

# Life As We Know It

How do you feel about this little verse?

*Happy the man, and happy he alone,  
He who can call today his own;  
He who, secure within, can say,  
Tomorrow, do thy worst, for I have lived today.*

Dryden, who wrote that, died in 1700, but it sounds to me like a pretty good summary of contemporary attitudes. We feel we should "live life to the full", that "life is short", that "life is what you make it." "Tomorrow, do thy worst, for I have lived today," Dryden wrote. But what is it to "live", as opposed to just being alive?

I had an email from a friend in the States, in response to the recent tragedies there. It passed on a little sequence of pictures of mountains and flowers, each with a message, reminding me to tell my loved ones that I loved them, because I might not get another chance. It was very much along the lines of "tomorrow do thy worst, for I have lived today." In his response to the terrible news, the Prime Minister, didn't refer directly to God, but spoke about "the sanctity of life", and later about a "surging of the human spirit". President Bush, in his address to Congress, told Americans who were wondering what how they should respond to the crisis to "live your lives and hug your children."

There seems to be an idea around - and not just in the present crisis - that ordinary things have somehow taken on a special meaning. That little, person-sized feelings and stories are really "what it's all about"; that great international, political events should somehow be guided by, or grounded in, the values of ordinary domestic life.

But how much can the idea of "living" take the place of "God" or any kind of more formal religious teaching in guiding us on the big and the small decisions we face every day? Does a philosophy centred around the idea of "life" give us a better insight into our situation that a traditional religion can?

If it can, it must be able to offer us a framework within which we can explain to ourselves and to each other, some of the mysterious, confusing, conflicting questions we have to negotiate our way around between birth and death. It must provide us with a panoramic view within to orient ourselves in the smaller context of our lives.

Have you ever looked at an ant colony (or seen the Disney film 'A Bug's Life')? A thousand or more ants can form a line to transport a nice juicy leaf, section by section, back to their headquarters. You can't help wondering at the organisation that makes it all possible.

But you might also wonder about what's it's like for the individual ant. From our point of view, it looks like a fairly anonymous sort of occupation, being just another worker in the line. I wonder what "life's all about" for an ant. Does it try to get through its work as fast as possible, so it can get back to its family and its hobbies? Or does it just look forward to an evening relaxing in front of the TV with a couple of beers?

No, I'm afraid not. They work until they die, and two seconds later they're forgotten, as far as we know. If only they realised how little difference their individual efforts make in the grand scheme of things, perhaps they'd be able to relax, and "get more out of life".

We live almost under the Heathrow flight path in Chiswick. Sometimes our two-year old wakes up in the night, and needs a bit of entertainment before going back to sleep. So we go to the bedroom window, and watch the aeroplanes lining up to land.

I often wonder about travellers up there, looking down on us, seeing our house as one light among a great field of them, stretching away into the distance. London life may look orderly from up there, but perhaps a little pointless too. Do people looking out the aeroplane windows wonder how we spend our lives, and why there are still cars rushing around purposefully in the middle of the night? Do they wonder whether if we could see ourselves from a distance, from their point of view, we might realise how little our individual efforts mean in the grand scheme of things, and that if we did, we might be able to relax, and "get a bit more out of life"? Does look as though we're behaving like ants?

In this church, I think part of the attraction our services is an invitation to imagine the 'view from the air' of ourselves, to step outside the narrow focus of our daily lives, to see where we've been and where we're going.

But I want to talk a bit about the kind of view we get - from in here, or up there -, because it isn't quite what it used to be. When we practice religion - and I think this is the way religions in general are going - we aren't asked to sign up to some grand system of beliefs that claims to tell us with great confidence all sorts of things that are beyond human knowledge or understanding. Although we may come to church to take the long view, as it were, I don't think we get as dramatically different a view of ourselves as worshippers once did. When Marx talked about religion as "the opium of the people", what he meant was that it detached them from the grim reality of their lives. The grimness didn't matter quite as much when you saw it as only a part of the picture. In Christianity, for instance, there was the prospect of eternal life, once we had escaped our present existence. I remember from my Catholic childhood, the world was - rather beautifully - described in a prayer as "this vale of tears." That may sound rather depressing, but it's consoling, an acknowledgement that the world can be a difficult place. But it's only temporary there's hope of better to come.

Another expression of the attractions of Christianity to its followers comes from something quoted by Don Cupitt (whose book we had a reading from earlier). Bede's History of the English Church and People, tells the story of how Paulinus tried to convert the English to Christianity. Paulinus visits King Edwin in the year 627. Edwin and his followers worshipped pagan gods, and had no concept of a better afterlife to look forward to. Edwin was impressed with the ideas of Paulinus, but decided to hear the views of his advisors before deciding whether to convert to Christianity. One of them spoke in favour of Christianity, and put the case like this:

"Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counsellors. Inside, there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. So man appears on earth for a little while, but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it."

Cupitt argues that as the literal claims of Christianity and other religions are questioned, fewer people have the comfort which Edwin and his followers liked so much - the idea that there was something we could know about for certain outside the span of our lives, something that would put the known world into a bigger context. We're back in the world of the lost sparrow, enjoying our brief, but unexpected visit to the banqueting-hall.

A powerful religion can guide us through this life, as well as promising another one. The loss of connection between ideas about God and the everyday world prompted the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor to complain that we live in "a demoralised society, one where the only good is what I want, the only rights are my own, and the only life with any meaning or value is the life I want for myself."

I'm not sure that we do actually live in a "de-moralised" society. It seems to me that ideas of what's right and wrong are as strong as ever. But the source of those ideas isn't the authority of religious teaching: it's our own judgement, and the evidence provided by a huge mixture of cultures, traditions and knowledge - "life", in other words. The teachings of formal religion are not ignored or forgotten but we relate to them in the same way we relate to art. They have a kind of legitimacy, in that we may recognise that they're brilliantly conceived and expressed, but we no longer treat their ideas, in the words of Edwin's counsellor about the attractions of Christianity as "certain knowledge."

So can we satisfy the appetite for religion that all peoples seem to have had, by an awareness and celebration of life itself? To embrace the philosophy of "life" that Don Cupitt describes is to refuse to make dogmatic claims, or even to demand consistency of ideas. If an idea seems right, go with it. If you saw some of the spontaneous ceremonies of grief in New York recently - people gathering in unplanned groups, with candles, singing, or creating 'Prayer Walls' which were half shrine half notice boards - you'll know that there can be great power and authenticity to this kind of 'people's religion'. And it feels quite familiar to us - almost indistinguishable from our variety of Unitarian. In fact, I've always felt that our approach to worship and belief will one day move from the fringe to the mainstream.

But is it enough? We can enjoy the seasons, live for the moment, be fully present, come up with some nice ceremonies and so on, but it can easily become rather thin gruel, a mixture of the blindingly obvious, and the hopelessly vague. My feelings on this may be coloured by a residual longing for the elaborate and unquestioned certainties of my Catholic childhood, but perhaps I'm not alone in sometimes wanting at least to be offered some kind of 'theological meat'.

A spontaneous, do-it-yourself, pick 'n' mix religion is one that can't be refuted because it makes no claims. It is immune to scientific discovery, and unconcerned about being explained away by psychology. It's a cross between therapy and artistic expression, and nobody can seriously object to either. But if nobody can really disagree with it, is it really what people have meant by 'religion'?

It is true that great mystics of all religions need nothing more than what they find in front of them to achieve insights that intellect could never offer. They are able to sense the unity of all things, to see "a world in a grain of sand, heaven in a wild flower." And Thoreau's quest for the essence of life by Walden Pond was an exercise in discovering truth by examining the ordinary.

But Thoreau was trying to reduce life to its simplest essentials, rather than to tap into some kind of global consciousness. He was critical of people's incessant need to keep up with events all round the world: "after a night's sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast," he writes. Well, lots of us probably show exactly the kind of obsession with faster and fuller news that he was complaining about. We feel drawn into a global drama that unfolds in the media. We share the sorrows of people we've never met, we worry about relations between countries we've never visited, we follow the fortunes of statesmen with as personal an interest as if they were members of our family. We become a tiny cell in a kind of global brain, with nerve signals made of emails and phone calls.

There's a dilemma here. In one way, a greater awareness of other people of different cultures and in different places seems to be good thing. But I also think there's a danger that the world we sign up to in our embracing of global "life" in all its richness, is rather too closely tied to commercial interests. Emotions are sloshing round the world powered by communications organisations which are vast, profit-hungry multinationals with strong ties to the culture of consumerism. It's a world in which happiness and 'normality' are only a step away from the values and images sold to us by advertisers. 'The happy family', 'freedom to choose' (or is that the freedom to shop?), the open road (which is only liberating if you've got a nice car to drive and plenty of cheap petrol.) My friend's email message from the States was almost a blatant invitation to continue consuming: "life is a chain of moments of enjoyment, not only about survival" it said, over a picture of a sunset, "Use your crystal goblets. Do not save your best perfume, and use it every time you feel you want it." And when Tony Blair was asked what ordinary people should do in this crisis, he said they should "go about their daily lives: to work, to live, to travel to shop." To shop?

By all means, let's celebrate life, but let's remember Thoreau's approach: "simplify, simplify."

Consciousness of "life" and a global community have not left people content with a simple, person-centred religion. Just as spontaneous, free-flowing ceremonies were taking place in the streets of New York, so churches, mosques and synagogues were filling up in a way they haven't for years. People wanted to worship, they wanted to pray. They wanted to believe. And they wanted some answers. Because there are some really difficult questions that just won't go away, and any religion worth its salt has got to have a go at answering them. Not addressing them is no better than offering answers that are no longer taken literally.

Religions have to tackle the inescapable weirdness of the situation we find ourselves in. Here we are, leading our complex little lives, for a brief moment, on a tiny planet, in the middle of nowhere. It's very crowded, it's hurried, it's complicated. It's full of stupid things to worry about: don't park on a yellow line, it's time for school, do I need a haircut, I thought we just fixed the washing-machine. But at the same time, it seems that human life is unique and we're the most advanced species we've ever heard of. Oh, and together with all that, we're all going to die in a few years, if we're lucky. Religion is about the sheer, breathtaking mystery it all, and surely it must include a sharing of our awareness of all these realities, however impossible the task of making sense of them may seem.

I don't have any proposals for what any emerging religion might be like - you'll be glad to hear. But in the spirit of Unitarianism, I think it will probably involve a tension or a dialogue between the changing beliefs of individuals and the inspiration and organisation that a religious institution can provide.

At its centre, will be a continuing awareness of, and wonder at, the strangeness of "it all", the human condition, whatever you want to call it. Let's examine and celebrate its rich diet of contradictions and puzzles. Let's look for a map that shows us as part of a bigger scheme of things. And let's use that perspective to inform our smaller, human-scale existence, to fight for what we believe to be right, and to extend our sympathy and love to each other, in the words of Art, our last minister, "as we know we should."