Religion, Knowledge, the Human Condition, and Ethical Challenges

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The talk has the following components:

1. Religious belief and commitment have changed dramatically, since the medieval period, in the part of Western society that has adopted a "scientific" world view. What has been the nature of those changes, and why have they been so inimical to traditional religion?
   [Science has explained much that formerly seemed to require divine intervention. This has inculcated a temper of mind where God has seemed unnecessary. But what is meant by "explain"? Among key figures in the scientific changes, note Newton and Darwin.]

2. Knowledge (or, perhaps, ways of construing the world) can be classified into (i) the personal, (ii) the cultural, and (iii) a component that transcends personal and cultural perspectives
   [A key issue is: how does knowledge cross from (i) & (ii) to (iii). Some form of filter is essential. Is it reasonable to describe the needed filter(s) as inevitably, in a broad sense, scientific?]

3. What is the nature of "scientific" knowledge, broadly understood, and what are its limits?
   [Scientific knowledge relies on consistency of pattern in natural phenomena. Science does not give access to any privileged knowledge, in a sense that everyday experience does not. Claims in scientific journals criticism and scrutiny, much as for other claims. Scientists do not always, or necessarily, behave scientifically. Large areas of claimed scientific knowledge are, rightly, controversial. There are large areas of personal knowledge that can never move into (iii); they are not open to public inspection.]

4. What insights on the human condition has science brought? What do we know that Edwin's counsellor (625CE; see below) did not and could not know?
   [We are creatures of our biochemistry. (Spice what I drink with drugs, and observe that I am what I drink.) We are living creatures, alongside other living creatures. (The chimpanzees are our cousins, and the bacteria that inhabit our guts are our cousins many times removed. Our animal origins has large implications for much of our behaviour, though note also the role of social conditioning.) We are made of stardust, but so what? (How does it happen that creatures that are thus constructed can be here in this hall, reflecting on the human condition?)]

5. Where do religious and ethical commitments fit?
   [They are a mix of cultural inheritance, and personal and cultural reshaping. There is, in ethics, no equivalent of the role of science in what we have called "knowledge".]

6. What major ethical challenges do religious people, including Sea of Faith members, face? Can religion, so often a divisive force, become a force that brings nations and peoples together?
   [The challenge it to build a world where there are large shared ethical commitments. The old religious traditions are not equal to this task. Any attempt to build such a world will, to be successful, require the cooperation of those from a humanist tradition.]

The Origins of our Modern Western World View

In the year 625 of the common era Edwin, King of Northumbria, took a Christian woman to be his Queen. Some time later he consulted with his leading men on whether he should become a Christian. As the monk Bede tells the story, one of his counsellors gave this advice:

> "When we consider the uncertain span of time that is ours, the present life of men seems to me as when a sparrow comes to the house and flies through it quickly, coming in at one door and immediately going out by another, while you sit at dinner with your chiefs and attendants in the

> winter time. The dining hall is warm from the fire kindled in the midst of it, but hurricanes of rain or snow rage everywhere outside. While the bird is inside the house, it does not feel the wintry weather, but when once the tiny space of light and warmth has been traversed (and that takes but a moment), then it returns from winter to winter and is gone from your sight. So this life of men appears for a brief space; but we are completely ignorant of what has gone before or what will follow after. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought us any greater certainty, I think it is right that we should follow it."

Edwin, and his subjects with him, became a Christian. One of the stories about him is that wherever there were springs by the wayside, he ordered bronze cups to be hung on posts that had been erected for the purpose, so that wayfarers could quench their thirst.

For many of us, the light that Christianity had seemed to shed on the past is now, if it continues at all, very dim indeed. It is no longer a source of comfort and conviction. It is common to blame this on the progress of science. There is some truth in that, but I do not think it has been a direct result of scientific knowledge. It has more to do with the temper of mind that science has fostered.

I want now to talk about two of the great architects of the modern scientific world view – Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. These two men had a major role in the transition from the world that Edwin and his counsellor inhabited to the world of a modern educated person. Both wrote famous and influential books. Newton's book (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy)* is famous even though very few ever read it. Darwin's book (*The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection)* has been very widely read.

Newton

In 1687, Isaac Newton astonished the world with his *Philophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica (Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy)*. He offered a theory that described the motions of the planets about the sun, and that would be invaluable for navigation. For those who studied and extended his work, he was the sage who gave a mechanistic explanation of the planetary system, reducing it to clockwork.

Newton's work led in due course to Einstein's refinements, and to Big Bang cosmology. Big bang cosmology describes how Newton's universe evolved from its beginning perhaps 14 billion years ago. Its mathematical tools are a refined version of the tools that Newton invented, using observational data that are vastly more detailed and accurate than the data available to Newton.

Newton considered that he was demonstrating the marvellousness of the works of God. For him, God not only started it all; he kept the whole show going. Gleick (p.152) summarised Newton's view in this way:

> An activist interventionist God must organise the universe and the solar system: otherwise substance would be evenly diffused through infinite space or gathered together in one great mass.

Newton's (theistic) view was not widely shared among scientists. More common was the Deist position that, once the planets and comets had been set in motion, Newton's work made God unnecessary. Once God had started the whole show, it could then run of its own accord.

Newton remains one of the greatest mathematicians of all time. He was also a sharp and perceptive experimental scientist. He thought deeply about the philosophy of science, setting out rules of procedure that remain useful guides for modern scientists. But there was another side to Newton, that today seems at odds with his marvellous scientific skills. Newton accepted the Bible as a literal source of truth, even to containing prophecies that, for those who could probe their mysteries, foretell the course of human history. He calculated and recalculated the date of the second coming of Christ. Given the starting point for such exercises, his approach was however highly rational. He reasoned his theological understanding out for himself from the Bible, leading to highly unorthodox views that he kept to himself. He dabbled heavily in alchemy, with its strange mixture of experimental fact and occult wisdom.

Keynes, the economist, was astonished at what he found when he bought and read some of Newton's manuscripts that had come up for sale:

> Newton was not the first of the new age of reason. He was the last of the old magicians, the last of the Babylonians and Sumerians, the last great mind which looked out on the world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago."

I do not agree that Newton should be classed with the magicians. Newton was far too critical and rational to be called a magician. Newton was a Moses who brought a generation of scientists and engineers and navigators to the entrance into a new world of understanding. He laid the intellectual foundations for a world of ideas that was very different from his own. He used the powers of reason to amazing effect. But he used those powers within a world of thought that now seems archaic.

Darwin

Darwin not only had a huge role in completing the transition into the modern world. Unlike Newton, he became himself entirely part of that world. He started out as a Christian believer, probably fairly liberal for his day, becoming in due course an agnostic. The God of Darwin's student days was the Designer and Sustainer of traditional theology. The God of "The Descent of Man" had a much reduced role. His job was done when he started the evolution of life by breathing life into a few life-forms. As Darwin's thinking progressed he ceased, finally to have any belief in a recognisable God or in the Christian religion. He had become an agnostic. He is the patron saint of those who, if they maintain the outer forms of Christian religion, no longer retain the old beliefs in a recognisable form.

Darwin, like Newton, had a state funeral. Anglican and other pulpits up and down the land resounded with sermons in praise of this great scientist, great Englishman, and Christian gentleman. In view of the huge change that Darwin's ideas wrought in the way that educated people understand the world of nature, pushing God out to the periphery, this veneration of Darwin was ironic.

Gravity could explain the motions of the heavens and evolution by natural selection could explain the emergence of complex life forms. There was nothing that in principle lay beyond the power of scientific explanation. Again, the change was not a matter of logic but of temper of mind. But does scientific explanation really explain? Or does it merely describe?

A Personal History

My own experience started much like Newton's thought world, and has moved close to Darwin's eventual thought world. My father's family joined the Plymouth Brethren following a mission that went though the South Island in the early years of the 19th century. My father was imbued with a strong determination to know and understand the Bible, and to save souls for Christ. He was a member of the Brethren Bible Carriage for a couple of years. He ran evangelistic missions, with a strong prophetic emphasis. He was a Presbyterian Home Missionary at two periods in his life. His world of thinking was, in many ways, very like the world of Isaac Newton, modernised a bit here and there, but still recognisably Newtonian.

I never quite managed to inhabit my father's world. One of my earliest memories is of accepting Jesus into my life, at age 10, and quickly rejecting it. That early scepticism persisted for a few years, to be followed by a second "conversion" and immersion in a form of Christianity that, while not quite of my Father's variety, was nevertheless pietistic and conservative. I inhabited a species of eighteenth or nineteenth century world. Like my father, I took the study of the Bible very seriously. It was the seriousness of that study of the Bible that was, finally, the undoing of my conservative Christian faith. The Bible simply did not have the coherence that made it possible to use it as an authoritative source of Christian doctrine. My scientific studies were no doubt a factor, but far more immediately damaging was

my study of the Bible itself. My story is the story that Don Cupitt's book "The Sea of Faith" tells of the loss of traditional faith in Western society.

Other 19th C figures

Darwin's religious journey resonated with that of numerous leading figures in the nineteenth century. One of the most interesting of those figures is Francis Newman, brother of John Henry Newman. Francis Newman progressed from evangelical Anglicanism, via involvement with the Plymouth Brethren as a missionary in what was then Persia, to a "pure theism" that was close to agnosticism. He was the first to make the British public aware of German Biblical criticism, and made his own important contributions. At one point in Darwin's thinking as he moved from Anglican Christianity to agnosticism, he read and was influenced by the story that Newman wrote of his religious journey.

The Different Types of Knowledge?

I want then to ask: "Is there anything at all that we can know?" A postmodernist kind of scepticism is very old, to be found even in the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes:

> "Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all, but let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity."

Or are glimmerings of understanding available to us? What, anyway, can such glimmerings as we can find do to help us live, or tell us how to live? There seem to me three kinds of "knowledge":

7. personal
8. cultural and religious
9. knowledge that transcends personal, cultural and religious differences.

All knowledge starts in category (a) or (b). How can some knowledge move over into category (c)? For this to happen reliably, there must be some way, transcending specific cultures and my own experience, to test claims of knowledge. Some may argue that until claims have passed some form of scrutiny that allows them to move into (c), they are not really knowledge. This is a matter for debate.

A classification of this type is important in responding to those who claim to have special access to "truth", to know what the rest of us do not. "You know this, in your inner being. How can I, while maintaining my personal autonomy, have such knowledge?" Knowledge can only pass from (a) or (b) into (c) if it passes tests that are of a broadly scientific type.

Personal knowledge should not be denigrated. I genuinely do, as an individual, have access to a knowledge that is not available to any other living being. The only way you could ever know what it is like to be John Maindonald is to become John Maindonald.

The Nature and Limits of Scientific Knowledge

Here, I am taking a very broad view of scientific knowledge. The only types of explanation I know that transcend my personal experience and that transcend culture are: (1) scientific explanation, i.e., identifying patterns in natural phenomena, and (2) mathematical modeling and reasoning (which can be informal as well as formal) that tease out and extend scientific explanation, thus creating a theory.

The informal use of scientific approaches is older than humankind, found, e.g., in a primitive form among the chimpanzees who discovered that they could use a straw to tease ants out of holes, and thus obtain a delicious snack. Some chimpanzee, at some point in the past, found a method that was repeatable, and others copied it. At that point, it became part of chimpanzee science. A procedure had been found that

was repeatable.

Modern scientists have studied this chimpanzee behaviour extensively, providing a theory that explains why it works. The straw has to be vibrated in just the right way so that the ants are provoked to attach themselves to it. At this point, generalization can be attempted. Do the same techniques work with termites? In this case, it is possible to do a test and check. But if no test is possible, what then?

In modern times, scientific approaches have been highly systematized. Starting perhaps at the time of the industrial revolution, this systematic probing of nature has been, for those who've been able to take advantage of it, spectacular material gains. Many of the gains are unsustainable, because of the havoc that they are wrecking on planet earth.

Philosophers (and I myself, in pensive mood) agonize over why scientific approaches work. My answer is simple: we live in the kind of world that allows these approaches to work. Would life as we know it be possible in any other kind of world?

There are three points (and, in essence, this is what David Hume said in the 18th C)

10 There is no logical reason why, in our world, science should be possible.

11 The world could, for all we can prove, cease to be that kind of world tomorrow.

12 All our planning and thought for the future assumes a world where science is possible. In a world that lacked such regularity, planning would be pointless.

No amount of philosophising can change the import of these points! A consequence is that the past and present are the only guides that we have, or can have, short of divine revelation, to the future.

Scientific approaches in action

A narrow view of scientific method takes the stance: "Don't tell that such and such is true; show me. Make predictions that I can verify." Halley used Newton's laws of motion to predict the return in 1757 or 1758 of the comet that is named after him. They are used to calculate the paths of satellites that are sent out into space. There is a bit more to it than making successful predictions.

Most of us believe that the sun will again tomorrow appear above the horizon. Yet we also can contemplate the idea that, at some remote time in the future, the sun will burn itself out. Some scientific claims are more fundamental than others. In this case, the claim is that the sun is a massive heat engine whose stock of fuel will finally run out. Place a car 100 meters from the edge of the cliff. Each day, move it one metre closer to the edge. The fact that nothing untoward happens to the car on the first 99 days is irrelevant to its fate on day 101. Gravity is more fundamental than the record of the first 99 days.

It is not as simple as making successful predictions. Science looks for coherent ways to understand a wide range of phenomena. Examples are: (1) Newton's theories that explain both the motion of planets and the movement of cars on a race track; (2) Einstein's theory of relativity; (3) Darwin's theory of evolution. These theories all make coherent sense of a huge range of different phenomena. This coherence is just as important as specific predictions.

Having a coherent account is all very well. How far do the conclusions generalize? Many controversies within science revolve around the legitimate extent of generalization. Cosmology is open to challenge because it generalizes from limited observations, made in a tiny part of the universe, back to the universe's presumed beginnings and out into the far reaches of space. Albert Einstein put the point well:

> Nature shows us only the tail of the lion. But I have no doubt that the lion belongs to it, even though he cannot totally reveal himself all at once because of his large size. We can see him only the way that a louse that is sitting on him would. [Quoted in Singh, p.265.]

Because of the success of theories such as I have mentioned, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that such theories we are on to something fundamental. The success of such theories engenders a habit of mind that takes the view that these theories really do explain, that they are more than descriptions of what we observe. There is a leap of logic here that attracts complaints both from postmodernist philosophers and from people like Plantinga who come to the philosophy of science from a conservative theological stance.

Accepting the methodology of science is one thing. Accepting specific claims is another. There is a huge amount of nonsense in the scientific literature, and the problem is getting worse. Scientists do not consistently and with sufficient rigor apply the methods of science.

The present explosive growth of scientific knowledge is unique in the history of human kind. Its conceptual foundations were in place by the 1930s, and there have been no really revolutionary conceptual advances since then. On the other hand, technical advances subsequent to the 1930s have been spectacular relative to what has happened since.

There are some who harp on about the need for a new scientific paradigm. The philosophical underpinnings of science are said to be in crisis. I reject that. The only philosophy that scientific approaches need is based around the observation that we live in a world that has (so far, at least!) made science possible. Ants always grab onto straws when they are suitably provoked. What is in crisis is the planet, in large part due to the misuse of scientific knowledge.

The Limitations of Scientific Knowledge

I have noted that scientific approaches have very limited access to my personal experience. I may be having a fun time, and maybe psychologists can somehow get a measure on it. But you cannot be sure that your experience of fun is the same as mine, or that your experience of pain is the same as mine? I know people whose experience of colour is certainly not the same as mine. Science oversteps the mark if it does not respect the autonomy of individual experience. I have also, as I must, a set of working assumptions that allow me to get on with my life. My working assumptions will not be yours.

Even within its proper sphere, scientific explanation is a very limited form of explanation. Scientific explanation is, at base, no more than a statement of regularities that are observed in nature. It does not explain why those regularities occur, except perhaps as a consequence of other regularities. Newton's critics complained about his notion of gravity. What is it, they asked? Newton's response, in essence, was that he had given the only kind of explanation that was possible. Any deeper level of explanation was a matter for theology. Modern educated people are deeply suspicious of theological explanations. We still do not understand how gravity operates, but rather than introducing a divinity, we prefer to ascribe what are in effect divine powers to the law of gravity. This is what I mean when I say that there is today a different temper of mind from that of Newton and many of his contemporaries.

Dangers from an uncritical use of personal knowledge

Why are humans prey to stupid and dangerous ideas? Newton commented:

> Tis the temper of the hot and superstitious part of mankind in matters of religion ever to be fond of mysteries, & for that reason to like best what they understand least. [Gleick, p.149]

Some personal and cultural beliefs are dysfunctional and dangerous. They produced the demand, among the Aztecs, to regularly sacrifice maidens to the gods. They led to the burning of thousands of women who were supposed to be witches. They produced Jim Jones and the mass suicide of his Guyana community. They have produced blood-letting and all manner of dangerous medical practices. A colleague of Freud as a young doctor persuaded Freud to go along with his idea that ailments in the mind and the stomach were a result of problems with the nose, that the cure was to remove a bone from the offending organ. The operation, which Freud performed, was a disaster, and required several further

operations to remove the resulting infection from a nose that until the end of the woman's days bore witness to the abuse. Freud was lucky not to lose his medical licence.

When scientists use their own authority to justify their claims, they thereby circumvent the processes of science, and behave unscientifically, just as was the case for Freud's colleague. Whoever you may be: "Do not believe everything you think". Even less should you ask others to so believe.

In summary:

13 scientific approaches provide a way, while respecting the intellectual autonomy of the individual, to cross the boundary between individual knowledge and experience, and a pool of common knowledge.

14 individual differences in understanding are inevitable. The view should be that they are a resource that is to be cherished, creating a richer whole, not something that is dangerous that should be beaten down into a homogenous pulp.

15 there is no escaping personal "knowledge" – a knowledge of myself that is not available to any other sentient being. Only a very limited part of your personal knowledge can ever become mine.

16 this is in strong contrast to the tradition of organized religion, where any dissent from the prevailing dogma, even in what should be matters of scientific fact, is often suppressed.

Directly testable forms of scientific knowledge are highly secure. There is a large part of scientific knowledge that is not directly testable. It is, then, accepted because it gives a coherent account of a wide range of phenomena, and seems better for this purpose than alternatives that may be on offer. Science is in any case limited in the questions that it can address.

Scientific Insight on the Human Condition

What can what we know from science tell us about the human condition? It does offer us a few facts. They have this character:

17 Change my biochemistry and you change me (but is there some essential me that is not changed when my biochemistry changes?)

18 We are the kin of apes, and of all living things. Major aspects of the sort of beings that we are have been shaped by this ancestry.

19 We are made of stardust, with origins that go back to the Big Bang

Among the most pertinent insights, for understanding ourselves, are those of biochemistry and psychology. If you change my biochemistry, you will change me. Give me certain drugs, and you may well be able to change me into a raving madman, or a self-deluded lunatic. Fortunately, it also works the other way round. In 2000 a sports broadcaster was on the railway station at Broadmeadow in Newcastle, waiting for the train to Sydney. This normally pleasant individual was shouting obscenities up and down the platform. Incongruously, he was convinced that he was Jesus Christ, on his way to Sydney to save the world. Now recovered, he has written a book about the experience. Be in no doubt of the difference that biochemistry makes.

You can also change me by the way you treat me. Once again the effects can be dramatic. The details of those effects are hard to tease out, but are certainly real.

Next come the insights of evolutionary biology. We all, and Bush and Blair and Clark, are descended from the same stock as the chimpanzees in the forests of Africa, or the orangutans in the forests of Indonesia. We share with animals many of the motivations that drive us. Similarities with the great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, etc.) can be eerie. There is a social overlay that checks and controls the

expression of our animal instincts, which can and does sometimes break down.

Given this ancestry, how did our powers of reason arise? They are surely an overlay on more basic animal instincts. Rather than complaining about the common irrationality of humans, perhaps we should be surprised that relatively disinterested rationality is sometimes possible. It is the ancestry of our most brilliant playwrights and mathematicians, of our leaders who have the power to start wars and to make peace, and of we ourselves who are here tonight contemplating these matters.

The evidence is now overwhelming, both from studies of animal behaviour and from the establishment of direct genetic connections. At a fundamental level, the genetic mechanisms are the same for all living things. The relationships between present living organisms, or between organisms alive today and the remains of our recent fossil relatives, can be traced with increasing accuracy. About five million years separate us from our common ancestor with chimpanzees. For mice it is 60 million years, for coral 600 million. These calculations are very approximate, and open to challenge, but the wonder is that they can be done at all.

Combined with knowledge of historical geography, evolutionary biology explains the differences between organisms on different continents. For organisms that had no means for moving between continents, those differences closely reflect the time that has been available since geographical separation for differences to develop.

It is now relatively well established that the universe had a beginning in time, a "Big Bang" that happened perhaps 14 billion years ago. By using telescopes to look into the far reaches of the visible universe, we are at the same time looking back in time, to events that took place 3 or 4 or 13 billion years ago. It is a huge intellectual construction, and perhaps in that sense a social construction. While there is a large speculative element, observational data places large constraints on what theories are possible, and several alternative theories have for this reason been conclusively rejected.

The Big Bang set in motion processes that formed stardust and stars and planets, and eventually ourselves. Putting it more poetically, we are indeed made of stardust. But so what? This "Big Bang" account of the universe seem to me to have none of the far-reaching implications of human biochemistry and evolutionary biology, except that it set the stage for the evolution of life.

Some really difficult "scientific" questions

The laws of nature have to be very precisely tuned to make life possible. How does it happen that our universe is so tuned? One highly speculative notion is that universes pop into being all the time. The event 14 billion years ago that generated our universe is not unique. Some of these universes, maybe very few of them, have laws that allow life. Many or most do not. There is no way to test this theory, which is one reason why it is controversial. Its attraction is that the unusual features of our universe make better sense if we have been taken from a lottery that has many possibilities. Every so often, when a ticket is drawn, something very unusual appears, something as unusual as our universe. If we ask what really happened, the answer has to be that science is utterly unable to tell us.

Then there are questions about the relationship between mind and matter:

> Is mind an expression of matter? Or is matter an expression of mind? Or are both somehow intertwined?
>
> Suppose we take the view that matter is an expression of mind. Is this mind then distinct from the universe, as in traditional Christian belief? Or is it somehow bound up with the universe, as in pantheism? If distinct from the universe, why should this mind be identified with the Christian God?

These questions seem to me simply unanswerable. We may choose one answer rather than another, perhaps invoking the notion of faith. Or we may choose to be agnostic.

One stance, in the attempt to handle such questions, is to invoke a principle of parsimony – make no more assumptions than necessary. Newton enunciated the principle that:

> No more causes of natural things should be admitted than are both necessary and sufficient to explain their phenomena. [Gleick, p.142]

In the matters just noted however, it is not obvious how this principle should be applied. Newton's acceptance of this principle did not prevent him from invoking God as the First Cause and Sustainer.

The fact that science is unable to answer such questions is not, for me, a reason for looking for religious answers. It is not obvious that religion, of whatever description, can do better. The churches would do well to leave both strictly scientific questions, and questions such as these, to the individual conscience and judgment.

Ethical Commitments

There is, in ethical judgements, no equivalent to scientific methods that can take ethical judgements out of the realm of the personal and cultural and make them the property of all. The key question is not so much, "Where have I come from", but "What kind of person will I choose to be?" What are my values? The answer, within Sea of Faith, has often been that we must create our values ourselves. I'd prefer to say that we construct them ourselves. It cannot be creation out of nothing (ex nihilo). It has to be construction from existing materials. Many of those materials come from the religious traditions that nurtured us, a point on which I will comment further below.

Shared ethical commitments

Globalization is for real. It has brought different peoples and cultures together in a way that is unprecedented in history. That meeting together can lead to huge cultural enrichment, or it can bring massive conflict. In our separate societies, religion has, to some extent at least, been a mechanism for bringing social cohesion. In this new situation, it readily becomes a generator of conflict.

Some commonality is needed in a group such as Sea of Faith, just so that people work together effectively. Governments have often thought it necessary to impose cohesion, sometimes coercively, just so that societies cohere. What Sea of Faith I hope demonstrates, and what such movements as the Unitarian Universalists in the United States and the Quakers demonstrate, is that people with a huge diversity of belief systems can work together effectively. In the global village in which we now live, effective working together, across religious and cultural barriers, has become a necessity.

The key humanitarian challenge is to build a world where shared ethical commitments are so strong that no government will ever again be able to do what the Sudanese government has done in Darfur, or what the Hutus did in Rwanda, where Western countries will not never again cooperate with the likes of Saddam Hussain, where the US will never again invade another Iraq in defiance of world opinion, and so it goes on. Religion, which arguably had a useful role within many of our individual societies, has become a serious obstacle to making progress on these really difficult problems.

Additionally, we live in societies that, as never before, are multi-cultural and multi-religious. Even within our individual societies, religion readily becomes a cause for conflict. A religion that cannot meet those ethical challenges can surely have no claim on my intellectual commitment.

Technological challenges

Scientific progress has brought huge technological challenges. Here are some of them:

 The nature of armed conflict has changed radically

21 Nuclear power has brought us almost unlimited energy, but at what cost?

22 We have unprecedented control over human reproductive processes – IVF etc
[This opened the stable gate to everything that detractors regard as wrong with therapeutic cloning.]

23 Therapeutic cloning may offer the opportunity to re-engineer body parts.
[In my view, get on with it. The objections to harvesting cells from embryos seems to me largely semantic (embryonic cells are not, until implantation has occurred and differentiation has started, a foetus), and to lack ethical substance.]

24 Medical technology can keep the human body functioning in situations that would formerly have been thought hopeless. Should there be any limit to the expense that will be countenanced, in order to do this? How should assessment of the resulting likely quality of life affect the decision?
[These issues are not unique to medicine. We tolerate diesel fumes in our cities, in spite of the damage done to health, because the costs of effective emission control are thought unacceptable. We set limits on spending on the prevention of accidents on our highways.]

25 We have the ability to radically engineer living organisms, though as yet using rather hit and miss mechanisms (changing one gene may change much more than was intended).
[If the gung ho genetic engineers have their way, food production will change dramatically. In my view the testing is grossly inadequate. The technology for engineering new bio-organisms has become so routine and relatively inexpensive, especially if done in a cavalier manner, that backyard genetic engineering operations are feasible. There is massive and dangerous potential for misuse.]

26 Cloning of humans is in principle possible. For a long time to come, I expect it to remain illegal.
[The first few cloned individuals may, like Dolly the sheep, have short and unsatisfactory lives. I am certain that it will happen, in the not too distant future, in a laboratory that is out of reach of authorities in countries that enforce a ban.]

The comments of religious leaders on such matters carry little conviction outside of a small group of committed adherents. Official Roman Catholic views reflect a thought world that seems distinctly medieval, to the extent that even among Catholics churchgoers, few take much notice. Fundamentalist Protestant views carry greater weight with their rank and file, but seem based on an ill-informed understanding of the science. Nor, for that matter, does Sea of Faith seem to be thinking much about such questions. If however there was ever a demand to construct an ethical response, based on an understanding of the scientific issues, here is it!

Challenges to traditional religion (and to the Sea of Faith?)

A large part of the church acts as though its major threat comes from the intellectual challenge posed by modernity. This is surely a self-inflicted wound, a result of burying its head ever deeper in the sand. It has made it hard for it to focus its attention on the very serious ethical challenges of our day.

The challenge to retain the allegiance of thinking people

I did not choose the religious tradition in which I grew up. Once imposed upon me, it became a part of me, and made me a large part of what I am. These influences came with strong demands to believe this or that. There are some belief claims that I can accept might be so. There are many others that I am very sure are not so, not because they are impossible, or because science has proved them wrong, but because they seem so utterly arbitrary. I have become adjusted to living with uncertainty. There are others that are surely wrong. Yet I wish to maintain some limited dialogue with those traditions

Unfortunately, dialogue with the modern representatives of those traditions has become, for those who no longer fit within the old belief structures, extraordinarily difficult. The fundamentalists are standing

guard at the gates. Discussion and debate where the conclusions are not prejudged seems in general possible only outside the confines of the mainstream churches, in academia, in Sea of Faith groups, or among Unitarians and their like. There are many educated thinking people whose condition, intellectually and religiously, is much like mine.

I am grateful for Sea of Faith because it offers a place where the likes of me can openly wrestle with questions that are broadly religious, with no pre-judging of conclusions. There is complete acceptance that there are multiple ways to use the Christian tradition, that mine is a legitimate way. It may, for many modern people, be the only way.

For myself, I'd think it risky to immerse myself, more than peripherally, in the life of a mainstream church. Even where allowed immediate acceptance, I'd fear a change of circumstances, leading to the use of the church's historical doctrinal baggage to bang me about the head. I'd risk hearing, at some time in the future: "Fall in line, or depart! If you cannot get over your intellectual hang-ups, we have no place for you." The mainstream churches in Australia (the Anglican communion in Western Australia seems a notable exception) seem increasingly prey to the orthodoxies of the new Christian fundamentalisms. Thus it is that I stand outside the church door and speak what is on my mind.

Ethical challenges

Minds that are bound down by the old orthodoxies do not have the flexibility needed to respond effectively to contemporary challenges. The freethinkers and humanists have seen present challenges coming, have been thinking about them for longer than most, and will not readily tolerate pat answers that are likely to be ignored. They are a product of the same forces that led to the Protestant reformation, and have had a huge influence on all subsequent religious thinking.

The Hebrew Bible found room, especially in Job and Ecclesiastes but elsewhere also, for those of a freethinking and even agnostic disposition. Certainly, the ancient texts have been edited to bring the words of those writers closer to later orthodoxy, but what is important here is that those views did find their way into the Hebrew Bible. Those who today use the Hebrew Bible as a part of their foundational literature would do well to show the same breadth of acceptance!

Questions to ask, inside or outside the doors of the mainstream churches, include: How far does the reformation right of private judgement extend? Should religion really be such a matter of intellectual conviction that those who no longer believe in something like the old way, and can no longer repeat the old forms of words, are cut off? How, if the church cannot reach out to the humanists and freethinkers that inherit the same medieval and renaissance world of thought as itself, can it possibly bridge the gap to other peoples, cultures, and religions? How can religion become a force that, instead of fomenting conflict, brings cohesion between peoples of different cultures and traditions? Does the church have the will to recreate itself, using the resources it needs from whatever source, to deal with the ethical challenges that are created by religious, cultural and economic conflict? By pressing of such questions, Sea of Faith and its ilk can be useful gadflies.

Thank you for your willingness to hear, and respond to, my thoughts.

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