

'Physician, Heal Thyself'

8. Loss of Faith?

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EXETER

'Put not your trust in princes', warns the Psalmist. *Even princes of the church*, comes my usual mental response. But this morning at Matins, as we recite the familiar words, I am disposed to think more kindly of my bishop. Five years ago one of his colleagues dismissed me from my parish and refused me permission to officiate as a priest for publishing unorthodox opinions. Now my present bishop has written to the incumbent whose church I currently attend to 'express goodwill towards your inviting Anthony Freeman to do such priestly duties as you request'. I am quite specifically not being given a general 'Permission to Officiate' in the diocese, but at least my position as a priest in the Church of England is again being acknowledged. A small step, but a significant one, and a good time to take stock of the costs and of the blessings which have stemmed from writing those fateful words, 'I do not believe in God'.

The 'Freeman affair'

The public facts of my case, and some of the issues raised by it, were conveniently set out in the 'Review of the Year' in the *Church of England Year Book* for 1995:

The matter of the clergy freehold [the subject of the previous section of the Review] was a side issue in the dismissal from office by the Bishop of Chichester of his former Domestic Chaplain, the Revd Anthony Freeman. Mr Freeman combined the post of being the Bishop's Officer for Continuing Ministerial Education (CME) with priest in charge of a parish. In 1993, influenced by the 'Sea of Faith' movement, he published a book (*God in Us*, SCM Press) stating that he no longer believed in an objective God.¹ The Bishop dismissed him from his CME post but gave him a year to consider his position. Mr Freeman felt unable to change his position and was removed from his priest-in-charge post. This would not have been possible if he had a freehold. Is it wise to limit explorations of faith by the clergy? Is it wise for clergy to express views so contrary to the tradition, not least in an area where our basic attitude should be one of adoration, awe and wonder? Other clergy sharing similar beliefs are protected by their freehold. The right to genuine intellectual enquiry must be preserved, but the pastoral wisdom of some clergy is also open to question. These are not easy matters. It could well be that a genuine thinking and enquiring clergy is more likely to

commend the faith than those who take a simplistic view of the Gospel. The Bishop of Oxford has now published a reply (*The Real God*, Mowbray). The debate continues. Mr Freeman has since found alternative employment.

So much for the formal record. The personal story is far more exhilarating: a heady mixture of joy and hurt, of frustration and opportunity. Above all a story of new life, of resurrection, of affirmation for my Christian faith.

My supposed 'loss of faith'

I am rooted in what used to be called the 'Prayer Book Catholic' tradition of the Church of England: christened at three weeks, confirmed when eleven, ordained at twenty-five (having gained degrees in both natural science and theology). At that time my theological outlook was distinctly liberal and my liturgical preferences decidedly conservative (as they still are). For me the essential continuity of religion is provided by the unvarying and familiar words of the scriptures and the prayers; and the necessary questioning and development comes in the preaching and the teaching.

Among the powerful influences on my approach to teaching and preaching the Gospel were John Robinson's *Honest to God* and Harry Williams's *True Wilderness*. Only to preach what was true to one's own experience; only, to offer teaching that had 'cash value' (as we used to put it) in the lives of our parishioners; not to use words that had no meaning for us just because they had always been used. Those were the guiding principles. But over the twenty years of my ministry I found it increasingly difficult to honour these precepts. More and more I had to answer my parishioners' questions by such evasions as, 'The Church teaches ...' or, 'These are various answers contained in the tradition ...', rather than boldly proclaiming, 'I believe ...' let alone, 'The truth is ...' In relation to God, for example, I found the blatant 'economic trinitarianism' of the revised initiation rites a constant embarrassment, and could imagine the Cappadocian fathers spinning in their graves.² When it came to human nature, especially in relation to eternal life, I found that the soul/body dualism inherent in most Christian people's approach to their own selves was hard to reconcile with either biblical anthropology or contemporary science and philosophy. Yet the church's language – 'when our bodies lie in the dust our souls shall live with Thee', etc. – seemed to encourage if not positively to demand it. This was not simply a conflict between 'Christian teaching' and 'modern science'. It was more often a case of a

¹ The theological views expressed in my book may be found summarized by the Editor of *The Expository Times* in a joint review of *God in Us* and the Bishop of Oxford's *The Real God* (ET 106, 1994–95, 193–196).

² 'Economic trinitarianism' divides the tasks of creation, redemption and sanctification between the three persons of the Godhead (as in the ASB 1980 rites of baptism and confirmation); by contrast the Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa) were notable for their doctrine of 'co-inherence', insisting that each of the divine persons is fully involved in all aspects of divine activity.

multiple Christian tradition at odds both with itself and also with contemporary understandings.

In this situation a modern, liberal, realist theology – one which takes ‘Christian truth’ to be a matter of matching up the church’s dogmas with external reality – had to make judgments about which interpretations were true, and then to reject all the others as false. This had been my own approach, and it was becoming less and less tenable. By contrast a postmodern, radical, non-realist theology could appreciate the value of one tradition without necessarily condemning the others. This was not a mindless relativism that says anything is as good as anything else; it was an acceptance of the limitations of human knowledge. Such was the approach taken by Don Cupitt in his television series and accompanying book, *The Sea of Faith*, and discovering it enabled me to grasp the fact that theological traditions, including statements about God, are human creations whose value – whose ‘truth’ – does not depend upon their being accurate descriptions of some state of affairs ‘out there’. It enabled me to ‘take leave of God’³ as an objective reality and embrace God afresh as a creative life-enhancing force in my life.

Although my new-found faith might have appeared unorthodox to many, I felt it as authentic gospel – as liberating good news – in a way that the old alleged certainties had never felt. I described this ‘conversion’ experience in my book:

[T]he old liberal dilemma – how can religion be both credible and exciting? – has been resolved. Every aspect of faith takes on a fresh look and a new meaning ... This freedom came when I accepted that I did not believe in God as traditionally understood. That was a kind of trigger which released me to find a new meaning in the word God. Only when I accepted that ‘I do not believe in God’ (my old God) was I free to discover how with integrity I could still say ‘I believe in God’ (understood in a new way).

... Anxious friends asked whether I had lost my faith. I was able to assure them that I had not. I had given it away: given away my old second-hand faith and so been free to discover for the first time what I myself *really* believed. One of the things I found was that in a new way I could give real meaning to belief in God. That, surely, is authentic Christian grace. That, surely, is the *gift* of faith (*God in Us*, pp. 11–12).

One of the ironies of my new situation was that all my life I had seen myself as a teacher rather than a preacher, an explainer rather than a proclaimer. Now, at the very moment when I had something that I was burning to share, and for which I felt – literally – an evangelical zeal, the pulpit was forbidden me. Yet even this seems to fit into an authentically Christian pattern. Jesus was rejected by his home town and forced into a nation-wide ministry; the apostles were persecuted in Jerusalem and so embarked

upon their mission beyond Judaea into Samaria and throughout the Mediterranean; Wesley was ostracized by the Church of England and declared ‘the world’ to be his parish; I have similarly been refused permission to preach by my own church, but have found myself invited to speak to Quakers and to Humanists, to students and academics, in small groups and in public lectures, on radio and television, on both sides of the Atlantic. These opportunities have come precisely because I was dismissed by my bishop, and I could accept the offers with relish because, for the first time, I really had a gospel to proclaim.

The Joseph factor

Anyone who responds to a religious calling – as a priest, a pastor, a missionary, by membership of a religious order, or however – will encounter what I call the ‘Joseph factor’. Whenever I take a Christmas Crib service for children, I like to draw their attention to the figure of Joseph, who is generally in the background and half forgotten. He suffers all the upheaval and disruption consequent upon the choice of his wife Mary to be the mother of the Christ, but without the special gifts of grace associated with her calling. To me he represents the families of all those whose personal vocations have far-reaching consequences for their nearest and dearest. They suffer all the external deprivations without necessarily gaining any of the inner satisfaction of responding to God’s call. Worse than that, they often suffer inwardly as well, beset by bewilderment and anxieties that are directly linked to their relative’s calling.

In my own case, there were many compensating factors for me personally, to balance the undoubted downside of losing my home, my position and my income. Yet for my wife Jacqueline, who lost all those things as well, there were no such compensations. And for my parents, there was disappointment, a sense of loss, a conviction that I had betrayed my faith and my calling. Others will have been tainted by association. Who can tell how my brother’s future ministry in the Church of England might be affected by his relationship to me? I know for certain that my former curates have been questioned by their bishops to make sure they have not been ‘infected’ by my views.

This has been one of the hardest things for me to deal with, because there is really nothing I can do about it. I have my own inner strength to draw on to meet my own problems, but I cannot bear the burdens of those close to me who have been made to suffer on my account.

Publicity

The greatest initial problem with the ‘Freeman affair’ was coping with the publicity. Although the book was not due for publication until September 1993, I had – as a matter of courtesy – sent my bishop a copy of the manuscript three or four months earlier. That led to an interview at the end of June, which in turn resulted in my being sent to discuss my views with two eminent retired

³ The phrase comes from a sermon of Meister Eckhart and was adapted by Don Cupitt as the title of his first anti-realist book, *Taking Leave of God*.

professors of theology. By the end of July, when it was clear that I would not withdraw the book, the bishop wrote to tell me that I was to be relieved of my position as CME officer and assistant director of ordinands with effect from 15 August. Furthermore, any reference to my being a diocesan officer was to be deleted from the promotional material relating to the book (which was due to be launched with a signing session at a Chichester bookshop on 1 September). It is my opinion that this stipulation led directly to the wave of publicity that engulfed us a month later.

The way the publisher complied with the bishop's instruction was to include with each review copy of *God in Us* a note saying that the information on the cover was now out of date, since the author had been dismissed from his diocesan post as a consequence of writing the book. Both the *Church Times* and the *Tablet* responded by turning the forthcoming publication and my dismissal into substantial news items. That was Friday morning. From there it was picked up by Damian Thompson, the religious affairs correspondent of the *Telegraph*. He rang the publishers, and someone bicycled round from the SCM Bookroom and delivered a copy to his office. All very quaint. I had a phone call from SCM giving me about two minutes warning that Thompson would be ringing me for an interview, which he duly did. This resulted in a prominent and substantially accurate article (although he got the title of the book wrong) complete with photograph.

At 12.40 a.m. on Saturday I was awoken by the telephone. It was not a parishioner in distress but Dominic Kennedy from the *Daily Mail*, wanting to check out the story he had just seen in the first edition of the *Telegraph*. I approve of journalists checking their sources but this seemed to me to show excessive zeal. It took me a couple of hours to get back to sleep properly, and as things turned out I could have done with a really refreshing night. By the time I went to bed Saturday evening I had given telephone interviews to two local papers and to Independent Radio News; been videotaped and recorded outside the parish church for both BBC and Independent local TV; travelled to Broadcasting House to record an interview for the BBC Radio 4 'Sunday' programme; been driven from there to the Sky TV News studios to appear live on their mid-evening programme; and avoided giving interviews to quite a lot of other journalists.

The following morning (Sunday) there were reporters in the churchyard waiting to assail the congregation and their vicar as we emerged from Sung Matins and it was still three days before publication date. None of this would have happened if the bishop had waited until after publication before making his move and if it had not been the press 'silly season'. (I was regularly featured that week as the 'vicar who does not believe in God' in a double-act alongside a butcher who had turned vegetarian!)

Some people will think that I should have kept my head down when the requests for interviews began. I decided

not to do that for a number of reasons. First, if you refuse to talk to the press, you cannot blame them if they get things wrong. Secondly, I recall Lord Soper saying of his soap-box performances, 'I do not mind what the hecklers do to draw the crowd; what matters is the use I make of the opportunity'. I felt that all the publicity, none of which was of my seeking, was an excellent opportunity to promote as simply as possible the postmodern radical Christianity which had so revitalized my own faith. And thirdly, I decided that if this was to be my Andy Warhol 'fifteen minutes of fame' then I might as well enjoy it. I do not often have the chance to be chauffeur-driven round London.

Later there were opportunities for more in-depth interviews and broadcasts, including one in Joan Bakewell's *Heart of the Matter* series. Overall I was impressed by the quality of the reporting and the briefing of the journalists I met, and the seriousness and sympathy with which I was treated. That year their emphasis was chiefly on the contents of the book and how I thought I could hold the views that I did and still function as a priest. Twelve months later, when I was finally dismissed from my parish, there was a second flurry of press interest. This time it focused much more on the fact and consequences of my dismissal. There was a good deal of disbelief that all this could really be happening in the 1990s. That a bishop should have the single-handed power of dismissal – without any form of appeal – from home and livelihood was itself a matter of amazement to most people; that he should go ahead and actually use the power defied their imagination.

Personal consequences

The practical consequences of the dismissal were far less harsh than they might have been, thanks to the generosity of many people and an element of good fortune. Indeed, we have been greatly blessed – and that provides me with a degree of confirmation that my decision to publish was right. Even so, there were undeniably negative consequences.

Public reaction in the parish, as in the country at large, was divided between those who labelled me mad, or bad or brave. A small group of worshippers, styling themselves 'the congregation in waiting', began to meet in a private house rather than attend services at which I was officiating, but their numbers were made up for by others who began to attend the church as a result of my book. Thanks to the loyalty and wisdom of the churchwardens and others, there was no public row or acrimonious split to bring the church into disrepute. My fellow-clergy were also divided, but there was no obvious personal animosity, even from those who felt most strongly that I was wrong and should resign.

By allowing me to continue in the parish for twelve months, while having removed more than half of my workload, the bishop acted generously. (Under the terms

of my licence I could have been summarily dismissed and required to leave the vicarage at once.) On the other hand, it was noticeable that – outwardly at least – no effort was made by the diocesan authorities to help me find either alternative employment or accommodation. By dint of careful saving, Jacqueline and I had been able to put down a deposit on a ‘retirement’ bungalow about fifteen years earlier, and the happily timed maturing of an insurance policy enabled us to pay off the remaining mortgage shortly before my income from the Church Commissioners ceased. Whether the diocese would have shown more concern had I not had that property available, I cannot tell. Certainly there was no active assistance in finding work, and lack of secure employment was – and remains – our chief anxiety.

The practical and timely offers, in relation to both work and housing, that did come were in each case from lay Anglicans who also found themselves unwillingly moved by the church to its fringes. A farmer in Oxfordshire, a GP in the West Midlands and a publisher in Devon, none of whom I had ever met in my life, each independently sought me out and offered me a lifeline. And in each case they managed to do it in such a way that they made me feel that I should be helping them, rather than the other way round, if I accepted their proposals. In the event, all three gave support at crucial times, which served both to meet our material needs and also to restore my self-confidence that I had something to offer, even though my church made it clear that my services were not welcome. There was also great generosity from friends and acquaintances, not least from the parish whose life I had turned inside out.

Blessing in disguise

The hardest thing for me to bear has been the refusal of permission to officiate in all three dioceses where I have lived since my dismissal. It does seem strange, to say the least, that colleagues who have published – and still openly proclaim – similar views to mine continue to hold benefices and licensed ministerial posts, while I am formally denied even the possibility of baptizing a friend’s child, or celebrating communion on the silver jubilee of my ordination. Not that I begrudge my fellow-priests in the ‘Sea of Faith’ their freedom to exercise a ministry; rather I detect a whiff of the ‘Admiral Byng’ solution to a difficulty: the bishops might not actually shoot any radical clergy, but to discipline one of them harshly – *pour encourager les autres* – perhaps seemed a good idea.

Many people have suggested that I was unlucky in having a very conservative bishop. I do not think that made much difference. More significant was probably my former close association with him and the fact that he could not hide behind the freehold as a reason for not taking action. That is to say, he could not stay neutral: not to sack me (when it lay in his power) would have been positively to back me. That would have been asking too

much. If it is still insisted that a more liberal bishop might have behaved differently, I can only point out that the self-confessed liberal, John Habgood, then still Archbishop of York, came out publicly against me, and the only English bishops to offer me any kind of support or encouragement were either retired or in academic posts. Of all the diocesan bishops in the world, Jack Spong alone offered to authorize my ministry, but I had no wish to go to the United States, and in any case he lacked the patronage to be able to guarantee me paid employment.

However, even my frustration at not being able to exercise my ministry became a source of reinforcement for my faith. Like many liberal and radical Christians, I have always had intellectual problems with intercessory prayer. I still do. But I am convinced that the circumstances which have denied me the ability to minister have been an answer to prayer. Back in the early 1990s, when the movement for ordination of women to the priesthood seemed to be grinding to a halt, some priests considered refusing to exercise their priestly functions until women were ordained. I was sympathetic, but always felt that a voluntary renunciation of this kind (apart from harming one’s parishioners more than recalcitrant members of the General Synod) would only rub in the fact that one had the choice. What I felt the need for (what in the deepest sense, even if not in so many words, I prayed for) was to share the helplessness of the women who felt called to the priesthood.

They really were helpless. There was apparently nothing they could do to forward their cause. The theological argument had been won, but still it was held that ‘the time was not right’; and from the Anglo-Catholic clergy came that cruellest of all arguments – that since the priestly ministry is a great privilege to which no one has any right, for women to point out the injustice of the situation proved that they had no grasp of what priesthood was really about, and so were more than ever disqualified from entering its ranks. I wanted to share with them that sense of helpless frustration of one’s vocation, but I had no idea how such a thing could come about. Now I do know. In the same year that the way finally opened for women’s ordination to the priesthood in the Church of England, I found myself deprived of the authority to exercise my own ministry, in circumstances which have for five years put me in a situation so similar to what theirs had been, that I can only see my own frustration during that time as being somehow linked with theirs; in other words, as an answer to that deeply felt if barely expressed prayer to share their pain.

To others this may seem fanciful. To me it is perhaps the most important aspect of the entire ‘Freeman affair’. So far from being a loss of faith, my ‘conversion’ and its aftermath have been a tremendous confirmation of it, and in particular have given me a new awareness of what Christian prayer truly is.