

When Belief Fails

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We are supposed to live in an age in which belief is harder than ever before. In fact the Dean of Emmanuel thinks that belief in any traditional form is just not possible for modern men and women.² According to him, humanity in the late twentieth century finds itself alone in a disenchanted universe, the age-old props and comforts of religion have fallen away, and we are left with an austere, demanding, individual task of imposing meaning on the inane, of making ourselves and our ideals the heart of a heartless world. If we choose to call these ideals God, well and good; but when we say we 'believe' in God we *don't* mean, the argument goes, what people in the past have meant by that. Their God was a sort of super-hero, a Dr Who figure, who made the lightning flash and the sun rise and who could be invoked to fend off the horrors of existence. This is superstition, says Don Cupitt, and so is any account of God which does not acknowledge that God is simply the sum of our human values, representing "their ideal unity, their claims upon us and their creative power". In other words; penetrate to the heart of religion, look closely at the image in the shrine, and what you will find is not the unseen God, but a mirror. The true name of YAHWEH is Narcissus. And we have heard this before. It is, with a change to a kindlier, less triumphalist tone, the voice of Victorian Atheism:

Is not this the great God of your sires, that with
souls and with bodies was fed,
And the world was aflame with his fires? O fools,
he was God and is dead.
Yea, weep to him, lift up your hands; be your eyes
as a fountain of tears;
Where he stood there is nothing that stands; if he
calls there is no man that hears.
Thou art smitten, thou God, thou art smitten; thy death
is upon thee, O Lord.
And the love song of earth as thou diest resounds
through the wind of her wings—
Glory to Man in the Highest! for Man is the Master
of things."

(Swinburne, Hymn of Man.)

But in any case the Church does not preach a God who is ever ready to bail us out of trouble, a general anaesthetic against the pain of being human. Such a God *would* be a superstition, and an unbelievable one too, since you only have to look around you to find pious Christians with cancer, or mangled in road-crashes. Christianity has never involved belief in a God of the gaps, a God who is the item of last resort in the medicine-cabinet of remedies for our human ills. God is presented to us in Christian tradition, not as an escape hatch *from* reality, but as the *ground* of reality, in whom we live and move and have our being. He does not, and never has, lived out there in a heaven that astronauts have proved doesn't exist, or as the end term in a sequence that philosophers now tell us needn't have an end.

So what are we to make of this claim that *modern* men and women *can't* believe in God? Patently millions of them do, not all of them intellectual primitives or young fogeys. Perhaps the claim means that intelligent and sensitive modern people, as clued up on modern thought as the Dean of Emmanuel, can't believe in the God of tradition. Again, I'm not sure what to make of this, given that three of the philosophy chairs at Oxford and Cambridge are occupied by Roman Catholics of a rather traditional sort, and that one of Cambridge's most brilliant theoretical physicists recently resigned his chair to become an Anglican priest. So in what sense is 'modern' being used? I begin to suspect the presence of Humpty Dumpty.

"There's glory for you."

"I don't know that you mean by glory," Alice said.

"I meant there's a nice knock down argument for you."

"But glory doesn't mean a nice knock down argument,"

Alice objected.

"When I use a word," said Humpty Dumpty in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."

I find myself, then, a beachcomber along the edges of the sea of faith. I am to speak of unbelief, to try to pick from the flotsam and jetsam of my own experience some reflections on doubts about the existence of God, and the worth of religion. And what I want to register at the outset is my scepticism about the notion that it is somehow harder for us to believe because we *know* more, *understand* more, about the world than people in the past. Belief in God, in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who acted in Jesus, who was before the worlds and will survive them, the God from whom we are born and into whom we die; belief in that God is not now, and never has been, a matter of a collection of opinions and ideas about the world. The saints and theologians and the simple believers of the past can't be dismissed as a bunch of flat-earthers, whose God is some sort of discredited spiritual technology. Belief in God is now what it always

has been, a matter of trust and reliance in the hopefulness and goodness of reality, and our place in it. Knowledge as such hardly affects it, and can't in itself hinder or help it. Ask yourself; who will find it harder to believe in a loving, caring, creator God—a secure western scientist in search of explanations in a warm laboratory, or a peasant woman in Ethiopia whose children have starved to death before her eyes? I want to suggest that it's not immediately obvious that the scientist will have the more strenuous task in believing. And accordingly I am unimpressed by the suggestion that the undoubted marginalising of religion in our society has much, or anything, to do with knowledge, or intellectual advance. I think that the explanation lies elsewhere. Since the onset of the Enlightenment, for at least three hundred years, we in the West have been systematically constructing a world in which men and women are dehumanised; pushed into anonymous multitudes, as 'hands' in the production of commodities, or as 'consumers' in an economy dominated, not by human needs, but by market forces. And within these collectivities they have been isolated, peddled an understanding of identity which is defined by separation from others, peddled an understanding of freedom as individualism. Our closest bonds are vested interest, or solidarity for the purpose of waging war. This is the dark side, the soft underbelly, of that process which the Dean of Emmanuel welcomes, by which "in contemporary society scientific knowledge plays an ever-increasingly important part", offering "a way of arriving at the truth which is very different from the traditional teaching of the Christian Church". Indeed it is! That process seems to me to rest on the puerile assumption that one rule will do to measure all of reality, that all that cannot be quantified must be jettisoned. We strip our common discourse of all but utilitarian words and notions, and then greet the disappearance of non-utilitarian concerns and beliefs, firstly as somehow surprising, and then as somehow progress. We put out our eyes, and then insist that the sun is a fiction of the poets. But humanity is not by its nature the inhabitant of what D.H. Lawrence called "the dry sterile little world the abstract mind inhabits". The matter is essentially a simple one; empty society of the experience of shared value and commitment, exclude wonder and reverence as legitimate human responses to the world, isolate men and women within the trap of their own limited and limiting goals, and they will cease to speak of God. They will have forgotten his name, because they will not know their own.

It was there that they asked us
our captors, for songs,
our oppressors, for joy.
Sing to us, they said, one of Sion's songs.

O how could we sing
the song of the Lord
on alien soil?

If there is any truth at all in the idea that we live in an age of *doubt*, it lies not in the advance of knowledge, but in the impoverishment of our collective perceptions, in the emptying of our language and our society of anything but number and calculation. Blake saw it coming, and denounced it at the beginning of the modern era.

“What, it will be questioned, when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?

O no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying HOLY HOLY HOLY is the Lord God Almighty”.

But of course lack of belief in God can't just be explained away by social conditioning, any more than belief can. Doubt, the fear that the world has indeed no direction, that all man's aspirations are trivialised by death, the death of the individual or the generation or—a new possibility in our time—the species, the conviction that our goodness passes away and our evil can never be undone; these things touch all of us. If we are to be believers it can't be by pretending that no one has these feelings or that they aren't formidable and persuasive. It can't be by pretending that we don't feel them ourselves.

I have no claim to expertise in these matters, and I have no illusion that my experience or perception of things has any sort of exemplary status. But in thinking what I might usefully say in a few minutes about the failure of belief, I thought that the best thing I could do was to tell you about my own failure of belief. Not the repeated infidelities, the hundred failures of commitment and conviction that seem to make the substance of my life as a Christian; but one particular period in my life when, quite simply, I became certain that there was no God, and that Christianity was an illusion.

I had my basic religious education from Irish monks, in the bad old days before the Second Vatican Council. It was a tough training, involving total saturation in Catholic subculture, 'God is Love' thumped into you with a stick and the penny catechism. You can do one of two things about the sort of conditioning that form of education gives you; you can kick against it and turn it on its head—like James Joyce—or wallow in it. I wallowed because I loved it. It provided me with a world of colour, historical resonance, poetry and intellectual vigour way beyond anything else in my provincial Irish upbringing. And when, as a teenager, I came to England, I was lucky enough to be sent to a school where religious education was in the hands of two exceptionally gifted men. At a time when most teenagers are quite understandably rejecting the threadbare platitudes

that often pass for Christianity, I was being made to read Kafka and Sartre and Camus and Wittgenstein and Ryle, I was being introduced to the critical study of the Bible, I was being shown that religion had something worth hearing to say about all the issues of life and death. So I went to university, and read theology and philosophy, to begin with. And though I met and liked and talked through many long days and nights with people who didn't believe, I never encountered anything that seemed half so rich or so satisfying as my inherited Catholicism. I married a Christian, and so never had to confront the problem of fundamental allegiance that being in love with a non-believer might have posed. Three years research in church history only confirmed all this, and my satisfaction was bolstered by the willingness of many of the people I met to be influenced by me. I was not only religious, I was *successfully* religious. And all this in the 1960s, when the Church and the world were in such exciting ferment, when the worst idiocies of the Catholic church seemed to be peeling away, and when religious and political and social commitment seemed to flow together; when one could spill out of a Mass at the chaplaincy, to take part in a silent demo in the market place against napalm bombing in Vietnam. Heady days.

In my last year or so at Cambridge I was introduced to a blind man, a retired Anglican priest, who lived just outside Cambridge. I used to cycle out once a week to read to him. He was a very remarkable person; despite his blindness he edited a magazine, and was at the centre of an ever-expanding circle of friends of every class, creed, colour, shape and sex—he married a number of them off to each other! He was a life-giver, full of wisdom, which he disguised with a rather freakish, macabre sense of humour.

In 1971 I moved away to my first job, and I just about kept in touch with him; and then in the following year I got news, very unexpectedly, that he had died.

It turned out to be the most traumatic event of my life. Never before or since has anything so terrible happened to me. I still don't know why I was so affected, but in the weeks after his death I woke up night after night, drenched in icy sweat, swept by wave after wave of nauseating physical fear of death; my own, my wife's, our new-born son's. Not fear that somehow we might die *soon*, unexpectedly; just a horrifying realisation that one day there would be nothing; that our hopes, our preoccupations, our beliefs would be simply brushed aside, shown up for the meaningless treadmill they had always been. And with the horror, came the realisation that God was gone; there was no God, and I had no faith. All the conditioning, all the arguments and emotional scaffolding I'd built round and into my life were as if they had never been. I no longer believed, no longer even wanted to believe; I was absolutely mesmerised by this overwhelming perception

212

of mortality. I'd never been much good at prayer, and now more than ever prayer seemed hollow. I felt confused and embarrassed by my attempts to pray, like a man caught talking to himself in a railway carriage.

What I want to emphasise is that *intellectually* nothing had changed. The arguments for or against belief seemed neither stronger nor weaker to me than they had ever done before; I *could* still, and endlessly I *did* put up a strong case for believing in God. Quite simply, it carried no weight for me. The death of my blind friend seemed the ultimate rebuttal. He was dead; everything, good or bad, would die.

I'd encountered this awful annihilating blanket of death once before; but that had been safely between the covers of a book I'd read as a sixth-former, Camus' *l'Etranger*. There is a horrifying scene towards the end of the novel, where the Outsider is waiting for execution in the death cell, and he explains the mystery which has dominated the book so far, his own total deadness of feeling, his inability to love or to hate, or to regret or to hope. A priest is trying to talk to him, and the Outsider, just for once, explodes.

I hurled insults at him, I told him not to waste his rotten prayers on me; it was better to burn than to disappear ... he seemed so cocksure, you see. And yet none of his certainties were worth one strand of a living woman's hair. It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he. Sure of my present life and the death that was coming ... all the time I'd been waiting for this present moment, for that dawn, tomorrow's or another day's, which was to justify me. Nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow persistent breeze had been blowing towards me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze had levelled out all the ideas people tried to foist on me in the unreal years I was living through. What difference could they make to me, the death of others or a mother's love or his God ... As a condemned man himself, couldn't he grasp what I meant by that dark wind blowing from my future?"

Now, standing in the full blast of that same dark wind, my plight had none of that appalling eloquence or clarity. But I felt myself confronted with the same issue. Were love and meaning to be flattened by my conviction that the world didn't add up, that it had no significance greater than the sum of its parts? If people were ephemeral, were the things they lived by and for ephemeral? Looking at what had been lovable and admirable in my friend's life, could I just say that had been 'nice' and turn away? Could I say, in fact,

'death is stronger than love'?

I found I couldn't, and the implications of my inability to say that baffled me. I could find no way of holding on to the values of Christianity while denying the account Christianity gave of reality. It wouldn't do to say that, yes, the world *was* a bleak place subject to inexorable material forces, and yet that one might as well structure one's life by values like love and selflessness and compassion, because they were really very attractive. I didn't see how righteousness could be reduced to some sort of pleasant and useful hobby like carpentry or crocheting, something to fill in the time till the hearse came to take me away. And I couldn't make any sense of the idea of defeated virtue for its own sake. I once saw an appalling newsreel of the Russian invasion of Hungary, in which a man rushed into the streets with a national flag which he brandished defiantly in the path on an oncoming tank, till it rolled over him with a noise like crackling sweetpapers. Was goodness like that; was *Jesus* like that? I found that I simply couldn't see righteousness as *pathetic*, a lost cause, like defeated Jacobite squires drinking to the King over the water who would never come into his own. I didn't see how one could affirm the beatitudes, and yet assert that in no circumstances whatever would the meek inherit the earth.

All this time I had carried on going to Mass, though I didn't know what I was doing there. And it was there, in its celebration of the death of Jesus, (and what an extraordinary idea the *celebration* of a death seemed) that I found something by which I could establish some sort of bearing on my turmoil. For as I knelt there rather numbly, week by week, it dawned on me that the Mass began from the point at which I had now arrived. Here, in a ritual grown commonplace to me by long acquaintance, there was an unblinking contemplation of all the ills of humanity. Here it was acknowledged that men and women die, often horribly, that good is defeated, that power crushes tenderness, that lies swallow up the truth. And in the face of that acknowledgement, in the face of the cross, the Mass proclaimed a celebration, an affirmation of the unquenchable life of love. Out of death—and not just the death of Jesus, but out of *my* death, the masterful negation and collapse of all that made *me* man—it asserted our right to rejoice. It did so because there had once been a man whose trust in the loving reality that underlay the world was so total that in the face of his own destruction he could still call that reality Father; whose death was not an end to his loving, but the means of its infinite expansion. I saw that what was on offer here, true or false, was not an escape from my own mortality, for it began with a death. Karl Rahner says somewhere that "when we look on the face of the Crucified we know that we are to be spared nothing". What was on offer was an account of our living and dying which did justice to its

urgency, and its fragility, and its loveableness; which affirmed that the forces that give warmth and worth to our existence have power in the dark places, even in death.

And I knew I had to choose, between the bleak valueless world of the Outsider and the world of human significance, where love and forgiveness and celebration were possibilities.

I don't have much recollection of the process by which I made my choice; except that, when it dawned on me that I had made it, it seemed not so much a choice, as a gift. As I sat after communion one Sunday, simply looking at the people walking up to the altar, I was quietly overwhelmed with an overflowing sense of companionship, of gratitude, of joy and, oddly, of pity. My mind filled up, quite literally filled up, I could think nothing else, with a single verse of the psalms:

Lord, how I love the beauty of your house,
and the place where your glory dwells.

There was no miraculous conviction. Perplexities and pain remained. I had and I have fewer certainties than before, and there are many areas of the faith that I gratefully and wholeheartedly accept which are opaque to me, like the idea of life after death. But now I know that faith is a direction, not a state of mind; states of mind change and veer about, but we can hold a direction. It is not in its essence a set of beliefs *about* anything, though it involves such beliefs. It is a loving and grateful openness to the gift of being. The difference between a believer and a non-believer is not that the believer has one more item in his mind, in his universe. It is that the believer is convinced that reality is to be trusted, that in spite of appearances the world is very good. When we respond to that good, we are not responding to something we have invented, or projected. Meaning is not at our beck and call, and neither is reality. When we try to talk *about* that reality we find ourselves talking *to* it, not in philosophy but in adoration, for it is inescapably personal, and most luminously itself in the life and death of Jesus. Christians are those who find in that life and death an abounding fountain of joy and hope and life; who affirm and are content to affirm what he affirmed about God, because they find in that affirmation a realism which does justice to life in all its horror and all its glory. Not sad, high-minded men with a handful of high-minded, bleak ideals, but citizens of a world whose heart is love. We know in the way of Jesus, not a *law*, but a liberation into true humanity; the power to love, to belong to one another, to start again when things go wrong, to be grateful, to adore.

Everyone of us, every human being, confronts at some time the collapse of meaning and direction in their lives—in anxiety, in illness, in unemployment or broken relationships, in all the forces that frustrate and diminish us as persons, and, at the last, in our own deaths. The Church has no pat answers to the dilemmas of existence,

only a witness to what she knows. That under the mercy of God our perplexities, our failures, our betrayals, our limitations, can open into new freedoms, if we follow the way of Jesus. A century and a half ago Coleridge wrote:

Christianity is not a theory, or a speculation, but a Life;
not a Philosophy of life, but a Life, and a living Process...Try it.

I don't know how to better that advice; like Coleridge I have found life in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, like millions of others in every age, like the psalmist before us:

I love the Lord, for he has heard
the cry of my appeal.
For he turned his ear to me
in the day when I called him.

They surrounded me, the snares of death,
with the anguish of the tomb:
They caught me, sorrow and distress:
I called on the Lord's name.

Turn back, my soul, to your rest
for the Lord has been good.
He has kept my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
and my feet from stumbling.
I will walk in the presence of the Lord,
in the land of the living.

- 1 The talk "Encountering God: when belief fails" in the teach-in for members of Cambridge University *Encounters : Exploring Christian Faith*, to be published by Dartons, Longman and Todd, London.
- 2 See *The Sea of Faith* by Don Cupitt, published by BBC Publications, London, 1984.

Pohier's Apologia

Fergus Kerr OP

Finding myself at Le Saulchoir, the French Dominican study-house near Paris, towards the end of September 1962, was a daunting and exciting experience. My first meal, in the meticulous asceticism of that lofty gymnasium-like refectory, consisted of half an artichoke, a lump of cheese, and as much thin beer as one wanted. A month later, as