

W. H. Auden called himself an Existential Christian and so tentatively do I. This is primarily because it is what I find myself to be. I did not choose to believe in a particular dogma, I certainly do not profess to have found the truth above all other truths, but when I look inside myself I find myself already engaged in a relationship with someone I believe to be the holy spirit I associate with Christ..

This is probably because I was brought up by Christian parents and that I went to Catholic primary schools in which we spoke about God, looked at biblical stories, sung hymns and said prayers every day. It may also be because other people have prayed for me. It maybe because God is always there in relationship with us but we don't always see it. It may be because God called me personally. All I know is that this is what I find.

My choice has been to nurture this relationship, to believe in it, to attend Mass on Sundays, to seek quiet time to pray. I have found it to be a fruitful relationship. When I pray I feel my prayers are heard. I find myself loved, affirmed, guided and occasionally admonished. I can often distinguish between prayers in which I speak only to myself and prayers, which seem to go beyond myself. I am surprised by what I hear; the people, for example, I am encouraged to contact. I was taught to pray by a master of prayer, a wise nun, who taught me to be still and to listen and most significantly to believe what I heard during my prayers. She also taught me to discern and to begin to recognize the forces of negativity that can come into a disciplined spiritual life. I am forever indebted to her and to the other sisters I now know through her.

When I look at the world I am aware of a lot of suffering. I am aware of a great need amongst people. Everywhere around me I see people needing to be loved. This may be manifest in a need for food or medicine or companionship. My awareness of this need corresponds with the vision of Christ that I have inherited through my upbringing, which is that the world needs love. Love breeds love.

Alongside an overly romantic compulsion towards sexual love in our popular culture, there is also a distaste for the deeper need for love. This distaste is extremely negative. It does not respect the soul or heart of people. It condemns people for needing. It fuels a drive towards self-sufficiency, achievement and competition. It consequently undermines the fragility of human life and human communities. Yet human fragility is the door to the soul, the door to all that is beautiful, sensitive and fully human. In this climate, when human fragility or vulnerability is exposed, it is likely to be despised, in the needy, the sick, the elderly and the disabled.

People feel blamed for having problems as though it were a kind of failure. There is an assumption that if you eat the right food and take the right exercise you will not get sick or old. This is a delusion which makes us despise ourselves for being weak. It is a delusion of power, which destroys love of self, love in relationships and in the community. It forgets our essential humanity; the fact that we need each other and that we will all age and die. It pretends we are in control of our destinies when we blatantly are not. It demands perfection; perfection of the body, the pretense of eternal youth. It demands achievement status and money. However the soul requires love, and to receive love requires vulnerability. We are working against ourselves. We do not acknowledge our needs or that we are susceptible to powers beyond ourselves.

Ours is a culture of ambition, in awe of the powerful, the celebrity and the glamorous. The pressure on people which these values determine and the sense of inadequacy and failure it produces as a consequence is deeply destructive. It is also extremely divisive, it promotes competition, envy and slander. This is most obvious in the tabloid media which is shameless in its desire to trash people publicly.

During a period working in an orphanage in Southern India I was drawn to work amongst the children with learning difficulties. I continued to work with adults with learning difficulties when I arrived home. This work profoundly challenges these negative trends in our current culture. In order to truly relate to people with learning difficulties there is a process of being made vulnerable; of having social props and social vanities stripped away. Although this process can be difficult it is also liberating because one is brought back to the core of what it is to be human; the essential need for love. Jean Vanier has written inspirationally about this process and his own personal experiences when he was called to give up his life as an academic in a university and live alongside people with learning difficulties. As the gospels indicate, there is light when you move alongside the most vulnerable of society.

Established religion is unpopular in our culture at the moment. People are wary of dogma, wary of fanaticism, wary of Puritanism. History shows the terrible consequences of warring religious factions, each ready to convert others at any cost, each convinced of their own truths. Jesus stands up in the gospels most forcefully against the religious authorities of his own time. His anger is most acute against those who burden others in the name of religion. His warnings are stringent against the love of power. He responds sharply to those who criticize him for picking corn on the Sabbath and for healing the sick on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was made for men; not man for the Sabbath (Mark ch2 vs27)

For centuries Christians have read this to be a criticism of Jewish law, whilst fragments of the Christian church have fallen prey to the same dogmatism and fanaticism, which seems to be the downfall of the powerful. Christian persecution of Jews culminating in the holocaust of the Second World War has been the most loathsome and terrible legacy of the church and one for which we need to continually make reparation.

Just as I am a Catholic, so Jesus was Jewish. Everything about Jesus makes much more sense in the context of the Jewish tradition. He was born to Jewish parents. He kept the Sabbath and holy days and attended the synagogue. He was steeped in the traditions of Judaism.

The problem Jesus had was not with Judaism or with Jewish people but with figures in authority who maintained their own positions through the oppression and condemnation of the people in their care. This is a common problem in large powerful institutions including the church.

I have spent some time in Israel amongst Jewish people and have been moved by the spiritual richness and wisdom of the traditions that are in one way so familiar. The Christian church has suffered greatly by being severed from its Jewish roots. The Jewish relationship to scripture is particularly poignant for our time when we are again so much under the shadow of fanatics. In the yeshivas, where young men are sent to study the Torah, each line, each word of scripture is discussed and argued over. There are commentaries on commentaries. Many aspects of

scripture and spiritual language are notoriously contradictory, paradoxical and ambiguous. The understanding required is more holistic, more complex and able to accommodate ambiguous and contradictory tenements. For example the relationship between the world of flesh and spirit is a relationship of huge tension and uneasy alliance, but a vital tension particularly in a religion of God made incarnate as human flesh. This is not to say scripture is un true, but true in a different way. In our scientific age we tend to associate truth with scientific fact, which is in itself dubious and another kind of dogma.

There may be historical fact contained in the biblical stories, which can be backed up with archeological and historical evidence from other sources. However it is the engagement with the sacred text which matters. Taking the scriptures literally leads to an absurd and dangerous dogmatism. The Bible is a complex mixture of social history, myth and poetry unarguably inspired by God but presented through the channels of people in various social and historical contexts.

When religion begins to be less authoritarian, some religious people are able to recognize qualities in religions different from their own. They find common ground. They find room for dialogue. Many people have shed the idea of a single absolute truth embodied in a particular dogma. There is beginning to be some recognition of authentic spiritual experience expressed in a variety of ways. This is cause for hope.

As I said in the introductory paragraph, I find myself in a relationship with God. I did not implement this, but I have responded to what I have found, a rich dialogue with someone beyond my knowledge, that is familiar to me as the holy spirit of Christ. Although it is a far from easy relationship, it is one that feeds my deepest yearnings. It is not simply a narcissic relationship in which my egotistical self is caressed by a supernatural parent figure. After all the central burning symbol of Christian faith is the cross and the tenement of *being lead where you would rather not go*. Pride is the deadliest of sins and the tension between the self and the divine the most necessary and the most difficult.

I am deeply moved by the Mass, particularly by receiving communion. Just as I feed my body, going to Mass and making quiet time for prayer, is food for my spirit. I am nourished and sustained. I find the holy spirit of Christ most profoundly in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

However, I have problems with some aspects of the dogma of the church. I am suspicious of the church on matters of sexuality. I cannot accept the teaching on contraception, particularly when families are struggling to survive. My decision is not to leave the church because as I have said the mass is meaningful to me. I find the presence of Christ within the church; however I cannot accept every detail of the churches teaching. I would like to see the church modernize. I believe it is unbalanced and needs greater input from women, but I do not want to break my connection with the church; with the traditions and rituals of Catholicism. It gives me a place in which to be and grow in a meaningful way.

I have chosen with my husband, who is not attached to any formal religion, to bring up our children as Catholics. They go to Catholic school, they attend Mass regularly and pray. They are taught about their own religion and other religions in a sensitive and respectful way. They are taught evolutionary theory and modern science. Both my husband and myself are philosophy graduates and we encourage them to think about the world as independently as

possible and to question the prevailing assumptions of the consumerist culture. We want them to find meaning and lead fruitful happy lives. I hope they find a relationship with God in which ever form that takes and hope that in their own small but meaningful ways they make a difference to the world. We have been criticized for our decision to educate the children as Catholics. Friends and relatives have said it is a form of brain washing and that they should be free to make up their own minds.

Nevertheless I argue that this is the place in which I find myself. It is the natural heritage of my children and thankfully my husband is supportive of this. If it were a place I found unbearable or unfruitful or destructive, a place in which I could not be or could not grow, I would seek to change it and not want to hand it down to my children. The traditions of the church offer a way to live an inspired life, a fruitful life and certainly a much richer life than is on offer in our secular, money obsessed, celebrity obsessed, culture of the moment. I do not believe truth exists objectively in a realm outside of ourselves. I believe truth is much more to do with authentic relationships; to do with *being in the world* in a meaningful way and here lies the existentialism I associate with my faith, inspired by others like Auden and most famously Kierkegaard. I believe in God not because of any metaphysical theory on the creation of the universe but because I find myself engaging with a presence greater than myself. Christ is the face of God for me because He is there, He is what I find in my spirit and in the world. It is a presence which leads me beyond my ego, my vanity, my greed and my desires and a presence I can trust. It is a presence which has shown itself to be fruitful. A presence which occurs in a spiritual realm and the awareness of it is something which I hope to pass onto my children. A presence which is alive within the sacramental traditions of the church.

Essentially God is great. He is bigger than any understanding I have of Him. I am a listener and a learner. When I find myself at odds with the church - in relation to the role of women within the church for example - I do not feel compelled, like some of my contemporaries, to leave the church. I speak about my concerns. I pray. I hope for change in the church, but essentially my heart stays with the church. It is where my spirit finds home; not exclusively, but mainly.

The church has a very mixed history. As I mentioned I am deeply ashamed of its role in the persecution of the Jews. I am troubled by the crusades and the violence and injustice of the past. However I am also moved by the role of the church at the root of welfare and campaigns for social justice. I am moved by the writing of the church's monastic and mystical traditions. I am inspired by the heritage of religious art, the beautiful music, paintings, literature and architecture of the Christian tradition.

It was a wonderful experience to witness the church within in a different cultural context. For me this was mainly in India and in Israel. It was good to walk into a Catholic church and pray in front of the reserved sacrament, sensing the same presence in the same silence.

It was also interesting to see the differences and to come to the important realization that a lot of what we ascribe to the church in England is cultural as opposed to purely religious. For example, the repression of the body is much more striking in Europe and although unfortunately the legacy of Puritanism has been exported elsewhere, it does not seem endemic to the same degree as it is at home.

The core of Christ's teaching and his actions is that we should love God and love one another and that we can be given the grace to do so. This makes more sense to me than anything else. It connects with my experience in the world, which is that the world needs love. Love breeds love. As love has its own momentum, so does hatred. It seems to me to be vital that we choose.

As one of the commentators on Auden said of his Christianity in *Grappling with God*;

Auden himself believed he had rejected the Christian faith as a young man, but gradually found himself drawn back to it, partly in reaction to the brutal political realities emerging in the late 1930's, especially the rise of Nazism and the closing of the churches in civil war Spain, both of which shocked and dismayed him.

There is a terrible hunger for love in the world. In the shadow of brutal terrorism, genocide, starvation and particularly in our culture a terrible neglect of the lonely, the old and the sick I turn to the promises of Christ. I believe Jesus, I believe there would be heaven on earth if we loved one another.

Unfortunately as I inferred previously, religion is tainted by the terrible actions of fanatics who seem to pour a lot more hatred into the world than love. This seems to have more to do with a quest for power than a quest towards love. Wisdom seems to be born of a profound awareness of the fragility of one's own nature, which leaves no room for condemnation of others. One of the most memorable Christian images for me, is Jesus drawing in the sand, whilst the people around him condemn a woman caught committing adultery.

He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone. (John ch8 vs8)

However despite the problems with the established churches, the blind antagonism towards religion in secular culture makes me deeply uneasy. Auden also lamented *what he called the prudery of cultured people who treat religious belief as the last remaining shameful thing and find theological terms far more shocking than any of the four-letter words. (Grappling with God Wilfred M. McClay)*

Auden was well acquainted with the darkness of the human heart both within himself and within the world around him. However he did not despair or become cynical but reaches for something good and beautiful beyond the darkness; something beyond himself. This is what I find moving. The yearning of the human heart for God makes sense to me. As in any broken relationship, the way of healing is to rebuild trust but perhaps with fewer illusions, particularly illusions about oneself. After the events of the last century we know what human beings are capable of and we should never be allowed to forget it. However to lose hope is to lose the spirit, the vast silent place within us and beyond us where there is the possibility of forgiveness and the potential for a better world.

*“O look look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.*

*O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;*

*You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.”*

(from as I walked out one Evening, Collected Poetry, WH Auden)

Lucy Calcott