

“Mummy, if God loves us all, why does he let all those children starve on TV?”

Do you suffer from compassion fatigue? When these wrenching pictures of dying children come on the TV do you mentally switch off, or even physically actually switch off? Do you kind of think ‘Oh no, not *again*’, last year it was Kenya and Somalia, the year before it was Haiti, Sri Lanka and Sumatra, not long ago it was Zambia and Ethiopia and now they say that this summer it will be Niger. I already give to the Christians, the United Nations and the Marxists to rescue them and I have two dogs, a cat and fifteen grandchildren to think of. Stop upsetting me. I prefer to think of something else. And then do you feel guilty?

(now let us listen together to this tape)

It comes from the island of Sanibel, a millionaire’s retreat in the Gulf of Mexico just off the West Coast of Florida. The highest point in the interior is only about twenty feet above the sea. Many years ago I took my children there. We stayed in a motel. It says on the tin ‘Night Surf...recorded late in the quiet solitude of a moonlight night. The moon, the stars, the smell of salt air.....paradise.’
Just close your eyes for a few moments and be there.

First reading

From Richard Holloway ‘Between the Monster and the Saint: Reflections on the Human Condition. Pp. 99-100

In the Christian tradition the problem of suffering has a whole theological department to itself called ‘theodicy’ from the Greek words for God and justice. This aspect of theological scholarship sets out to defend God from the charge of being complicit in, or responsible for, the cruelty of his universe. But that way of putting the problem already suggests a development in thinking about God. To the early superstitious mind the issue was not to explain divine cruelty but to avoid it. Primitive religion takes it for granted that the Gods are capricious monsters who can

sometimes be bought off, like all bullies, by bribes or distractions. The sacrifice system probably had its origins here. From the beginning human beings have always found it difficult to get their heads round God, to figure out what he is like in himself, so they had to fall back on analogies with the human. For the primitive mind it stood to reason that if God is ultimate power, the X force, then the closest likeness to him on earth is the tyrant or absolute ruler. And, since you never knew when, like Al Capone, he was going to take a baseball bat to your skull, experience taught that it was wise to keep the big man sweet and walk warily in his presence.

The arbitrariness of this omnipotent sadism (Iain's emphasis) evolved into something more systematic in the first theory of suffering, which premised on the discovery that, contrary to earlier understandings of the Divine, God actually had ethics. Suffering was then believed to be a punishment for sin, for offending God's righteousness.

Hymn Name Unnamed

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria!

Beautifully moving, ceaselessly forming,
growing, emerging with awesome delight,
Maker of Rainbows, glowing with colour,
arching in wonder, energy flowing in
darkness and light.

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Spinner of Chaos, pulling and twisting,
freeing the fibres of pattern and form,
Weaver of Stories, fabled or unspoken,
tangled or broken, shaping a tapestry
vivid and warm:

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Nudging Discomforter, prodding and shaking,
waking our lives to creative unease,
Straight-Talking Lover, checking and humbling,
jargon and grumbling, speaking the truth that
refreshes and frees:

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Midwife of Changes, skilfully guiding,
drawing us out through the shock of the new,
Woman of Wisdom, deeply perceiving,
never deceiving, freeing and leading in
all that we do:

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Daredevil Gambler, risking
and loving, giving us freedom
to shatter your dreams,
Life-giving Loser, wounded and weeping, dancing and leaping,
sharing the caring that heals and redeems.

Name unnamed, hidden and shown, knowing and known. Gloria

Address

I chose to put the title of this address in the imagined words of a child partly because, as all parents know, often a child sees straight and clear without the filters of all those muddling ideas of theologies , and partly because I wanted to recognize that some of that childlike clarity lives on within us for all of our lives and we must never despise it lest we lose it.

A common response to those pictures is one of gratitude, gratitude that it is not me and not my child that is dying, awareness of how incredibly lucky, rich and wonderful our lives are here in this country. That is not just selfish, it is good. But those who work with post-traumatic stress disorders know that survivor guilt is a reality. Even although they are

themselves haunted by the horrors they escaped and dream about them waking and sleeping such people often know that they are lucky to have survived when others to whom they were perhaps close did not survive and the knowledge torments them. “Why was I spared and not my son?” A close relative of that response is the awareness of the responsibility of privilege. You had a good education and were born with good a brain so you owe something out of gratitude. He inherited or made a great amount of money so, like Bill Gates, he will give some of it back – or even all of it. Of course we all avoid pain and seek to stay in our own comfort zones – although if we stay too long there we become drugged in a kind of cocoon, like the Lotus-eaters in Tennyson’s magnificent poem. So, each in our own ways we cope with the intruding reality of the children dying on that child’s TV.

Of course we are never allowed to forget that a central condition of our existence is the possession of a sentient nervous system that we cannot escape for long, although some drugs, mostly illegal, can help for a spell. We live with joy and sadness; we sometimes live with agony and ecstasy. The Buddhist solution is to cultivate detachment and narrow the scale of our emotions safely away from other humans (who are the major cause of them) and often to live as the privileged few aristocrats in monastery palaces on the backs of the peasants around them. That was a large part of what was destroyed by the Chinese Communists.

One of the amazing things of our existence is that we can share our agonies and ecstasies with other human beings. We are, most of us, capable from time to time of not just sympathy but of empathy. We can use our imagination to project ourselves into the life of another so that we feel and think for a while pretty much just as they do. This is not just

a human glory. It is something we partly share with many of the higher mammals, as many who have lived with a dog or even a cat can testify. It is the root of our compassion and when it is absent that may be the most evil thing about us. We are possibly the most cruel and destructive species on this planet to each other as much as to any other forms of life. Indeed Simon Baron-Cohen our resident British, internationally recognized, psychologist expert **on** Autism and on Asperger's Syndrome has just published a book with the title "Zero Degrees of Empathy, A New Theory of Human Cruelty" in which he argues that lack of empathy is the major source of evil within us. He is not the first nor probably the last in a long line of psychologists who have investigated psychopathy experimentally by demonstrating that these people we sometimes label psychopaths feel little pain of their own, far less any pain of another person. So human evil is mostly down to the individual peculiarities in the neuro-circuits in the brains of some people rather than others? Is it?

As a frequently locked-in city-man, I use my various bases in the country-side as idyllic escape-holes and an opportunity to experience again the earth and the stars. But I am very aware that this disconnection, in the heart of the city, can, and does, lead to a romanticisation of the countryside and of 'mother nature'. This began a long time ago with Wordsworth and Blake back in the eighteenth century.

One of the environmentalists, I do not remember which, ran a story about how, when a Raven was seen devouring a baby sparrow, all the other small birds rose up and circled round the act. This was presented as care and altruism in nature but these very same birds then went off to devour the helpless grubs, insects and other elements appropriate to

their place in the food chain. Is this all in the design of a God that is allegedly 'Loving' or even Love itself.

And this brings me back to the main theme of this discourse. I have never met Rev Peter Godfrey that I remember and, if we did ever meet, I guess he will remember it no better than I. But twice recently I came across writings of his. There was a letter of his in the Inquirer arguing that it mattered less whether you were a Christian Unitarian or a non-Christian but rather that you should follow your truth. Then in the latest edition of Faith and Freedom in an article by him titled "Reason and Tragedy" I read a quote from Professor David Williams, formerly a Professor of Astronomy at University College, London and a Unitarian. He quoted "Is there a Creator God? If so, then the Universe has been created to house a civilisation that exists for only one millionth of the age of the Universe. Surely this could not be the intention of a Creator God? A Creator God made a Universe containing billions of galaxies, each containing billions of stars so that one of these stars could have planet Earth on which we live to worship the Creator. Can this be right? This speck of dust on which we live is in a Universe that is a billion, billion times as massive. Did a Creator God really go to all that trouble?" As Peter Godfrey wrote 'It makes no sense to me'.

Of course he is anthropomorphising God, painting him her or it, rather as our ancestors did, as thinking and having human motives, but he is making a powerful point in a fascinating article.

In an opinion written in the Inquirer and then a part of an address now archived on the Glasgow Churches web site under the title "Your God is Too Small", I began by stating "If I could form any concept of any God,

that would limit him, her or it and I would almost certainly cease to believe in such a God that had immediately become too small. Rather, as I sense or imagine mine, it is the God you and I cannot escape because we are part of it and it is part of us.”

Like many other people in the Unitarian Church, even the use of the word ‘God’ usually gives me problems, especially when it could be taken as referring to the traditional Judeo-Christian patriarchal, judgemental version that I do not believe in. Sometimes when I hear God described as ‘love’ in the same service of worship as sends petitions to him, her or it to please stop the cholera epidemic in Haiti or feed the children in Somalia as seen on TV, or when God is described as ‘Good’, I shudder and think “Well, they can put up a statue or an idol to God as Love if they want, they can worship Truth as another God or Justice as a God, but any one of these Gods are much too small to encompass my experience of him, her or it.”

Some years ago I took my two daughters to Sanibel, an island off the East Coast of Florida, a dwelling place of millionaires (we stayed in a motel) and, recently I found the tape I played you among the chaos of the academic junk yard that is my house. It was supposed to be for relaxation but I have never used it until now.

But some years earlier that same place, Sanibel, had been covered up to a depth of twenty five feet in a storm surge from the core of a hurricane when, no doubt, a few millionaires were killed. Probably many of them believed their God was Love or that they were especially loved and appealed to him as they were drowning. You are entitled, if it pleases you, to go around in a pink haze of sentimentality believing that

God is love and even perhaps especially loves you, although I don't think many Unitarians do. It may be good for staving off nightmares in children but that is a God I cannot believe in.

So how did this silly mistake get into the Judeo-Christian tradition chain? The fact is that the God of the Jews was originally a tribal God. He fought the Gods of their enemies in battle and he was supposed to have a special parental care for the children of Israel. The Jesus of history as a part of this heritage but additionally with his unique ethic of inclusiveness, universalised that loving care to all mankind and then Paul specifically extended it even to the gentiles. Then there is the later extension by the writer of the Gospel of John who famously wrote 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' – a verse that rings down the decades from my childhood, and possibly from some of yours' too. All this a sacrifice that echoes the Old Testament of Abraham's mythical willingness to offer his only begotten son in a savage sacrifice to be executed by himself at the Judaic God's request. So we have today a whole atonement theology built upon savagery – to which most Unitarians do not subscribe.

So is the Judeo-Christian God a psychopathic sadist as Richard Holloway hints he might be if he was one of us humans?

Well at least we need not, and should not, make the historicist mistake of the Marxists. You may remember that the inevitable course of history was to be that aristocracies should fall to the bourgeoisie and that in turn the bourgeoisie must fall to the rule of the proletariat. No, our values are our own, not divine and eternal but human and although mostly they endure and are often universal changing. And it would be a foolish

comfort to imagine that 'history' or God or anything else is on our side as we develop our values and live by them. Yet, as Richard Dawkins pointed out in his classic 'The Selfish Gene', compassion is an evolutionary asset. The tribe and the species that that looks after its members, rescues them and reduces internal conflict through a good justice system and well organised governance, even if the morality only applies to other members of the same tribe or family and there is permission to do what you like to any outsider, has a distinct advantage for survival over a chaotic uncaring mob. Many of our values have a sound collective survival effect.

Most of us here spend many of our waking hours serving the values of truth, the values of compassion or love, the values of justice and others. For some of us our lives are quite dominated by these values, even to the extent that an outsider might consider us quite driven or even imprisoned by them. Sometimes these values are in conflict with one another and one of them has to take precedence over another. Just for today, like Peter Godfrey, I am going to press the case for truth. I believe that truth is the key value because I believe that, without truth, our compassion is misdirected and our love is love for an illusion. Without truth, getting the facts right, our justice is a cruel farce.

Of course these are mainly the values of the Enlightenment. They are the values of contemporary humanists. But none of these values, not even compassion are anything but human. THESE VALUES ARE NOT OUR GODS We are more than just humanists We reach beyond these human values to seek to appreciate that which our ancestors called God and is often now called The Universe, probably seeking to appreciate

the ancient Hebrew 'I am' which could easily have been translated as 'Existence'.

Some more words from Richard Holloway ' Between the Monster and the Saint' p. 170

"It is a harsh world, indescribably cruel. It is a gentle world, unbelievably beautiful. It is a world that can make us bitter, hateful, rabid, destroyers of joy. It is a world of monsters and saints, a mutilated world, but it is the only one we have been given."

Closing Words – A Religious Humanist Ethic

Our ethics, our values, our truth, our justice, our compassion are developed and formed within us alone and in our community. Many of them are personified in the first hymn we sang about the Holy Spirit. Our values are sustained and implemented by us alone and in our community and are our responsibility alone and within our community. Sometimes a partially amoral state can germinate them; sometimes our friends can support them; sometimes a community like this can improve and sustain them. But there is no historical force that drives them and no God that we can rely on for them; no anticipated final victory. They are ours first and last.

Let us go and be the best we can be by our own lights and with our own puny inner and surrounding resources with no expectation of divine support other than the creative force within us which used to be known as the Holy Spirit. And then let us be at peace with ourselves without complaining. And let us enjoy our values and our sense of mystery for the amazing crown and glory of life that they are.

**O star of truth down shining
Through clouds of doubt and fear,
I ask but 'neath thy guidance
My pathway may appear:
However long the journey,
However hard it be,
Though I be lone and weary,
Lead on, I'll follow thee.**