

# Bearings on the sea of faith

*Following in the footsteps of Archbishop George Carey's article in the last issue of *Leading Light*, David Kettle challenges both postmodernists and fundamentalists in their search for truth.*

**T**he legend of Scylla and Charybdis provides a dramatic image for the Church's apologetic task today. The church is to steer between the snapping heads of postmodernism and the whirlpool of fundamentalism, or else be shipwrecked – as described by Archbishop George Carey, in the last edition of *Leading Light*.

No image can tell the whole story, of course. Another image taken from the same legend adds to the picture: the image of the Siren, whose beautiful singing lures unwary sailors onto the rocks. This reminds us that while postmodernism and fundamentalism should undoubtedly appear to us like a monster and a whirlpool, they in fact have a seductive appeal.

What kind of appeal is this? Each of them lures us to see it not as an obstacle to steer past within the wide horizons of God, but rather as a harbour and a home, in place of the voyage to which God calls us. The postmodern and the fundamentalist stances each try to make us see everything by reference to the bearings they offer – everything including each other, and the horizon of God which frames them both.

The scene depicted here is one of radical conflict. Postmodernism and fundamentalism each claims to provide us with bearings, while contradicting the claim of the other in this regard. Indeed, each can be seen as defining itself precisely by its contradiction of the other. In so doing, they also contradict the claim of God to offer us bearings.

The Church today is in danger of polarising between those who take bearings from postmodernism and from fundamentalism. All 'middle ground' is under threat. In the face of this, the Church's calling remains the same as ever: to seek and steer by true bearings and live in the vital unity which flows from this.

In exploring these dangerous waters, we can take as our starting-point the traditional Christian insight that the human heart or will has a critical place in our



knowledge (or ignorance) of spiritual things. The conflict between postmodernism, fundamentalism and Christian faith can therefore be analysed as a conflict not merely between different ideas about the truth, but also at the level of our appetite for truth. In both postmodernism and fundamentalism we see the distortion of an original responsiveness towards truth. We will look at each of them in turn.

**P**ostmodernism has arisen out of modernism and refers us back to it. It refers us back to how modernism approaches truth, and how modernism sees the enemy of truth.

Modernism's theoretical roots lie in the eighteenth-century European campaign for 'enlightenment'. This campaign was partly a reaction to the memory of

religious wars which had ravaged Europe, and to the continuing claim to privilege and authority by religious institutions. The enemy of truth was identified with unexamined dogmatic belief and its defence by custom and traditional authority.

In future, it was said, let humankind be united around firmly established, universally accepted knowledge. Our pursuit of such knowledge might challenge our fond illusions and vested interests; yet we must, as Kant urged, 'dare to know' in all honesty and humility. Final authority was to lie in the exercise of reason – something in which every individual might share with dignity.

How is the pursuit of truth conceived here? It is equated with openness, as opposed to blind prejudice; to honesty, as opposed to self-deceived ideas; to humble doubt, as opposed to overweening

view contests from all over the world, 24 hours a day. But we sense a law of diminishing returns at work.

'All joy has reached its eventide, the gladness of the earth is banished,' complained the prophet Isaiah, some time ago now. But he could have been talking about us. The Mexican wave is a little protest against the joylessness of our tired amusements, a gesture towards gladness.

Another 'hurrah' for the wave must be raised for the way in which it contributes to the sense of occasion, to the festivity and drama of sporting events. It is fascinating and beautiful to behold, like the concerted movement of a great shoal of fish in a Jacques Cousteau film, or the twisting and turning of a single-minded flock of pigeons above Rhondda town. It enhances our sporting rituals.

Of course it can be badly executed and inappropriately timed. My fellow Welshmen and I shouldn't have been waving when Welsh hopes were drowning. We should have been witnessing, admiring, regretting, hoping. Instead, we were locked into the wave we had created and weren't sure when – or whether – to stop.

**R**ituals. This, for me, is where things start getting tricky, and where my enthusiasm for the wave and contemporary sports in general begins to falter. Somehow or other, religious language comes easily to the tongue when we are talking about sport.

All of us – fans, commentators and players alike – speak quite naturally of the great shrines of our particular game, of devoted supporters, of coaches who have *faith* in their players, of teams who have experienced *resurrection*, of *life and death struggles*, of athletes who have achieved *immortality*. When sport is under consideration, gods and idols are never far away.

Is all this merely a manner of speech, an ironical use of language on the part of thoroughly secular people?

The American Catholic social critic, Michael Novak, author of *The Joy of Sports*, believes it is not. 'Sports,' he argues, 'flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection.'

Novak is a real fan. He loves baseball, basketball and football – 'the three great American public liturgies' – and he writes beautifully and sympathetically about them. He is convinced that sports really do

fulfil a religious function: 'they feed a deep human hunger, place humans in touch with certain dimly perceived features of human life within this cosmos, and provide at least a pagan sense of godliness.'

Back in the second century AD, the North African theologian, Tertullian, also drew attention to the religious nature of sports, although he certainly did not share Novak's enthusiasm for them. Writing about the public spectacles and contests of his day, he observed that they involved 'forms both of worship and of pleasure'; through their ferocity, their injuries and their endurance, the contestants earned for themselves 'an eternity of fame, a resurrection by being kept in remembrance'.

Tertullian pointed out that the Greek games, the Olympics among them, were inextricably bound up with religion. They were held either in honour of the gods or of the dead and were consciously set up as 'sacred' events. Many of the contests were marked by extreme brutality. He explained that these were formerly rituals of human sacrifice, designed to appease the gods; over time they had become thinly disguised as entertainment.

Tertullian condemned them bitterly, for they disfigured and dishonoured the image of God in human beings, and he warned Christians to stay clear of such demonic entertainments. Two centuries later, Augustine of Hippo likewise dismissed the so-called sanctity of the games in a memorable phrase: 'God's majesty never can delight in that which pollutes human dignity.'

Under the influence of the profound humanism of the Christian gospel, much of the barbarism and cruelty that once characterised sport in Western society has been outlawed. Traces of it remain in boxing, where it is still possible for a man to be clubbed to death before a maddened crowd lusting for blood.

But on the whole, the objections that Tertullian raised against sports have been publicly addressed and dealt with. We have been freed from seeing the sporting contest as an appeasement of the gods or a sacrificial shedding of blood, and are able, with Michael Novak, to marvel at the accuracy of a quarter-back, the agility of a basketball player, the skill and power of an in-form batsman.

But like the wave in perpetual motion around the stadium, the issue of sport as sacred ritual will not subside so easily. Augustine's objections to the great public spectacles went deeper than simply the

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AUGUSTINE

question of violence and human degradation. It touched on our concept of time and the very meaning of human history.

Novak himself recognises that, as spectators of sports events, we are lifted out of our ordinary humdrum sense of time and are immersed into what is elsewhere called 'sacred time'. He says: 'sacred time is more like eternity than like history, more like cycles of recurrence than like progress, more like a celebration of repetition than like a celebration of novelty.'

Sports can effect something similar to what the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, called an 'eternal return', the plunge of primitive peoples into their origins to re-enact the foundational myths of their people. In their way of thinking, to enter this circular, ever-repeated time, is to be really living, to become 'a contemporary of the gods'. But it is that time which is important, not ours.

Augustine protested against this cyclical view of time embodied in the spectacles, the rituals, the sports of his contemporary culture, and propounded by pagan philosophers. For him, this form of existence – religious though it might be – denied the possibility of change and newness in the world, the reality of God's actions and of human freedom. He described it as imprisonment within a circle. 'Christ died *once* for our sins', he reminded his fellow-Christians. 'We refuse to walk in the circle with them. Let us follow Christ, our true way, and leave this circle or maze of the impious.'

Round and round it goes, that beautiful, enchanting wave – the charismatic tendency of the terraces, accompanying our rituals, signalling our praise. Are we, in our increasingly sports-obsessed culture, imprisoned within a circle, locked in an action replay, captive to our own amusements? Having started the wave, can we stop it? 

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fundamentalism, vice-versa.

Yet this opposition between questioning (weighing, judging, critically searching) and affirming (showing commitment, allegiance) arises only in the context of our theoretical attention. Both alike have as their object a statement which is itself neither theoretically questioned nor affirmed in this act, but simply assumed. However, such theoretical questioning and affirmation is not our primary expression of concern for truth.

Instead, our primary concern for truth expresses itself in personal, moral and spiritual matters and in other lively explorations, such as those which mark human infancy. In these matters, our attention is not merely rooted in some established theoretical framework and directed towards a theoretical statement within it, but is rooted in the mystery of ourselves directed towards the very mystery of God. And here – crucially – our intention is both of radical, searching discernment and of total personal commitment.

Here, question and answer are not in simple opposition; rather they enliven each other in a profound way. As Gerhard Ebeling writes, 'According to biblical usage the quest of God and search for God certainly does not mean that he is then found in a way that puts an end to the searching and questioning. Rather it is a searching and questioning which is stimulated more than ever by the true knowledge of God.'

Our primary concern for truth expresses itself in our reaching out to God. Now this concern stands in opposition both to false allegiance or prejudice and to false questioning or evasion. But it cannot be defined by its opposition to either or both: it is primary. In the same way, when sailing between two obstacles, our primary concern must be for what lies ahead – for our bearings come from God, our 'leading light'. If instead of this we set our rudder fixedly away from one obstacle, we shall likely run into the other. This is what happens when we exalt the secondary over the primary, in an act of logical inversion.

The 'secondary' arises, we have seen, in the domain of theoretical thought, from the opposition found in this domain between the acts of questioning and of affirming. To make this opposition absolute is falsely to exalt theoretical thought as primary, in place of our personal encounter with God.

To give primacy to theoretical thought is to treat God as a theoretical construct.

But by contrast, the God we worship, the God who embodies all truth, is a personal God who acts in history. In so doing, God reveals himself through signs in creation. While this creation itself can be known theoretically, the God whose disclosure is mediated by it cannot. God is known only through signs in creation and as he empowers our obedience. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God's power of self-disclosure overcomes in a final way the power of everything within us which resists this.

This brings us to the heart of the seductive power of postmodernism and fundamentalism. When we embrace either of these we not only bind ourselves to a mistaken method of acquiring truth. In binding ourselves to any such 'method' at all we have already abandoned our primary impulse towards truth. We substitute for God, a method. This 'method' now takes the place of God in defining for us who we are. We use it to give ourselves identity.

This is not a self-conscious, instrumental act; rather we conceal it from ourselves. We do not acknowledge to ourselves that our identity is in question. In the case of postmodernism, we imagine to express who we are by the choices we make – our choice of purchases, activities, values, and so on. But in reality, it is the aim of our choices to 'become someone' in the eyes of others and of ourselves. Advertisers know this and use it to great effect.

Similarly, in the case of fundamentalism, we imagine to forget about ourselves as we throw ourselves into some religious or political cause. But in reality, our concern is once again for ourselves, to 'become someone', to find identity by identifying with a cause. Radical activists and cult leaders know this and use it to great effect.

The identity we pursue is in each case is an illusion. It is created by our own hearts when we turn away from God and invest our selves in a self-image we can possess and pursue. This identity is the illusory, seductive object of our narcissistic desire.

**A**ccordingly, to be called away from either postmodernism or fundamentalism to faith in God is to be called not just to a change in thinking but also to a conversion of the heart. It is to find restored our primary concern for God and leave safely in God's hands the 'self' which has held us in its seductive power.

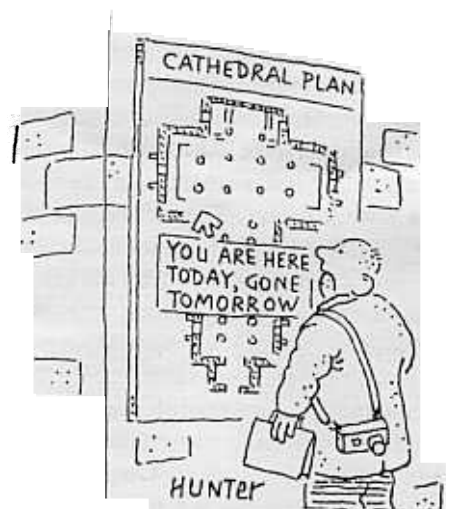
For the postmodernist, this change of heart comes with new faith that identity

has been given us. We don't need to create it; indeed we cannot. And we need not resist it as an imposition; it is the gift of ourselves, no less, and we find ourselves as we respond with our fullest participation. Now we see that we have 'not wanted to know' about God – and in so doing have 'not wanted to know' about ourselves. Resisting, in our false autonomy, claims upon us 'from outside' we have defined ourselves negatively – and contradicted the true freedom which is ours in dependence on God.

For the postmodernist, the change in thinking comes, meanwhile, with a new awareness that fundamentalism is not the only enemy of truth. We recognise that betrayal of the truth is also its enemy and that in our preoccupation with fundamentalism we may have slipped into such betrayal. What we have condemned as fundamentalism may be no such thing. Ironically, if we assume uncritically that every truth-claim is fundamentalist, then we show ourselves to be fundamentalist and not open to the truth.

For the fundamentalist, by contrast, the change of heart comes with a new acceptance that God entrusts us with personal freedom and responsibility to discern the truth. We need not fear that our pursuit of these will ever threaten our place before God. We always remain 'someone' in his eyes. Now we are freed to serve God without fear of ourselves. Now we see that we have 'not wanted to know' about ourselves – and in so doing we have 'not wanted to know' about God. In false dependence, denying our own responsibility, we have defined ourselves negatively – and contradicted the true dependence on God which is ours when we rise to this responsibility.

For the fundamentalist, the change in thinking comes with a *CONTINUED PAGE 26*



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FROM PAGE 26 new awareness that betrayal is not the only enemy of truth. We recognise that blind submission is also its enemy and that in our preoccupation with betrayal we may have slipped into such blindness. What we have condemned as betrayal may be no such thing. Ironically, if we assume that every question is a betrayal of faith, then we show ourselves to be the ones who are not faithful to God, but faithful only to our idols.

Where does all this leave us? Having

exposed the workings of postmodernism and fundamentalism, are we now left with a sure method of pursuing truth – by steering between them? Not at all. If we have learned anything from our reflections, it is that no ‘method’ whatsoever can be a substitute for discerning and committed attention to God.

At best, our reflections alert us to such substitutes, to the forms they take, and to their seductive power. This is important. But they provide us with neither a ‘method’ nor a vantage-point from which to view what is ‘on course’ and ‘off course’

for God. Instead, they call us, immersed in cross-currents, to discern what is on and off course from within the communal voyage of faith itself, drawing as ever from all the resources of scripture and tradition, and with the Spirit of responsiveness alive in us.

We can do this only as we look ahead to the God who is our leading light, and who offers us bearings on the sea of faith. 

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