

The Ferguson Lectures August 2011

Forbidden Flesh: Subversion & Encounter

Lecture Two: Losing My Religion

To briefly recap on my first lecture, for the sake of those who were fortunate enough to miss it, my thesis is that we face a time of genuine crisis for the plausibility structures of Christianity within Western culture. I suggested that rather than the bankrupt options of conservatism or liberalism, that the best way forward is suggested by the radicalism of Acts 10, where a kind of theology in extremis is implemented to subvert the previous understandings of what God is doing in the world. This was by way of laying a methodological framework for the real substance of the lectures, which hopefully will be provided tonight.

The more culturally astute of you will know that the title of this lecture comes from a song by Michael Stipe of R.E.M. In it the refrain indicates “That’s me in the spotlight, losing my religion.”¹ If he was a member of a keen Evangelical congregation, this confession might be sufficient to spur a prayer group to intercede for his backsliding. However, I wish to take it in a broader and deeper sense as a heart cry from a fractured culture in which the historical religious underpinnings are collapsing at a speed reminiscent of the fall of the twin towers. In fact that event stands in many ways as a defining symbol of our times.² The fall is much more profound than the destruction of steel and flesh. It somehow signifies the end of modernity, not to mention Christendom.

Losing religion is not necessarily a bad thing. It rather depends on how religion is defined. If we were to describe it as an institutional system developed by humans to mediate the presence of the divine, then it might just as easily be regarded as restricting access to God as enabling it. Religiosity might then be associated with the bureaucracy of faith: a set of rules, rituals, and authorised powers by means of which faith is regulated and promulgated. We might imagine that it involves considerable wealth and power, and that through a network of sanctions resists challenges to its dominance and reach. Such an understanding of religion might even encompass aspects of the Christian church, might it not?

What I’d like to do tonight is to peer across the border of the new territory we’ve come to and dare to suggest that we are coming to a crisis of maturity within Christianity in which there will be paradigmatic shifts required of us if we are to be faithful to the living tradition that we carry. Some of these reconsiderations are radical enough to earn the accusation of departing from historical Christianity altogether. Rather in the way that Jesus’ re-conception of Judaism was regarded as blasphemous and heretical in the context of his times. Of course I’m not so presumptuous as to compare my small candle of insight

¹ ‘Losing My Religion’, Michael Stipe, Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, from the album *Out of Time*, Warner Bros, 1991, 4’28”.

² See ‘Beyond Ground Zero: Resourcing Faith in a Post-Christian Era’, Mike Riddell, pp.215-230 in *The Future of Christianity: Historical, Sociological, Political and Theological Perspectives from New Zealand*, ed. John Stenhouse & Brett Knowles, Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2004.

to the blazing sun of Christ; I only want to suggest that heading down such a path often brings consequences unpleasant to the messenger.

Mindful of the time available to reconceive our faith, let's get straight to the task with an indicative but not exhaustive set of contentious topics.

1. The Catholicity of Faiths

Initially the Christian church was a community within Judaism. Peter's encounter with the forbidden flesh of Acts 10 was by way of opening his eyes to the fact that the work of God in Jesus was much wider than the fledgling community had envisaged. The apostle that we remember as the rock on which the church was founded, discovered that the very same Spirit that touched him was at work among the Gentiles – people who were supposed to be beyond the pale. There were new and as yet unrealised dimensions to the event of Christ's resurrection. Naturally enough there was some debate in the community as to the veracity of Peter's revelatory experience. And yet the door was opened to the extent that Paul could prophetically declare that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.³ We could argue that the history of Christianity is one of learning to understand the significance of those three phrases.

One of the greatest challenges to the plausibility of Christianity in the West is its exclusivity. It claims, at least in traditional formulations, that there can be no salvation apart from Christ. So it seems, unless we employ theological casuistry of a dishonest kind, we are left with few choices as to the fate of people outside of our particular circle of faith. They are condemned either to hell or to destruction.⁴ All our talk of anonymous believers or the endless grace of God is meaningless if we are to assert that the only criterion of salvation is baptism into Christianity. I'm being completely candid and vulnerable when I say that such a scenario is sub-Christian. By that I mean it simply does not accord with the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Has the time not come to supplement Paul's confession with "neither Christian nor Muslim"?

In the age in which we live, surrounded on all sides with devout Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and Taoists, it is bordering on a crime against humanity to regard them as outside the purview of salvation. And to these I would add all those seekers after truth and meaning, including so-called New Agers and Humanistic Atheists. It may be that God is calling us to open our eyes to the Spirit at large in the world. I quite understand that many of you will view this as universalism and namby-pamby liberalism. In defence of the proposition I would argue that it is based entirely on my reading of the universal nature of Christ's resurrection. If Pannenberg is correct about the proleptic nature of the resurrection⁵, we

³ Galatians 3:28.

⁴ "Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number 'make it to a better place' and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?" Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, New York: HarperOne, 2011, p.2.

⁵ "Only because the end of the world is already present in Jesus' resurrection is God himself revealed in him." Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968, p. 69.

may regard it as a pebble tossed into the pool of history, the ripples from which spread through the ages in progressive understandings of the nature of the event.

Even if you're unable to travel with me all the way on this one, I want to contend for the catholicity of faiths. The creedal affirmation of the church as catholic is a watchword by which we affirm variety within the family of faith.⁶ Through it we are able to disagree and yet tolerate difference while refraining from the need to persecute or annihilate those who worship differently from us. Is there not a possibility that we might expand this concept to include the whole of humanity? Could we not begin with the assumption, informed by the incarnation, that God loves each and every person and creature that draws life, and that all of them are caught up in the magnetic pull of that divine ardour? This is not to baptise them covertly into our faith.⁷ Nor is it to demand they encounter God through the door of Jesus Christ. It is to recognise the validity of their own cultural responses to that of God which they encounter. It is to accept the longings and desires of seekers after truth without insisting that they become one of us.

Monotheism demands it of us, if nothing else. We have declared that there is one God, and no other God but God. Therefore we don't believe in a myriad of gods competing for attention. Our historic faith suggests that if people encounter God, it is the one and only God who they meet. Can we honestly insist that the Buddha was a demon? Do we believe that Gandhi has been consigned to the fires of hell? Was Mohammed an evil man who led millions astray? Is Oprah Winfrey some sort of sinister deceiver? Or can we view them through the lens of the resurrected Christ who has already won salvation for all the peoples of the world, as our brothers and sisters – children of God all? Can we, like Peter confronted by Cornelius, discover that the love of God is broader and more diverse than we had previously thought?

2. Embrace of Anima

I suspect if the general public were to undertake a word association test, and offered the term 'Christianity', the most common response would be 'sexual abuse'. Whether warranted or not, this connection is both pervasive and deadly. But to be objective about it and to look at the church through the eyes of an outsider, it would take enormous chutzpah to ignore the fact that sexuality has caused huge problems for the followers of Christ.⁸ While we could talk about the various contributors to the general malaise, such as

⁶ "If the church, according to its very origins, according to the mission which sustains it and the message which it preaches, is universal, then it is clearly summoned, not to deny or to ignore differences between peoples and cultures, races and classes, historical periods and their individual spirits, but to transcend them... in this way the Church showed itself to be catholic from the very beginning." Hans Küng, *The Church*, New York: Burns & Oates (trans. Ray & Rosaleen Ockenden), 2001, p.304.

⁷ "We might therefore put it as follows: the 'anonymous Christian' in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who *lives in the state of Christ's grace* through faith, hope and love, *yet who has no explicit knowledge* of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ." Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 14 translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), p 283.

⁸ "The consequences of all these scandals for the reputation of the Catholic Church are disastrous. Important church leaders have already admitted this. Numerous innocent and committed pastors and educators are suffering under the stigma of suspicion now blanketing the church." Hans Küng, *The Irish*

enforced celibacy, theological dualism, or a largely male clergy, it might be useful to delve a little deeper and explore the roots of our historical unease with sexuality.

Borrowing from Jungian terminology, I'd like to suggest that the church's pathology stems from an underlying discomfort with and fear of the anima⁹. For those unfamiliar with the term, it denotes an archetypal force of the internalised feminine within the male psyche. Given the predominance of male power and theology within the church, it is understandable that fear of the feminine principle dwelling within is more of a force for havoc than it's polar opposite, the animus. The anima represents a potent force of mystery, sensuality, sexuality, rich darkness, synthesis, and wholeness.¹⁰ It dwells within the male psyche. Fear of it results in the demonising of women, the regulation of sexual behaviour, iconoclasm and crusades against sensuality, the predominance of logic over intuition, and the entrenchment of power in hierarchical forms. All of which sounds strangely familiar.

In psychotherapeutic terms, wholeness comes through integration. Throughout Christian history there has been a fear and suspicion of women, of the natural world, and of sexuality. All of these are of course deep streams in which one can drown. Wonderfully so. Suppression of archetypal forces creates not only a form of psychosis but opportunities for mayhem when the internal fortifications are breached and the unsuspecting subject is swamped with a tsunami of pent up inertia.¹¹ Small wonder then that those most virulent in opposing the deep currents within end up succumbing to them and inflicting their pathology on the rest of the world. Institutions, such as the church, can suffer similar fear-driven reactions.

I'm sure you can connect the dots and relate fear of the anima to the phenomenon of sexual abuse. But the malaise is much deeper than that. I would suggest that abuse is a symptom of the problem rather than the root of it. Other indications include a neurotic ambivalence toward sex itself, the fear of homosexuality, the lack of a deep aesthetic, an inability to enter darkness or pain, and the predominance of doctrine over worship. The big kahuna is the way the church has treated and continues to treat women, with the

Times, April 16, 2010.

⁹ See Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, New York; Doubleday and Company, 1964.

¹⁰ Poet James K. Baxter speaks of the anima as "that mysterious archetype who has been called variously Venus, Cybele, Artemis... The *anima* changes shape according to the motives of those who approach her – a violent man will see her as a wolf; a sensual man, as a temptress; a Puritan, either not at all, or as a poisonous reptile" James K. Baxter, 'The Man on the Horse', pp.91-120 in *The Man on the Horse*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1967, p.116f.

¹¹ "It is a frightening thought that man also has a shadow side to him, consisting not just of little weaknesses- and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism. The individual seldom knows anything of this; to him, as an individual, it is incredible that he should ever in any circumstances go beyond himself. But let these harmless creatures form a mass, and there emerges a raging monster; and each individual is only one tiny cell in the monster's body, so that for better or worse he must accompany it on its bloody rampages and even assist it to the utmost. Having a dark suspicion of these grim possibilities, man turns a blind eye to the shadow-side of human nature. Blindly he strives against the salutary dogma of original sin, which is yet so prodigiously true. Yes, he even hesitates to admit the conflict of which he is so painfully aware." Carl Jung, 'On the Pathology of the Unconscious', *Complete Works 7: Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, p.35.

virgin/whore dichotomy revealing the unease of a church ruled by a fragile animus. It robs and demeans us all, and reveals that we have yet to achieve one of Paul's basic three inclusions.

One of the developments in recent human history has been the breaking of the connection between sex and procreation.¹² That is a massive shift, and one that the church has yet to fully come to terms with. While we preach caution and restraint, it remains at least possible that such a development is evidence of God's transforming work within the world. Like any powerful force, sexuality can harbour both good and evil. But surely the Christian message is not about how people use their bodies to express love, so much as about the nature of love as a small sacrament of divine loving. To embrace the anima would be to overcome our fears of homosexual loving, and rather celebrate it. In Christ there is neither heterosexual nor homosexual. Please form an orderly queue for my forthcoming immolation.

3. Fullness of Humanity

The difficulties with sexuality are further related to an inability on the part of the church to believe fully in the incarnation. For the most part we don't consider Jesus to have been human in the same sort of way that we are human. I discovered this in my days as a Baptist minister, when I led a Bible study on the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume, wiping his feet with her hair. Among a group consisting mostly of faithful spinsters, I raised the possibility that Jesus might have experienced an erection during the encounter. The response was not positive. For some reason we find it easier to ascribe full divinity to Christ than we do to recognise his full humanity. And yet any limitation on the extent of the incarnation means that aspects of human experience are regarded as unredeemed.¹³ A failure to engage with Jesus as a sexual being is surely related to our ambivalence toward our own sexuality.

I find myself in that stream of mystics and theologians who might be described as Christian Humanists. For better or worse, I believe that humanity is a good condition – one to be celebrated and respected, rather than demeaned and diminished. As has also become clear already, I believe in the universality of the resurrection. It follows from this that all of humanity has already been redeemed, just as God has been eternally transformed through the incarnation. For this reason among others, I find myself more interested in what is going on outside the church than inside it. Where God is present in

¹² "This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act." Pope Paul VI, *Humane Vitae*, 1968 #12.

¹³ As per Gregory of Nazianzus: "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed." Baillie: "No more Docetism, no more Monophysite explaining away of the human character of the life that Jesus lived, but a full and unreserved recognition of His human nature as 'homo-ousios' with our own, which means 'essentially the same as ours': that lesson of the historical movement has been well learnt on all hands, and it is common ground to-day. DM Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948, p.10.

the ordinary brokenness of common human experience – that’s where the action is.¹⁴ In the sublime words of Leonard Cohen: “There’s a crack, a crack, in everything – that’s how the light gets in”.

What does it mean to be fully human? This is a question not just for theologians or philosophers, but for everyone who ever lived. It’s the stuff of life, which we all make subtle wagers on. In all realms of human existence the discussion goes on: in prisons, in factories, in hotel rooms, in taxi cabs, in hospitals, in supermarkets, in staff rooms, and sometimes even in churches. It’s a conversation that anyone can join, provided they’re prepared to listen as well as speak, and provided also that they bring their own broken humanity to it. We believe that in Christ we have caught a glimpse of a human being in full flight, and naturally enough we want to add our voice to the korero. Those around us treat us with suspicion, because too often in the past we’ve tried to dominate and speak over them. These days I’m a filmmaker because I’ve opted to join the conversation.

But of course it’s not simply a matter of talking. We’re invited to join in the adventure of discovering for ourselves what it means to be fully human. To explore the depths and heights of the inexhaustible mystery that lies at the core of our being. Christ in you, the hope of glory. To be human is to be vulnerable, fragile, confused, lonely, frustrated, anguished, desolate. It’s also to be beautiful, mysterious, curious, tender, creative, hopeful, divine. Our task in living is not to become what we’re not, but to become who we are. The incarnation means for us that we find our salvation in the fullness of our humanity, not apart from it. Some people have found that this requires leaving the church.

4. Risk of Freedom

Many years ago when I was studying in Switzerland, my wife Rosemary was asked to preach at the church we attended. She chose to explore the words of Jesus, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”. I may be biased but I thought she made a particularly fine job of the sermon. Afterwards, however, she was approached by the pastor. He advised her that such a topic was not appropriate for students, because advocating freedom was irresponsible in the context of young minds. It put me in mind of Dostoyevsky’s story of the Grand Inquisitor¹⁵, who is called in when Jesus returns during the Inquisition. He informs Christ that his teachings were hopelessly libertarian, and that the church has been forced to take on the task of adapting the message to one that people could handle.¹⁶

¹⁴ Baxter speaks of “the gulf between the battlements of the Church Militant and the stony ground below where men struggle often with the same basic problems under different names, yet fear to accept orthodoxy lest their present armour should be called intellectual arrogance and stripped from them. Lacking a Christian humanism, men have turned to agnostic or atheistic humanism for an understanding of their problems.” James K. Baxter, ‘The Creative Mask’, *The Fire and the Anvil: Notes on Modern Poetry*, 35-55. Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1955, p.48.

¹⁵ ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (trans. Constance Garnett), New York: Lowell Press, 2009.

¹⁶ “Thou didst choose what was utterly beyond the strength of men, acting as though Thou didst not love

Of two things I am certain. One is that the gospel is a message of glorious freedom. The other is that freedom by its very nature entails the risk of abuse. It seems that the Grand Inquisitor has prevailed in the church, and that by and large we have preferred to hedge freedom for the sake of order. This is perhaps nowhere so evident as in my own branch of the church, Catholicism, where Pope John XXIII urged Vatican II to throw open the windows of the church, and where the Vatican has subsequently sought to nail them shut again. Freedom, like sexuality, is a powerful force when unrestrained. But while the ecclesial institution seems to think that the only safe course is to use authority and regulation to restrain freedom, the movement of the divine within humanity is to encourage it. There are proud moments where Christianity has undergirded the quest for liberty, but also an unrelenting drive to inhibit it.¹⁷

Perhaps it is time to ask the hard question of whether the church is on the side of God or not. There is a strong thread in the teaching of Jesus regarding the willingness to risk all in order to gain all; to face death in order to embrace life. I spoke earlier of a pebble thrown in the pool of history with ripples radiating from it. An important part of that activity among us is the progress of freedom. We have progressively struggled toward the emancipation of slaves, the liberation of women, the end of racial discrimination, the promotion of religious tolerance, the acceptance of sexual identity, and freedom from political and military oppression. It is the work of God through us and among us. The ripples have not stopped spreading, and there will be more to understand and enact as we explore the freedom that is our heritage as the children of God.

5. The Salvation of Sin

Let me introduce this final and controversial section with one of my favourite stories. It seems that when God creates each person, there's an invisible string that stretches between every soul and the creator. But when people do things to sever the connection, preferring not to be attached, the string is broken. This is a bit of a hassle for God, who has to set about tying a knot in the string. Over time, some people have more knots than string in their connection, and of course the string becomes very short. It's because of this that the greatest sinners are closest to God. I like these little theological fables, because they have the power to subvert expectations. And it seems to me that there is a lot of misinformation around about sin – surprising really when it's such a popular pastime.

Somehow or other we seem to have got the notion that sin consists of a series of wrong actions. Personally I blame it on the plural in the Lord's Prayer which entreats God to forgive us our sins, when it might be helpfully ask to forgive us our sin. The very notion of sin is meaningless apart from a perceived relationship with God. To call an atheist a sinner makes as much sense as rebuking a wild horse for not wearing a saddle. A movie I

them at all—Thou who didst come to give Thy life for them! Instead of taking possession of men's freedom, Thou didst increase it, and burdened the spiritual kingdom of mankind with its sufferings for ever." *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "In the church of Christ the religious, economic and sexual privileges that obtain in the world around lose their force." Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (trans. Margaret Kohl), London: SCM, 1977, p.106.

love is called *As It Is In Heaven*¹⁸. There's a very provocative scene in it where the pastor's wife takes him to task about the subject of sin. Let's have a quick look at it.

[Play scene from film]

If I were to go right out on the limb of heresy, I'd say that she's fundamentally correct to deconstruct the concept of sin in the light of the resurrection. Sin is separation from God, and Romans 8 tells us that there's nothing that can separate us any more from the love of God. The vigilant among you will already be thinking "Aha – that refers to those who are in Christ Jesus". To which my response would be: who isn't in Christ Jesus after the resurrection? Is sin finally more powerful than the ability of God to reconcile us? And should we be constantly hung up about sin after we've understood that even we are loved? Perhaps in the end not only sinners can be redeemed, but sin itself. Personally I find the grace of God most prevalent among those who know themselves to be broken.

Conclusion

It may seem that in these two lectures I've gone out of my way to critique the church. If so, it's a backhand expression of my deep passion for the presence of God in the world – which I've encountered through Jesus Christ. I remain unashamedly and irrepressibly Christian, despite being a Catholic. It is the hope of what might be that lies behind my despair of what the so-called community of Christ has become. I do believe that we are in new territory where theology in extremis is called for, and where the rehearsing of old solutions found in other eras will not suffice. I hope I've provided some evidence that such radical rethinking is not new to the church.

Perpetual reform is essential to faithfulness, and to keep us from idolatrous allegiance to penultimate structures – no matter how much we've invested in them. God lives and moves and continues to create, and we're invited to the dance. It's an invitation to a kind of death and dying, a giving up of certainty and power in order to experience the fragility of new life. Theology is a companion to those who travel the road; not a commentary from the grandstands by spectators. No one is going to make us cross the border of the future into unexplored territory. We can stay where we are and extol the virtues of the past if we wish. It's a choice we get to make, like Peter when he wants to resist God. Let us pray for courage to proceed.

¹⁸ *As It Is In Heaven*, Feature Film (original title *Så som i himmelen*), dir. Kay Pollak, Sweden, 2004.