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Introduction

Our doubt is our passion.

Henry James

I USED TO BE A PRIEST. I trained for three years at an Anglican theological college. It was a dysfunctional institution that inspired and dismayed in turn. We excused it by saying that at least it was never lukewarm. Then, I worked as a clergyman in a high Church of England parish in the North East of England. It was a role with a clear sense of purpose being situated in a working-class community where, if much else had departed, the Church remained.

But mostly it was not a sense of social justice that made me don a dog-collar. Nor was I like those Christians who have a passion for conversion and a certainty that doctrine is as clear as the summer sky. I was ordained because I was gripped by what I can only call a religious imagination; the human spirit that cannot put meaning, beauty and transcendence - the very fact of existence - down. I loved the big questions. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the theologian, had stressed that religious feeling is primary, dogmatics secondary: 'True religion is sense and taste for the Infinite,' he wrote. That made eminent sense to me. I felt drawn to another theologian, Paul Tillich, when he wrote that God was not a being, nor the monarch of monotheism, but was being-itself, the ground or power of being. The weightiness of such theology and the resonances of catholic liturgy mattered to me because I longed to connect with these mysteries. I took it that questing and doubts were more energising of an authentically religious outlook than any confessional formulations. And at the time of my ordination, buoyed up by the massive pillars and ancient sanctity of Durham cathedral, I found a certainty: God is love, love of life, and we in his Church are called to be lovers - I say that advisedly - too.

Illus. I.1: Durham Cathedral has stood for over 900 years, 'half church of God, half castle 'gainst the Scot', as Sir Walter Scott put it.

This, I was to realise, is a sensibility that is profoundly felt but easily perturbed. The problem was that I could not say for certain how it all added up: how could it, when its object is God who is not an object or even ultimately a 'who'. So, in retrospect it is not surprising that disillusionment with God's earthly work set in too fast. The presenting symptoms for my crisis were loneliness in the job and frustration with the Church. Underneath that a number of neither coherent nor attractive objections raged. It depressed me that some clergy spent so much time policing their version of orthodoxy - monitoring who believed what about the Bible, the resurrection, homosexuality or women priests. It annoyed me that people wanted security from churchgoing more than challenge. The 'hatch, match and dispatch' routine that filled the week in between Sundays felt more like an industrial process than rites of passage. I was uncomfortable being an ambassador for a national organisation that seemed at least as hypocritical as it was helpful.

Against this background, the voices of theologians like Schleiermacher and Tillich came to seem irrelevant. They said that dogmatics should be derivative of the religious spirit, whereas the Church, in practice, seemed to do the reverse. So, I turned increasingly to humanist philosophers. 'Ah!', I began to think. Here is an account of things on the ground that is better than the double-talk of theology. Here is a discourse with edge. The threads of my faith thinned. And then snapped. Seeking succumbed to certainty. Doubts became a refusal of God. And now how I suspected that love-talk! It seemed like an excuse, like an opiate to cover epistemological realities. After a little less than three years in the Church, I quit. I had become a conviction atheist, a lover of the freedom and reason of the deicidal age.

It felt like growing up, like the history of humanity's conception of divinity played out in my own life. For centuries, people believed in many gods. Then, in a gradual process that began before Christ, tribal cultures mingled with each other and realised that their gods were like other gods: polytheism gave way to monotheism. And after that - and this, I now reckoned, was the genius of Christianity - God became man, which also meant that man had become God. Paradoxical though it may seem, with the birth of Christ, the death of God was only a matter of time. How lucky we are that this has been made manifest in our own age!

Cultures of Certainty

Now, when Nietzsche announced the death of God, he told a story. A madman entered a marketplace where atheists were about their secular business. 'I seek God! I seek God!', he yelled - and they laughed. 'Is he hiding or on holiday?', they suggested in contempt.

For a while, after I left, I scoffed at believers too - until, that is, I noticed how Nietzsche continued. The crowd had the smirks wiped off their faces, for this madman was also a prophet. 'We are murderers,' he shouted, and proceeded to tell them what their killing had done. We think that we are now masters of the world, but we have actually unchained the sun, made our home cold, and strayed unawares into infinite space. 'Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?', Nietzsche concluded. 'Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?' Man as God: how impossible and laughable is that!

His point is that the death of God is not a triumph, it is a tragedy. And a while after my atheistic turn, I began to sense it. My newfound certainty crumbled because atheism, as much as conservatism, seemed to entail a poverty of spirit. Militant non-believers began to look as unappealing as the fundamentalists who do not do doubt.

Nietzsche foresaw this outcome too. If all can be explained by science, as is this Man-made-god's belief and hope, why have morality, values or spirit at all, he asked? If nature and history can be understood by mechanisms, rules and laws, then is not purpose, imagination and life inevitably sidelined and then squeezed out? Of course, in practice, even the fiercest atheist adopts some set of values that they superimpose on the world. It is impossible to live otherwise. They might even say that inventing, not inheriting, morality is part of the liberation, and ask if this is not what it means for humanity to know of God?

The trouble is that we are not divine. So this humanism can easily be made to look flimsy and challenged. It is why, I suspect, contemporary ethical discourse so often sounds like a repeat record. 'Freedom of speech, human rights, equality for all!' 'Freedom of speech, human rights, equality for all!' 'Freedom of speech, human rights, equality for all!' Yes, yes and yes! But to what end? On what basis? And why? The same thought exposes the emptiness of what often seems like modern

life's sole goal, namely, the pursuit of technological progress. Many great goods have arisen from the appliance of science. The trouble is that technology only nourishes us in certain ways. It can entertain us, but not make us happy. It can heal us, but not make us whole. It can feed us, but only in body. It offers defences, but does not make us feel secure. The double trouble is that technology is *so* good at this entertaining, healing, feeding and defending that it is easy to believe, or hope, that it can, or one day will, solve all other human ills too. Some say it might even makes us immortal - an apparent deification of humanity.

What is missing is meaning. Modern humanism finds it hard to address the questions of morality, values and spirit. Following the scientific rationalism it holds in high regard, it tends to boil it all down to a discussion of mechanisms, rules and laws. This may create an illusion of meaning and a sense of purpose. But meaninglessness keeps rearing its head because, well, mechanisms, rules and laws are actually not very meaningful. This is why atheism feels like a poverty of spirit. This is why 'Why?' is the cry of our age and we are no longer quite sure who we are. We are like Sisyphus: forcing the boulder of our values to the top of a mountain, hoping to lend them the authority of a high place, only to see them roll down again. In truth, this is absurd, as Camus realised - though only a few can stomach that thought. 'Thus wisdom wishes to appear most bright when it doth tax itself,' says Angelo in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

What is doubly distressing is that contemporary Christian discourse often sounds the same way too. It readily slips into being a process of mechanisms (being saved), rules (being good) and laws (being right). It was with the Copernican revolution that things began to change. The new science seemed to render many Christian conceptions of the universe unlikely or invalid. The Victorian age that followed was one in which belief struggled with disbelief and science seemed to be winning out. Hence, Nietzsche's announcement. What is overlooked, as I did at first, is that he also exposed science as bad religion - because it unchains the sun and floats unguided amongst the stars. So, science did not win conclusively. But it has been successful to the extent that it has altered the terms of debate. And having been thus challenged to prove itself, Christian orthodoxy tries to make itself look like a 'transcendental

science'. It used to be faith seeking understanding, now it is surety seeking expression; it was a search, it is now a statement. As one of the founders of American fundamentalism, A. C. Dixon, declared: 'I am a Christian because I am a Thinker, a Rationalist, a Scientist.' Thus, the most successful examples of contemporary churchgoing are conservative and evangelical. Even liberal churches have not escaped unscathed. They are increasingly defined by what they are not against - be that being not against homosexuality, women priests, contraception or divorce. What they struggle to do is to articulate a sense of self on their own account.

Having lost faith with atheism, I could not simply go back to Christianity. My scoffing at belief stopped but so had the appeal of belonging to a church. This was partly a matter of being sensible. A life lived against the rising tide of conservatism, for the sake of an institution that I could not help but regard as flawed, would not be healthy. It was also a matter of being honest. The modern Church requires you to adhere to a creed that is more substantial than God is love: one should really be able to make a good stab at believing that God is Father, God is incarnate in Christ, God is in his Church and God is revealed in the Bible. Hand on heart, straight forwardly, I could not and can not. I once had a conversation, walking down Oxford High Street, about whether the churches would ever drop the recitation of their historic creeds. In that rarified atmosphere I thought that this might be to advance the quest for God. Foolishly, it did not occur to me that they are not called formularies for nothing.

Wittgenstein famously wrote, 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.' For a while, after atheism, I thought I should be silent too. If my journey had taught me anything, I reasoned, it was that some things just cannot be said. But that did not last for long. It has also been said that some people are not musical when it comes to religion. Well it became apparent to me that I was. My religious imagination was rekindled and I began to enjoy the big questions again. Like the operas of Wagner, that I know one day I shall have to sit down and listen to, I could not pretend that centuries of spirituality could be simply discounted, as the flotsam and jetsam of more primitive times. The big questions flourished for me once more.

But neither believer nor non-believer - a doubting Thomas, doubting Richard Dawkins combi - where and how? My suspicion is that this

predicament, at least in outline, is a common one. Not only does it partially mirror the history of Western ideas over the last few hundred years, but I feel it must resonate with the many who are as dissatisfied with conservative belief as they are with militant disbelief. Around 40 per cent of Americans are not members of a church though say they do *not* simply not believe in God. And nearly a quarter of Britons frankly admit they are open and undecided.

On Being Agnostic

We are what is called agnostics. Or to be more precise Christian agnostics. I think it is important to emphasise the 'Christian' for two reasons. First, it is in a Christian context that agnosticism as a question of rational assent typically comes about - not least because of the modern history of Christianity and science. In Eastern religions, being agnostic makes little sense since the form of these religions is so different. And in Judaism and Islam, religious systems that are in some ways close to Christianity, it seems more natural to talk of degrees of practice than belief. Second, it is better to talk of Christian agnosticism because the idea of God with which agnostics struggle (and which atheists deny) is Christian. It is monotheistic and shaped by the Christian tradition.

Agnostic - meaning 'not known' - was a word first coined by T. H. Huxley in 1869. A Victorian populariser of science, he found himself at the centre of the religious crisis sparked by the rise of science. The agnostic, Huxley said, is not an atheist but is someone who tries everything, and holds only to 'that which is good'. In an essay, entitled *Agnosticism*, he wrote:

> Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.

Huxley and others like him were passionate men, embroiled in debates with dogmatists of science and religion alike. Today, though, the word

Illus. I.2: T. H. Huxley coined the word agnosticism saying that he was against ‘gnosis’ - doctrinaire knowing.

agnostic has come to mean something both less rational and more passive. Its strong sense - the considered conviction that nothing of ultimate things can be known with certainty - has been subsumed in the weak sense of someone who is simply non-committal or indifferent. This has happened because times have changed. In Huxley's day science had the upper hand, and Christianity was in retreat. Victorians had to struggle with what they might believe and what they should doubt, and with that struggle came their convictions - for or against or deliberately unsure. Today, though, someone can be agnostic with little more than a shrug of the shoulders. Like flat-pack goods, agnosticism can just click into place, part of the drab mental furniture of the theologically uninspired. I remember a flyer we were given at the start of the Oxford lecture course on the historical Jesus. It contained a list of what he can be known to have said for sure. It was not long. However, the real sadness was not that so little is known about Jesus, but that it takes so little effort to arrive at that conclusion today. This is inevitable, given the settled results of biblical criticism. But before it had established these results, there was something to be fought over, something to be passionate about. Similarly, the introduction to analytical philosophy course I attended had me doubting I was sitting on a chair in less than five minutes. It was an uncertainty that was so easy, it was boring.

Wisdom's Lovers

To put it another way, Victorian agnosticism was a way of seeing the world and a framework from which to approach life. The weak form of agnosticism that is at least its partial legacy today is no such practice, or barely a principle, but merely a tacit non-belief. This presents two challenges to someone who senses that agnosticism has more to offer than that. First, it is necessary to show that agnosticism still matters at an intellectual level. If it had work to do, so to speak, in the Victorian period - to challenge the excesses of religion and science - then we must identify what work it has to do today, and why that matters. Second, if agnosticism is to be an alternative to dogmatic scientific and religious worldviews, and not just a critique of them, it needs to move beyond being an intellectual exercise to become an ethos. A life lived according

to the tenets of scientific empiricism or religious faith is a way of life based upon those beliefs, and not just an abstract creed. Similarly, agnosticism must prove itself to be more than a set of dry questions and expansive enough to become a positive commitment.

Questions then. Does agnosticism matter today, in the sense of being of consequence and carrying weight? Can it be a conviction and not just a shrug of the shoulders? Why should it be a stance that makes the dogmatists of faith and science sit up and take notice? And can it carry weight again for the contemporary passionate doubter?

The writings of the philosopher Kierkegaard suggest why it should matter to the unquestioning believer. For him, faith was a problem not because it was disproved but because it seemed so impossible. He develops this in his book *Fear and Trembling* around the quintessential figure of faith, Abraham. Why Abraham? Because when God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac, as a test of faith, Abraham said yes. On every conceivable level, this 'yes' of faith was impossible for Kierkegaard.

> [W]hen I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated. I am all the time aware of that monstrous paradox that is the constant of Abraham's life. I am constantly repulsed, and my thought, for all its passion, is unable to enter into it, cannot come one hairbreadth further. I strain every muscle to catch sight of it, but the same instant I become paralysed.

Agnosticism is the position from which Kierkegaard struggles with faith. The paradox is that it is his agnosticism that gives faith its meaning: he argued that doubt underpins faith, since it ensures that the believer really has faith and faith alone. He calls this the leap of faith. He knows that it would be the most remarkable, refined and extraordinary thing. That is why it is agonisingly out of reach. He therefore despises those who say they have it or, for that matter, simply dismiss it: if faith can turn water into wine, he quips, they would turn wine into water; they make a 'clearance sale' out of true religious convictions.

Kierkegaard is a prophet who challenges Christianity today as much as he did in his time. If modern belief judges itself according to the standards set by a fact-testing, relevancy-seeking scientific humanism, the

challenge is to recover the agnosticism of the religious imagination - the exploration found in chapters 4 and 5 here. There is a negative and positive aspect to this. Negatively, I want to argue that being beholden to the scientific worldview distorts Christianity, and arguably other religions too. Positively, by exploring the apophatic tradition, as well as revisiting the so-called proofs of God along with issues like the problem of evil, I want to make the case that not knowing who God is - being radically agnostic - is essential to theology. It is more fundamental than anything positive that can be said about God. The general point is that the agnostic spirit and a religious way of life are one and the same thing. To lose the former is to lose the latter.

When it comes to science, I believe agnosticism is crucial - the argument of chapters 2 and 3. It is for those who are neither utopian about a technological future, nor Luddite about the achievements of the present. Negatively, the technological age needs a constant grasp of the limits of science, so that it does not put too much faith in it, and an agnostic attitude can provide that. Positively, agnosticism takes these limits as pointing beyond what science can comprehend to the persistent mysteries of life - aspects of existence that carry value and meaning, and are best captured and expressed in non-scientific ways. The hope is that these ways of talking can regain some of the authority that the scientific worldview tends to seek to monopolise. Moreover it seems to me that the reinvigoration of these other visions of reality is an increasing pressing need. In a society that faces what has been called an epidemic of ennui, and is on the verge of environmental crisis, it is not just more technology we need but *more than* technology.

It is said that a little learning is a dangerous thing, because the learned forget that their learning is little. A humanism of humility, not hubris, is what agnosticism struggles to put centre stage, in the belief that it nurtures right thinking. But what about the person commonly called agnostic - the individual without faith though not without a sense of the religious? How can agnosticism be made to be worth its salt, for, following Huxley and Kierkegaard, it must inspire passion and be a quest that can make for a life too?

Passion, quest and life. In Plato's dialogue the *Phaedrus*, the eponymous friend of Socrates asks the founder of Western philosophy a question. Where and how can he find truth? Phaedrus has an admiration for

the orator Lysias, thinking him a great speech-maker and writer. He presumes that he is also, therefore, wise. Socrates replies that this is not right: 'To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom's lover - a philosopher - or something similar would fit him better.' This is someone who does not possess but lacks the wisdom they desire.

Socrates is talking about himself. He is a lover of limits, of being thrown onto the unknown. He is also someone who turned to philosophy having become disillusioned with the overreaching science of his times. And he is a man with a religious imagination. He is fascinated by the big questions of life. He understands the limits of being human, of standing in between the ignorant animals and the wise gods. The seminal moment in his career came with a message from an oracle. It told him that uncertainty is characteristic of the human condition, but that human beings need not be pig ignorant. They can understand their predicament by becoming conscious of what they do and don't know - by being wise agnostics. This is why Socrates calls himself a lover of wisdom, a philosopher. Moreover, being a philosopher added up not just to a legacy of thought but to a life that informed a civilisation. It mattered. So, might it be that by reflecting on the figure of Socrates, agnosticism can rediscover its passion and *raison d'être* today? Could his passionate doubt suggest a contemporary agnostic way of life? This is the matter that I pursue in the first chapter and return to again in chapters 6 and 7.

Throughout I reflect on my own experience too, partly in the hope that it illuminates what a committed agnosticism might be, partly because what I hope to convey is, again, not merely rational argument but the sense of something lived. In that spirit, we start with a life - the life of Socrates.

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