of a Father-God figure up there in the sky. But I’m still a nice person: so please like me – and I’ll try to keep my odd views to myself.’ It’s

time for all this sort of thing to come to an end, because there’s a long-standing honesty-deficit, which needs urgently addressing. For far too long there’s been a severe shortage of plain-speaking about what liberals and radicals do and don’t believe, which, in turn, has left the way clear for all sorts of lunatics to take over the religious asylums, and in the process, putting off pretty much anyone with the capacity to do joined-up writing – let alone joined-up thinking.

What’s needed is for people like us to have the necessary courage to stand up and be counted. And that depends on us having a robust sense of what we’re about – and a willingness to be different. Because when it comes to questions of self-worth, we simply have to shrug our shoulders and say: ‘This is *Who* we are, and this is *Where* we are: take it or leave it’. And to do so without so much as a hint of either apology or defensiveness. But we’re poor and fragile creatures, and constantly need affirmation – which means being ever-dependent on getting a constant stream of positive strokes.

Work of one sort or another is what gives this sense of validation to many (maybe most) of us. And this is why they/we have to have something to *do*. To do is to be – it’s feeling part of something bigger than myself. It’s about ‘making connections’, being grounded. When our attention is on other people/things/projects we can be ‘taken out of ourselves’, and freed from the navel-gazing that imprisons us in self-consciousness, always standing outside ourselves and objectifying our situation. To avoid this, we need to immerse and ‘connect’ – and it’s work (maybe religious, maybe non-religious) that can do this, so that we reach outside ourselves, and achieve a kind of transcendence of the self. Given the way this can turn lives that are inward-looking (and therefore unsatisfying), into lives that are other-centred (and therefore profoundly fulfilling) – it’s something that really *does* matter.

NOTES

1. *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (OUP 1984).
2. *What’s It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, Julian Baggini (Granta Books 2004).
3. *Culture and Value*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, ed. G H von Wright, translated Peter Winch, 1980.

Tony Windross is the Vicar of St Leonard’s Church, Hythe (Kent) and a former SOF trustee. His book *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith* was published by O Books in 2003. This is an edited, shortened version of the talk he gave to the SOF Annual Conference at Leicester.