

Disinheritance of Saints

It is the church's belief that a community of those who seek that God's will be done in earth as in heaven stretch on both sides of death. This is contested by atheists. Their position must be contested in turn.

I have a respect for atheists who simply live authentically by what makes sense of life to them, who keep testing their atheism against realities as Christians should also allow their faith to be tested. Sometimes they reject what are considered to be godly attributes which turn out to be disguised forms of idolatry. For that we are in their debt. Sometimes reality breaks through and challenges their atheistic stance.

During my ministry in Rosyth I was doing parish visitation in Dollytown, the area of little houses given that name by the locals. When one door on which I knocked opened, I immediately recognised the occupant as the atheist Communist secretary of one of the Dockyard trade unions. He said roughly 'Why are you coming to my door: I'm not one of yours'.

I said he was. I was not appointed to a congregation but to a parish. He was in that parish. It was quite in order for me to knock on his door. On the other hand, the house was his. He had every right to shut the door in my face. He engaged in a short desultory conversation and then did so.

A bit later, when I was in the area, I knocked again on his door. This time we talked a bit about the need for justice in industry, in politics, at home and abroad. Then he closed the door.

I was going to leave it at that. You have no right to barge unfairly into people's lives. But, somewhat later when I was again in Dollytown, I was told 'He's desperate to see you'. So I went to his house. This time he pulled me in. He wanted to talk. His wife was badly ill in hospital. She meant so much to him! We talked about the wonder of a good marriage and the love which cemented it.

Out of the blue it came: 'Pray for my wife and myself', here and now'.

I said we had established good friendly human contact – there was no need to ask for something he did not really believe in.

'Stop your bloody nonsense, get down on your knees by me and pray for the baith o' us' was his reply.

So I stopped my bloody nonsense. I got down on my knees beside him. Together we lifted the woman he loved to the God in whom he was supposed not to believe.

When we were at Scottish Churches House, Holy Week was regularly given over to a mixed company of senior schools for a consultation on 'Faith and Doubt'. Half of the scholars were lads and half lasses, half Roman Catholic and half other traditions, half believers, half doubters. It was common, at the end of the week, to find almost a reversal of positions. Those who had had a firm faith had to face doubts spoken with clarity and urgency which compelled them to reassess the reality of faith at a deeper level. Some who came as doubters found more in Christian faith than they had anticipated and had to revise their position. Those who came were called on to examine more deeply where they stood. My last Holy Week before we went to Geneva was especially memorable. Willie Barclay and Bernard Haring were let loose among the pupils without any programme except what would be created on the spot by questions which the whole company raised.

Faith and doubt can be quite close to one another for those who go in for honest enquiry into what makes sense of life.

Richard Dawkins is a pretty credulous atheist. It is part of Christian belief that there is a communion of saints (saints is a word not for high achievers but believing punters) which stretches on both sides of death. Death does not have the last word. Dawkins believes it does. That calls for examination.

When we have worked our way through life's main menu, what is there for 'afters'? In the T.V. series on 'Sex, Death and the Meaning of Life', Richard Dawkins listens keenly, shows sympathy for views contrary to his own but treats as final his own unquestioned assumptions as forming a rock bed of reality. His is a type of superstition, characterised by obsessive reverence for a particular form of scientific method as if that were a key which could unlock all doors of knowledge – without the least evidence to back up his assumption. In the case of a breakdown who would trust his car to a mechanic who had a favourite tool which he wants to apply, whatever the cause of the breakdown? Most unscientific!

He dismisses, as illogical and irrational, things which he cannot get his head round. Yet people who take a similar position contradict their own stated convictions when they fall in love. Knowledge of the other person is gained through relationship not just mental stringency. It is so with knowledge of God. It cannot be gained by accumulating all the information in the world about perceptions of God. Only by establishing a relationship – in some equivalent to courtship – can reality be tested, then lived out or discarded.

Dawkins has an affinity with Flat-Earthers. They had every reason to believe that, if the earth were round, we would fall off – until the power of gravity was identified, a factor which made sense of what had appeared to be nonsense. As gravity invisibly sustains and knits together the universe, so prayer may invisibly sustain and knit together the human community with all other forms of life. Gandhi called prayer the most practical of human resources. Dawkins' ideologically narrow field of vision cannot compass it. A genuinely scientific mind should be open to fresh forms of perception, not closed against them. Fundamentalist attitudes betray the search for enlightenment.

Moreover Dawkins irons out obstacles to make his own position easier to maintain. He spoke of the soul as if it were like a canary in a cage – an inner disposition which could fly free once the body is discarded. But the soul is the essence of one's total being. The body provides means of expression. People who knew us in our youth might well not recognise us in later life, yet we are the same person at a different stage of life. When Jesus rose from the dead his most intimate followers did not recognise the one whose close company they had kept over years! Yet he was not a ghost but the same person, only now his life had been transformed. My wife, Margaret, died more than a quarter of a century ago. Once I saw her in a dream and realised what I saw was her transformed self. Others who had known her might not have recognised her at first. I could see that she was the same person in a transfigured state. The Christian belief is that, beyond death, we still have a body, a means of expression – that we are ourselves in a different state of being.

Dawkins treats, as if it were universal, a form of logic which is Western and intellectual. It develops a case through step by step reasoning to a conclusion. I was to learn its limitation. In one of my visits to African countries I asked people on the spot to arrange a gathering to contribute to the World Council of Churches' study 'Participation in Change'. As usual, I left this to be set up in the way which was thought appropriate by local contacts. It lasted for just over two days and for almost half of that time I thought the subject of study had escaped the company. Participants

shared what life was holding for them, how families were coping, how they were responding to challenges to the faith, national and local in character – without any direct reference to the theme. I had misjudged them. Thereafter they homed in on the subject as if their sharing had resulted in their being honed to deal with it. There was a relational logic, aimed at bringing to the concern of the study the whole person in context. It was logical to develop an understanding of where people came from and where they were now as a basis for tackling the subject.

To dismiss some things as irrational which do not fit in with your particular understanding of reason is itself irrational.

My mentor Prof. John Baillie, once told me of his experience when Prof. Reinhold Niebuhr gave a public lecture. He was a formidable intellectual. As the audience dispersed, Baillie was surprised to see a woman he knew, who was a good soul but not specially bright, whom he had not expected to be there. Her face was radiant. He greeted her and, in time, asked whether she had been able to follow the lecturer's reasoning. 'O' she said, 'I couldna keep up with him in all his thinking', then, with an ecstatic smile, 'but I kent he was makin' God great'.

An irrational reaction? Rather one in which the response was that of the total being, the intellect included. The lady had heard the lecture but had also heard with it the affirmation of faith which throbbed through it.

My father-in-law liked nothing better than to take one of our wee babies and wander down the banks of the Campsie telling the little one of the wonders of nature all around. Illogical? Is human bonding illogical?

To give voice to the poor when I headed up the 'Participation in Change' study for the World Council of Churches, I asked to stay with them and share some of their food.

Where food was in short supply, my share of the scarcity would leave them with still less for themselves. An irrational request to make, accordingly? The opposite.

Eating is a way of establishing fellowship. Those who might, in straits, be at the end of handouts became hosts and hostesses. That gave them dignity. Dignity is a kind of food to nourish and uplift the human spirit – it can play a more important part than physical sustenance.

The Penguin book 'Poor Economics' gives innumerable examples of cases where the better-off might accuse the poor of improvidence. If they get a step up life's ladder instead of using it as a basis to establish a better standard of living they might indulge in what may seem a colourful luxury. Jesus Christ did not wish people to have a grey existence but life to the full (woe to those politicians who get for themselves plum jobs and educate their children to do likewise, who expect the poor to be grateful to get any kind of low paid employment as if those lives did not matter). Jesus wanted, for all, colourful, rewarding lives.

Scientific method can unlock marvels by means of investigation, testing, consequent theorising. It is a brilliant resource. But it can no more cover the whole panoply of human experience and knowledge than a handkerchief can substitute for a bed sheet. Theology too has had its time of arrogance with the claim to be Queen of the Sciences to which other disciplines owed fealty.

What is 'for Afters'?

Prof. Dawkins lives in too small a world, a world he has made compassable to buttress confidence in his convictions. But when we face death can we ourselves have a basis for confidence that it is not the end? Is there a credible alternative? Jesus said that, in the Father's house, there are many living quarters; that he goes to prepare a place for us: 'I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am

there you shall also be'. The essence of life after death is being with Jesus and those who are with him. As far as detail is concerned, we are faced with a dive into the unknown. But a child will jump from a wall into a father's arms confident of not being allowed to crash to the ground – there exists a whole basis for that confidence in a fatherhood which has proved to be trustworthy. Jesus' promises have a sure basis. My granny could be relied on to set her hand to many tasks but as far as words were concerned she spoke little – when it comes to religious words there was almost a blank. That is till she was dying. Mother was going about the house red-eyed, weeping. Granny brought her up sharp. 'Dinna greet, Annie. It's tae oor Father we're goin' and whaur could you get a better welcome'. In life she had tested the reality of the Fatherhood.

Diving into the unknown came into my own personal experience after theological college. I stood looking down into the hollow where the Tulles Russell paper mill lay. I was scared and determined at the same time. To set out to act as a labouring pastor seemed a daft ploy after two degrees and a projection of university posts for me by college staff. There was no precedent – the French worker-priest movement did not start till two years later. I did not know if I would be accepted by the workforce – they could hardly have been expected to opt for or against my being a labourer-pastor alongside them when that role had no definition till I could give it some. Scared but determined I made my feet walk into the unknown.

I believed that I was led to this by the Holy Spirit. I also had a basis of personal experience as a backup. I, with the rest of the family, had to lend a hand in our butcher's shop to allow dad, who was blind, to make a living. On Sundays, when respectable members of the Forres community went to church, young men such as I worked alongside in the shop, stood at street corners, watching the procession go by – knowing that whatever was going on was not for the likes of them. I knew it was for the likes of them. That was a solid incentive for my venture, a basis in reality in which I had lived.

George MacLeod, having at first challenged me to decide whether to go into industry or to join the Iona Community with its commitment to ordained ministry in new areas, came round to see that the membership of the Community need not be so restricted. He backed my move, recognised its relevance.

Prof. John Baillie, having hoped that I would make myself available for academic theological appointments, swung right round when he heard of my intention and backed it to the hilt – as did his brother Prof. Donald.

The Home Board of the Church of Scotland offered unqualified support and were prepared to pay me a labourer's wage, received in turn from the firm, so that I was doing the work under the authority of the church and was answerable to the church not only to the firm.

My fiancée, Margaret, was all for it and joined me after a year.

In all this I was provided with a springboard into the unknown. A solid basis for a risky venture proved sufficient.

For reaching the time of death we also have a springboard which allows us to take a header into the unknown with confidence. It consists of the whole biblical testimony summed up in Jesus Christ.

Jesus made outrageous claims, and then lived up to them. 'Before Abraham was, I am'. 'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. 'If you know me, you will know my Father also'. Thus simply to be with him will be part of the fulfilment of all that God purposes, in which we will share

along with all those whom he affirms at the end of life.

We are left with this 'It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Lord has set by his own authority. But you will receive power . . . and be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth'. Jesus urges disciples not to waste time in speculation about things which are not in their human prerogative but in that of God the Father, rather to take hold of the Spirit's power. To enable and sustain mission to the ends of the earth is what to focus on – a concrete challenge with a reliable back-up, to transform the world's life.

As a courtship which leads to marriage can provide substance for taking the plunge, though it does not eliminate the hazards of a new way of ordering life together, so we prepare creatively in life to meet the unknown. 1 John 3.2 puts it 'We are God's children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed'. But there are clues.

Transformation

a) Paul speaks about a spiritual body taking the place of our earthly body. He expands this in 1 Corinthians 15.35-49, saying 'It is sown a physical body it is raised a spiritual body'. We will still be ourselves. Identity is not obliterated but fulfilled.

b) I see some confirmation of this in the book of Revelation 1.17: 'To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it'. The 'I' who will give these things is the Spirit of God speaking to the churches.

The nourishment of our spirits by the Spirit may be like a hidden manna which enables people to be sustained beyond what all human resources could provide. The white stone bears a new name. Name stands for identity. Simon, the apostle, became Cephas (in Aramaic) Peter (in Greek) when Jesus renamed him, comparing him to rock or stone. A name which is new may indicate growth into fulfilled being. On this earth we get some idea of who we are and what our life is given for. Only after death will we know as we are known.

When Rumpelstiltskin's name (i.e. his identity) was solely within his own grasp he had power over the king's bride. But when his identity was no longer exclusively his own, that grip was broken. In contrast the white stone confirms the eternal possession of personal being which cannot be filched, 'a name that no one knows except the one who receives it'. Our life will not have been in vain but will be made complete and still be ours.

c) The parable of the pounds (Luke 19.12-28) and the better known one of the talents (Matthew 25.14-30) are usually taken to urge us to use constructively whatever gifts are ours – to play our part in making answer to the prayer 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. But note also that the rewards go contrary to the current practice of high salaries and bonuses for presumed achievements. To those who used the entrusted money well, creative use of ten pounds led to a responsibility of taking charge of ten cities (how would Boris Johnson handle that?) and five pounds to responsibility for five cities. In the parable of the talents (a talent was worth 15 times a labourer's yearly wage) the reward is described thus: 'You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things'. The final reward of success is simply increased responsibility! If God's will were reckoned with similarly, what difference would that make to societies where Mammon rules? Heaven is so often thought of as a place of rest. Those who receive Jesus Christ's 'well done, good and faithful servant' may be put in charge of constellations.

The reality of 'the beyond' As to the reality of life after death it keeps being acknowledged in all kinds of places including some unexpected. In the Ryder cup victory Seve Ballesteros was thought of as looking down with delight at the seemingly impossible reversal of fortune that the European golfers achieved. The secular anthem 'You'll never walk alone' was sung in memory of all who perished in the Hillsborough disaster. 'Don't be afraid of the dark', in contrast to Dylan Thomas' 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light' speaks of confidence and hope.

The reality of 'the beyond' keeps breaking through the 'here and now'.