

Sermon Delivered by Rev Peter Godfrey (*in note form*)  
at Essex Church, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2005

# Reason and Tragedy

**'Faith is rational wrestling with mystery.'**

Karen Armstrong is an excellent writer on religious issues. She is on the radical wing of orthodox Christianity. In an article in The Guardian Armstrong argued that treating religious myths as fact misunderstands the meaning of religion: this is a very good observation, but in the course of the article Armstrong wrote:

*'When faced with tragedy, reason is silent and has nothing to say. It was mythology and its accompanying rituals that showed people how to acquire the strength to go on'*

As we struggle in our minds and hearts to comprehend the consequences of the earthquake and terrible wave in the Indian Ocean I have been asking myself if these words of Armstrong's are true: Is it really the case that *'When faced with tragedy, reason is silent and has nothing to say?'*

I do not think so: When reason is silent, beware: The great artist, Goya, a man extraordinarily sensitive to atrocious and senseless violence - said: *'The sleep of reason brings forth monsters'*

Armstrong says mythology showed people how to acquire the strength to go on: What sort of things do myths say? I am sure Armstrong did not mean astrology, but the popularity of astrology fills me with dismay: a report last year said that believing in horoscopes has become the most popular belief in Britain among 18 to 24 year-olds. Two thirds of young people believe that horoscopes are true. To me this seems nothing more than superstition, and I am so anti-superstitious that it is almost a superstition!

I think of the story of the man who got into a train... another man spreading newspaper over seats. Why? To keep the elephants off? But there are not elephants here! That proves it works! 'there is no answer to that!'

Those of you who read the Guardian will know that the clash of reason and science versus religion has been set off in the letter columns by an article by Martin Kettle, commenting on the tsunami disaster, headed 'How can religious people explain something like this?'

The keen exponent of the scientific point of view is Richard Dawkins: He describes three ways in which religious people traditionally respond to, and try to explain, tragedies such as earthquakes: One is that the tragedy is a payback for original sin - he calls this loopy: Two is that disasters are sent to try our faith - he calls this vicious: Three is violence: he says that after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 heretics were hanged for promoting God's wrath. Dawkins is saying that when people ask why such tragedies occur the only answer is a scientific rational explanation: in this case, the answer to 'Why?' is that tectonic plates way below the earth's surface, crashed together with terrible consequences.

It seems to me that this is the only answer.

Dawkins has been criticised for being a heartless bogeyman, but my own view is that a rational explanation is far more satisfying than what seem to me to be myths, Take one example: the myth that when we are faced with tragedy 'These things are sent to try us'. Or - even worse - the myth that suffering is a punishment.

I remember talking to someone who said that when her mother was dying from cancer the doctor said 'Your mother must have been very bad to be made to suffer like this'. My argument against such myths is that there is no evidence that there is a god who acts like this: who punishes us with physical suffering or who sends things to try or test us...

*'There is no evidence'...* what I am doing here is to using reason. Unitarians are committed to using reason. This commitment is one of our distinguishing features. I think and hope it is true to say that a Unitarian cannot have a faith that contradicts reason: For some Unitarians our flaming chalice symbolises the light of reason.

Our Unitarian ideals are often expressed in the words: Freedom, Reason and Tolerance... they are not our beliefs: they are things to which we are committed; They are the 'conditions under which' we pursue religious truth. The juxtaposition of 'Freedom, Reason and Tolerance' first seems to have been made by Earl Morse Wilbur, our best known Unitarian historian:

Wilbur was describing what he saw as the common and enduring characteristics of Unitarianism as it developed in Transylvania, Poland, other parts of Europe, and then in America.

In one of the most influential Unitarian sermons ever preached, William Ellery Channing in 1819 said: "The worst errors [have] sprung up in that church which proscribes reason and demands from its members implicit faith' He continued: 'God has given us a rational nature... we may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril' (Echoing the words of Goya.)

Channing was speaking in the spirit of the Unitarian Thomas Jefferson who wrote to his nephew in 1785:

*'Shake off all the servile fears and prejudices under which weak minds are crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat. Questions with boldness even the existence of God, because, If there be one He must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blind faith'.*

Bruce Clear, an American Unitarian Universalist minister, has written:

*'At a minimum, Unitarian Universalists affirm that reason is the most reliable guide we have to truth, and that all other sources are subject to the tests of reason.'*

But what is reason?

John Taylor, an 18th Presbyterian cum Unitarian put it delightfully:

*'Reason is that faculty of mind, by which we perceive, or understand the Truth, or the Natures of Things, and are capable of considering, distinguishing, comparing and judging of their Natures, Properties, Circumstances and Relations, and of discerning what is agreeable to, or inconsistent with them'*

But strictly speaking a person does not 'have reason' in the same way that he or she has a nose. We have the ability to reason: we can engage in reasoning. Reasoning, it seems to me is thinking about experience and about evidence. Historically many theologians and ministers have so exalted faith and revelation that reason is decreed to be much inferior - Calvin's view was that reason is something very limited in its value because of its liability to be influenced by human sinfulness and inadequacy.

The Calvinist John Flavel put it graphically when he said:

*'The light of reason was at first the bright lamp or candle of the Lord, till sin, like a thief, melted it down to snuff' !!*

'Carnal reason' it was sometimes called. [Eddy, 154f]

How are reason and reasoning valuable? Some answers have already been implied: Jefferson saw that it can free us from unnecessary fears and prejudices. Reasoning can help us to choose. The matter of choosing is important: I remember not so long ago a TV programme on prayer: hundreds of people prayed for some people in hospital: those prayed for were matched to people not prayed for: and as far as recovery from the illness and operations were concerned there was no difference between those prayed for and those not prayed for. My response to this was one of great relief: A relief expressed in the actual programme by one doctor who said: *'Could you really believe God would only help people who were prayed for and just leave the others because no one prayed for them?'*

People who survive an accident in which others die sometimes say 'God saved me' - how must the relatives of the dead people think? If our image of God is of someone or something that only responds to the pleas of those who believe in him/her then 'Our God is too small'. In the programme a ladies' prayer group was asked about the prayers of Muslims: And one of the ladies said that prayers by people who did not believe in Jesus could not be effective!!! I have been reading a Muslim magazine. There is an article on 'Reason, Authority and the Foundations of Faith'. The author is a lecturer in medical ethics in Islamabad, Pakistan. He writes: 'Faith... has to be via the authority of Muhammed (peace be upon him). Any attempt to reach God bypassing Muhammed's authority is useless'. The Christian lady and the Muslim both have faith in their beliefs: Both would say that the truths of their faith are revealed - are a revelation. Yet in their exclusiveness they cannot both be right. We have to choose one or the other or neither.

(I must admit that when I think of the sort of narrowness I have just quoted I feel much sympathy with Thomas Paine when he said: 'Each religion, each church accuses the other of unbelief. I, however, am impartial. I disbelieve them all'.)

How do we choose? By using reason... by reasoning.

Both traditions decry reason when faith and reason are in conflict... But over two hundred years ago the Unitarian Robert Aspland wrote: "The pretence of excluding reason from religion is the idlest of all follies; they that set it up expose its vanity by their own conduct, for they always reason as well as they can, and allege what they think reason for discarding reason altogether" [Sell p 469]

An influential C20th theologian Karl Barth did try to reject reason completely in favour of revelation. Faith, Barth said, is always in response to God's initiative. Reason is a human phenomenon. Therefore revelation is all that matters, since only from this beginning can true faith spring and mature. But there is a fatal flaw here... How is one to know what is truly revelation? Again, we have to use our ability to reason.

Orthodox religious people of the various world faiths often try to argue that the great truths such as the Trinity or the Resurrection cannot be understood by reason: but these are man-made doctrines and notions. When we discuss them we are discussing problems (solvable) and not life's great mysteries which are unsolvable.

Of course the ability to reason is only part of our human nature: Richard Boeke has sent me a poem about reason that includes the words 'If we only think, we'll be extinct'. This is rather different from Descartes' philosophy of Cogito ergo sum - I think therefore I am. (Descartes was asked if he wanted a coffee - I think not. And vanished)

Reason does not exist in a vacuum. It must take account of people's emotions and feelings, it must work in conjunction with humility and compassion. Milton wrote: 'Down, Reason, then', And immediately qualified this by adding: 'At least, vain reasonings down' - but when is reasoning sound and when is it vain??? Music and poetry are spheres of our experience that show us that there is something beyond reason but it must not be contrary to reason.

At a meeting of the Unitarian Renewal Group, reported in 'The Inquirer', Jopie Boeke is reported to have 'advocated new hymns and something of a shift from our emphasis on reason to catering for emotion'. I can, I think, understand this point - Pascal the seventeenth century mathematician and philosopher, a highly rational man, wrote that "we know truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart." Or putting it another way, he said "the heart has its reasons which reason does not understand." I am sure there is truth in this - But we must be very careful: we can be selfish or even cruel sometimes if we are ruled just by our hearts or emotions; we must think... and I think that the danger of over-estimating reason is a small danger.

Dawkins has been criticised for forgetting compassion and simple human comfort: But this is not a fair criticism: what he says in reply is: 'If the comforts afforded by outstretched human arms, warm human words and heart-broken human generosity seem puny against the agony they at least have the advantage of existing in the real world'.

Here, it seems to me, is the heart of the matter: What matters when we are faced with tragedy is our response: It may well be that the best we can say when asked where is God in all this? is that God is in the response...

The great mystic Julian of Norwich observed that:

*"God has no hands on earth but our hands: no hands to do his work except our hands."*

As Jesus realised, when faced with suffering what matters is not blaming God, but kindness and compassion.

*[There was then something said about the campaign Make Poverty History and the part we can play in the campaign... followed by a meditation.]*