

Christians a Beleaguered Minority?

Isaiah 52 vv 7-10 p739, Hebrews 1 vv 1-12 p1201, John 1 vv 1-14 p1063

We Christians often feel like a beleaguered minority in modern Britain. Most people don't go to church. Sunday is treated just like any other day. Christian moral values are constantly questioned. Indeed many people don't see any connection between faith and ethics. What you believe about God is deemed to be irrelevant to how you ought to act in society. Your faith reflects rather than determines the sort of person you choose to be.

Religion is regarded as a purely personal matter with no place in the public arena. God is for individuals and maybe for families. God's influence is confined within faith communities. Our country's laws and our public policy are determined without any reference to God and His Law and His purposes for humanity. Religion has a bad press as the motivation for fanatical fundamentalists who will stop at nothing in their efforts to impose their vision for society on other people. Therefore, it is often implied, people motivated by religion must be kept out of positions of power and influence unless they are prepared to lay aside their religious beliefs when acting, say, as members of parliament, judges, marriage registrars, teachers or nurses, to give but a few examples where personal faith could conceivably conflict with holding office in a secular state. The Christian nurse who promises to pray for her patients is reprimanded. I doubt that a Christian teacher could get away with teaching that the Christmas story is really about the Birth of the Son of God because he might upset parents who either didn't believe in God or who belonged to religions which believe that it is blasphemy to say that God could have a son. Marriage registrars have to solemnise civil partnerships for gay couples, whatever their personal convictions about sexual morality. Judges have to grant divorces under our rather liberal civil divorce law, whatever their religious convictions about the sanctity of marriage. There have been campaigns to prevent Christian members of parliament from being ministers in departments which might legislate on questions of abortion, human fertility or euthanasia.

Sometimes it feels like Christians experience a double whammy. Not only are we excluded because people in power believe that religion must not be allowed to determine public policy in what they believe ought to be a secular state; but for reasons of tolerance and social inclusion it often seems that people of non-Christian faiths enjoy protections that we Christians miss out on. Sikh men are allowed to wear turbans and carry knives and Moslem women are allowed to wear the veil in situations in which Christians are forbidden to wear crosses.

Religion is apparently on the fringes of society, clinging on by its finger tips, tolerated, but not integrated. Faith may be accepted as an important contributor to the social cohesion of some ethnic minorities and immigrant communities, but Christianity is an old, tired religion, which is slowly dying out and won't be much missed. In the long run, secularists believe, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and all other religions will follow Christianity into oblivion, as a better educated and more prosperous human race comes to recognise that this world is all we've got and that you might as well eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we shall all die.

So we Christians might well feel like a beleaguered minority, clinging onto the wreckage of our faith in an ocean of indifference to religion or even of outright hostility. It is normal, it seems, to be an agnostic or an atheist and exceptional to believe in God. People of faith are the eccentrics in society, usually harmless, occasionally beneficial, but always a potential threat to the harmony and values of the secular state.

So it's normal to be an atheist and slightly odd to be religious? Actually, Science is increasingly showing, that things are entirely the other way round. It is normal for human beings to be religious and atheism is an oddity in human cultures. I was at a conference in Edinburgh in the Spring at which we heard about some interesting research with children. If you show quite young children boxes of biscuits, they very quickly learn to recognise them. Children like biscuits and learn to recognise the boxes at a young age. If you put stones in a biscuit box and ask them what they think is inside the box, naturally they will say "biscuits", but you don't fool even young children for long. Once the children know that there are stones in the biscuit box, ask them what Mummy would think is in the box. A child of 3 or 4 will say that Mummy will know that there are stones in the box. Young children think Mummy knows everything. But, ask a slightly older child, and he will say that Mummy will think that there are biscuits in the box. A child of 6 or 7 knows that Mummy is human and will expect her to make the same mistake he did – to think that there are biscuits in the box (even when there are stones) if it says "biscuits" on the label. But ask this older child what he thinks God will think is in the box and the child will answer "stones". Children very soon get the idea that there is a God Who knows everything, much greater either than the child or the adults in his life.

In the same way, quite young children have no difficulty believing that grandma is in heaven even though they know that she is buried in the cemetery and the family regularly visit the grave. Religious ideas come naturally to the growing child. They have to learn materialism – the belief that the world you can see and touch is all that there is. Normal human beings are naturally religious.

When scientists investigate Stone Age cultures, it appears that, from the very beginning, when people first start to leave things that we can interpret (cave paintings, artefacts, burial sites, etc.), human beings are religious. In the same way, explorers have never discovered an atheist tribe anywhere in the world today (except in countries like modern Britain). All human beings are normally religious.

Communist states like Stalin's Russia and Mao's China have ruthlessly used all the force at their disposal to extirpate religion and have totally failed in the attempt. The tyrant who attempts to enforce atheism is fighting human nature.

There are of course many scientists who believe that it is natural for humans beings to be religious but who believe that religion is untrue and even that religious belief is a bad thing. They have to find some mechanism whereby religion might have evolved even if it is untrue. Maybe it is advantageous to believe in God even if there is no God because faith makes us

personally more resilient, binds us together in community and provides us with a moral framework.

Scientists who can see nothing good in religion, suggest that faith has evolved as what they call a spandrel, a useless characteristic which just happens to evolve alongside a trait which is useful. The Russians had the idea of domesticating fur foxes. Over several generations, they selected the most docile cubs from each litter to breed. In time they had domesticated fur foxes. However, not only were the foxes now more like dogs in the way they behaved, they also had more dog-like coats and ears. It seems that the genes for behaviour are closely associated with the genes for hair. In the same way, it is possible that the gene for religious belief is accidentally closely associated with a gene for some other more useful trait.

The most obvious explanation, however, for the naturalness of religion is that there really is a God. I believe that the reason why human beings are naturally religious is that God made the world and the best way to understand the world is to recognise it as the creation of God and that God made us in His own image and the only way we can make sense of our own lives is through a relationship with God.

It seems to me that primitive human beings may have come to a belief in God in three possible ways. First of all, we find order and purpose in the Universe. It seems logical to assume that the Universe was made by a Mind, which may be infinitely greater than our minds, but which nevertheless is essentially analogous to ours. We can make sense of the Universe, we do Science, because the Universe really does make sense. It is the creation of a Rational Mind, a Mind infinitely greater than our minds, but a Mind Whose Wisdom, Reason and Logic is simply an infinitely greater Wisdom, Reason and Logic than our Reason, Wisdom and Logic.

Secondly, we wonder what happens to us when we are dead. As I said, the little girl visits Granny's grave in the churchyard but she instinctively feels that Granny is alive and that she is somewhere else. We find it hard to believe that we are nothing more than our physical bodies and that we are finished when our physical bodies die. Mostly people believe that they are something more than a body, which can let them down through weakness, disease or old age, and that they somehow continue to exist in some way after their bodies die. Human beings naturally assume there is non-material realm, a realm of the spirit, to which we go when we die, the home of God and maybe of other spiritual beings such as angels and archangels.

Thirdly, religious experiences are very common. People claim to have met ghosts, communed with the dead, seen the Virgin Mary, felt themselves warmed in the presence of God, witnessed all kinds of phenomena. Now we have to be careful. Some of these claimed experiences are made up. Some are the result of mental illness or caused by the abuse of drugs. Some are the result of people misinterpreting phenomena which can be explained straightforwardly in material terms. I do not believe, however, that such a widespread phenomenon as human religious experience is entirely bogus. Surveys tend to show that the majority of people have at some time in their lives had a religious experience of some kind.

They can't all be delusions or lies. There are spontaneous religious experiences which just happen to people without them looking for them and experiences sought out using techniques just as meditation. They cannot all be illusory. I read once that patterns painted thousands of years ago in some caves in South Africa correspond closely with the patterns found in the brain waves of people whose brains have been monitored by electroencephalograph whilst meditating. Religious experience runs deep in the human psyche.

Given that religion is natural, however, given that it is normal for human beings to believe in God, we would still have to discover what sort of God we believe in. Religions contradict with one another. They can't all be true. Some religions are downright evil, practising human sacrifice or persecuting people of other faiths. Granted that it is normal for us to believe in God, what sort of a God should we believe in?

God is the Creator of the Universe, but so far the Universe is beyond our understanding. The more scientists discover about the Universe, the more wonderful it turns out to be. Learning more about the infinite wonders of the world makes us realise just how wonderful God is, so infinitely wonderful that He passes our understanding. We can apprehend something of God's greatness from knowing that He is our Creator, but not much more. We can't work out what God is like from investigating the Universe He has created.

Neither can we know what lies beyond the grave. By and large people don't return from Heaven to tell us what Heaven is like or what God is like. Generally speaking we are wise to distrust those who claim to be able to communicate with the dead. The exception is Jesus but he is a very special case.

As we have seen, religious experience is so varied that it is impossible to get a clear and trustworthy picture of God from the multiplicity of human encounters with the divine or the spiritual. We cannot always even distinguish between the counterfeit and the genuine, let alone make sense of what is genuine in the world of human interaction with the divine.

It is true that human beings are made in the image of God and that, as St Augustine said, *Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee*, but God's image in us is so marred by our sin, by our rebellion against God, that it is not possible to ascertain the nature of God simply by looking at ourselves or at other people.

No! The only way we can have any certain information about God is if He reveals Himself to us. The Christian story is the story of God's self-revelation. God does declare Himself to all human beings in the glories of Creation. He has give every one of us a conscience. But it is not enough. The Bible, which is itself the Word of God, teaches us that God chose the people of Israel through whom to make Himself known to the whole of humanity. They were not very numerous. They were not very important people in worldly terms. They were not especially wealthy or powerful, but God chose them for His own reasons, inscrutable to us or them, to be the people through whom He would communicate His Nature to the whole of creation.

The Israelites learned that God is active in history. He holds people's lives in His Hands. You can talk to Him in prayer. You can experience God for yourself. He guides the destinies of individuals and nations. He is both transcendent and imminent. He is the LORD Who made heaven and earth. He looks down from Heaven at us and we are like grasshoppers in His sight. Yet He loves and cherishes each one of us. You can ask Him for help and healing. He may choose you for a special job or rôle. God is just and merciful, yet He is also mysterious and beyond our understanding. You can reason with God; you can argue with God, but essentially God answers to no-one. Finally, God just exceeds our knowledge. And yet we do know Him. We can trust Him implicitly. We must trust Him. There is ultimately no-one else and nothing else that we can trust.

God is just and holy, the Israelites learnt, and He demands that His people are just and holy. Through Moses God gives His people the Law. Moses is granted a vision of God and, in that vision, he receives the Ten Commandments and the rest of God's Law. Everyone ought to know what's right and what's wrong, because ultimately right and wrong derive from the very Nature of God. It is when He experiences God that Moses is able to receive the Law. The summary of God's Law is love – to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves. When Moses has a vision of what God is like, he sees what human beings ought to be like too, because we share the nature of God. We were made to be like God and it is our punishment for our rejection of God that we fall so far short of the fulness of eternal life.

Love is the Nature of God. To be holy is to be love. To be holy is to be both just and merciful. This is the nature of God. It is what human nature is meant to be. We are made in the image of God. We are made to be holy, to be love, to be just and merciful. Love is what God requires of His people. In Leviticus 19 v2, God says to His people, *Ye shall be holy for I the LORD your God am holy*. There follow 16 verses about faithful worship and about properly caring for other people, especially the poor and the handicapped. The section culminates in the words, *thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD*.

Justice and mercy are of the very Nature of God and they ought to be the nature of God's people. Of course, historically, the Israelites, just like everyone else, failed to live up to this vision. They were anything but just and merciful. They were unfaithful to God. They oppressed the poor. They were violent and dishonest. Because of this rebellion against God, because of their rejection of His Law, all sorts of troubles came on the Israelites. The world doesn't work if we don't obey the Maker's instructions. The Universe is created and ordered by the Law of God. So, when human beings disobey the Law of God, they are going against Nature. They are working against the grain of the world and everything goes wrong. Punishment for sin is intrinsic to the way the world works.

But, in His faithfulness, God does not give up on His faithless people. He sends them the prophets – God's spokesmen – to bring them His Word. Time after time, through the prophets, God reminds them of His Law and reinterprets it for the circumstances of each generation. Justice and mercy are inextricably connected, two sides of the same coin.

Promises of blessing for those who walk with God are indivisible from warnings of judgment on those who reject Him and His ways.

And in the words of these prophets, the Word of God, there is a foreshadowing of a much more perfect revelation of God. Having prepared the people of Israel through the Law and the Prophets, God will make Himself known wholly in the person of Jesus Christ. The Word is made flesh. God becomes one of us. The Son of God is the Son of Man.

Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets because He transcends the Law and the Prophets. In Jesus God's justice and mercy resolve their necessary, eternal conflict because Jesus dies on the Cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. He effects the Atonement. He makes us one with God. In Jesus, humanity fulfils its proper nature. In Jesus we are recreated in the image of God. In Jesus we see for ourselves that God is love. In Jesus we see the people we are called to be.

It is natural and normal for human beings to believe in God. What is God like? Well, Jesus is God. What God is like is what Jesus is like. What Jesus is is love. Jesus is the One Who makes us at one with God. Jesus is the One Who enables us to be wholly human, to be a holy people, a just and merciful people, a people who dwell in eternal love.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas and it is what it means to be a Christian throughout the year every year of our lives. It is natural to believe in God. Jesus reveals what God is like. Through what Jesus has done for us we too can be like God, dwelling in eternal love. All we need is faith in Him. To know God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ is natural for human beings. Our calling is to remain faithful and to bear witness so that the world may find its salvation in Him. *God so loved the world, that he have his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*