

“The challenge of belief in God today”

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I am delighted to have the chance to dialogue with you this evening. Luxembourg and Britain enjoy close links. Luxembourg's only saint, St Willibrord, was English, born in Northumbria in 658. But Britain is also indebted to Luxembourg. According to the legend, the Prince of Wales got his motto, Ich Dien, from Jang de Blannen, John the Blind, Earl of Luxembourg. Jang was strapped into horse so that he could fight against the English at the battle of Crecy in 1346. The Prince of Wales was so impressed by his bravery that he called him 'the Prince of Chivalry' and took his motto and coat of arms.

The title of this evening's lecture is 'The challenge of belief in God today.' At no time since the French Revolution has Christian belief been subject to such aggressive attack. And it is not just Christianity but all religion. One of the bestselling books in the world is The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins. There is Christopher Hitchen's book, God is not great: And there are lots of others. Why all the agro?

In the seventies religion was assumed to be a declining force in the world. Of course the vast majority of people believed in God, but religion seemed unimportant. It was assumed to be a private matter which had nothing to do with public life. Then there was the fall of Soviet Communism. One factor, among others, was probably the election of a Polish Pope. Communist countries such as China and Vietnam nervously noted the power of the Church. And since September 11th 2001, religion is increasingly associated with violence. Everywhere we see the rise of aggressive religious fundamentalism: Christian fundamentalism above all in the United States; Hindu fundamentalism in India, even aggressive forms of Buddhism. But above all, the rise of Islamicist fundamentalism in Europe, Asia and Africa. So people like Dawkins articulate a growing suspicion, especially among educated Western Europeans, that belief is conducive to violence and intolerance.

My aim in this lecture is not to reply directly to Dawkins. I must confess that I have not even read The God Delusion. I know I ought to, but I was told that it would make me so irritated

that I simply have to devote all my energies to refuting it. This would be a waste of time since the bookshops are filled with excellent books by people who have already done this better than I could.

So I wish to take a more positive approach and ask what it means for a Christian to have faith. What does it mean to confess belief in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I want to grapple with some tough issues in the next forty five minutes. I hope that you will not feel like the man who drifted over the south of England in a hot air balloon. He had no idea where he was and finally he came down in a tree. He saw a couple of people walking by and so he shouted out to them, 'Help, where am I?' One of them replied, 'You are in a tree.' 'So the man replied, 'You must be a Dominican.' 'How did you know?' 'Because what you say is true but completely useless.'

If I say that I believe in God, then it may look as if I am asserting the existence of a very powerful and invisible person, someone who runs the Universe, a mega-version of President Bush. Like the Loch Ness Monster or the Yeti, some people believe that this person exists and others, like Dawkins do not. You weigh the evidence and decide. If that is how you think that you may sympathise with Bertrand Russell, the atheist philosopher. He said that if, after he died, he discovered that god did after all exist, then he would say: 'God, you should have made the evidence of your existence more conspicuous'.

But all the great theologians, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, have always rejected this idea of belief. God is not a powerful invisible person or three persons. We are not saying that besides all the important visible people whose existence is evident, like the President of the United States and the Pope and the Grand Duke of Luxembourg, there are three extra ones whom we cannot see who are even more important. If you made a list of all the things that exist, God would not be there. God is the reason why anything exists at all.

The Monty Python team produced a hilarious film called The Meaning of Life in which they parody just such an idea of God. We English have an odd sense of humour, and so please forgive me if this just seems absurd. It is making an important point. John Cleese plays a headmaster leading the school prayers.

Oh, Lord,

R: O Lord

You are so big

R: You are so big

So absolutely huge

R: So absolutely huge

Gosh, we are all really impressed down here I can tell you,

R: Gosh, we are all really impressed down here I can tell you,

Forgive us, our Lord, for this our dreadful toadying

R: and barefaced flattery

But you are so strong and, well, just so super...

R: Fantastic

Many atheists believe that they are rejecting the existence of this absolutely huge Celestial Daddy, the person who runs the Universe. And all the great theologians, from St Augustine in the fourth century to St Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth would say that they are right to. That is not the Christian God. We would need to be liberated from this terrible figure, the Heavenly Boss Man. He would suffocate us and rob us of our freedom. We should not believe in him. Much nineteenth century atheism was getting away from the shadow of this oppressive figure which no decent theologian ever accepted anyway.

So what then does it mean to believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Naturally as a Dominican I think that Thomas Aquinas gives us the best starting point. And for Thomas, belief is not most fundamentally believing things about God. God is a mystery beyond the grasp of our understanding. Thomas says that in this life we are joined to God as to the Unknown. Belief is the beginning of a relationship with God. Belief is entering into God's friendship. And we are God's friends not by thinking things about him, but seeing things with

God, through God's eyes, as it were. Nicholas Lash, of Cambridge, wrote: "If faith is the way in which, in this life, we know God, then learning to "believe in" in God is learning to see all things in the way God sees them; as worth infinite expenditure of understanding, interest, and care.¹

Let us imagine that you are a friend of my host, Francis. Often the first signs of friendship is that we see the world in a similar way. We find ourselves laughing at the same jokes, enjoying the same novels, sharing other friends. Friends do not primarily look at each other. They look at the world together. They live in the same world. They treasure the same things. Of course friendship does imply knowing some facts about Francis, for example that he exists, and that he lives in Luxembourg at the beginning of the twenty first century. If someone claimed to be Francis' friend and denied his existence, or claimed that he was a fifth century Chinese Emperor, then you might doubt the reality of the friendship.

So it is with belief. I do claim to believe various things such as that God exists, even if I do not understand what it means for God to exist. I believe that Jesus was born, died and rose again. But the core of belief is this entry into friendship with God. To believe is to share God's life. And this changes how I see everything. God's being, according to Thomas, is perfect happiness. So sharing God's life is in the first place about being happy. And I will suggest that belief in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit nurtures a deep and threefold happiness. Nietzsche used to complain that Christians should look more saved. And he was right. We need to discover the triune happiness of Father, Son and Spirit. To see what this means, let us look at the Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We begin by proclaiming our belief in God as creator. This does not mean that God set up the world at the Big Bang and then left it to get on with itself. Creation is not what happens at the beginning. It is that now God gives existence to everything. To be created means that I

¹ *Believing Three Ways in One God: A reading of the Apostle's Creed* London 1992 p.22

need not exist. My existence is a gift from God in every moment. It is not necessary, a sentiment that you may come to share by the end of the evening!

Most human beings throughout history have had some sort of deep sense that everything is a gift, which is why nearly everyone has always believed in God. But it is easy to forget. We rush around, do important things, and we lose sight of the one who gives everything. Adam and Eve are created to till the soil and bring forth its fruit. And people in touch with the miracle of fertility are rarely atheists. You are always receiving gifts. But in a Supermarket, then vegetables become plastic wrapped goods. They are products rather than gifts.

Sociologists have speculated much on the magical properties of railway stations in nineteenth century France. Deeply religious peasants came to Paris to seek work, but the moment that their feet touched the platform, then they ceased every to go to church again. They forgot God. In an urban slum, it ceased to be obvious that everything was a gift, and so one easily forgot the Giver.

This year, for the first time in human history, more than half of all human beings live in cities. When people live in an environment that is entirely constructed, then everything will be seen as produced rather than given. Nothing need be. I was in French Polynesia last Christmas, not on holiday I hasten to add! I went to visit an atoll called Rangiroa. It is a large circle of thin soil, perched on coral, hardly anywhere more than a metre above the sea. If the sea rises much, then Rangiroa will cease to exist. But everyone drives around in big four wheel drive trucks, which are destroying the environment and may well lead to the disappearance of their land. It was a poignant sign of our forgetfulness. We are poised over non-existence.

So we share the happiness of God the Creator by gratitude. Ronald Rolheiser wrote that 'to be a saint is to be fuelled by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less.'² Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century German Dominican, said that 'if the only prayer I ever make is Thank you...That is enough.' When my mother became old and ill, hardly able to speak because of strokes, I was overwhelmed by her gratitude. She remain constantly astonished by the

² *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* New York 1999 p.66

endless care of God for her. When she fell out of bed, and ambulance men had come and put her back, her first reaction was gratitude to God for their help. That is belief.

Our primary witness to God the Creator of heaven and earth, then, is gratitude. In Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty* we come across Howard. Howard does not have time for religion. When his son goes back to England, he discovers faith and this is what he says about his father: 'What I have really realized is that Howard has a problem with gratitude', pressed Jerome, more to himself than to his brother. 'It's like he knows he's blessed, but he doesn't know where to put his gratitude because that makes him uncomfortable, because that would be dealing in transcendence – and we all know how he hates to do that. So by denying there are any gifts in the world, any essentially valuable things – that's how he short circuits the gratitude question. If there are no gifts, then he doesn't have to think about a God who might have given them. But that's where joy is.'³

After Thomas Merton had spent a few years in the monastery, struggling with his demons and having to face himself without any evasion, he went to the local city on an errand. And he found himself standing at the corner of a street, amazed at people's goodness. He wrote in his diary, 'Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their being, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more greed.'⁴

So the beginning of sharing God's happiness is gratitude. The necessity for gratitude cannot be proved. It can only be shown. Thomas' so-called five proofs of the existence of God are not really proofs in the ordinary sense. They are five ways of showing that nothing need be, and so we can give thanks. Basil Hume said that when he was a child, and he wanted to steal an apple from the larder, he felt that God would tell him not to. As he grew older, he came to feel that God would say to him, 'Take two apples.'

³ *On Beauty* London 2005 p. 237

⁴ quoted Willam H. Shannon *Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and non-violence* New York 1996 p.63

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

I was once stopped in the street in Oxford by a couple of young men with clipboards, doing research. They asked me whether I believed that Jesus was literally the Son of the Father. I replied that if it meant that he was the Son of the Father in just the same sense in which I was the son of my father, then no. But if they meant that he was truly the Son of the Father, the one who granted him everything, even his divinity, then Yes. They looked at each other in puzzlement, and then one said, 'Put him down as "don't know".'

'Through him all things were made.' We do not just thank for creation; we confess that it is made by the Word of God. Creation is not just the result of blind forces and pure chance. It is the fruit of God's word, which is to say that it is intelligible. We are able to understand this world because we are rational, people of the word too.

We believe in the Son, the Word of God through whom everything was made. It is our joy and happiness that the world is not absurd. We have the pleasure of understanding it. We do not just have the happiness of gratitude but of understanding. So, again, belief is not primarily believing things about God. It is sharing God's life, living in God's world. And this includes that it is an intelligible world.

George Herbert was a seventeenth century Anglican poet, and he wrote a wonderful poem called 'Prayer.' It lists all the things that are part of prayer, ending like this:

The milkie way, the bird of paradise,
Church bells beyond the staves heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood⁵.

⁵ *George Herbert* Selected by W.H.Auden London 1973 p.54

Prayer is conversation in friendship with God and it includes the breakthrough into understanding. It may be understanding the laws of nature. In 1936 Einstein wrote an essay called 'Physics and Reality', in which he expressed his wonder and astonishment at the intelligibility of the world. He evolved his beautiful theories of relativity, and they revealed what the world was really like. He wrote 'The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility...The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.'⁶ It may be in understanding other people through literature and poetry. It may be in understanding my friends and even myself.

Simone de Beauvoir was astonished to learn that Simone Weil wept when she heard of a famine in China. De Beauvoir said, 'I envied a heart able to beat across the world.' She believed that it was more important for people to have a reason to live than to give them food. To which Simone Weil replied, 'It is obvious that you have never gone hungry.'⁷ But which Simone is right? It is a tough call. Which is more miserable in the end, a life deprived of meaning or of food? I leave that question with you.

One sign of our society's disbelief is that it draws back from even asking the larger questions about the meaning of human existence. Why is there anything rather than nothing? What is human happiness? A taxi driver who picked up Bertrand Russell did not wish to lose a chance to learn something. 'I asked him, "Well then, what is all about?" and do you know, he could not tell me.' There was a famous debate between Russell and the Catholic philosopher Freddy Copleston. When the question was raised of why there is anything rather than nothing, Russell maintained that this is a question which cannot even be considered; it just is there. But it was the Catholic who had to insist that there are no limits to our questioning. We share the life of God the Son by trying to make sense of things whether through novels or science or poetry or philosophy. We give thanks for the meaning of our lives.

The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy was a cult book of the 80s. You may regard it as yet another example of the crazy British sense of humour, but it is full of insight. It suggests that every society goes through three phases: Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication. I quote: 'For

⁶ Walter Isaacson *Einstein: His life and Universe* London 2007 p.462

⁷ *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

instance the first phase is characterised by the question How can we eat? The second by the question Why do we eat? And the third by the question Where shall we have lunch? That is spot on, for we have largely become a society which does not ponder the ultimate questions but settles for entertainment. The cathedral of our time is the shopping mall.

So belief in the Son, the Word of God, is more than believing an internal fact about the life of God. God's own existence is beyond our comprehension. It is in cherishing the truth wherever we find it, even when it appears to contradict our own convictions. The truth is one in Christ, and so any truth, whoever speaks, must be welcomed.

As Christians we go on struggling to make sense of what our lives in the light of the Word of God. We believe that ultimately nonsense and meaningless cannot have the last word. And yet sometimes, faced with failure or suffering and death, we may find ourselves in the dark, unable to glimpse any meaning to our lives. And this brings us to the next bit of the Creed.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

When the bottom drops out of our lives, when we cannot make sense of anything, then the Creed does not offer us a neat explanation. It does not explain away the nonsense of someone whom we love dying of cancer young. It does not remove the absurdity of some terrible suffering. What the Creed does is to offer us a story which embraces that experience in the story of the cross, the dark moment when Christ cried out saying 'My God, my God why have you abandoned me.' Sometimes all that we can do is to be in the dark place, when nothing makes sense anymore, and wait.

⁸ Douglas Adams *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* London 1979 chapter 32

Eamon Duffy, the Cambridge historian, tells of how one day everything came to pieces. He was a happy practising Catholic, secure in his faith, and then a friend of his died, an Anglican priest, and everything plunged into darkness. There was the horror of death, of nothingness. 'And with the horror came the realization that God was gone; there was no God, and I had no faith. All the conditioning, all the arguments and emotional scaffolding I had built around and into my life were as if they had never been. I no longer believed, no longer even wanted to believe; I was absolutely mesmerized by this overwhelming perception of mortality. I had 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.⁹' And when faith returned, it came as a gift. He knew he had to choose between a bleak and valueless world and one in which love and forgiveness and celebration were possibilities. "I do not have much recollection of the process by which I made my choice; except that, when it dawned on that I had made it, it seemed no 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, with a single verse of the Psalms (26.8):

Lord, how I love the beauty of your house, ...
And the place where your glory dwells.¹⁰

Some people have to wait for a long time in the dark. It seems that Mother Teresa spent most of her life there. Sometimes God just seems to have gone and nothing makes any sense any more. But Rowan Williams wrote, 'The light is at the heart of dark, the dawn breaks when we have entered fully into the night. When we recognise our God in this experience we can indeed say with the Psalmist, "The darkness is no darkness with thee; the night is as clear as the day" (Psalm 139.12). As for John of the Cross, it is "The night that joins the beloved with her loved one, the night transfiguring the beloved in her loved one's life." (Canciones del alma 5)¹¹. I must confess that I have never been fully plunged into the

⁹ *Faith of our fathers* p.4

¹⁰ *op. cit* p.8

¹¹ *Open to Judgment* p.99f.

Dark night of the soul, more like the occasional grey evening! Maybe God knows that I am not ready for it!

So we see that belief in the Father offers us the joy of gratitude. Belief in the Son brings us to gratitude for the tiny glimpses of the meaning of our lives. Sometimes we may have to go through the dark night so as to be brought to a deeper meaning and happiness. As the Sufi poet Rumi wrote, 'where there is ruin, there is hope for treasure.¹²'

And now we come to the last part of the Creed. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

Time is running out and so I hope that the Holy Spirit will forgive me if I do not say much. Belief, then, is not primarily knowing things about God; it is entering into God's friendship. In the Son, we delight that the world is not absurd, and that nonsense does not have the last word. With the Spirit, we are caught up into the happiness of God's love, of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, which is the Spirit. Pope John Paul called the Holy Spirit, 'The divine live in person.'

My elder brother's nine year old grandson, Mattie, sent my brother a card recently which said, 'Grandpa I love you so much. I love you even more than I love God.' God would not be jealous because God is that love with which Mattie loves my brother. St Augustine wrote, 'Let no one say, I do not know what to love. Let him love his brother and he will love that very love.'

So believing in the Holy Spirit is not adding one more to the list of invisible people whose existence we accept. It is believing in the love that is God, the love that can never be defeated. It is the refusal of cynicism, of the people who think that deep down we are all just selfish people seeking our own ends, or selfish genes, and that love is ultimately an illusion.

¹² Quoted Anne Lamott Travelling Mercies: Some thoughts on Faith. New York 1999 p.76

A few three years ago I received a visit from a wonderful man called John Rae. He had been headmaster of Westminster School and was one of the good and the great. For years John had considered himself to be an agnostic but the time had come to decide whether he believed in God or not. He asked to see a number of theologians and atheists and asked each side to argue their case. I met him on a number of occasions and we became friends. Nothing that I say is in breach of confidentiality since he planned to publish a book, which I still hope will appear. The crux of our arguments was whether he would die for those whom he loved. And even more deeply, did he sense in that love something that was just now, or might he glimpse something that was eternal, that could never be destroyed. [Paul Groves]

John sent me the manuscript of the book for comment. I was disappointed that he thought that the atheists had the better arguments. I pointed out that was because his definition of an argument was purely scientific, and science could not prove the existence of God. Then John developed cancer. Shortly before he died, he asked me to go and see him, and for two hours we thought again about the nature of God. John kept saying that I was not going to get him with a death bed conversion, but still....

So the question is this: Do we accept the invincibility of love? Is it just a fleeting emotion useful for the evolution of the selfish gene? Is it an illusion of meaning in lives that are ultimately going nowhere? Or is it the sign of a love which cannot be defeated?

Have you seen a film called Love Actually? It maintains that if you keep your eyes open, there is lots of love all over the place. It ends in a terminal of Heathrow airport, probably familiar to you all. One sees dozens of people meeting the people whom they love. The couples are unlikely and unconventional. Love takes many forms. If you believe in the Holy Spirit then your eyes will be open to see it.

A year ago I spent a month in Zimbabwe. The President, Robert Mugabwe, ordered operation Murambatsvina, the cleaning out of the rubbish. The people living in the townships had not voted for him and so he ordered the destruction of their homes. 700,000 watched as their homes were bulldozered. Sometimes they had to destroy their own homes at gunpoint. Sr Tarisai, a Dominican sister who worked there took me to visit the place where some of the

refuges had tried to start life over again. There was a plastic tent, not more than ten feet by twenty, which proclaimed itself a school. The sign read, 'The Young Generation pre-school.' In it there were more than a hundred children under the age of six, nearly all HIV+ and with TB. This was the home of a young woman called Evelyn, and she used it as the school in the day. The children sang me a song of welcome. Sometimes there is food for them to eat, but usually there is nothing. I asked Evelyn why she did this and she just smiled and said that it was because she loved the children.

This love is already present in every human life. As Christian we do two things. We name it as the very life of God. It is not a mere emotion but the beginnings of our sharing in God's own happiness. Secondly we proclaim that this love is Trinitarian. It is the Holy Spirit who, with the Father and the Son, is worshipped and glorified. It is an equal love. The doctrine of the Trinity criticizes any love which is condescending, patronizing. A master could not really love his slave without setting him free. The love that is God lifts up into equality, the equality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Everything in the Creed is an expression that we know that we are loved in Christ. Everything we believe is an expression of that mystery of love. If we use the articles of the Creed to shut people out or beat them up, then we are betraying our belief. It is like beating up people to make them pacifists.

So, to conclude: When we recite the Creed, we do assent to a number of propositions. And that is good because human beings struggle to make sense of the world through our words. But St Thomas says that though our faith is expressed in words it reaches beyond them to the mystery of God. Through faith we know God rather than knowing about God. We know by seeing the world through his eyes, as friends do. We know by entering into God's happiness, through gratitude, a gratitude for meaning and ultimately for love.

It is good and necessary that we use hard intellectual arguments to refute Dawkins and his cohorts. Many people have done this well. It is not difficult because he does seem to be remarkably ignorant of religion. But the task is more challenging; it is to become people whose lives are filled with gratitude, who are seen to seek the truth whether it may be found, even from people who attack us, and who believe in the invincibility of love. Cardinal Suhard



once wrote that the challenge of mission is not to make propaganda, but to live in such a way that our lives would be incomprehensible if God did not exist.