

Faith in Search of Understanding

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I

From the age of about fourteen my religious faith was marked by increasing intensity, a common enough teenage experience. At the same time, however, I was coming to have doubts, doubts that I found difficult to express since I didn't possess the requisite vocabulary or ideas, nor did I have those around me with whom I could discuss such matters. When I was sixteen I discovered Bertrand Russell's *Why I'm not a Christian*. On reading this book all the inchoate questions I had suddenly became clear. Russell's book acted like sulphuric acid on the grounds of my faith; I found that they could not stand up to rational criticism so I abandoned my faith and, for the next 14 years or so, I was a convinced atheist—an atheist, note, not an agnostic for I subscribed to the principle that if there was no evidence for a belief system then that constituted evidence for its negation.

I continued my study of philosophy, first independently and then at University, and eventually found myself, at the age of 29, a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame. Many of my fellow graduate students in philosophy were Christians of one sort or another, mostly Protestant, from an astonishing variety of backgrounds—Dutch Calvinist, Wesleyan Methodist, Southern Baptist. Despite these differences they were all firm believers. That came as a shock to me. Here were people who, according to the normal indicators, appeared to be intelligent but yet they believed in God. Many of them were researching in the area of the Philosophy of Religion so I often found myself drawn into conversations on religious topics. Sometimes the talk would to questions about the actual content of faith of different Christian denominations. While my fellow students often disagreed among themselves, they generally congratulated themselves on at least not holding the indefensible beliefs of Catholics. Now I didn't mind the Church being hanged but my innate sense of justice demanded that she be hanged for the right offence and it often seemed to me that the

accusations that were levelled against her were simply wrong. The accusations might be, for example, that Catholics had a mechanical ‘filling station’ theory of grace—that all you had to do was to turn up to the filling station (i.e. Church) on a Sunday and stock up on grace for the next week; or that according to Catholic doctrine your salvation was a matter that could be arranged entirely by yourself—a long list of good deeds obliging God, as it were, to award you salvation. Now all I had in my head from my own religious education were the shreds and patches of my knowledge of the elementary catechism and from this I was able to draw some bits and pieces according to need. I found myself thrust into the role of defender of the faith in spite of myself, often having to flee to the library stacks to sustain the role. This went on for almost three years so that I came to know a lot of Catholic doctrine in a detached fashion, as one might come to know the doctrines of Buddhism or Confucianism.

By now I was married and my wife and I had one child. Having a child makes you take the long view of things. When you are single your horizon of concern extends perhaps a few weeks into the future; when you have a child, your horizon shoots out about 20 years. Slowly but surely topics that had not been, to use William James words, ‘live options’ for me for many years now became live again. I still didn’t quite know what I thought about all this religion, but I was definitely in a state of change. My atheistic certainties had been shaken. Where I would end up I didn’t know. I was impressed with the intellectual coherence and rigour of Catholic doctrine; once accept the starting points and everything else had a ring of coherence and consistency and a certain kind of inevitability that was nonetheless unpredictable. I stayed in this state of detached conviction for some time. Then, one day, on my way home from lectures, I was passing by the Sacred Heart church in Notre Dame. Skirting around the back I was about to pass the entrance to the crypt chapel when I felt a strong impulse to go in. I did. A confession box was operational and without pausing to reflect I went straight in and made my first confession for almost 14 years. Afterwards I was quite surprised by what I had done. Looked at providentially my 14 years in the desert of unbelief led to my being rationally persuaded of the truth and beauty of the faith before I gave it my real assent. Since then my faith has never wavered though I often have had what Douglas Adams called ‘a long dark tea-time of the soul.’ Having, as it were, been on the other side of the fence, it no longer has any attractions for me.

II

Faith's search for understanding is often presented as if it were a phenomenon that occurs only in a religious context. I believe, however, that it is a general condition of the pursuit of all knowledge. To think that we can have knowledge without faith is to take the road that eventually leads to scepticism. Scepticism prizes cleanliness over disorder, form over content, sterility over fertility and certainty over doubt. In the interests of intellectual hygiene, nothing is admitted into one's mind until it has been inspected and passed free of all infectious diseases. But taken to its logical conclusion this attitude won't allow us to pass *anything* fit for consumption—for what is it that is going to do the inspecting in the first place and why should *it* be presumed to be uncontaminated? There is no antiseptically sterile Archimedean point on which we can stand prior to our engagement with the world; Descartes gallantly attempted to discover such a point and Descartes failed. As we now look back on the philosophy in the 20th century we may reflect that if it has taught us anything surely it is that we are thoroughly engaged with our world even before the beginning of inquiry and that our efforts at understanding and clarification have to be conducted from a position of prior engagement. It's like living in a house while you redecorate it. It would certainly be a lot easier to move out and live somewhere else while all the fuss is going on but if you can't do this, as you can't with your beliefs, you have to live with the mess. For a long time I have suspected that there is something intellectually immature about scepticism. It is, I believe, often the result of a failed search for certainty. When knowledge and certainty are effectively equated then failure to achieve certainty almost invariably leads to scepticism. The mature inquirer will demand and accept from each area of inquiry that level of knowledge that it will sustain. As Aristotle said long ago in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

...it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. It is as absurd to accept probabilities from a mathematician as it is to demand certainty from morals." [Book I, chapter 3]

It doesn't follow from this that one's initial positions are incapable of changing, even of

being abandoned. It may be that the process of seeking understanding leads precisely to the abandonment of our initial position and to the assumption of another. It may be that at the end of our inquiry we come around again to our point of departure albeit at a higher level. Whether or which, the point is that there is no uncontaminated, no value-free or uncommitted starting point.

One of Wittgenstein's targets in the *On Certainty* is the notion of hyperbolic doubt, which is a staple dialectical device of scepticism. An all-too-easy assumption of the sceptic is that in relation to any position whatsoever one may always and everywhere express doubts. But, as Wittgenstein puts it, "doubt needs grounds"?. The position of the sceptic who reiterates "And why should we accept that?" is very like that of the child who has learnt the power of the question "Why?" to elicit a response from its distracted parents.

Wittgenstein's position is not a foundationalism in any recognisably standard version; he does not hold that there are propositions that are self-evident, obviously true, or that manifest any other variety of intrinsic epistemological specialness—it is simply that in any complex of beliefs and practices some are at any given time more central to the complex as a whole, and thus more resistant to change, than others. But these propositions do not necessarily maintain that functionally privileged position over time. Wittgenstein's uses a striking image of the interaction between a river and its bed to illustrate the thesis that systems of beliefs are internally dynamic and are also in continual interaction with other systems of belief. Relative to the water in the river, the bed of the river is stable and abiding. But the river bed exists as such only because it has been carved out by the waters that previously ran in it and because of the continuing action of the water the course of the riverbed can be, and sometimes is, changed.

In the religious context, then, to seek an understanding of one's faith is simply to do what all seekers after knowledge do. It is not necessarily to prejudge the questions of whether or to what extent the content of one's faith is rationally justifiable. It may be that all that one can arrive at is a rational articulation of a content that, in the end, cannot be rationally justified but then, as Wittgenstein remarks, enquiry has to end somewhere – why not here?

Sometimes believers are challenged by non-believers to prove their beliefs. Failure to

deliver such proof is then taken to be tantamount to disproof. Perhaps it might be worthwhile to examine the concept of proof. The first thing to realise is that all proof is relative. Anything at all can be proved provided that one has been equipped with the right starting points. And that, of course, is the rub. Here, for example, is a snappy six-line proof for the existence of God:

1. ∇G [It is possible that God exists]
2. $G \Rightarrow G$ [If God exists, then God necessarily exists]
3. $\nabla G \Rightarrow \nabla \Box G$ [if it is possible that God exists, then it is possible that God necessarily exists]
4. $\Box G$ [It is possible that God necessarily exists]
5. $\Box G$ [God necessarily exists]
6. G [God exists]

[Where $\nabla \dots =$ ‘It is possible that...’; or ‘possiblyX’: $\Box \dots =$ ‘It is necessary that...’; or ‘necessarilyX’; $\Rightarrow =$ strict implication, and $G =$ God exists]

This looks as if it were a latter-day equivalent of the ‘proof’ given by a famous French Mathematician—La Place, I think—to the assembled Russian nobles ‘ $x + y = z$, therefore, God exists’. Without wishing to deny that logic can be used for the purposes of intellectual intimidation this proof is not quite in the same category of disreputability as the La Placean one. The two premises are not implausible. The first states that it is possible that God exists. Unless you are a necessitarian atheist this would seem to be true. (A necessitarian atheist holds not just that God *does not* exist; he holds that God *cannot* exist, a much stronger position.) The second premise fleshes out the content of an understanding of what orthodox theists, Christian, Jewish or Muslim, mean by God. For someone to be God is for that person to be an entity strictly incommensurate with the other things in this world. All the theistic religions believe that their God is transcendent; that the world is his creation and that he is not to be confused with anything in that world or with that world as a whole. Whatever or whether such a God may be, if he exists at all, then his existence is not contingent. The third step of the argument involves the application of an inference rule in one

system of modal logic. The fourth step is simply a modal version of a common and uncontroversial inference rule in logic, Modus Ponens. Step five involves yet another inference rule from a system of modal logic; and the move from 5 to 6 is a basic insight of modal logic, namely, that it is valid to move from necessity to actuality. Obviously, this argument is not beyond criticism; my point in putting it forward is precisely to make that point. While its premises are not implausible and its inferences not obviously wrong one may yet not feel rationally coerced by the argument even if one is unable to point to specific defects. Often, the demand made of the religious believer is often not just for a proof; it is for a proof that would be rationally coercive for all. But this is much too high a demand. It is a demand that if made in the science would invalidate scientific theories!

All proofs, then, are situated in a context, and it is only if the context is impeccable that the proof works without the possibility of a hitch. It is open to anyone who wishes to undermine your proof to broaden the context so that new questions are asked, new demands made for arguments, new demands made for evidence. What this means is that it is perfectly possible to feel the probative force of an argument while another, equally rational person, does not. This experience is not confined to the world of religion; it happens all the time in politics, in sport and in art. Have we not all had the experience of believing a certain film to be brilliant, insightful, witty, enhanced by superlative acting and direction, deep and significant only to find that someone close to us whose values and judgement we respect judges it to be superficial and trashy? The existence of a difference in judgement does not in itself necessarily lessen our attachment to our own judgement though subsequent discussion and reflection may do so. In most areas of life we do not require unanimity to justify our adoption of firm beliefs. It would be special pleading with a vengeance if it should be required in the case of religious beliefs.

One of the functions of faith's search for understanding is to open that faith out into new contexts, into new situations that it may not obviously cover. This is a risky venture for, as I indicated above, a consequence of this may that you will find yourself forced to abandon your initial faith. But this is a risk that must be taken. As Thomas Kuhn has demonstrated so forcefully in his seminal work on the philosophy of science such risk-taking does not require you to give up a position at the first sight

of a difficulty (as Cardinal Newman said in a similar context “Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt”) but it does open up in principle the possibility of a renunciation of one’s position if the difficulties should come to be experienced as insuperable.

What kinds of evidence might be germane to coming to or moving away from belief in a theistic God? Everything in the universe appears to be contingent, that is to say, there is nothing necessary about the existence of any particular thing. It exists now, it did not exist in the past, and it may not exist in the future. This contingency also seems to apply to the universe as a whole so that one does not necessarily commit the fallacy of composition if one concludes from the contingency of the parts to the contingency of the whole. So, if there is to be something rather than nothing then the ground of that being must be sourced somewhere other than in any individual element of the universe or in the universe as a whole. There are, of course, many other features of the universe on which arguments for the existence of God can, and have, been based; change, causality, the phenomenon of order, conscience, etc.

On the negative side of the scale we have the problem of evil. The problem of evil takes its start from what would appear to be an obvious fact of human experience, namely, that there is evil, and quite a deal of it, in the world. Reading one of my favourite authors, Raymond Chandler, recently, I came across this passage in which our hero gathers his thoughts at the end of a very busy day at the office:

When I got home I mixed a stiff one and stood by the open window in the living-room and sipped it and listened to the ground swell of the traffic on Laurel Canyon Boulevard and looked at the glare of the big, angry city hanging over the shoulder of the hills through which the boulevard had been cut. Far off the banshee wail of police or fire sirens rose and fell, never for very long completely silent. Twenty-four hours a day somebody is running, somebody else is trying to catch him. Out there in the night of a thousand crimes people were dying, being maimed, cut by flying glass, crushed against steering wheels or under heavy car tyres. People were being beaten, robbed, strangled, raped, and murdered. People were hungry, sick, bored, desperate with loneliness or remorse or fear, angry, cruel, feverish, shaken by sobs. [*The Long Good-Bye*, chapter 38]

But it needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us this. Open the daily paper, for whom the maxim ‘no news is good news’ might be more accurately converted to ‘no

good news is news'. Here we are presented with a diet not only of the human depravity that Chandler so graphically sketches, but of a host of fascinating natural disasters without notice of which we seem unable to enjoy our breakfast cereal, such as the devastation caused by earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, not to mention the less spectacular but even more relentless parade of the ills that human flesh is heir to – accident, illness, deformity and death. And while it may be hyperbolic to claim that we always and everywhere suffer pain, distress and misery there are few if any of us who have lived beyond childhood who have not experienced some serious degree of suffering.

The problem of evil arises when you put together the fact of human suffering with the notion of God that is common to the orthodox versions of the great theistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—from the apparently irreconcilable tensions generated by the clash between the fact of human suffering and the theistic conception of God as a Person possessed of certain hyperbolic characteristics or attributes, the Creator of the Universe and all it contains, and the Providential Guardian of that Universe.

Is this the last word? Of course not. One reply to the problem of evil could be that human choice is always made *sub ratione boni*, that is, under some aspect of goodness. At the moment of choice we choose what we choose because at that moment it appears to us as the most desirable among other goods. But what is good to us at any particular moment is not necessarily either the best, or even good at all *per se*. God wants us to choose Him but He will not coerce our choice. If our decision for or against God is to be real, God cannot reveal Himself to us as He is, otherwise there would simply be no contest; no created good could measure up to God. But *God cannot make us to be free and, at the same time, consistently override the consequences of our free choices whenever they result in evil.* To do so would be to refuse to take us seriously, to treat us a father might when he 'loses' a game of chess to his young child by deliberately blundering away his pieces; neither can God bring it about that *in our present circumstances*, in freely choosing, we choose only the good. Is *that* the last word? No – the process of argumentation is essentially dialectical, essentially open-ended.

III

In the last twenty years or so, we have witnessed a revolution in the position and status of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Much of the change has been a result of conditions that are more or less universal in the West; some are peculiar to Ireland. One of the most obvious and devastating factors that has contributed to the changing status of the Catholic Church has been the revelation of the existence and activities of priests who have sexually abused children and teenagers. While not all priests are child-abusers nor is child-abuse a phenomenon exclusively confined to the clergy there is something particularly scandalous about the phenomenon of priests abusing young people. It is not only the abuse itself, which is obviously horrendous, but perhaps more so that such abuse should be perpetrated by those whose lives should be exemplary and who are accorded, or at least used to be accorded, so much respect and trust.

Almost as scandalous as the abuse itself has been the manner in which the Church has attempted to deal with the problem. In part this has resulted from the Church's acceptance of the secular doctrine of the 'medicalisation of morality', the 'it is not wrong but sick' school of thought. The Church should have known, none better, the difference between sin and sickness. Sickness is inadvertent and it excuses; sin is the result of a free choice and it must be repented. To conflate sickness and sin is to undermine human dignity by undermining human freedom. In the case of child abuse, the two concepts were conflated. Diabetes and pneumonia are illnesses; child abuse is a sin and a crime.

The root of the problem with clerical child abusers, as with all sinners, is that they did not make Christian choices, did not live their lives in fidelity to Christ's Church. They were not, nor are they, sick, unless we make the mistake of taking a metaphorical notion of sickness literally. The notion of sin, of transgressing God's laws, never a very popular notion needles to say, must return to the front of Catholic consciousness. This is not to point the finger at any particular person or group; we are all sinners – that much we do know for certain. But to deny the reality of sin is to make it all the more difficult to escape from its slavery; one might even speculate that this is the mysterious unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. Writing this on the first Sunday

in Advent, I am reminded of one of today's Scriptural readings:

O Lord, why dost thou make us err from thy ways
And harden our heart, so that we fear thee not?
In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
We have all become like one who is unclean
And all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
And all our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
Thou hast hid thy face from us
And hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities. [Is 63: 17; 64: 5-7]

The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic; these are its essential marks. Its personnel, on the other hand, whether clerical or lay, are guaranteed neither unity, catholicity or holiness. We have need of all three, but of holiness I judge is our need the greatest.

The news is not all bad. From my point of view the demise of the Catholic Church as a functional State Church is a matter of rejoicing. Unlike the situation in many European countries we have no official established church in this state. However, I think it would be true to say that that for a variety of historical and demographic reasons, the Catholic Church has functioned as a non-official established church. There are those who want to separate Church and State, largely for the purposes of, as they see it, freeing the State from Church interference. I would like to separate Church and State to free the Church from State interference. There is no reason, for example, why the Church should provide schools and schooling for the population at large. There is no reason why the Church should provide buildings and ceremonies for those who are not in any real sense its members. One may hope that an end is in sight to the baptising, communioning and confirming of the semi-pagan; the provision of Churches for the wedding ceremonies of the non-practicing. It is time and beyond for the Church militant to be comprised of those who can actively and sincerely subscribe to its beliefs and practices, not those who are too intellectually slovenly to have the courage of their lack of convictions to leave. If the current crisis spells the end of the quasi-established Church and its associated cultural Catholics then it will have had an unintended benefit.

If the current crisis in the Church brings about an end to clericalism then another good will have come out of evil. I do not mean by clericalism the claim that there is a distinct clerical state with certain activities, for example, the celebration of the Eucharist, the hearing of confessions, and so on, being proper to that state. Clericalism is rather the improper attribution to or the claiming of special rights and privileges by those in the clerical state. In a curious way, some at least of those pushing for the ordination of women seem to be suffering from a kind of clericalism in that their understanding of what it is to be ordained seems to be centred on status and power rather than on service, on a view that to be a non-clerical Christian is somehow to be a Christian of a lower order.

Apart from the child abuse scandals, there are some other factors that contribute to the perception of crisis in the contemporary Church. One very important factor is the lack of clarity about what it is that a priest is supposed to be, a lack of clarity that affects not only laypeople but also priests themselves. Unsure of just what it is they are supposed to be doing and without the respect that was accorded to them in more innocent times many priests find themselves in situations not unlike that of the three stooges of Craggy Island. It is hardly surprising that when what one has committed oneself to appears meaningless and is devalued, that there is a temptation to do nothing or to turn to other things.

There is often a lack of vertical or transcendent focus in the liturgy which is consequently reflected in belief and practice. Often the liturgy appears self-centred rather than God-centred. It seems to function as if it were some kind of social get together. As such it's pretty much a dismal failure. The Mass cannot compete in the entertainment value stakes with popular culture. It's bound to appear boring when compared to TV or film. But that is to confuse the ritual with the ephemeral, the mythic with the mundane. When understood as the re-enactment of a cosmic drama there is nothing more gripping than the Mass.

There is, and has been for some time, a failure of nerve in religious instruction, reflecting an impatience with the necessity for intellectual distinctions, for definitions, for dogma. A generation, perhaps even two, have now left their Catholic schools with almost no knowledge of just what it is that their religion teaches. And ecumenism, which if it means not hitting your religious opponents over the head with a club and

recognising that elements of truth can be found in more than one place, is a commendable attitude can sometimes lead to the belief that religious differences are insignificant, that they don't really matter at all. But this isn't ecumenism; it's indifferentism.

The solution to the Church's problems, *pace* its cultured despisers, is not to dispense with clerical celibacy, it isn't to admit women to the priesthood or to relax (as if it could) the moral law, particularly in relation to sexual morality. The reason these erstwhile solutions are not the answer is that this is not where the problem lies. Other Christian bodies have tried all these erstwhile solutions without any noticeable improvement in the behaviour of their members and leaders. The problems of the Church need to be seen in the larger national context where for some considerable time, as attested to by the proliferation of tribunals, many institutions have come under scrutiny: the beef industry, the blood transfusion service; the planning process; the Gardaí. Moreover, the international context needs to frame the whole. Francis Fukuyama, commenting on the emergence of the information society, notes that "Hierarchies of all sorts, whether political or corporate, come under pressure and begin to crumble" and "Trust in many traditional types of authority, like politicians, police, and the military, has declined in most Western developed countries"¹ What he calls 'The Great Disruption' (his term for post-1960s seriously deteriorating social conditions) has peaked in many other countries, it has still to reach its zenith in Ireland. But man cannot long tolerate the absence of order and meaning² the need for which, if not as exigent as the need for food and drink, is every bit as important to human flourishing in the long run.

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption* (London: Profile Books, 1999), p. 4; p. 49.

² See Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (Washington Square Press).