

13 April 2008

‘Blind Faith?’

1 Peter 1:3-9

One day a Christian and an atheist are walking down a street. As they chat together they suddenly spot a huge tornado heading straight towards them, wreaking destruction and sucking up everything in its path (this must be in America). The two men don't know where to run.

The Christian is a man of faith and does exactly what's expected of him. He falls to his knees and starts praying fervently, "Jesus, save us! Lord, have mercy!"

The atheist, of course, can't do that; he can't pray to the God he doesn't believe in. But he does what he can. He simply turns and grabs hold of the nearest tree, and cries out, "Oh nooooooo ...". (Did he end up in Oz?)

As Christians, we are people of faith. In fact we say that we believe in some quite amazing things. We say that we believe in a God who created the universe from nothing. We say that we believe in a God who speaks to humanity, both nations and individual people. We say that we believe in a God who loves and cares for us, who hears and answers our prayers. We say that we believe in a continuing eternal life after we die. And the very core of our faith is in a man who we call the Son of God, who not only lived on earth but who we believe rose from the dead after two days. Said like that, many of those things we believe in actually sound quite far-fetched, even ridiculous, although to us they are familiar, even easy to accept. Yet the accusation is sometimes levelled at Christians: "You have no real reason to believe. Your religion has no basis in reality. Your faith is nothing more than blind optimism".

Of course there are several different categories of faith. At one end of the spectrum is the faith you exercise when you visit the doctor. You believe that the doctor is well-qualified for his job, that he has studied for several years and that is able to assess your symptoms and come to a considered conclusion. My father, who was a doctor, always said that good diagnosis was as much an art as a science: the doctor must weigh up what he or she sees and come to a conclusion before suggesting a course of treatment. And you, the patient, have faith in them to do so – with good reason. The certificates hanging on the surgery wall give you confidence that they know what they're doing.

Equally, you might be watching an erudite programme about history on the television. The facts which you are hearing may well be fascinating, but you have no way of knowing if they are actually correct. Of course, you might know a bit of history yourself and so set what's being presented in context, that will help a bit. But ultimately you will want to see if there is a well-qualified historical adviser behind the programme, and you might crane over the small print in the final credits to find out. If there isn't, you might well dismiss what you've seen as mere speculation and take its conclusions with a very large pinch of salt.

At the other end of the faith spectrum, anyone who has a computer and receives e-mail will be well aware of getting lots of junk mail or "spam". Among other things, one receives adverts offering miracle cure tablets for all sorts of medical conditions, not to mention the so-called "419" scams where you are invited to send your bank details to a supposed prince in Nigeria and receive thousands of pounds. If you do that, I suspect that any money you do have will quickly flow in the opposite direction as your account is cleared out! For you would be well advised not to put your faith in any of these junk messages. Their credibility is absolutely zero. Trusting them is a stupid step of blind folly.

In our reading the apostle Peter – writing to early Christians who were obviously finding it quite hard to hold to the faith under trying circumstances of oppression and persecution - makes some very powerful assertions about faith. It is quite clear that he believes every part of the Christian message, from the

resurrection of Jesus Christ to the glorious promise of future hope in glory. Indeed, he uses this promise more than once to encourage his readers to remain true to the Gospel. But one thing he says is absolutely crucial: “though you do not see him, you love him; even though you do not see him now, you believe in him”. This is the absolute essence of faith, the same message in fact which Jesus tried to teach Thomas in that upper room: faith in action means that you believe strongly – but you can never be absolutely sure.

So we must then ask the fundamental question: are Christians guilty of blind faith, of making nothing more than a spiritual leap in the dark? Certainly there are fundamentalist atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, who think that is precisely what we’re doing, that we have absolutely no evidence to make the religious statements that we do. As far as Dawkins is concerned, evolution and natural selection are the reason not only for all life on this planet but in fact the source of all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all so-called “design” anywhere in the universe. Dawkins tells us that there is no need to believe in a God as the creator of the universe and there is no evidence for the existence of anything beyond the natural and the physical. Religion is a nothing more than a concept we have built up in our own minds. We should grow up and forget it.

Well, Dawkins’ statement that we should not trust anything unless we’ve got evidence that it’s true certainly sounds compelling. However, what he doesn’t seem to realise is that he himself has said something which cannot be proved. He states that any impression we have that the universe was designed is merely coincidental. But statement has no foundation; and in fact all his theories are based on faith: faith that evolution is capable of doing all it’s cracked up to have done. Do we really agree with him? Well, I think that my faith in God ultimately gives a better explanation than his blind faith in evolution. And even Anthony Flew, for decades one of the world’s most influential atheists, has come round to this way of thinking. In December 2004 he let it be known that he now believes in a god of intellect and power for, as he says, the case for doing so is now much stronger than it ever was before.

Of course, the Christian faith is much more than simply believing in a God who created the universe (and who, I believe, did use the power of evolution to bring that universe to its present state). So what about our detailed belief in a personal loving God, who answers our prayers and who sent his Son to die and rise again – is all that still a blind faith?

For many years - certainly since the rise of science in the eighteenth century – there has existed a branch of theology called apologetics. Now I need to explain that term: “apologetics” has nothing to do with “apologies”, it is not about Christians saying sorry if their beliefs offend anyone! No; this is a branch of theology which aims to give reasoned explanations of why our belief is worthy of acceptance. So it includes evidence to show that the Bible text is accurate, that the stories it tells unfolded in a real historical context, and why people were not imagining things when they said they encountered God. People as different as the student speaker Josh McDowell, the broadcaster C.S. Lewis, and the philosopher Francis Schaeffer have all been great Christian apologists. They and others have done a huge amount, both to convince unbelievers of the Christian faith and to bolster up the faith of people who have already believed.

However, some apologists went much too far. Some of them started going down what is really a very agnostic route: “If we can’t prove it, we’ll ignore it”, they said. “If we come to any supernatural bits we can’t understand, then we’ll snip them out of Christianity”. Sometimes they also said, “This is the modern scientific approach to Christianity”. Matters came to a head when Bishop John Robinson published his controversial book “Honest to God” (I’m sure some of you read it at the time) in which he said, “Our outmoded views of God have got to die”.

In fact “Honest to God” wasn’t a very good book – Robinson himself knew that. Nor was it saying anything startlingly new: the ideas in it had been buzzing round academic circles for at least 70 years. (In fact they had probably first been voiced by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his book, “Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone”). But in the swinging sixties, a decade when the past (including the Church) was being thrown out of the window and we were entering the white-hot heat of technological revolution, Robinson’s book certainly seemed to strike a chord.

But Robinson went too far. In their admirable attempt to rework the Christian faith for modern people, to remove its magical and superstitious elements, he and his friends ended up explaining away all its awe and wonder, imagination and mystery. Instead of giving us a vast and inscrutable God, the eternal Creator of the universe whom we can never fully comprehend, they left us with an earthbound deity who was more concerned with social problems than with giving meaning to people's spiritual life. This present life is important, of course; but faith must always include things which are beyond us and which we cannot understand. This new kind of Christianity reduced God to our human level. So why bother believing in that kind of God at all?

Today the world is a different place from what it was in 1963. Science and rationalism no longer rule the roost. Many people are realising that elevating these things above religion and spirituality has robbed the world of its mystery and taken the soul out of our lives. There are many folk who are looking for more than a stripped-down view of Christianity, who genuinely want to meet God. And the way they will know that God exists is not through intellectual proof but by seeing him alive in his people, not just individuals but communities. The Church must be a place where God is clearly visible, where newcomers genuinely catch the vision of Christ.

Please don't misunderstand me. I do believe in a faith which has firm foundations. I do believe that the historical evidence for Jesus is overwhelming. I do believe that the Bible is a dependable book which tells us the truth about God - I wouldn't be here if I didn't.

But I also know that it is very rare to make a convert to Christ through logical argument, that it is almost impossible to argue someone into the Kingdom of God. For, ultimately, Christianity is spiritual rather than rational; it is caught rather than proved. And so we must not take a high-handed view and simply push dogmatic declarations of the truth we possess down peoples' throats. Rather, we must become the sort of believing community in which the Gospel is not just spoken about but lived. Indeed, many people today "belong" before they "believe"; they become part of a Christian community before they are converted to Christ. If that community is not real, they may be put off for life.

No, I don't think I have a blind faith, and I hope that you don't have it, either. I do believe that I have good reasons, rational reasons, to believe what I do. In fact I believe that it is more sensible to have faith than to not have it. Nevertheless, the most convincing evidence for the truth of our Gospel comes, not through carefully marshalled facts, but through Christians who not only believe the Gospel but live it. For God's Spirit asks us to rediscover the message of a song that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s: "We will walk with each other. We will walk hand in hand. And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land. And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; they'll know we are Christians by our love."