

# People and their gods evolve together

by David Paterson

One way of experiencing this talk is to see me now, starting to read my script, imagining me folding it up in (we hope) 10 minutes time, and wondering what will happen in between. And that's one way of looking at what we call the universe. Time starts at the Big Bang and flows all one way until it finishes at the Big Crunch. 'Time like an ever-rolling stream/ bears all its sons away.' But perhaps that's not the only way of seeing *all-that-is*. Perhaps there really is no answer to the questions 'What happened before the Big Bang?' or 'What will happen after the Big Crunch?'. Perhaps *all-that-is* just IS. As T. S. Eliot wrote in the Burnt Norton movement of his Four Quartets:

Time present and time past  
are both perhaps present in time future  
and the future contained in time past...

Does that mean then, that (as Eliot continued): 'All time is unredeemable./What might have been is an abstraction/remaining a hopeful possibility/only in a world of speculation.' ? Or does it rather mean that hopeful possibilities are the essence of *all-that-is*? The necessity of hope? Not smug, super-optimistic belief in unstoppable progress; not uni-directional time at all, not cause and effect, but ever-present evolution from boundless possibility. Quantum theorists, the mathematicians and the poets, each in their own way, seem to think the answer might be YES. The story of BEING is a story of evolution. At every stage there are unbounded possibilities, and a complexity of probabilities; and the natural selection process is the event of choice. So *all-that-is* is constantly *what-is-chosen*. And the choices spring from past, present and future. Einstein might have been right to say 'God doesn't play dice', but random selection plays a major part in the richness of *all-that-is*. Energy – elementary particles – protons and electrons – atoms – molecules – molecules that make copies of themselves – living organisms evolving in ever-increasing complexity – nervous systems,

brains, thoughts and dreams. To love, value and delight in these wonders – to express them, share them and contribute to them – is the stuff of poetry, music and all the arts.

So here are we – the phenomenon of boundless possibility and random choice – looking for a meaning for it all. In the evolution of language and consciousness, story and poetry are born. Gods are born. We tell our stories to each other and to ourselves – like Philip Pullman's characters in Malcolm, Alice and Lyra's world we have our *dæmons* to accompany us, and the necessity of hope to urge us on. *All-that-is* consists of possibility, hope and choice – faith, hope and love – and the meaning lies in linking being to becoming by the necessary glue of hope.

Our gods evolve with us. The pattern is seen in the individual life, as we develop from the boundless potential of the new-born 'trailing clouds of glory as we come' to the regrets and wisdom of old age and the rage against the dying of the light. Throughout the human experience there are new challenges, new disillusionment, new ways to hope.

We see it in the history of the human species and its religious traditions – crude, violent, cruel, superstitious, trapped – or beautiful, peaceful, loving, wise and free. Our gods evolve with us. They are the consequences of our choices, and we are responsible for them and for the religions built on them. We live in an ever-flowing stream, an ever-evolving story of the god who is not, but who will be, who fires our imaginations with a new vision of the human form divine. Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his poem *Carrion Comfort*, enshrined the struggle of his own evolution, his temptation to despair, the necessity of hope to make meaning from it all, and the joy of discovering a new freedom to be, a new relationship between self and god:

## Carrion Comfort

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
Not untwist – slack they may be – these last strands of man  
In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;  
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.  
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me  
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan  
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,  
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.  
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,  
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.  
Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fíot tród  
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year  
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.