

IS INTELLIGENT FAITH A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

Wednesday September 22, 7.30 -9.30 Durie Room, St Marks

1. Intro me, today's thoughts, ?tomorrow; part of a conversation.

Faith = confidence or trust; belief not based on proof; Now we can't live without some faith, whether in ourselves, our buildings, our companions etc. So:

We are asking here if religious belief is intelligent?

can I, intelligently, believe in the existence of a god?

if so, what sort of god do I believe in?

what impact does having been a biochemist have on this;

and what about being an activist for church reform.

2. Faith in community. I can cut through much of this by saying that I remain a card-carrying member of the catholic church. This doesn't mean that I'm happy with all and every pronouncement from the Vatican: indeed I reject a number totally; and have grave doubts about others.

Nor does this mean that I find the existence of God - or a God - automatic or easy. It's faith; I have no proof; but through over 60 years of living with christianity and in christian community, it's the only answer to life's purpose that makes sense to me.

What this means is that my faith is utterly dependant on the faith of others; I believe we go to God in community. And to remain a person of faith, I hang on to the coat-tails of my believing friends. As the community into which I was born is a christian one, my heritage is judeo-christian, my understanding of God comes from and through this community. If I'd grown up in another faith community, I've no doubt but that I would be happy in that faith, be in Jewish, or Hindu, Buddhist.

3. Why christian. I have a hard or easy time - depending on my state of mind etc - holding to this community, but I find the overall wisdom of our tradition satisfying intellectually and challenging; I accept what I hold to be the principle tenets of my Christian faith: that God is in someway equal persons in loving relationship (and not a lonely monad); who desires closeness, intimacy, relationships; who chooses to be present in the finality and frailty of human beings and enters into their sufferings and life experiences. God's act of incarnation in Jesus the Christ is a critical part of this whole picture: it illuminates it; it challenges, grounds and saves me — from myself. Even while I struggle with it.

Formal Religion is our fallible, limited, communal response to this God. Perhaps our best response is communal praise. Because it's a communal response, it's a community of disputing voices, of discussion, dissent, argument, of growth and change, of the new and the old. It can't be a group of like-minded people. I may take strength from my own internal sense of God-within, but I can't rely on it. I need to check out my thoughts, responses against those of the community. To depend on me alone seems to be the final stage of Enlightenment thinking; of 'I think therefore I am', the self-sufficient, autonomous individual able to reach god alone, an idea Charles Taylor traces back to Augustine.

Our cardinal said recently that he thought that discussing the possibility of women's ordination was tantamount to discussing whether there are three or four people in the Trinity. I think that god would find that funny. The Trinity after all is a metaphor, and not a family portrait. My concern with the present magisterium in Rome is that it seems anti-intellectual; it seems frightened of critical analysis, in spite of recent faith and reason paper from the pope. Clings to a belief in absolute knowledge, which it alone has. Against all current working theories of interpretation of text, which help me to beware of the grand theory, including the grand story of 'salvation history' - a boy's story if ever I heard one.

4. religion and science. Perhaps it is because I like to see ideas change that I have found the world of biochemistry so fascinating. And I've never found it a faith problem, probably because I think that science and religion live in separate - even if contiguous - realms.

Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts; it considers what the universe is made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory).

Religion operates in the equally important but utterly different realm of human purposes, ultimate meanings, and moral values, which science may illuminate but can never resolve. As do Art, Music, Poetry, Theology. Religion has to take into account who and what we are, our humanness; this world in which we live. The science/religion tensions derive from the time when the Christian religion claimed all the territory. And it has only let go slowly and, it would often seem, grudgingly.

None of this means that every scientific idea put forward, every discovery claimed is 'correct'. Science is the work of a community of scholars; a struggle to understand; and for much of the time the community of working scientists was very limited; the classic white,

western males; so many interpretations of data were way off; but they always will be; we are telling stories, using partial data, interpreting to the limit. But the larger the community taking part, the closer to reality the scientific story probably gets. But it remains science story.

I'm suspicious of much of the present work in science and religion which seems to be trying to equate the two: I don't believe that if we understand the world, then we necessarily understand god. Is this current trend a response to a cosmic sense of abandonment, an attempt to produce order, security and finally control?

Certainly, biochemistry opens a world of incredible beauty, of incredible complexity; a world which, by analogy, suggests that God is equally beautiful and complex. But, if I see worldly beauty and say that that illuminates God, then the violence of a tsunami, the apparent callousness of some forms of life towards other forms, must also illuminate violent, uncaring and callous attributes of God.

Now I take it, because it's the only theory that fits the facts, and it fits so very many facts from so many different biological methods - macro and micro - that evolution is a fact. In other words, the living world has evolved, and we are accidental products of that evolution. Biologically, we do not have to be, and life went on for a long time without us. We may be the brainiest of all species, but we're only a tiny recent twig on a single branch of the very rich bush. This bush shows no preferred direction of growth. Whole species have died out. New ones arrive. Bacteria build the main trunk and have always dominated the history of life by criteria of diversity, flexibility, range of habitats, modes of life, and sheer weight of numbers. We are absolutely unnecessary. And isn't that wonderful.

I'm not sure that the question of whether we are/were part of God's plan makes any sense. If God is eternally present, then God has no past and no future. So does it make sense to ask if God makes plans? I think that God delights in what the world creates; and God upholds this world; god in that sense continues to create. But as a tiny species on a tiny planet in a tiny part of the universe, we are inevitably faced with questions of meaning. And if the universe is part of creation, - to use a biblical metaphor, how much do we learn about the potter by examining the pot?

5. conclusion. So I end up with questions to which I have no answers. Faith, it has been said before I think by Newman, is basically a blind leap in the dark, a leap I hope into the arms of God. This seems reasonable, that is, intelligent, but it could all be wrong.