

What Should I Believe?

Suddenly, in the twenty-first century, religion has become a political power. It affects us all, whether we're religious or not. We want to make up our own minds about what we believe, but it's difficult to do this. Everyone has to face the dilemma that we all die but no one knows for certain what death actually is. All religions promise to overcome death, but there's no set of religious or philosophical beliefs that ensures that our life is always happy and secure. Moreover, for many of us, what we were taught about a religion severely diminished our self-confidence and left us with a constant debilitating feeling of guilt and shame.

Through all this turmoil comes the calm, clear voice of eminent psychologist Dorothy Rowe. She separates the political from the personal, the power-seeking from the compassionate. She shows how, if we use our beliefs as a defence against our feelings of worthlessness, we feel compelled to force our beliefs on to other people by coercion or aggression. However, it is possible to create a set of beliefs, expressed in the religious or philosophical metaphors most meaningful to us, that allows us to live at peace with ourselves and other people, and to face life with courage and optimism.

Dorothy Rowe is a psychologist and author of thirteen books, including the worldwide bestseller *Depression: The Way Out of Your Prison*. She is Australian and divides her time between London and Sydney.

What Should I Believe?

Why Our Beliefs about the Nature of
Death and the Purpose of Life
Dominate Our Lives

Dorothy Rowe

Previous editions published by Fontana (1989) and Harper Collins (1991) as
The Construction of Life and Death (also known as *The Courage to Live*)

First published in Great Britain by John Wiley & Sons 1982

This edition first published 2009 by Routledge
27 Church Road, Hove, East Sussex, BN3 2FA

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge

270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

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Typeset in New Century Schoolbook by RefineCatch Limited,
Bungay, Suffolk, UK

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall
Cover design by Lisa Dynan

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This publication has been produced with paper
manufactured to strict environmental standards
and with pulp derived from sustainable forests.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Rowe, Dorothy.

[Construction of life and death]

What should I believe? : why our beliefs about the nature
of death and the purpose of life dominate our lives / Dorothy
Rowe.

p. cm.

Originally published: . Construction of life and death.

Chichester [Eng.]; New York : John Wiley, c1982.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Personal construct theory. 2. Psychology, Religious. 3.
Death—Psychological aspects. 4. Life. I. Title.

BF698.9.P47R69 2009

150.1-dc22

2008019672

ISBN: 978-0-415-46679-0

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PREFACE

We live in a crazy world. Over the past few years, thousands of people have been killed, or injured, or driven from their homes by other people who believe that they are entitled to kill those who do not share their religious beliefs. At the same time, a president of the most powerful country in the world, while following policies which have fostered these tragedies, believed that the end of the world would soon be upon us, whereupon he and those who share his beliefs would be ‘raptured’ into heaven, leaving behind the chaos he helped to create. Millions like him believe that the turmoil in the Middle East and the perilous changes in the world’s climate are no more than evidence of the working out of God’s plan, and that nothing should be done that would impede His plan.

In the last two years a number of militant atheists have ridden to the rescue – or so they thought. They certainly stirred up controversy. Religion is being talked and argued about in a way I have not seen before in my lifetime (b. 1930). In his book *The God Delusion* and in his television programmes which followed, Richard Dawkins asked in great amazement, ‘How can people be so stupid as to believe this nonsense?’ Christopher Hitchens was hurt and angry. ‘How’, he asked in his book *God Is Not Great*, ‘can people have beliefs which lead them to be unforgivably cruel?’ John Humphrys does not see himself as a militant atheist but as a curious, persistent questioner; as he ended his book *In God We Doubt*, where he interviewed three religious leaders, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Professor Tariq Ramadan and Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, he could

only ask himself, 'How can these intelligent, educated men believe such things?'

These three questions may have been rhetorical and not requiring answer, but asked in the hope that the misguided and the wicked would mend their ways. Parents often ask rhetorical questions of their offspring, questions like, 'How can you bear to live in such a mess?', and expect that within the hour their teenage child will transform his room into a model of neatness. The parents' hopes are always dashed, just as the hopes of Dawkins, Hitchens and Humphrys show no sign of being fulfilled.

However, I have decided to treat these questions as genuine questions, requiring an answer that I shall supply. My answer is based on an understanding of how we create meaning, and how out of these meanings comes our sense of being a person, what we call 'I', 'me', 'myself'. Our sense of being a person is no more than a fragile structure of ideas, but it is our most important possession. So important is it to us that we cannot bear the thought that it will vanish with our death. Our greatest fear is that our sense of being a person will be wiped out if we are humiliated, or if we discover that there is a serious discrepancy between what we thought our life was and what it actually is, or if we are treated as an object of no importance. In these situations, the ideas that constitute our sense of being a person fall apart, but we experience this as ourselves falling apart, shattering, disappearing. Our terror threatens to overwhelm us, and so we do whatever we can to defend ourselves against this fear.

The theme of Primo Levi's account of his time in Auschwitz, *If This Be a Man*, is the battle to survive not just physically but as a person. To be a person we have to assert our right to disobey those who claim to have power over us. Levi wrote about those people who tried to survive in the Lager by being totally obedient. For some unknown reason, they were called 'muselmans'. He said,

To sink is the easiest of matters: it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of work and the camp. Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive for more

than three months in this way. All the muselmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea . . . Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen.

If the drowned have no story, and single and broad is the path to perdition, the paths to salvation are many, difficult and improbable.¹

Perdition is to lose our sense of being a person; salvation is to be the person we know ourselves to be, and not the person other people tell us that we are, or that we should be. It can take a great deal of courage to be the person you know yourself to be, and so, when courage fails, we resort to believing all kinds of improbable things.

We all believe improbable things. We all have fantasies that we treat as truths. And we all have reasons for doing so which are very important to us. Our reasons are a matter of life and death to us.

Each of us has a fantasy about the nature of death. We know that we are going to die, but all we can ever know for certain about death itself is that a living person grows strangely still. So we create a fantasy about what death is. Our choice of fantasy is limited to two ideas. Either death is the end of our sense of being a person or it is the doorway to another life. As soon as we decide which kind of fantasy we will choose, we determine the purpose of our life. If we

decide that death is the end of our sense of being a person, we then have the purpose of making our life satisfactory. There is a multitude of ways we can define 'satisfactory', but, unless we can feel that our life is developing in a way we can feel is satisfactory, we cannot face our death with any equanimity. If we decide that death is a doorway to another life, we then have to decide whether this next life will be better than the previous one. If we decide that the next life will be better than this one, we then face the question of whether everybody goes on to a better life or whether only those who reach a satisfactory level of goodness can proceed to this better life. Our strong sense of justice usually impels us to choose the latter. Now we have to decide what the standards are that determine whether we go on to a better life. Once we decide what these standards are, we then have to live this, our present life, in terms of the next. We can conceive of a better life and the means of getting there in an infinite number of ways, but, whatever we choose, the purpose of our life is to gain entry to a better life after our death.

What we see as the purpose of our life becomes a project stretching forward into the future. Death cuts across that project. We find that we have to accept that our body dies, but we cannot accept the idea that our sense of being a person will vanish. If we can create a fantasy that satisfies us that our sense of being a person will continue on, then that fantasy becomes a dearly held belief. Those people who see death as the end of their sense of being a person try to create a fantasy that they will continue on through their children (this is one of the reasons why having children is so popular), or through their work, or simply in the memories of those who knew them. To die and be forgotten is never to have existed. Hence, we have graveyards, memorials, autobiographies, and family photograph albums. Religion is popular because all religions promise to overcome death. Death has no sting because our soul or spirit or self continues on in heaven, or paradise, or in another life on earth.

Our beliefs about the nature of death, the purpose of life, and the means by which the most important part of us will continue on become our religious or philosophical beliefs. We might want to regard our beliefs as absolute truths, but,

alas, they cannot be. As neuroscientists now tell us, our brains do not allow us to see what exists around us. Instead, our brains construct a map of this territory, but they do not allow us to see the actual territory. Even when we have one of those extraordinary experiences which seem to show us something above and beyond the world in which we live, what is revealed to us is our idiosyncratic interpretation of that experience. Some people interpret their experience as being a revelation from God; others interpret their experience as being at one with everything that exists. Either interpretation can be marvellously self-affirming. Our individual interpretations are sometimes referred to as being relative truths. Such relative truths can be reliable, that is, the individual once in possession of them never changes them, but they cannot be valid, that is, saying something accurate about the world, unless we go to the trouble of testing our relative truths against what actually is going on. For instance, you might believe that the restaurant which is to open nearby will be the best restaurant ever, but this belief cannot have any validity until you and your friends go to the restaurant and then compare your observations about the food and service. Until you do this, your belief in the worth of the restaurant is just a fantasy.

What we all need to do is to check our maps of the territory with other people's maps, and to check them carefully against our own past experiences. However, doing this is hard work, and often we can be dismayed to find that our ideas are wrong. It is always very tempting to do nothing, and treat our precious fantasies as being absolute truths. We can even be tempted to claim that faith in our fantasies is more important than evidence that might confirm that they are true.

All of these beliefs about life and death are guesses or fantasies, but, if we have constructed these beliefs with a view to which beliefs would benefit us or which beliefs we can live with most comfortably, we can be very reluctant to change them, for to do so would mean changing how we live our life. The philosopher Arthur C. Danto told the story of what happened to one of the first Christian missionaries to China.

Father Matteo Ricci, a correspondent of Galileo and a mathematician in his own right, offered to teach the Chinese ministers what he knew of science. They would be able to predict eclipses, would be able to do wonderful things. In the end, the ministers decided that it would be better not to know these things. For theirs was a form of life that had worked well enough for a very long time, and surely the most that can be asked of a form of life is that it can be lived, that it bestows a degree of rationality upon existence, and that it holds chaos at bay. It is difficult for us to sympathise with these mandarins, since we regard knowledge as liberating. We regard them in somewhat the same light as we view those astronomers at Padua who failed to look into Galileo's telescope. Yet I believe we might appreciate this refusal to acknowledge facts in pragmatic terms. A system that induces rationality is through that fact alone of considerable value. One does not, in science any more than in life, lightly surrender a system of beliefs that facilitates experience, that renders it tractable and smooth.²

Religious beliefs render life tractable and smooth only for those who benefit from holding those beliefs. The two great powers, the Church and the State, have always tried to coerce their subjects into holding beliefs which benefit the people in power in the Church and the State. For many of their subjects, their beliefs are onerous indeed. Their beliefs can lead them to denigrate themselves, or to denigrate others. Their beliefs can lead them into a constant state of guilt and martyrdom. When you have become an expert in feeling guilty, you have acquired the necessary talent for becoming depressed.

I should be grateful because the Church keeps me in business, but I am not because I have seen at first hand the suffering of those who believe that they are, in essence, bad and unacceptable, who can never rest from striving to be good, and who believe that, whatever they do, they can never be good enough. They can never take life easy and just be themselves.

To understand why we hold certain beliefs and fear to

change them we need to understand how we operate as human beings. In this book I explain how our sense of being a person arises out of the way our brains create our minds, how our religious and philosophical beliefs are central to our sense of being a person, how we create our beliefs by interpreting the beliefs of others in our own individual ways (there are as many religious and philosophical beliefs as there are people to hold them), how our ideas of being good become entwined with our ideas about life and death, and how our beliefs develop from our earliest childhood. I also explain why some believers get very offended, and worse, if they think their beliefs are being criticised. Whatever the beliefs we choose to hold, holding a religious belief does not of itself make us superior to those who do not share our belief, nor does it automatically make us virtuous, nor does it give us the right to force our beliefs on others and, if they resist, to rob them of their sense of being a person or to kill them.

Beliefs are ideas. Ideas are things that we create, and, as we create them, we can change them. There is no set of religious or philosophical beliefs which ensures that we are always secure and happy. Like everything in life, whatever the belief, it has advantages and disadvantages. However, it is possible to create a set of beliefs expressed in our own individual way, using the metaphors which are rich in meaning for us, with which we can live comfortably with ourselves and with others, and from which we can draw strength and optimism.

Whatever language we speak, each of us speaks in our own individual idiolect, using metaphors and similes drawn from our past experience. In the discussions about religion and philosophy we often do not realise that another person, using an idiolect very different from our own, is talking about something which we actually share. Fundamentalists of whatever religion are easy to understand because they would have us believe that they know what is right and what is wrong. In contrast, those people who focus on what it is to exist as a human being can be talking about much the same things but not realise this because of the differences in their idiolects. However, sometimes we do understand.

When John Crace interviewed Geza Vermes, whom many regard as the greatest Jesus scholar of his generation, he asked Vermes what he believed. Vermes, a former priest who had been born into a Jewish family who converted to Catholicism, took him to his garden that backs onto 700 acres of woodland. Here he said, 'You know, I'm not a great one for synagogues and other places of worship. When I want to listen to that little voice, I go out there for a walk.'³

Most of us know what he meant.

My thanks to all those people who talked to me about their beliefs.

RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Whatever our religious beliefs and whether we want it or not, in the twenty-first century religion has come to dominate our lives. Religions in a wide variety of forms have always existed, and at times in past centuries what you believed was a matter of life and death. This still applies in some parts of the world. However, in the developed world we prefer to see religion as a kind of unguent that gives comfort in times of loss and confirms our worth when danger threatens. Has not God always been on our side? Apart from this, religion did not play a very significant role in the latter part of the twentieth century when the attention was focused on the Cold War and the likelihood of the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) that would follow if the USSR and the USA used their nuclear arsenal against one another. When the USSR fell apart and the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the effects on the world economy brought into being a word new to most of us then but now so common – globalisation. We were assured that such a change in the world economy would bring inestimable benefits. To many people it seemed that the Millennium would usher in a time which would be the best in human history. But when Muslim extremists flew two planes packed with unwilling passengers into the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 everything changed.

In the days following September 11th television news frequently showed interviews with ordinary Americans who expressed their bewilderment with the question, ‘Why do these people hate us?’ Their ignorance of their country’s relationships with Islamic countries was matched only by that of various American government officials who revealed

a basic ignorance of the geography of the Middle East and Afghanistan, while the Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA, had little reliable intelligence about this area and contained no Arabic speakers who might be able to operate as intelligence officers in the Muslim world. Complete ignorance of Islam did not stop commentators in the Christian world holding forth on whether or not the Qur'an regarded suicide bombers with great favour. Moderating voices pointed out that Mohammed Atta, who led the attack on the Twin Towers, and his colleagues represented an extreme form of Islam which could be called fundamentalist, and that there were many Muslims who had nothing but goodwill towards those not of their faith.

Fundamentalism is not a throwback to medieval times but is essentially a modern phenomenon. It is not confined to Islam. Like Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism are divided into a more liberal mainstream and the fundamentalists. In Christianity, evangelicals include both liberal and fundamentalist churches. As Giles Fraser, the vicar of Putney, has pointed out, 'These [liberal evangelicals] are passionately concerned with issues of poverty and social justice, they run soup kitchens, give generous proportions of income to good causes, have taskforces to reduce their carbon footprint, go on demonstrations against the war, and speak out against the use of torture.'¹ However, at present the Church of England is tearing itself apart in the battle between the liberal Anglicans, whose beliefs differ but little from those of humanists, and the fundamentalist evangelicals. When the American Episcopalian (Anglican) church appointed Gene Robinson, who was in a gay relationship, as bishop of New Hampshire, these evangelicals in the world-wide Church were outraged. African bishops threatened to boycott the next Lambeth conference. In Australia the Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, supported the Global Anglican Future Conference of evangelical bishops to be held in Jerusalem just before the ten-yearly meeting of all the world's bishops in London. He said, 'Some American Anglicans are as committed to their new sexual ethics as to the Gospel itself, and they intend to act as missionaries for this faith, wishing to persuade the rest of us. The problems

posed by the American church are not going to remain in America.² As some people said in the 1970s when gays were venturing out of the closet, 'They're making homosexuality compulsory now.'

The sociologist Peter Herriot has shown in his study *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity*³ that evangelical Anglicans fit in all respects the chief characteristics of fundamentalism. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is regarded by evangelical members of his church as failing to uphold the truth of the Scriptures. Rowan Williams tries to maintain the unity of his church, but he persists in expressing views which are contrary to the beliefs of the evangelicals. They believe that the Bible is the infallible word of God. In a discussion with Simon Mayo on BBC Radio Five, Rowan Williams pointed out that there was scant evidence for the Magi, and none at all that there were three of them, or that they were kings. All the evidence that existed was in Matthew's Gospel. The archbishop said, 'Matthew's Gospel doesn't tell us that there were three of them, doesn't tell us they were kings, doesn't tell us where they came from. It says they are astrologers, wise men, priests from somewhere outside the Roman Empire, that's all we're really told.' Anything else was legend. 'It works quite well as legend', the archbishop said.⁴ Rowan Williams takes a similarly relaxed view of same sex relationships and gay clergy, much to the dismay of the evangelical members who regard homosexuality as the greatest of sins.

In Israel, fundamentalist Jews hold fast to their literal interpretation of the Bible, that God promised the land to the descendants of Abraham, and thus gave Jews a legal title to Palestine. On this basis, land long owned by Palestinians has been confiscated and Jewish settlements built.

Hindu fundamentalism, much like Buddhist fundamentalism, sounds like an oxymoron, but Hindu fundamentalists and their political party, the BJP, want to turn India into a purely Hindu state. In the course of achieving this aim, the fundamentalists make frequent attacks on Christians and Muslims. Even Buddhist fundamentalists have existed. In 1938 leading members of the Nichiren sect in Japan founded a group devoted to 'Imperial-Way Buddhism' and supported

the Emperor Hirohito's army. Christopher Hitchens wrote, 'By the end of the dreadful conflict that Japan had started, it was Buddhist and Shinto priests who were recruiting and training the suicide bombers, or *Kamikazi*.⁵

'Fundamentalists', wrote Peter Herriot,

represent themselves as returning to the pure premodern origins of their faith, as prescribed by their sacred books and as practised by their legendary founders and heroes. In fact, they use modern means to battle against modernity, and arguably are frequently operating at a postmodern level of sophistication in their use of the media . . . Militant Muslims use other people's media to promote their cause. News media around the world carry accounts and pictures of violent crimes which are committed in order to send a message of fear. The deeds of Osama bin Laden, of suicide bombers in Israel and of kidnappers in Iraq tell the world that it is not safe from a vengeful God and his faithful servants. The other major free global organ, the internet, contains much Islamic recruitment material. For example, a dedicated youth site offers an apologia for the radical cleric Sayyid Qutb, together with the text of his most famous book.⁶

In calling the story of the Three Wise Men a legend, Rowan Williams was not denigrating legend. He was well aware that everyone needs stories and legends, what scholars call *mythos* and I call fantasy, just as much as we need *logos*, rational, sensible, scientific thought. Mythos is essentially those myths and legends which are handed down from one generation to the next and revised and elaborated by succeeding generations according to their own experiences. The stories our ancestors told around the fire in their cave are now being retold in fiction, drama and film, in comics and in computer games. The legends of great heroes who survive death by having extraordinary skills or good contacts in the supernatural world are now being re-enacted in games like

Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2003), in which the player could rewind time after time after dying, allowing another chance to attempt a previously fatal

manoeuvre. In shooters, the barriers between life and death are even more blurred. EA's *Battlefield* series allows players to become medics who can revive comrades after fatal wounds.⁷

Myths and legends tell us to be brave and steadfast, that good will triumph, and love conquer all. Moreover, as Karen Armstrong, the historian of religious ideas, pointed out,

The various mythological stories, which were not intended to be taken literally, were an ancient form of psychology. When people told stories of heroes who ventured into the underworld, struggled through labyrinths, or fought with monsters, they were bringing to light the obscure regions of the subconscious realm, which is not accessible to purely rational investigation, but which has a profound effect on our experience and behaviour.⁸

Mythos and logos are not two separate forms of thought. They interact when we are deciding what course of action we shall take. The myth of the hero who rescues those in danger has often provided the motivation for a scientist or an engineer to explore a novel but essentially practical idea. If we are wise, in planning any activity we try it out first in fantasy to see if things will turn out the way we expect. When some practical project fails we can comfort ourselves with the popular fantasy of what I would have done or said had I thought of it at the time. When frustration and defeat lead to anger and the desire for revenge, we can dissipate these dangerous emotions in fantasies of overcoming those who have frustrated and betrayed us. Indeed, the unity of scientific thought and fantasy goes even deeper than this. Not only are we story-makers and story-tellers but our brains work in such a way that nothing is meaningful to us until we have fitted it into a story.

A story has a simple structure. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. Knowing the middle of a story but not knowing either the beginning or the end makes us uncomfortable, even anxious. Suppose you arrive home one evening to an empty house which you knew was locked against all intruders and you find a large parcel sitting on your kitchen

table. Before you carry out any steps to ascertain how it got there what rushes through your mind is a string of hypotheses – you must have left the back door unlocked and the postman let himself in, your neighbour must have had a key, or even Santa has come early this Christmas. You have to find the beginning to the story. When your investigations reveal how the parcel got there, you turn to the end of the story. What are you going to do with the parcel and its contents? When the end of the story is in place you relax. The parcel is fully explained. It has a meaning. Mythos and logos both use the form of the story.

We cannot live just with mythos or just with logos. Living just in fantasy we not only make some dangerous errors in our dealing with the world but we are unable to communicate with other people. We have to pay careful attention to the world in order to find meanings which we can share with others. For instance, my generation, born in the 1930s, were faced in our sixties with the choice of learning about computers or not. Those of us who made the effort to acquire this knowledge can now share with younger generations discussions about computers, their benefits and abysmal failures, discussions which have all the excitement and interest of conversations about the weather, but which make us feel at home in the modern world. Those of my generation who decided that they were too old to bother with all this new-fangled nonsense of emails and the internet find themselves living in a world which is increasingly alien, where younger generations seem very different from what they were like when they were young.

Living just in logos and eschewing everything that is not immediately tangible and knowable removes our ability to live with uncertainty. Fantasy is all about uncertainty, the entertaining of a multitude of possibilities. Fantasy is about doubt. Those who try to live only in logos find uncertainty and doubt impossible to bear.

The Bible, like the Qur'an, can be read as a mythos text, full of stories which might not relate to real events and which are best understood in the light of the circumstances under which they were told. Such a reading is full of uncertainties and therefore unacceptable to those who want to see

the world in terms of logos. To fundamentalists their book, be it the Qur'an or the Bible, is the Word of God and therefore is infallible, inerrant and internally consistent. God's word is logos, the Knowledge and the Law. In their world nothing happens by chance. Events that benefit them are caused by God; events which harm them are caused by evil spirits, or the Devil, or by their enemies.

Logos is essential when we want to deal with practical problems or to discover the nature of the material world in which we live, but there are very important aspects of our lives where logos alone is inadequate. In logos if something is A it cannot be not-A, but in fantasy A and not-A can exist together along with every gradation between A and not-A. In human relationships we can love the people we hate, and enjoy a friendship with someone we know is our enemy. Siblings can compete ferociously with one another, and then come together in great loyalty when an outsider attacks them. Those people who try to live only in logos not only fail to understand how mythos works but they also fail to understand themselves and other people. They form simplistic theories about why people do what they do. Thus people are supposed to be driven by their genes, or a chemical change, or evil spirits, or the Devil. What people do is never explained in terms of how they see themselves and the world because this kind of theory recognises that people have choices about what they do, and observers can never be certain that their predictions about what people do will prove to be correct.

Fundamentalists see people in simple, binary terms. They are either good or bad. 'Good' people are fellow fundamentalists; 'bad' people are outsiders. Not recognising that other people are fellow human beings who, like all of us, are mixtures of good and bad, means that fundamentalists have no difficulty in seeing their enemies as objects which can be destroyed. Fundamentalists see the world in similar terms. For them the world is in the grip of cosmic forces, the forces of good against the forces of evil. The fundamentalist is a soldier in the war of good against evil. The myth that sustains the fundamentalist world-view is that of a cosmic war. Such a world view requires an enemy. No enemy, and the myth fails.

Had George Bush decided to see Mohammed Atta and the hijackers as murderous criminals, the myth that sustained the hijackers would have failed. Bush could have called the destruction of the Twin Towers and the deaths of so many people the greatest crime the world had ever seen. He could have sworn that all his forces of law and order would capture those who had aided and abetted these criminals, and that these men would be brought to justice and tried. But he did not do this. Instead he reacted in the way the hijackers wanted. He used the cosmic language of fundamentalism. He announced that all of those who had plotted against America were America's enemy and he would lead a 'war on terror'.

Fundamentalists have wars on abstract nouns, usually some version of a war against evil. For instance, when the evangelical Bishop Chukwuma of Nigeria attempted to exorcise the Reverend Richard Kirker of his 'demon of homosexuality', he said, 'We have overcome carnality, just as the light will overcome darkness.'⁹ 'War on terror' fits this fundamentalist pattern. Wars on common or proper nouns, that is, the names of real entities, define precisely which people are on each side and when the war ends. The Second World War was between the Allies and the Axis – Britain, the Commonwealth, the USSR and the USA against Germany, Italy and Japan. To be regarded as an enemy combatant you had to have the appropriate nationality. A Mexican, say, visiting England could not be arrested as an enemy combatant solely on the grounds that he once visited Germany as a student. The war ended when Germany, Italy and Japan each surrendered and signed a peace treaty. In contrast, Bush's War on Terror encompasses us all. The fact that I have met at a party two men who have been released from Guantanamo could arouse suspicion and perhaps lead to my arrest if I visited the USA. There is no possible date when terror will surrender and sign a peace treaty. Already the war on terror is merging with conflicts over nationality and over oil. As the climate changes in future decades the war on terror is likely to merge with conflicts over water and habitable land.

George Bush was brought up in the Episcopalian Church but when he gave up alcohol he took on the language and

ideas of fundamentalist Christianity. Stephen Bates, who reported on religion for the *Guardian*, told how

Peter Singer, the Princeton philosopher, has analysed the president's statements and says: 'No other president in living memory has spoken so often about good and evil, right and wrong.' He mentioned the word 'evil' in 30 per cent of the speeches he gave in the first two and a half years in office and furthermore used 'evil' far more often as a noun than as an adjective (914 uses to 182).¹⁰

How much of Bush's conversion was a matter of politics and how much a matter of belief is debatable. There were strong political reasons for his conversion. Rather than being seen as just continuing the Bush family dynasty, he could claim that he had been called by God to become president. He could draw on the belief widely held by Americans that they are especially favoured by God, and that America's mission was to provide moral and spiritual leadership to the rest of the world. This belief seems to have been derived from the Pilgrim Fathers who 'saw themselves as being in a covenant with God. The Deity would promise redemption to his chosen, special people, infusing them with grace, and they in turn would give him their allegiance and await his revelation.'¹¹

It would be impossible for a nonbeliever to become president of the United States. An atheist simply would not get the votes. Stephen Bates noted,

Six out of ten Americans say religion plays 'a very important part' in their lives and 39 per cent say they have been 'born again in Christ'. Nearly two-thirds of Southerners claim to have had a religious experience that changed their lives (only half of non-Southerners believe they have had the same) and a quarter of households say they have at least five Bibles in their homes.¹²

He went on,

God, indeed, does seem to intervene an awful lot on the activities of individual Americans, as well as the state itself, in big things and in small. To Him is ascribed

success in examinations, the election of office, the cure from illness, the escape from Hurricane Katrina, even when others, equally Christian did not survive . . . He does not stop the war in Iraq, or the attacks of 9/11, but He's perfectly capable of correcting a skid on a lonely road.¹³

There had always been various fundamentalist religious groups in America but in the second half of the twentieth century fundamentalist groups were growing more militant. Revivalist preachers were drawing millions into their churches with promises of salvation without suffering. Moreover, the preachers assured their listeners, 'God wants you to be rich!' America does not have an established Church as does Britain with the Church of England.

This lack of a religious establishment was and has remained one of the most significant features of American religiosity. Americans change their religious adherence and choose their churches much more easily than their ancestors could in England and Europe. Allegiances shift; churches and parishes rise and fall; churchmen must become much more entrepreneurial to attract worshippers and cannot rely on custom and habit to maintain their congregations.¹⁴

The entrepreneurial character of the evangelical churches has forced mainstream churches to attempt to sell themselves in much the same way.

In her study of Christianity and politics in Australia, Amanda Lohrey noted,

Mainstream church attendance in Australia is in decline – a mere 9 per cent attend – except for a 10 per cent increase in the Anglican archdiocese of Sydney. For all the recent razzamatazz, the Pentecostals represent a congregation of between 160,000 and 194,000 – depending on whose figures you accept – out of a population of twenty million. The number of church-going Anglicans is estimated at around 170,000. Compare this to the number of 'no religion' (2,906,000), declared atheists (347,017) and Buddhists (424,839). The Christian-based Family First Party claims to have 2,000 members, far fewer than the

average first-grade football club (whose weekend game attendances are also higher than the megachurches). Arguably the most distinctive feature of the Christian Right in Australia is not its actual numbers but its proselytising zeal.¹⁵

Another Australian writer, Margaret Simons, in her essay *Faith, Money and Power*, pointed out that,

It is clear that there has been a revival, not so much in religion as in religious enthusiasm. 'There is more feeling in the spirit,' said one pastor I spoke to. There may not be more Christians overall, but there are more active Christians, particularly among young people. As anyone who mixes with the young will already know, Christianity has become a significant part of youth culture. At the same time it has become acceptable and more common for people of all ages to talk about their religion.¹⁶

The Hillsong Church in Sydney was founded by Frank Houston but he was forced to resign in 2000 when he admitted having sex with a boy some years before. He was succeeded by his son Brian who, along with his wife Bobbie and son Joel, expanded the activities of the church aided by the congregation's donations. In 2004 Brian Houston estimated that Hillsong had an income of 50 million (Australian) dollars on which he was not required to pay any tax. At each meeting buckets with holes in the bottom are passed around so that change will drop through to the floor. What is wanted is notes, credit cards and cheques. Lohrey wrote,

Here is religion geared to a generation raised on television and the rapid-fire commercial break. Dr Carol Cusack, a lecturer in religion at the University of Sydney, describes Hillsong's style of worship as more attuned to secular values in the community than that of other denominations. It's not new religion, she argues, but 'part of the re-branding of Christianity as fashionable, trendy, not dowdy'. In the Pentecostal churches there is and always has been plenty of dancing – or at least plenty of clapping and swaying and waving of arms – but now it has a new, slick look to it.¹⁷

The Catholic Church demands that anyone who wishes to become a Catholic should undergo a long period of instruction and examination by a senior priest. To join Hillsong all you need to do is to be saved. Lohrey asked three teenage girls, all enthusiastic members of Hillsong, how a person was saved. One girl replied, ‘You get saved basically just by accepting Jesus, by acknowledging that you have sin in your life, you’re not perfect and acknowledging that Jesus is the way to make that right, and you say, “Jesus. I want you in my life.” And once you’ve got Jesus in your life, basically you’re saved.’

Lohrey asked, ‘What about if you die and you’ve done some bad things – do you still go to heaven?’

‘Yeah, as long as you’ve accepted Jesus into your life.’

Lohrey wrote, ‘Here we have the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, as clearly and unambiguously stated as it could be.’

Lohrey asked the girls what happened to people who lived a good life but did not believe in Jesus. The girl explained,

They love God but they don’t understand what Jesus was. They don’t understand that he died for our sins so we didn’t have to go to hell. If you just believe that Jesus was a regular prophet, then you can’t understand that he died for our sins. But in the end it’s really not about what you know and don’t know, it’s do you have a relationship with Jesus. Basically it doesn’t matter what you call yourself, or what you’ve done, if you have a relationship with Jesus, that’s it, pretty much.’

‘And everyone else goes to hell?’

‘Yeah, much as it sucks, you have to understand that Jesus was the only savior.’¹⁸

Despite the fact that, as an Anglican, John Howard was bound for hell, when he was prime minister he and other Coalition politicians were keen to address meetings at Hillsong. Hillsong’s political influence waned when Kevin Rudd became prime minister. Rudd had been brought up as a Catholic and he never hid how important his religion was to him, but he ‘condemned the “privatised, pietised and politically compliant Christianity on offer from the televangelists

of the twenty-first century'. Christ's vision was for a just world delivered by social action and driven by personal faith, Rudd said. Christianity was a more demanding challenge than merely to be 'the political handmaiden of the conservative establishment'.¹⁹ Simons commented, 'Why protest, why take action, why even vote when all problems come from a lack of relationship with God, and can be solved by prayer.'²⁰

Kevin Rudd knows that keeping the Australian economy sound requires more than the belief in the Prosperity Gospel of Hillsong which says that, if you have a relationship with Jesus, he will make you rich. Hillsong is not the only church which preaches the Prosperity Gospel. Most televangelicals do. The extraordinarily popular American preacher Benny Hinn does. On a recent visit to Brisbane he told his audience,

'I am going to tell you something. This is a prophecy. You are about to see the biggest transfer of wealth in the history of the world. You are going to see prosperity like you never dreamed of. Money is being transferred from sinners to the righteous.' His voice boomed out: 'Are you righteous?' 'Yes,' we cried. 'Are you righteous?' 'Yes,' we cried a little louder. 'This is money you never dreamed of. Are you righteous?' 'Yes,' we thundered.

'We' included the Reverend Dr David Millikan, a Uniting church minister. He had gone with a friend to see the healings which Benny Hinn performed. What they saw was the marshalling into the healing circle of those people who could easily take up their beds and walk, or, in this case, get out of their wheelchairs, shove them aside, and walk. Seriously ill people were kept far away from Hinn's healing. Millikan concluded,

I judge Hinn by the measure of the one he claims to have been following. Jesus never promised people wealth, or instant healing. He didn't promise his disciples houses on the coast. Pastor Benny recast Jesus in his own image. He has forgotten that his Lord died, humiliated, tortured, alone and penniless. But how do you sell that?²¹

A gospel of salvation requires that there be sins and

sinners. For Hillsong, the two great sins are abortion and homosexuality. Sydney provides many examples of these sins. Abortion is legal in Australia. Sydney vies with San Francisco as the gay capital of the world. The annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2008. Many thousands of people cheered the parade and enjoyed the party. The parade presented a cross-section of Australian society, and included contingents from the police and the armed services.

The religion of most Australians continues to be sport. The greatest sin an Australian can commit is to fail to mow his lawn and keep his car shiny clean, even when there is a drought. By concentrating on how their team is faring, many Australians turn their minds away from the gigantic problem facing Australia right now – climate change. The effects are already being felt across Australia, from the drought-stricken Murray-Darling basin, the bread basket of Australia, to the damaged and dying Great Barrier Reef, and worse is predicted. But none of this matters, does it, if you're sure to go to heaven when you die.

In the USA the Jewish vote is carefully cultivated by both Republican and Democrat politicians, not just because the Jewish lobby is very powerful but also because Israel plays an important part in the widely held evangelical belief in being raptured to heaven before the world comes to an end. According to the website www.biblebell.org, rapture will occur when Jesus returns to resurrect dead Christians, glorify their bodies, and catch them up to heaven to be with God. The same will happen to living Christians, in the same way that Jesus was raptured. Rapture will occur before the wrath of God falls upon the planet. Wars, starvation, frequent earthquakes, floods, droughts, global warming, and fierce storms will show that the end is nigh. At the same time Israel's enemies will become increasingly hostile and aggressive. Anti-Semitism will become rampant. Fundamentalist church-goers in America give considerable financial support to Israel so that God's plan for the end of the world, as laid out in the Book of Revelation, will be fulfilled. They approve of the massive help which successive American governments have given to Israel in order to expand Israel's

defence forces. They see the conflict between Israel and Palestine as evidence of the working out of God's plan. Israeli leaders are not looking this gift horse in the mouth, even though they probably know that a key element in God's plan is the conversion or the death of all Jews.

Along with all this, fundamentalists are battling the scientists. Darwin's theory of evolution presents a huge challenge to those who believe that the Bible is infallible, inerrant and internally consistent. Both Christian and Islamic fundamentalists reject the theory of evolution, despite the increasing weight of evidence to support it. Christian fundamentalists developed their own theory, Creationism, which states that the world was created by God a few thousand years ago. Just how many thousand has varied from time to time, from 4,000 years to around 6,000. Fossils, apparently, were God's little joke. Dinosaurs are seen as existing along with Adam and Eve. In an attempt to avoid the derision Creationism has attracted in the past, the name has been changed to Intelligent Design. Creationists insist that the world could not have just come into being. There must have been an Intelligent Designer. They spurn the question, 'Who designed the designer?' God, they say, has always existed.

Sean Carroll is one of the pioneers of evolutionary developmental biology, which is the science of how genes tell organisms to form their shape, both in growth from the egg and in evolution over time. He said of his new book *The Making of the Fittest: DNA and the Ultimate Forensic Record of Evolution*,²² 'The body of new evidence which I will describe in this book clinches the case for biological evolution as the basis for life's diversity, beyond any reasonable doubt.' In his review of the book Peter Forbes explained the significance of what Carroll had claimed. He wrote,

The most vivid and bounteous evidence we have for natural selection concerns two kinds of genes: those that never change (immortals) and are going strong at more than two billion years old; and those that are no longer used (fossil genes) but live on accumulating more and more mutations. The immortal genes are vital for cell life processes and are almost identical in every living creature.

They have been preserved by selection because most mutations to them would be fatal.

The fossil genes hang around, gathering mutations, making them even more useless. Because they are not used, selection cannot keep them in trim. Moles still have rudimentary eyes but because they are not needed they are furred over. All of the eye genes are still there but they are shot to pieces. We humans have lost the functionality of half of our odour genes. We still have the genes that dogs use to sniff out their world but again the holes, insertions and other damage have disabled them. The elegance of this double whammy – immortal and fossil genes – for natural selection is almost beyond poetry.

Which brings me to so-called intelligent design, the idea that some biological structures are too complex to have evolved under natural selection. Fossil genes are the nemesis of intelligent design. What sort of grand designer would litter his creations with decayed copies of genes which we know are still functional in other creatures? There is a simpler explanation. Fossil genes have decayed because they are no longer under selection pressure. We humans use our eyes more than our noses. As Carroll says, 'the rule of DNA code is use it or lose it.'²³

Like fundamentalist Christians, those people who describe themselves as being 'spiritual' reject science. Instead they have developed their own science which, like Intelligent Design, does not require the detailed thought and sheer hard work of traditional science. They use scientific-like terms when they are talking about their own discoveries of magical cures. For instance, the magazine *Nova*, an Australian publication distributed by Health Food shops, carried an advertisement for Hexagonal Water Supplies. Hexagonal water has an

Advanced Oxygenation System. Vitalized Plus water is hexagonal water! Vitalized water awakens, cleanses, energises and revitalizes. Hexagonal Water has 6 apparent functions: hydrates the cells, helps transport the nutrients to the cells, enhances waste removal from the cells,

supports the immune system, improves cellular communication and enhances metabolic efficiency.²⁴

This is undoubtedly a great improvement on square water!

Alternative or complementary medicine, as it is known, has an immense market, not only in its products but in its advertising. Fundamentalist Christians and spiritual people ensured that George Bush would not lose support when he put the interests of the oil industry ahead of scientific research. The science journalist Gordy Slack wrote,

In Washington the Bush Administration's contempt for science and evidence-based policies is everywhere evident, including its inhibition of stem cell research; its censoring of the Clean Air act, climate change, and other environmental reports; and its depleting of NASA's science budget to pursue vanity projects such as sending humans to Mars. If belief trumps fact, in these days of very dangerous truths, we're screwed.²⁵

Our need for good scientific research and a careful appraisal of its results has never been greater. There is no simple answer to global warming. Biofuels might reduce our dependence on oil, but a wholesale switch to biofuels could mean that many people would starve. Are the risks involved in nuclear power worth taking in the long run? Questions like these need to be examined and answered at a global level where every country takes part in the debate and then commits to the programme decided upon. Time is rushing by, the climate is changing faster than scientists had predicted, but Bush dallies, refusing to make a meaningful commitment. On December 18, 2007, he did sign the Energy Independence and Security Act which aims to phase out 100-watt incandescent bulbs – but not until 2012. Wal-Mart launched a campaign to sell 100 million energy-efficient bulbs by the end of 2007, but achieved this by October.²⁶ Why don't we all make a quick trip to Wal-Mart? However, George Bush says there's no hurry. After all, if you're going to be raptured before the world comes to an end, you don't have to bother, do you?

Research and practice have shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that for an undeveloped country to develop there must

be access to contraception and abortion as well as education, especially for women. Both the Catholic Church and the Bush Administration reject contraception and abortion. The Church condemns the use of condoms, while the Bush Administration has withdrawn financial support for any non-governmental agency which includes contraception and abortion in its work. Thus the Church and the Administration have ensured the death of millions of Africans from Aids. In villages across Africa there are only children and old people. The generation which would have brought up the children and looked after the old people has been all but wiped out. The consequences of this situation in coming decades are incalculable, but it is likely they will be terrible.

Events in the first years of this century and all the events to come cannot be explained solely as the outcome of religious belief and practice. Many other factors are involved. However, the ideas held by all of us and especially our leaders about the nature of death and the purpose of life will play a significant part in our lives.

As Bush's presidency comes to a close we are left with:

- 1 A war on terror which shows no sign of coming to an end. No one is safe from the war. As I write, the 2008 Dakar Rally has been cancelled following the death of four French tourists in Mauritania and a threat from a group linked to Al-Qaeda to disrupt the rally. This will mean a huge financial loss for the organisers of the rally, the competitors and their teams, the countries where the rally would have been held, and the media. No terrorist bomb, just the threat of a terrorist bomb, achieved all this.
- 2 A tardy and very limited recognition of climate change at the Bali conference in 2007, which resulted in an agreement to do something about climate change some time.
- 3 An eight-year neglect of science and the application of the results of scientific research to alleviate disease and poverty, and to solve the problem of climate change.

At the same time, in Chechen, a new form of an old conflict is brewing.

When the USSR broke up, Chechen people tried to set up their own independent state. Russia claimed sovereignty and

sent in Russian forces to quell the rebels. A terrible conflict followed. Grozny, the capital, was destroyed. Putin spared no effort to defeat the rebels. When his forces had established a kind of peace he installed 31-year-old Ramzan Kadyrow as president. Kadyrow, who enjoys considerable power and has his own militia, was an amateur boxer. He is accused by human rights groups of kidnapping, torturing and murdering civilians. He practises Sufism, a mystical form of Islam that emphasises a personal union with God. Being backed by both Putin and God must be a heady mixture. Against him are the rebels. They started out as a largely secular force, but now their main commanders are fundamentalists with ties in the Middle East. They want to create an Islamic caliphate across Russia's North Caucasian region. The Chechen war proved to be a special training ground for Taliban and Al-Qaeda combatants. The rebel leader, Doku Umarov, has announced that he is extending his movement's battle with Kadyrow's forces to include a holy war against the USA, Britain and Israel. He said, 'All those waging war against Islam and Muslims are our enemies.'²⁷

* * *

Meanwhile, Britain had a prime minister who, like George Bush, was a devout Christian. Tony Blair's predecessors, Margaret Thatcher and John Major, were conventionally Christian. Thatcher did not need God to tell her how right her views were, while Major's great passion was not God but cricket. In those days it was wearisome being addressed by both Thatcher and Major as wayward children who needed to mend their ways, but at least they never invoked God in this process. In contrast, Blair was forever letting us know that he had religious beliefs which meant that, not only was he always right in his views, but he was especially good, much better than those of us who led our lives without the benefit of being overseen by God. Blair would have laced all his speeches with references to God and his blessings, but his adviser Alistair Campbell warned him, 'We don't do God.'

Traditionally, the British public prefer their leaders to stick to politics and leave religion to the clerics. However, the significant majority of tame backbenchers which Blair

had in the House of Commons meant that Blair could ignore the fact that the British public was against joining the USA in a war against Saddam Hussein and Iraq. As Iraq descended into bloody conflict and evidence emerged that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction did not exist, Blair did not apologise for his part in this debacle. Instead he insisted, 'I only did what I thought was right.' Writing in the *Spectator*, Ron Liddle pointed out that,

In his otherwise equivocal memoirs, Hans Blix, the UN weapons inspector who pleaded with Bush and Blair to wait a while before wreaking military havoc in Iraq, blames the two leaders' shared religious fervour for their single-minded commitment to the invasion: their unshakeable conviction that they were doing the right thing.²⁸

Believing that you did the right thing may explain your error but never excuse it. Hitler went to his death believing that he had done what he thought was right. Thousands of Hitler's supporters believed the same. They explained Germany's defeat by the Allies in terms of being betrayed by their enemies within Germany.

Not long after he left office Blair converted to Catholicism. Pope Benedict XVI might have praised him, but Cardinal George Pell in Sydney took a much sterner line, as he did in everything to do with Catholicism. He wrote,

Apparently a religious man, Blair remains an enigma at many levels. He has attended Mass every Sunday for many years with his wife and family, and has just become a Roman Catholic. Yet he implemented and personally supported anti-Christian legislation over the years.²⁹

Blair's religious beliefs brought what look like lasting changes to British society. He encouraged representatives of the different religious groups to take part in government policy making. Such inclusivity could be beneficial to society if all groups representing the full range of religious and philosophical thought had been included but, when humanist groups asked to be included in Blair's group of policy advisers, they were refused.

Strongly held beliefs can prevent us from seeing the consequences of our actions. Blair put in endless effort, ultimately successful, in bringing the Troubles to an end in Northern Ireland and uniting in government long-time sworn enemies, the Catholics and the Protestants. He must have been told many times by many people that the root of the problem in Northern Ireland lay in the complete separation of the two communities. Catholic children and Protestant children were educated completely separately, and, until they were adults, many never met members of the other community.

Blair spent part of his childhood in Australia and it was an Australian, Peter Thompson, who sparked his interest in religion. Blair should have known how until the 1960s, Australian society was divided into Protestant and Catholic just as in Northern Ireland. The Australian Catholic Church was adamantly against Catholic children attending state schools. This was the Australia I grew up in. Years later, when I was visiting Northern Ireland, I found that I still possessed my childhood skills of identifying Catholics and Protestants within a few moments of meeting. In Australia, by the 1960s, the influx of migrants from Catholic countries put such a strain on the Catholic education system that the Church had to relax its rules about which schools Catholic children should attend. Not only did Catholic children begin attending state schools but many Protestant parents sent their children to Catholic schools which were regarded as having particularly high standards in education and discipline. Within a few short years the hatred, the ignorance and the horrible myths which each side told about the other had disappeared. However, by then racists had other objects for their hatred. They now could despise refugees from the Vietnam War and the other world-wide conflicts which followed. The then prime minister, John Howard, did not extend his Christian charity to those who were not already Australian.

All this Blair should have known. He once confessed a wish that he had studied history, but it seems he made little effort in making up for this deficit. While bringing peace to Northern Ireland, he encouraged the different religious

groups in England to open their own segregated schools. He called these 'faith' schools.

Political leaders have always known that, if you have a problem you can't or don't want to solve, one solution is to change the name of the problem. In 1981, when the seemingly endless series of breakdowns at the Windscale nuclear reactor was causing much public disquiet, the name of the reactor was changed to Sellafield. Comedian Lenny Henry, impersonating the newscaster Trevor McDonald, reported that, 'Windscale is to be renamed Sellafield because it sounds nicer. In future radiation will be referred to as magic moonbeams.'³⁰ In the same way religious schools became faith schools. 'Religious schools' carry connotations of religious wars and of madrassas where small Muslim boys are supposedly imbued with the ambition to grow up to become suicide bombers. 'Faith' sounds soft, sweet, smiling, and happy. People no longer belong to a particular religion. They belong to a faith. Different faiths come together, share with one another, and never indulge in those nasty arguments about who has the best God. (Though there might have been some rejoicing amongst the Catholics when, in December 2007, their numbers, bolstered by an influx of Poles, topped the number of Anglicans who attend church regularly.)³¹

Whatever Tony Blair's religious beliefs were, they never seemed to cause him distress or to require a regular inspection of his failings. Indeed, he never suggested that he had any failings, except, of course, the times when he was too good. His successor Gordon Brown did not carry his religion as lightly as Blair did. Brown was a son of the manse with all that that implies about conscience and a need to achieve. His biographer Tom Bower wrote,

Quite emphatically, from his youngest years, Brown was under exceptional pressure to excel, and infused with an obsession to work hard, to disappoint no one and to win. 'What is started must be finished,' was a constant parental admonition to the Brown brothers. Failure was inconceivable. From the pulpit the Reverend John Brown preached that many of the young 'are failing to think life

through and are living carelessly and irresponsibly.' They forgot, he said, that regardless of any remarkable achievements on earth, 'after death we must appear before the judgement seat of Christ.' He admonished 'the multitudes' who gave 'little thought of accountability for their conduct and way of life.'³²

Gordon Brown seemed to give endless thought to accounting for his conduct and way of life, and did not seem to be at the end of such reflection a happy man. The Calvinist conscience can be implacable.

So can the Catholic conscience. As I write, Kevin Rudd is enjoying his first weeks of being Australia's new prime minister. As time goes by, life at the PM's Lodge in Canberra might not be so happy. What we can be sure of is that, in Australia as in Britain and America, religion will continue to play an important part in the politics of the day.

* * *

In the 1970s when I was working in the National Health Service in Sheffield and then in Lincolnshire, psychologists had considerable freedom in deciding how they should work. I chose to have long conversations with my depressed clients. It took time to establish the kind of relationship where we could explore the ideas which might have led my client to become depressed. I soon found that depressed people struggle with the questions which have puzzled philosophers and theologians for thousands of years. They saw these questions not as universal questions but in terms of the circumstances of their lives. Death featured in our conversations, and, following that, my client's religious or philosophical beliefs. It was clear that these beliefs were very different from those held by people who did not become depressed. My clients had always held beliefs which confirmed their sense of unworthiness, and reinforced their pessimism and their fear. Many told me how they had relinquished the religious beliefs of their childhood but now they were wondering whether these old beliefs might not be true. Had they been born in sin as their priest had told them? Had God's grace, about which their vicar had talked so much, failed to fall on

them? If God knew of every sparrow that fell, He must undoubtedly know of their wickedness and would punish them. Was not depression their punishment for their sin? If it was God's punishment, should they not accept it, and resist anyone who tried to take it from them?

I knew that psychiatrists never investigated the religious beliefs held by their patients except to establish whether the belief was an example of 'irrational guilt', which psychiatrists saw as a symptom of depression, or whether it was a psychotic delusion. The implications of these beliefs were never explored. My psychologist colleagues were not interested in religious beliefs. They saw the purpose of life as being happy, and their task as therapists to help people give up being depressed and become happy. They did not acknowledge that the purpose of life for many people is not to be happy but to be good. When the psychiatrist Aaron Beck began to develop his cognitive behavioural therapy he expressly forbade his disciples to spend any time discussing religion or philosophy with their clients. I wrote *The Construction of Life and Death* to help people, including psychiatrists and psychologists, to understand how important religious and philosophical ideas are to all of us.

How times have changed! The Royal College of Psychiatrists now has a Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group. The Royal College's pamphlet *Spirituality and Mental Health* points out that,

Making a spiritual assessment is as important as all aspects of medical history taking and examination. When making a diagnosis, a psychiatrist should be competent in distinguishing between a spiritual crisis and mental illness, and able to explore areas of overlap and difference between the two . . . In healthcare, spirituality is identified with experiencing a deep-seated sense of meaning and purpose in life, together with a sense of belonging. It is about acceptance, integration and wholeness.

In essence, the pamphlet is based on few assumptions. It recognises that our religious or philosophical beliefs play an important role in the degree of happiness and security we feel, but it does not assume that certain religious beliefs are

mandatory, or that spirituality encompasses the magical. In all, it is a very kind and sensible document.

The Transpersonal Psychology Section is part of the British Psychological Society. On its website Transpersonal Psychology is defined as what

might loosely be called the psychology of spirituality and of those areas of the human mind which search for higher meanings in life, and which move beyond the limited boundaries of the ego to access an enhanced capacity for wisdom, creativity, unconditional love and compassion. It honours the existence of transpersonal experiences, and is concerned with their meaning for the individual and with their effect upon behaviour.

The terms used in that definition, such as 'higher meanings', are not defined. It goes on to say,

In addition to drawing upon many areas of Western scientific psychology, Transpersonal Psychology seeks insights from Eastern psycho-spiritual traditions, philosophy, theology, religion, phenomenology, anthropology, sociology, and from studies of mysticism and of humanistic and transpersonal therapies. It also focuses upon typologies of spiritual and subtle experiences, and upon their consequences for thought and behaviour.

There are times when I despair of my profession! Psychology is supposed to be a science. Apart from the study of perception and cognition, and the new field of neuropsychology where positron emission tomography (PET) of the brain can show some correlations between certain types of thinking and specific parts of the brain, the subject matter of psychology does not allow the setting up of experiments similar to the kind of experiments used in chemistry and physics. In this kind of experiment, small, even tiny phenomena are studied in great detail. Alas, the results of the research in neuropsychology have been seized upon by unthinking psychologists and journalists and turned into a new phrenology where different bits of the brain are considered to be the cause of complex ways of thinking and

acting, all without any acknowledgement that human beings are constantly interpreting what is happening and acting on those interpretations.

Experimentation may be difficult in psychology, but that is no excuse for abandoning the first requirement of scientific research which is to define the words you are using. Terms like 'spirituality', 'limited boundaries of the ego', 'an enhanced capacity' need to be defined, while 'it honours the existence of transpersonal experience' has all the posturing falseness of 'I hear what you say' and 'I'm comfortable with that'. Why not just say, 'Some people report having experiences which seem to them to be about a reality above and beyond the reality they ordinarily experience'?

Unfortunately, the need to give their sense of being a person a heightened significance has led many psychologists, who, after all, are only human, to use abstract nouns and manufactured phrases to imply that they are in possession of truths unknown to ordinary mortals.

The public section of the website of the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists makes no mention of 'spirituality' or 'religion'. Neither does the government website on depression, *beyondblue*. However, the website of the Australian Psychological Society lists the following interest groups: Christianity and Psychology; Sufism and Psychology; Buddhism and Psychology; Psychology from an Islamic Perspective; Transpersonal Psychology.

The last contains the following unscientific explanation:

Transpersonal literally means beyond the personal, beyond the ego, to include soul consciousness. Mind, spirituality, and higher states of consciousness are a main focus within transpersonal psychology. Within this context, spirituality refers to a universal dimension that is both transcendent and immanent.

Newer fields of psychology, especially transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology, are taking seriously the holistic notion of human beings as comprising mind, body, and soul. These fields propose that people are spiritual beings living a human life that extends beyond our mundane existence and skin-encapsulated ego-self to

include direct experience of the environment and the cosmos. They recognise the importance of integrating spiritual with physical and mental reality, that spirituality is but one part of the whole.

It seems now that, if you seek the services of a psychologist or a psychiatrist, it is not enough just to ask in which theoretical model the therapist works. Ask what his religious or philosophical beliefs are.

* * *

It was a tremendous shock to many non-Muslims when Muslims protested violently about matters which non-Muslims took for granted. Brawls amongst football fans were deplored, but the imprisonment in Sudan in 2007 of a teacher, Gillian Gibbons, for letting her pupils call a teddy bear Mohammed was beyond the comprehension of many. Much worse had already happened before that.

Christopher Hitchens described what followed when Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* was published.

The theocratic head of a foreign state – the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran – publicly offered money, in his own name, to suborn the murder of a novelist who was a citizen of another country. Those who were encouraged to carry out this bribed assassination scheme, which was extended to 'all those involved in the publication' of the *Satanic Verses*, were offered not just the cold cash but also a free ticket to paradise. It is impossible to imagine a greater affront to every value of free expression. The ayatollah had not read, and probably could not read, and in any case forbade everyone else to read, the novel. But he succeeded in igniting ugly demonstrations, among Muslims in Britain as well as across the world, where crowds burned the book and screamed for the author to be fed to the flames as well . . . A number of serious attempts were made to assassinate Rushdie by religious death squads supported by Iranian Embassies. His Italian and Japanese translators were criminally assaulted . . . and one of them was savagely mutilated as he lay dying. His Norwegian publisher was shot in the back with a

high-velocity rifle and left for dead in the snow, but astonishingly survived.

One might have expected leaders of the other religions, all cultivated, educated men, to speak out against such barbarity. But, as Hitchens wrote,

Such was not the case. In considered statements, the Vatican, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel all took a stand in sympathy with – the ayatollah. So did the Cardinal Archbishop of New York and many other lesser religious figures. While they did manage a few words in which to deplore the resort to violence, all these men stated that the main problem raised by the publication of the *Satanic Verses* was not murder by mercenaries but blasphemy.³³

The public discussion about the attack on the Twin Towers was based largely on the proposition that moderate religion was good, extremist religion was bad. Few voices were heard saying that perhaps the problem was religion. Then a trio of atheists burst upon the scene with books that put religious apologists on the defensive. Such a defence was difficult because scientist Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, and writer Christopher Hitchens were extremely well informed.

Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* was a great success world-wide. Dawkins is one of those scientists who can explain science to the general reader with immense clarity and simplicity. He reveals the world in all its wonder and complexity. Large though his readership from his earlier books was, the success of *The God Delusion* suggests that there are a great many people for whom religion does not have the answers.

Early in his book Dawkins makes clear what his position is. He wrote,

Human thoughts and emotions *emerge* from exceedingly complex interconnections of physical entities within the brain. An atheist in this sense is somebody who believes that there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the

observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the natural phenomena which we don't yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural. As ever when we unweave the rainbow, it will not become less wonderful.³⁴

Dawkins also makes clear that,

I am not in favour of offending or hurting anyone just for the sake of it. But I am intrigued and mystified by the disproportionate privileging of religion in our otherwise secular societies. All politicians must get used to disrespectful cartoons of their faces, and nobody riots in their defence. What is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged respect? As H. L. Mencken said: 'We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.'³⁵

In the television programmes made to accompany his book, Dawkins revealed a kind of bewilderment at the obstinacy and certainty of those whose beliefs were clearly irrational. In this he is like many scientists who understand the functioning of the brain as well as the world but do not understand what people actually do. What people do every moment of their life is to create meaning. They are interpreting what is happening around them and to them. It is these interpretations which determine what people do.

The meanings which people create might be engaged solely in mythos or logos. Usually it is a mixture of the two. Our meanings arise out of our past experience but, since no two people ever have exactly the same experience, no two people ever create exactly the same meanings. Dawkins revealed the limits of his knowledge about how we create meaning in the opening of his book where he described two boys each being overwhelmed by a sudden heightened awareness of the natural world. One boy went on to become an Anglican priest and the other a scientist, Richard Dawkins himself. He wrote, 'Why the same emotion should

have led my chaplain in one direction and me in the other is not an easy question to answer. A quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common amongst scientists and rationalists.³⁶ And that is as far as he goes.

Had Dawkins attempted to answer his own question he would have needed to examine his childhood and that of his chaplain, not just the events and circumstances of their childhoods, but how they each interpreted these events and circumstances. Only by ignoring these questions could Dawkins go on and create his theory about memes.

A meme is an idea or a small set of ideas which travels around a community and lodges in the brain of the people it encounters. We are all familiar with the way certain ideas seem to be in the news at certain times. We hear ourselves using particular words or phrases we might never have used before. For instance, over the time that the phrase 'suicide bomber' entered our vocabularies, 'strictly ballroom' became a popular passion. These ideas could be called memes.

When Dawkins was developing his theory of memes, boys who wore baseball caps took to wearing them backwards. This Dawkins saw as a meme in action. It did appear to be so. But had Dawkins taken the time to get to know some of these boys well enough for them to trust him, and then asked each one, 'Why is it important to you to wear your baseball cap backwards?', he would have got as many different answers as there were boys to ask.

One boy might say, 'I do it because my mates do it.' Asked why it was important to do what his mates did, the boy might describe how he felt that his existence as a person depended on him being surrounded by his friends. If his mates deserted him he would cease to exist as a person. Another boy might answer, 'Because it annoys my mother.' When asked why it was important to him to annoy his mother, he might reveal a picture of a mother who noticed her son only when he annoyed her. A boy who had resisted the fashion might explain that he maintained his sense of being a person by resisting fashion trends. Had Dawkins pursued such a line of enquiry he would have come to understand why some people hold fast to certain ideas, no matter how irrational they might be, while other people reject them.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett has written a particularly long book, *Breaking the Spell*, in which he urged his fellow Americans to break from the spell of religion. In a country where television producers believe that a television scene lasting longer than ten seconds would tax their viewers' patience, and therapists write books running to no more than 100 widely spaced pages about how to solve all of life's problems, a book of 412 pages of close print might not find many readers ready to accept the writer's criticism of their beliefs and be prepared to change their ways. But this is what Dennett and his publishers have produced.

Dennett considers himself to be a 'bright'. This is the name he decided upon in the same way that homosexuals decided to call themselves 'gays'. In this context, the opposite of 'gay' is not 'glum' but 'straight'. Dennett protests that the opposite of 'bright' is not 'stupid'. Perhaps, he says, those who believe in the supernatural might like to call themselves 'supers'.³⁷ However, he overlooks the fact that words have connotations. 'Gay' has the attractive connotations of cheerfulness and charm. 'Bright' cannot help but have the connotation of superiority.

One of the least attractive aspects of religious people is the pride they take in being significantly better than those who do not share their beliefs. Many religious groups, and not just the Jews, have claimed to be God's Chosen People. If children do not have their wish fulfilled that their parents love them most of all their siblings, they can comfort themselves that they are God's favourite. In the same way Calvinists can consider themselves to be amongst the infallible elect, that is, God had elected or chosen them for salvation. However, the belief that you and your group are better than those who are not in your group is a delusion. Culturally and individually people differ, but we all are alike in what it is to be a human being. We each want our life to have significance in the general scheme of things; we want other people to see us and respect us as a person in our own right, and not see us as an object of no importance; we want to enjoy good relationships with our family, friends and neighbours. The belief in being superior allows us to see other people as

objects and thus be able to be cruel to them. It is this belief that leads inevitably to conflicts and genocide.

Christopher Hitchens called Dennett's proposal of the name 'brights' for nonbelievers 'cringe-making'.³⁸ His book *God Is Not Great* is full of interesting and unexpected information culled not just from his extensive reading, but from his personal investigations, including his marriages, of the different religions. His anger at the stupidity and cruelty of religious people is intense. He sees no reason why all of us should not lead pleasant and secure lives. What prevents this, he says, is the beliefs of the devout. He wrote,

I once heard the late Abba Eban, one of Israel's more polished and thoughtful diplomats and statesmen, give a talk in New York. The first thing to strike the eye about this Israeli-Palestinian dispute, he said, was the ease of its solubility. From this arresting start he went on to say, with the authority of a former minister and UN representative, that the essential point was a simple one. Two peoples of roughly equivalent size had a claim to the same land. The solution was, obviously, to create two states side by side. Surely something so self-evident was within the wit of man to encompass? And so it would have been, decades ago, if the messianic rabbis and mullahs and priests had been kept out of it. But the exclusive claims to God-given authority, made by hysterical clerics on both sides and further stoked by the Armageddon-minded Christians who hope to bring on the Apocalypse (preceded by the death or conversions of all Jews), have made the situation insufferable, and put the whole of humanity in the position of hostage to a quarrel that now features the threat of nuclear war. *Religion poisons everything*. As well as a menace to civilization, it has become a threat to human survival.³⁹

When Hitchens wrote of 'hysterical clerics on both sides' this is not simple abuse. He understands what happens to all of us when we try to maintain something as being the truth when in fact it goes against our reason. He wrote,

How much effort it takes to affirm the incredible! The

Aztecs had to tear open a human cavity *every day* just to make sure that the sun would rise. Monotheists are supposed to pester their deity more times than that, perhaps, lest he be deaf. How much vanity must be concealed – not too effectively at that – in order to pretend that one is the object of a divine plan? How much self-respect must be sacrificed in order that one may squirm continually in an awareness of one's own sin?⁴⁰

A much gentler enquiry into religion was made by John Humphrys in his book *In God We Doubt*. 'Gentle' is not an adjective usually applied to Humphrys. He is one of the presenters of the BBC Radio 4 programme *Today*, and is both admired and criticised for his sometimes stern but always probing interrogation of politicians and those people who should be accountable to those who put their trust in them. When Tony Blair was seeking to be elected prime minister he was keen to be interviewed by Humphrys, but once he attained his goal and the public's trust in him began to erode, he refused invitations from the *Today* editors for such an interview. Blair preferred the comfort and safety of the chat show *Richard and Judy*. Also kept safe from Humphrys's probing questions are those religious leaders who present their words of wisdom on *Thought for the Day*, a slot from which all humanists and the like are barred. Weekday mornings at 7.50 is the time when nonbelievers who listen to *Today* absent themselves from their radio. If *Thought for the Day* speakers had subsequently to justify what they had just said in the way politicians have to justify themselves, there would be no drop in listener numbers at that time.

In God We Doubt is based on the BBC Radio 4 series *Humphrys in Search of God*, in which Humphrys interviewed three religious leaders: Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Professor Tariq Ramadan, and the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks. When I listened to these interviews, I was reminded of a comment by Gordy Slack. He wrote,

Several years ago I co-edited a collection of interviews, conducted by the philosopher Philip Clayton and myself,

with top scientists who were also religious. What I drew from my dozens of interviews, was that plenty of great scientists believe in a personal God, they virtually all try to keep God out of their research, and when they talk about the relationship between their science and their religion they can be quite moving. But they don't make a whole lot of sense, at least not a lot more than your average undergraduate stoner.⁴¹

John Humphrys was far too polite to come to a similar conclusion about his interviewees, but in fact his book is far more subversive than those by Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens. A good interviewer can get an interviewee to say far more about himself than he intended, and this is what Williams, Ramadan and Sacks did.

Before beginning an interview, a good interviewer has a clear idea of what he wants to discover. Humphrys wrote, 'What strikes me as important is whether it is possible to reconcile a personal God who is supposed to listen to our prayers and take heed of them with a God who proceeds to ignore them.'⁴²

(An Anglican vicar once told me, 'God always answers prayers. Sometimes the answer is no.' Wise parents are well aware that, if they want their child to trust them, they need to give a reasonable explanation which the child can understand every time the parent says no to the child. Why doesn't God do this?)

The Archbishop of Canterbury speaks in such a sonorous voice and with such earnestness and patience that a listener cannot help but feel that what he is saying must be true. But, when the sound of his voice is removed and his words are laid out in print, his hesitations and amendments dissipate the weight of truth which his voice might convey. When Humphrys raised the question of, say, the suffering of a mother watching her child die of cancer, the archbishop's first response was, 'We don't know why.' Humphrys persisted in his questions, and then summarised the archbishop's answers with, 'So the best you can offer to the person whose child has died of cancer, the best you can offer those parents, is "Bear up . . . there's a reason . . . your reward will be in

heaven”?’ What followed was what Humphrys called ‘an extraordinary moment’ in the interview.

JH: Is that it?

RW: No, that’s not what I want to offer at all, because the conversation I’d have in those circumstances isn’t the kind of conversation I’d have here. For one thing . . . if someone says, ‘Where’s God in that situation?’ it would have to be answered partly in terms of ‘Where are the people who should be alongside those who are suffering, offering what love and healing they can?’ Whether in the name of God or not, the act of God is there as well. I’m not saying there’s a purpose in the sense that God has said, ‘Oh yes, for that goal, for that end I will devise this disaster, or even that there’s a reward in heaven.’ I’d say there’s hope.

JH: Hope of what?

RW: Hope of healing.

JH: When?

RW: In God’s perspective, in God’s time, maybe within this world and maybe not. And part of the difficulty of living with the faith is the knowledge which you’ve underlined so powerfully, that for some people in our time frame in this world there is not that kind of healing. It’s not there. And that’s not easy to face or to live with.

JH: But you can live with it?

RW: Just . . . just.⁴³

In his interview with Simon Mayo, Rowan Williams said that over the years his belief in the Virgin Birth had strengthened. However it seems that he is still struggling with the problem which the Australian philosopher John Mackie described in its simplest form thus:

God is omnipotent, God is wholly good, and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.⁴⁴

Liberal Anglicans, when commenting on a major tragedy, offer as a consolation that God 'is beside' those who suffer. Many fundamentalists, believing as they do that we live in a Just World where good people are rewarded and bad people punished, take the view that suffering is inflicted by a just God only on those who deserve it. Clients have told me how their vicar, minister or priest has told them that their cancer or their depression, or the death of their child, showed that they were wicked. They should acknowledge their sin and repent.

Tariq Ramadan did not tell Humphrys that suffering was the result of wickedness. Rather he took the view that suffering exists, so put up with it. He told Humphrys, 'This is life, we are going to suffer because at the end of the day life is suffering.' Humphrys asked, 'But why did God want that to happen?' Ramadan replied, 'I don't know why he sometimes makes me happy or sad, but this is life. The only thing I know is that we have the responsibility to do our best with what we do and what we are facing.' He went on, 'Suffering is a gift and a problem . . . We live with this with great difficulty. And sometimes out of our suffering we become better, we become wiser, we become more knowledgeable about life.'

Ramadan rejected Humphrys's suggestion that in the end it is blind faith. He said,

We are dealing with people who are suffering. What you can do when you are a doctor, when you are a social worker, you do your best to make them suffer less . . . In the end every human being is a reformer. You reform your own self, you reform your family, you reform society, you reform around you. Whatever you can do, do it. But remain humble because, at the end, you cannot change everything and you have to accept the reality of life.⁴⁵

To say that suffering exists because life is suffering explains nothing. Ramadan was saying that you should be humble and not expect an explanation of suffering. Yet you must try to relieve suffering. How can you do this if you have no idea of the cause of suffering? In past centuries doctors treated grave illnesses with blood-letting because they believed they were removing the cause of the illness.

All they were actually doing was weakening the patient's resistance to the disease. Someone who seeks to relieve suffering without knowing its cause could themselves become the cause of suffering. Moreover, believing that something is inevitable becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. A Muslim mother, on learning that her son was preparing to become a suicide bomber, might not try to dissuade him, but decide that, since her son was going to suffer whatever he did with his life, he might as well suffer in a way which brought honour to the family.

When Humphrys asked Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, how anyone who has seen his child suffer and die could hold on to his faith, Sacks replied,

To my mind, faith lies in the question. If you didn't have faith you wouldn't ask the question. If I did not believe in a just and law-abiding God, I would not find injustice and human suffering worthy of question whatsoever. After all, the universe, if it has no God, is utterly indifferent to my question. It's blind to my hopes and indifferent to my prayers. So, if I have no faith, I cannot ask the question. Faith is in the question . . .

Humphrys commented, 'I have to say that if a politician said that to me, "That's a most difficult question. If I give you an answer it will destroy your faith in the political system, in the democratic process, so it's very important that that question not be answered", I'd think he was having me on.'

I often talk about things I do not believe exist – things like Freud's id, ego and superego, Jung's collective unconscious. I often talk about the abstract nouns 'depression' and 'schizophrenia', but I do not believe that a depressed person has a thing called depression inside him, or that a psychotic person has a thing called schizophrenia inside him. How can we examine ideas if we do not ask questions about them, even, or perhaps especially we do not believe that the idea relates to anything real? Saying that faith is in the question is nothing but an attempt to bamboozle the faithful and silence the critics.

Humphrys said of the explanations he had been given, 'It won't do.'⁴⁶ He concluded,

I suspect that on the most primitive level [religion] is not all that different from the little scrap of blanket that so many small children rely on. They need it whenever they get tired or life looks a bit threatening. I say 'need' not 'want' deliberately: every parent who has had a child with a comfort blanket knows what I mean.

I invite you to imagine the impossibly grand figure of the Archbishop of Canterbury – mitred and robed, holder of an ancient and powerful office, head of the worldwide Anglican Church, crowner of monarchs, sitting on the steps of Canterbury Cathedral with his thumb stuck in his mouth, stroking his bearded cheek with a little bit of satin at the edge of his comfort blanket. It's not easy, I grant you, and this image may not do a great deal for the dignity of the primate's office, but the comfort blanket is not a million miles away from what religion has to offer at its most simplistic. Strip from Christianity the notion of proof, evidence and historical events (or non-events) and what drives belief has little to do with the head and a great deal to do with the heart.⁴⁷

For 'heart' read 'emotion'. Emotion is a meaning, an interpretation of what is going on. Anger is 'How dare that happen to me!' Anxiety is 'Something terrible might happen.' Fear is 'Something terrible is happening.' Jealousy is 'That person has something which is rightly mine.' And so on.

* * *

Whatever we encounter, we give it a meaning. We cannot conceive of the opposite of meaning. Calling something meaningless is to endow it with a meaning.

We give something a meaning even when we lack all the knowledge necessary to find what that thing actually means. Presented with something unexpected, we can entertain a number of possible explanations (meanings) until we settle on one. On our way to the door to answer an unexpected knock, we speculate about who our caller is. Opening the door supplies the answer. In situations where we cannot get an answer to our question, 'What is this?', we supply an answer with a fantasy.

Death presents us with a need for such a fantasy. All we can ever know about death is that a living person becomes strangely still. What has happened to the person who that living being was we do not know and cannot know. So we create a fantasy.

Death presents us with only two possible fantasies. Either death is the end of my sense of being a person or it is a doorway to another life. We might spend much time puzzling over which fantasy to choose, but, once we choose, that fantasy determines the purpose of our life.

If we choose to see death as the end of our sense of being a person, the purpose of our life is to make our life satisfactory. How to define 'satisfactory' is an individual choice from an infinite array of possibilities, but, having arrived at a definition, we try to achieve our goal. It is only by feeling that our life has been satisfactory that we can face death with a degree of equanimity.

If we see death as a doorway to another life, we immediately have to decide what that life will be. Will it be better or worse than our present life? If our present life has not lived up to our expectations, we dream of a better future life. For many people the hope of a better life after death is all that sustains them in their present life. However, if we decide that there is a better life after death, we are then presented with the question, 'Does everyone go on to a better life, no matter how wicked they've been?' Our sense of justice tells us that this cannot be so. There must be standards which have to be met if we are to qualify for a better life after death. Having decided what these standards are, we know that the purpose of our present life is to meet these standards. Thus we have to live this life in terms of the next.

No matter how we might try, we cannot ignore death. If there were no death, if we lived for ever, we would not have to choose between different options concerning what we can do. All we would need to decide would be in what order to do things. Death makes us choose how we spend our life. We have to define death, even though we can define it only in terms of a fantasy. Our definition of death becomes a central part of our religious or philosophical beliefs.

A curious paradox of human life is that, while we can

actually live only in the present, we give meaning to the present in terms of our past and our future. 'I am what I am', we say, 'because of what has happened in the past, and I do what I do now because of what will happen in the future.' The causes of our actions lie in our past and the intentions of our actions lie in our future. Thus the world we each construct encompasses not just the immediate present but also a past and a future.

We can find our past intriguing and often ponder on it, but it is our future that engages most of our attention. 'What have I got to do at work today?' we ask ourselves on waking. 'Where'll I go for my holidays this year?' we say, reading January's newspapers. We react with joy to something that engages our interest as a possible goal. The greatest misery is to be without a goal, to see no purpose in living. We create goals, make decisions like 'I must lose some weight/scrub the kitchen/visit Aunt Milly', even though we know that some activities are trivial and Aunt Milly does not like visitors. By setting such goals and working towards them, we know that we are fulfilling some part of the purpose we have given to life. *We know that life must have a purpose because life is finite. If there was no death, if life was infinite, we would need no purpose. We could do this, and then that, and then some other thing. There would be no rush to get things done, no need to work in order to eat. We would not have to think about the future; we could live entirely in the present. But death exists, and it is death that fixes our attention on the future.*

What kind of beliefs about death and the purpose of life can best sustain us in our very uncertain future?

To arrive at an answer to that question we need to understand ourselves and what it is to be human.