

## **WHY I BELIEVE IN GOD, DESPITE EVERYTHING ENGAGING ISSUES, 15 DECEMBER 2020 (ZOOM)**

*Notes from a talk given by Bishop Mike Bourke on 15 December 2020  
as part of the Engaging Issues series of talks, Church Stretton.*

### **Tread carefully**

I invite you this evening to accompany me on a journey into the primeval forest of belief in God before it is chopped down. Tread gently, for it is perilous terrain. The philosopher Donald MacKinnon wrote: *“The agonizing prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is an antidote to seeing issues of faith and unbelief as simply opportunities for being clever”*. I don’t quote that in order to privilege religious discourse, for its warning applies to me as much as to anyone else. My aim is not to score points or win arguments, but to explore with you what’s meant by “God”, and why I’m persuaded that this language refers to what really exists. I speak from a Christian perspective, because that’s what I know best. But I hope that much of what I want to say would be shared across the religious spectrum.

### **The strange language of God**

Astronomers are familiar with an object in the constellation of Cygnus known as the “blinking nebula”. It’s an aging star which has ejected a sphere of ionized gas that glows like a smoke ring. When you look at it directly through a small telescope you can’t see the ring, but only the star. But if you look through the corner of your eye the star disappears and you see the ring. Now you see it, now you don’t. A similar apparent

contradiction gave rise to quantum theory. I want to argue that this kind of “averted vision” is necessary to speak about God.

Linguistically the word ‘God’ is unusual. It refers, not to a finite object, but to something all-pervasive like light which is invisible, but by it we see everything else. ‘God’ is not a word, but the Word (capital ‘W’) behind all other words, the source of coherent meaning. Debating with the philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens, St Paul quotes with approval the Greek poets Aratus and Epimenides: “*In God we live and move and have our being*”: in other words, God is not a “thing”, but more like the atmosphere we breathe, the ocean we swim in.

It’s the Jews who have taught us to recognize the uncanny characteristic of speaking about God, which is signified by the word “holy”. The core meaning of ‘holy’ is ‘separate’, ‘set apart’. The ‘holy’ is ethically separate in the sense of an ultimate standard of goodness and justice which is not to be trifled with. Even to speak of such Otherness is to be hesitant, almost inarticulate. Silence is better than words. In the Hebrew Bible there are two words for ‘God’: Elohim (which is actually a plural) and the Tetragrammaton, the four consonants JHWH. This is described as “the Name” and is surrounded by taboos enshrined in the Ten Commandments. It is dangerous to utter it; how to pronounce it is uncertain; indeed in time it became forbidden to pronounce it at all. The four consonants were surrounded by the vowel-points of another word, so that when you saw the holy Name you read ‘Adonai’ – ‘Lord’. Christians who didn’t understand this convention eventually came to read the vowels of ‘Adonai’ as if they belonged to JHWH, producing the

nonsense hybrid word 'Jehovah'. But the spirit of the Hebrew reticence about the Name has been preserved in those English versions of the Bible which print 'LORD' in capital letters.

If this extraordinary word does not refer to a thing like other things, neither is it a concept, as if God were an object of philosophical speculation. The Hebrew understanding differs most sharply from the Greek when it speaks of 'the living God', who communicates with us through historical events, 'mighty deeds'; who engages with us and makes herself known in his concrete liveliness (I will solve the Anglo-Saxon gender problem by alternating the personal pronouns and possessives). In his "*Pensées*" Pascal describes his conversion from "*le Dieu des philosophes*", the abstract 'God of the philosophers', to the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'.

This indirect "averted vision" of God can be summed up in the wonderful word ἀνεξιχνίαστος which occurs a few times in the Greek version of the Old Testament and in St Paul's letters. The root is ἴχνος, which means a footprint or the track of an animal; ἰχνίαστος is 'traceable'; ἐξιχνίαστος equals 'traceable to source' (like the Covid 19 App, hopefully!) and ἀνεξιχνίαστος translates as 'untraceable' or 'unsearchable'. The picture is of an animal whose tracks you can follow, but only until they disappear into water or rocky ground. You know it's there, and it may be looking at you, but you can't see it. That is how it is with the living God. The best theologians insist that, in speaking of God, human language is both necessary and inadequate. Doctrines of God are indispensable guides which can take us so far,

like the tracks of the animal; but there remains a cloud of unknowing. We know God “by faith” and not “by sight”. This is annoying to people who like things to be clear cut, but it is the nature of the Beast. In this primeval forest we must be guided by intuition as well as a satnav. God is wild and full of surprises, and cannot be domesticated. John Bell of the Iona Community has brilliantly translated the dove-symbol of the Holy Spirit into “the Wild Goose”.

### **Presence and absence**

Intuition and faith affirm that the Living One is there. From my earliest recollection I have had the sense of a “presence”. *“Heaven lies about us in our infancy”* wrote Wordsworth, describing the innate awareness of children which adults lose and poets must restore to us. There is more to the world than the things we can see and measure, more than just us and our opinions. The sense of a Creator is not just an explanation of how things began (whether in the biblical seven days or a scientific big bang 13.8 billion years ago). It’s about the Presence of One whose world it is, who is here before us and we are her guests. We know that nature can be cruel and inhospitable, and yet, as today’s environmental movement testifies – despite everything (the second part of my title!) – the natural world is not just a blind mechanism or a material resource for us to exploit. It mediates a presence and a sense of wonder. The traditional word for it is “glory”: *“Heaven and Earth are full of thy glory”*, or as Gerald Manley Hopkins put it, *“The world is charged with the grandeur of God”*.

But as well as presence there is also the experience of absence. Pandemics, disasters and other evils place a question mark against untroubled faith. The Bible includes snakes in the primeval paradise, and the *“groaning of creation as it waits for redemption”*. Christians sing, *“Holy, holy, holy, though the darkness hide thee...”* The concept of a sacrament combines both aspects: sacraments like baptism and the eucharist mediate the presence of God, but only by veiling it beneath ordinary water, bread and wine. God’s hiddenness is a necessary part of the story.

One of my favourite parts of the Bible is the story of Joseph in Genesis chapters 37 to 50. It has a distinctly ‘modern’ feel: like a soap opera it’s the racy tale of a dysfunctional family, and no supernatural explanation is required for anything that happens. Events are driven by purely natural causes: the sibling rivalry of Joseph and his brothers; their lying to their father as they cover up his disappearance; the lust of Potiphar’s wife; Joseph’s chance meeting in prison with Pharaoh’s butler; the widespread famine; the rational strategy which Joseph develops to avert disaster; and the psychological games which he plays with his brothers when they turn up looking for food. God is hardly mentioned until chapter 45, where Joseph discloses his identity to his brothers in a denouement which always makes me weep. *“I am Joseph your brother. Do not blame yourselves for sending me here to Egypt, for it was not you who sent me here, but God. God sent me before you to preserve life.”* In this sacramental universe God’s action is totally hidden, not overriding natural causality, but somehow weaving it all together to produce a meaning which is greater than the sum of the

parts, and an outcome in which the intractable evils of natural disaster and human bloody-mindedness are transfigured into reconciliation and amazing grace. It is a “Revelation” of God – “*Not you, but God*” – despite everything!

The paradox of God’s presence and absence has been eloquently explored by the poet RS Thomas.

*It is this great absence that is like a presence...  
It is a room I enter from which someone has just gone,  
the vestibule for the arrival of one who has not yet come.  
What resources have I but the emptiness without him  
Of my whole being, a vacuum he may not abhor?*

This sense of absence is not atheism. The atheist concludes that God is a delusion – there is simply nothing there. But the poet knows there is Someone there. He has seen the footprints and followed the tracks. The “*emptiness without him of our whole being*” is evidence of God’s reality, of the presence in the absence; the aching for a presence that cannot be possessed. And God can reappear as unexpectedly as she disappears. All we can do is wait, as the poet wears himself out waiting on the cliffs for the return of an unusual visitor:

*Ah, but a rare bird is rare. It is when one is not looking,  
At times one is not there, that it comes. There were days  
So beautiful, the emptiness it might have filled,  
Its absence was as its presence, not to be told any more.*

### **The language of prayer and worship**

We humans cannot speak about such an elusive God from a position of neutrality. We can only speak with God. The distinctive “slant” language of prayer arises spontaneously within us *in extremis*, when

we or others are in desperate need. As the crisis passes we are ashamed of our superstition. But perhaps we would do better to let the experience teach us that, in relation to God, we are always out of our depth. Instead of denying the prayer of desperation, let's train it to maturity in contemplation. Listen to the strange sounds of the primeval forest! Learn to interpret its songs and warnings, and give attention to a call which takes us out of ourselves. The language of prayer is also a co-operative art. Whatever our faith, it involves the disciplines of a worshipping community. We marinate ourselves in the liturgy. Doubt and unbelief are suspended in the beauty of Choral Evensong. Corporate singing when it's allowed) enables us to surrender, not our genuine autonomy or our critical faculties, but our stony hearts:

*O Thou, who camest from above  
The pure, celestial fire to impart,  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
On the mean altar of my heart!*

It is also in prayer and worship that we articulate our questions and our lament for the absence of God. In the face of evils and unanswerable questions the Jewish scriptures teach us, not to stop believing and praying, but to argue with God, and press the question “*Why?*” “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” is a healthy and liberating protest. God paradoxically legitimizes protest: if there is no God, and no possible hope of a Joseph-like dénouement to wait for – despite everything! - our protest is stifled into mute irrelevance.

Worship which sounds these depths is inspiring. David Sheppard, who did the great episcopal double-act in Liverpool with his Catholic

colleague Derek Worlock, defined worship as *“the motivator which keeps a great many people enduring when others would give up.”* The 17<sup>th</sup> century poet George Herbert described it more nostalgically as *“heart in pilgrimage...church bells beyond the stars heard”*.

## **I AM WHO I AM**

The mysterious Tetragrammaton is revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush in Exodus chapter three. Moses says, *“If the Israelites ask ‘What is God’s name?’ what shall I say to them?”* The syllables of JHWH are then given to Moses with the commentary: *“This is my Name forever, my title through all generations”*. The four letters are connected with the verb “to be”, an apparent abbreviation of the sentence *“I AM WHO I AM”* which is also given to Moses as an explanation of the Name. It can equally be translated, *“I will be what I will be”*.

The Name seems to be a kind of refusal by God to answer Moses’ question directly. The purpose of knowing the name of something is to define it, and know where we are with it; and if it’s the name of a person or a god, it gives us a handle on them. To Moses, however, God declares himself to be, not an object, but a subject: *“I am who I am; I will be what I will be”*. We cannot get behind the barrier of God’s subjectivity. We do not investigate God in order to classify her as some kind of “object” in our museum of specimens. It is God who investigates us. The divine *“I AM”* reminds us that we are not God. Our starting point is not our own subjectivity: *“I think therefore I am”*, but the First Person of Another. We cannot switch that voice off like the television, or erase her memory. We can try, but it is not in our power. The Living

One whose tracks we have lost sight of remains alive and at large, and will continue to haunt us.

The existence of God means first and foremost that **we are known**. That is the presupposition of our humanity. Individually and collectively, in all our amazing genetic and historical diversity, and in our mysterious self-consciousness, we are known. The dignity of human beings depends on us being equally and deeply known, independently of our opinion of each other. The I AM addresses us as “You” (collectively) and “Thou” (individually). God directs his gaze, not at someone else or people in general, but at us personally, and at me. We matter. We are not spectators of God’s dealings with humanity, but actors on the stage, in the spotlight. It is to this dimension of our humanity that the word ‘soul’ refers. The ‘soul’ is not a spiritual part of our nature detachable from the body. It is the whole of our being in relation to God. Psalm 42: *“My soul is athirst for God, even for the living God”*. It can be a stormy, love-hate relationship, but it’s never indifferent. The name ‘Israel’ means *“He struggles with God”*. Whatever happens, we can never ‘*finish*’ with God, and God never writes us off. *“How intimately does God know us, and how much does she care?”* we ask; and Jesus replies, *“The hairs of your head have all been counted”*. Psalm 139: *“O Lord, you have searched me out and known me...You search out my path and my resting place, and are acquainted with all my ways...Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it transcends my understanding.”*

Not only are we known – Life, the Universe and Everything are known. There is an implanted intelligibility even in neutrons and stones, a code waiting to be deciphered which stimulates scientific curiosity. It is very odd that inanimate matter and energy should contain information which corresponds to, and is capable of, rational analysis by the most brilliant human minds. Scientific understanding points surely towards an objectively existing, all-permeating and unifying knowledge which is more than just a projection of human fantasies.

## **Responsibility**

This sense that God knows us in loving detail, far more deeply than we understand ourselves, provides a distinctive foundation for Ethics. From a theistic standpoint moral “responsibility” is the response, the answer we give, individually and collectively, to the call of God, to whom “*all hearts are open and all desires known*”. This view of ethics depends on God’s existence. We are ultimately accountable, not to ourselves, but to a transcendent Other, who knows our inner motives as well as our actions.

A corollary of belief in God, which is not always appreciated, is that moral obligation is itself obligatory. It’s a structural element of human existence: not an optional extra for those who are interested in that kind of thing, but a question which must be attempted by all candidates. Part of the journey of life is “soul making”: small choices contribute to the formation of our character, and also make it easier – or harder – to respond to God’s knowledge of us. This prospect is not meant to turn us into self-righteous bigots or guilt-ridden control freaks,

but to encourage us to practice in ordinary life the virtues of our faith-narrative: not only in exceptional heroism, but in daily care, kindness, reliability, forgiveness, and humble service in small, distasteful duties. George Herbert put it so well:

*“A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgery divine;  
Who sweeps a room as for thy laws  
Makes that and the action fine.”*

A further corollary is the belief in **judgment**. This is an aspect that puts a lot of people off, but I want to defend it.

- ***First, we need a corrective to our own view of ourselves.***  
The encounter with God often makes people realize that they are on the wrong track, and galvanizes them into unexpected and courageous action. This ability to make radical new beginnings comes from the gift of judgment, from seeing ourselves as Another sees us.
- ***Secondly, we need judgment to deal with our individual and collective wilfulness.*** The main problem of ethics is not uncertainty about difficult questions like war or abortion. The main problem is that, when it is perfectly clear what we ought to do, we don't do it. The religious word 'sin' refers to this streak of perversity – knowingly ignoring or disobeying our own principles, and the ethical claims of our families, of justice or the environment. We need judgment to bring home the truth to us, to pierce through our denials, cover-ups and self-deceptions, and help us patiently to face up to our sin. Religious and

charitable institutions can be particularly blind to their violence and abuse of people's trust which wilfully pervert their message and mission. We need God's protest to sort out who is phoney and who is the genuine article; to heed God's "No!" to some of our most ingrained attitudes and ambitions; and to hear the even deeper "Yes!" to our longing to be loved and forgiven, to triumph over adversity, and to attain eternal happiness. – despite everything!

- ***Thirdly, God's judgment is part of his love.*** At first sight it seems like condemnation or punishment. But looked at with averted vision, it's a diagnosis which tells us what's wrong. If the idea of God's wrath disturbs you, remember that it's not anger but indifference that is the opposite of love. The Lord's judgment is part of her desire to save us, despite everything. Our sins will find us out. But to be found out is to be found!

*"I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see."*

I am not arguing that other understandings of ethics have no truth in them; still less that you can only be moral if you believe in God.

However I think that not to believe in God is to make things unnecessarily difficult for ourselves. The sceptics of the Enlightenment wanted to retain the broad outlines of the Judeo-Christian ethic, but without Christian doctrine. Their aim was to find a naturalistic, rational explanation for ethics, which all people could share, whether they believed in God or not. For example, morality is about ***happiness***,

promoting the greatest good of the greatest number. Or ethics is about **progress**, educating humans from their natural “savagery” to the norms of “civilization” – implying that what’s up to date is better than what’s behind the times, and providing a moral justification for the conquest of “backward” peoples! The idea of personal responsibility remains important in these philosophies, but responsibility to whom? Individuals can be held responsible to society, or to the Law or the nation; indeed, for the Enlightenment, the unified nation was the supreme focus of loyalty. But to whom is the nation accountable? If responsibility is based, not on God, but on a kind of fiction, then we are answerable only to ourselves, like Brexit Britain which rejects accountability to any external Court of Human Rights, and insists on being judge and jury in its own cause.

Another puzzle concerns **altruism**: how do we find a natural explanation for the generous spirit of self-giving for the sake of others, which arouses our spontaneous admiration precisely because it runs counter to the self-centred grain of human nature? It’s not surprising that Darwin’s discovery of evolution by natural selection was very quickly seen by its supporters as threatening the Judeo-Christian ethic as well as the doctrine of Creation. The idea of the ‘survival of the fittest’ favoured the strong over the weak, and was used to promote ideas of racial superiority and the practice of eugenics. Nietzsche denounced altruism and mercy as “slave morality”, and Sigmund Freud wrote *“Moses and Monotheism”* to explain the sense of guilt as a delusion of the “super-ego”. Modern scientists do not draw these conclusions, and point to many species where co-operative behaviour

aids survival. It is a fascinating and continuing debate. But after three centuries the jury remains out on whether these attempts to find natural explanations for moral responsibility, and altruism in particular, can succeed.

## **God and Ecology**

The case that I'm trying to make for the existence of God is a kind of cumulative "Ecological Argument". The thing about primeval forests is the delicate relationships between all the different parts which allow so many species to flourish. It's only recently that botanists have apparently discovered the underground networks of Earth's most prolific species, fungi, which convey information between the trees of an ancient woodland, enabling them to defend themselves against approaching danger. Such co-operative interconnections cannot be reproduced in the palm-oil plantations or soya fields with which clever humans replace the jungle.

I believe that:

1. God is the centre of just such an inter-related ecological system of values and meanings;
2. The divine language of holiness, glory, presence, prayer, judgment and blessing needs to be honoured and learned, and not silenced as the nations of the Enlightenment tried to prohibit so-called primitive minority languages like Irish, Welsh and Basque.

3. Theology has traditionally called God the *Summum Bonum*, the Highest Good. I have tried to argue that the human capacities for wonder, worship, ethical responsibility, reconciliation, vocation and scientific curiosity present, not a knock-down proof, but a convergent witness for the existence of God as the *Summum Bonum* - the natural environment in which these things can continue to grow and flourish.
4. God is the Archimedean point which promises to integrate all the separate elements of the world because God exists outside as well as within them.

If God does not exist, and we remove these elements from a “theological” context, we will have to re-invent God in the form of natural explanations and motivations for things like altruism. Such substitutes might work for a time, but they are not the Real Thing. They offer a kind of artificial life-support system like chemical agriculture or conserving endangered species in a zoo; and their long-term survival is uncertain.

Today’s environmental crisis questions our wisdom and our track record in replacing natural habitats with industrial alternatives. Maybe Someone is trying to tell us that the ecology we depend on includes not only the natural world, but also its Creator and Redeemer.

But, you may say, the many different religions, the rival claims to revelation, and the wars they have generated, surely discredit the

idea of a universal, unifying truth? It's not my purpose in this talk to argue for either an exclusive or an inclusive approach to religious pluralism. The many faiths certainly demonstrate the indirect nature of religious awareness! But what they have in common is the conviction that the divine (however conceived) has to be taken seriously. We are not the lords of the universe. Reverence, humility and trust are required of us in the macro-ecology of which we are part. This is very different from saying that the existence of many faiths shows we don't need any of them, and there is no loyalty we owe to anything beyond ourselves. Yes, there are different faith narratives, and we have much to learn from each other. But the resources we need to renew our sense of union with nature, our spirituality and our moral compass do not have to be searched for in exotic places. By turning our averted vision towards our own spiritual traditions, we can find these medicines in the weeds beneath our feet.

So instead of the prospect of a Silent Spring from which the song of birds has been banished, and our own voices are thin and shrill, let us unmute our souls, and – despite everything! - celebrate Christmas with carols of joy (even if we can't sing with the choirs!), to welcome (in the middle of this Covid winter) Emmanuel, God with us.

*Bishop Michael Bourke*

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