

Space in the City: Winchester, 11 January 2012.

Seeing and believing: is religion just a point of view?

On April 16th 1784 a man called William Roy found himself on Hounslow Heath, where Heathrow airport now is. He had been commissioned to create a carefully measured base line which could assist in an Anglo-French project to discover, via triangulation, the precise longitude and latitude of the Royal observatories in Greenwich and Paris. The English favoured using the stars as their constant measuring devices, the French favoured using meridian arcs, and that meant creating accurately measured baselines. It was a rare example of English-French cooperation.

William Roy created a series of wooden and glass rods to measure a line across Hounslow Heath. It took him until August 30th to complete the painstaking task and, all the while, King George III and notable scientists of the day visited the work in progress. Roy calculated the dead straight line to be 5.190 miles in length (current GPS systems calculate the distance to be 5.185 miles). It was a remarkable achievement and it led eventually to the same line being recalculated only seven years later when it became the baseline for the creation of triangulated maps of the British Isles, maps we now refer to as “Ordnance Survey”.

I would not want you to get the impression that I am an expert in map-making. All the stuff I have just said I found in a fascinating book about the creation of the Ordnance survey entitled “*Map of a Nation*” by Rachel Hewitt (Granta 2010). I commend it to you very warmly. It’s a delight.

And what has all this to do with the subject of to-day’s talk? Let me explain.

It turned out that as those eighteenth century map-makers got to work, they became aware that surveying was but the most superficial part of their task. They certainly wanted to be accurate, but they also had to invent symbols as they went along to describe the landscape. They did not use contour lines, for example, but indicated the steepness of a hillside by hatching. They also discovered that deciding what place names really were, was more difficult than they first thought. Who could they trust? How did they know that the names they were given were names that everyone else recognised? What were they to do in parts of Wales with names beginning in *Llan*, for example, and although they tried to be meticulous, asking local gentry and clergy to cross-check their spellings, they sometimes got it wrong. Not only did they stumble, as it were, into toponymy, they also began to see that by carefully mapping an area they might be able to deduce much about land use and could speculate about improvement (a favourite eighteenth century concept). In other words, as they constructed their maps, their eyes began to see new possibilities. The landscape revealed itself to them, and they began to read it with fresh eyes.

You and I now read our Ordnance Survey maps with the benefit of the results of the perceptual experimentation that our 18th century forebears pioneered.

When they set out on their heroic surveying activities they could not have foreseen the perceptual and conceptual shifts that they and their successors would necessarily undergo as a result of their work. It was part of that Enlightenment shift in thinking with which we are still living. But I want to add one thing more. When they made their maps they were obsessive about accuracy, and there was a direct relationship between the landscape they were observing and measuring and the symbolic representation of that landscape on their maps. Theirs was not “just” a point of view. It was not characterised by a shrugging of the shoulders and a kind of lazy moral indifference, nor was it an individualistic hobby; their map making was a truly communal activity involving heated arguments, intellectual discipline and rigour, and all were committed to the seriousness of what they were undertaking.

There have been other perceptual shifts in history. In the interests of brevity I shall only give one more example. It comes from here in Winchester and took place in the last decades of the 10th century. In 973 or thereabouts a synod was held in Winchester in which new and more demanding rules for monastic life in England were drawn up by the participants, including Aethelwold, Dunstan and Oswald. The document that resulted from the Synod was called the “*Regularis Concordia*.” Amongst its recommendations was one which concerned the celebration of the liturgies on Good Friday and Easter Day. On Good Friday a cross was “buried” in a specially constructed Easter Sepulchre near or at the High Altar; then on Easter Day, very early in the morning, the Cross was removed from the Easter Sepulchre and put on display. So far, so ordinary. But then something new happened. It was suggested that the Easter day liturgy should involve four monks “playing”, as it were, the parts of the angel at the tomb and the three women coming to the tomb to anoint the body of Christ. Each of the monks was given lines to sing, and there were what we might call “stage directions”. For example, the monks representing the women were told to move “*As though looking for something.*” This was the first recorded time in Western European liturgical history that this small dramatic episode had happened. The episode caught the imagination of people so that in England before the Reformation every parish church created an Easter sepulchre for their Holy Week liturgies. And the idea spread rapidly across Europe. Unfortunately, its continuance was forbidden in England by King Edward VI and after a very brief resurgence during the reign of Mary Tudor, it died out completely. But ... if you are an historian of English drama you look to that 10th century dialogue in the Winchester *Regularis Concordia* as marking the beginnings of it. No Winchester, no “East Enders” ...

The perceptual shift, more than likely invented by Aethelwold, was to have far-reaching consequences. It was not “just” a point of view that he was promulgating; it was a means of engaging the imaginations of congregations in the theology of Holy Week. It enabled them to participate in the events of Holy Week, as it were from the inside.

What I have been trying to argue thus far, using examples from the 10th and the 18th centuries is that perceptual shifts are of profound importance. A “point of view”, if treated seriously, is not to be underestimated. When people typically say things such as “Well ... that’s just a point of view”, and in particular when they say such things as “Your religious beliefs are just your point of view ...” they are woefully underestimating the significance of what they are

saying. Points of view are of profound importance; changes in perception lead to changes in thought and behaviour.

I want to suggest, however, that the phrase “point of view” can be understood in two ways. One of them is “strong”, that is, where changes in perception lead to significant changes in behaviour and practice. It is the *strong* sense of “point of view” that I have been talking about in the first part of this lecture. But there is also a *weak* sense in which the phrase “point of view” can be used. For example, in the phrase “my point of view is different from yours”, as though that signals the end of the matter. It implies, at best, a kind of tolerance of diversity, but, at worst, can lead to a kind of moral and lazy intellectual indifference.

But now let’s move to the heart of the matter. Is religion and Christianity in particular, “just” a point of view? It could be said that that is exactly what Christianity is, in the *strong* sense of a “point of view”, that is, one which leads to significant changes in behaviour and practice. When Paul wrote his epistles he was struggling to express and come to terms with a seismic shift in his own point of view, in his inherited, rigorous and highly-trained mental map. How could a crucified man possibly be the Son of God? How could his fellow Jews not see what he could see? Read Romans 2, 3 and 4. You can feel him agonising over the right words to use, the sweat pouring from his brow. However, he had the ability to draw on a very important part of his Jewish tradition – the notion that God is one who reveals himself, one who is in a covenant relationship with his people. That notion of revelation, of God disclosing himself, has been a profound part of the Christian mental map right from the beginning. It’s there in Luke’s gorgeous story of the Annunciation when the angel sweeps down from heaven; it’s there in the story of Jesus’ baptism – “and there came a voice from heaven, You are my beloved Son; in you I delight”; it’s there in the story of the calming of the storm – “What sort of man is this? Even the wind and sea obey him?”; it’s there in the story of the Transfiguration; it’s there at the crucifixion and resurrection, and in the story of the road to Emmaus; it’s there in the story of the first Pentecost. Revelation is a fundamental part of our Christian doctrinal and intellectual apparatus and, let it be said, it has been debated, argued over, thought about with care and rigour across the centuries

But ... but, although that has been the case, and has influenced us all very deeply, and although it has been part of our cultural heritage as well ... think of Wordsworth’s “sense of presence that disturbs with the joy of elevated thoughts”; think of the poetry of George Herbert or Elizabeth Jennings, it is now under serious threat.

Let me give an example. It comes from the world of art history. I was visiting the Tate a few years ago when I came across a small statue by Giacometti. Next to it was a gnomic statement. It said “The expansive gesture of “Man pointing” is open to various narrative interpretations”. In other words, the meaning of the piece was very much a matter of *personal* interpretation.

It raises a serious philosophical question which has been troubling the world of the arts and literature and drama for much of the 20th century, and continues to do so in the 21st century. Is truth something which is essentially revealed, or is it something which we create? If truth is something we humans create then any talk of revelation must be open to serious challenge.

It was at this point in preparing this talk that I found myself up against an intellectual barrier – a barrier, if I can so put it, interior to my own understanding. So I turned away from my normal sources of enlightenment in trying to answer my philosophical question, to areas of learning which push me to my mental limits; I turned to the worlds of mathematics and science and to contemporary theories about chaos. I read a book by Ian Stewart, Professor of Mathematics at Warwick, entitled “*Does God Play Dice?: the new mathematics of chaos*” (you may know it; it was published by Blackwells in 1989 and became available in Penguin in 1990) and to another writer, to George Johnson’s book, “*Fire in the Mind*” (Penguin: 1995), sub-titled “*Science, Faith and the Search for Order*”, because in this book Johnson, too, wrestles constantly with the revelation/self-created meaning dilemma. His hypothesis is that human beings are obsessed by making patterns, by trying to discover or create meaning. And he veers (you can feel him doing it) between coming down on the side of ‘revelation’ and then switching to ‘self-created’ meaning. The penultimate paragraph in his fascinating book is an existentialist cry from the heart:

‘Sometimes the intelligence of our species seems like a little tiny flame flickering on the periphery of a vast blackness, trying to illuminate the void. Who gave us this burden? Will anyone or anything beyond our celestial campsite ever care?’

And this is the part of the paragraph which intrigued me:

‘Perhaps mathematics is effective because it represents the underlying language of the human brain. Perhaps the only patterns we can perceive are mathematical because mathematics is the instrument of our perception.’

Well. The book for me, as a non-mathematician, would be described entirely accurately as tough going. It took me into worlds where a new language was spoken: ‘strange attractors’, ‘accumulating wobbles’, ‘phase transition’, ‘renormalisation’. But it was also filled with a breathtaking joy – a sense of genuine discovery, where order and chaos appear to be two sides of the same coin, where patterns at a macroscopic level repeat at a microscopic level. Referring to a mathematical conceptual pattern called the Mandelbrot set, but nicknaming it because of its shape, the Gingerbread Man, Ian Stewart writes this:

‘It’s rightly been described as the most complex mathematical shape ever invented. Yet you can persuade a computer to draw it with perhaps ten lines of program code. The most startling feature of the Mandelbrot set is the way it retains its highly complicated structure if you zoom in on it at ever higher levels of magnification ... each new level of detail reveals new and ever-surprising structures: whirlpools, scrolls, sea-horses, lumps, thin snakes, coils, insect-like blobs, zig-zag lightening. And every so often, buried deep within the gingerbread man, perhaps a millionth of the size, you can find ... tiny gingerbread men, complete in every detail, including having their own sub-gingerbread men’.

He heads the chapter which reveals this extraordinary phenomenon ‘The Texture of Reality’ and includes, as its foreword, a poem by Miroslav Holub:

*We have
a map of the universe
for microbes,
we have
a map of the microbe
for the universe ...*

But he ends this exploration of mathematics with both paradox and hope. The paradox he states baldly:

‘Quantum uncertainty may be like this. An infinitely intelligent being with perfect sense – God, Vast Intellect, or Deep Thought – might actually be able to predict exactly when a given atom of radium will decay, a given electron shift in its orbit. But, with our limited intellects and imperfect senses, we may never be able to find the trick. Indeed, because we’re part of the universe, our efforts to predict it may interfere with what it was going to do.’

And he continues:

‘The brightest ray of light that chaos (theory) sheds focuses on the nature of complexity ... What controls the relationship of equation to solution, of model to behaviour, is not **form** but **meaning**.’

I find that, if you will forgive the pun, enlightening, because it begins to show me that my initial positing of two opposites (either revelation or self-created meaning) may be a false opposition (I’ll return to this in a moment), but what Ian Stewart also points to, is the complex interaction of time and place and technology and chance, in the discoveries of scientists:

‘Bacteria are everywhere, but without a microscope you’ll never see them ... But instruments alone are not enough. It takes the wit of a scientist to recognise that what his new instrument has revealed is important.’

Can I emphasise this? It would seem that on the edges of mathematical understanding, we come up against questions of meaning and value (hence the word ‘important’) and (blessed word) “wit”. The instrument, say a microscope, may reveal a pattern of enormous complexity (and revelation is an appropriate word here), but it requires the human being to discern what the meaning and importance of that revelation might be.

But part of the way through his analysis of contemporary understanding in physics, maths and biology, he reports this conversation between Niels Bohr and Heisenberg. The problem, Bohr believed, is that languages, both verbal and mathematical, that have evolved to aid our survival on earth, are simply not equipped for navigation in the sub-atomic realm. ‘We must be clear that, when it comes to atoms, language can be used only as poetry,’ he told Heisenberg one day as they trekked through the German woods. ‘The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as creating images and establishing mental connections’. Then, Heisenberg asked, ‘How can we ever hope to understand atoms?’

‘I think we may yet be able to do so,’ Bohr replied, ‘but in the process we may have to learn what the word “understanding” really means.’

Which leads me neatly into my next part of the argument. But before I move on, I want to re-cap where I have got so far. I have been trying to discover whether meaning and truth are essentially revealed or whether meaning and truth are essentially self-created. Or, if you prefer, the world can be divided into two camps, the Discoverers and the Inventors. Discoverers believe that with enough effort and good luck, there is truth ‘out there’ waiting to reveal itself. Inventors believe that patterns of meaning and categories of truth are not ‘out there’ but, as it were, in here, in the very structures of our own minds.

Well, the more I read of maths and physics (and please remember that I come to those subjects as an amateur), the more it seems to me that to divide the world into either Discoverers or Inventors is really to create a false and unhelpful dichotomy. We are (it’s no surprise that I’m an Anglican!) both. I came to this not very startling conclusion when having ploughed through a number of books on maths and physics, I picked up Charles Causley’s collection of poems “A Field of Vision” and read there:

‘Kelly Wood’

Walking in Kelly Wood, gathering Words
Frail as spilt leaves, fine sticks of sentences,
Spirals of bracken from the fallen ground,
I listen for the silences of stone,
The stream’s white voice, the indifference of birds.

Safe in my quiet house I lay them out
– Leaf, stick and bracken – in the hearth’s cold frame,
Strike steel on flint against the page of dark,
Wait patiently for the first spark. A flame.

That poem seems to me to capture the subtle and very beautiful relationship which is both ‘revelation’ and ‘self-created’ meaning. It is the place where ‘discovery’ and ‘invention’ meet. The words of the poem, you will notice, Causley describes as ‘gathered’. They are lying around, waiting ‘frail as spilt leaves’. The poet’s attitude to language is essentially one of passivity. But having gathered the words (having, in my terms, received the revelation), there is then a long and indeterminate process of internalisation. ‘*I listen for the silences of stone*’ and only when that has happened and with the most careful, artful precision, the poet ‘*lays them out – leaf, stick and bracken – in the hearth’s cold frame*’. And then what happens is another moment of revelation, of insight, where discovery and invention fuse – ‘*Wait patiently for the first spark. A flame.*’

It’s a gloriously simple poem which picks up Niels Bohr’s response to Heisenberg’s question: ‘In the process we may have to learn what the word ‘understanding’ really means’

Conclusion.

In this talk I have been thinking aloud with you about the nature of perception. I drew attention to the two senses that we can give to the phrase “a point of view”: the strong sense in which perception is seen radically to shift and enrich our intellectual framework (I gave examples from 18th century map-making and from 10th century Winchester) and the weak sense in which the phrase “point of view” suggests that all truth is personal and does not matter very much. I then looked at the importance of revelation as a foundational part of the Judaeo-Christian intellectual world and contrasted this with contemporary views about the nature of truth and reality. I found myself in a place where there seemed to be a choice between two competing systems of thought – the one based on revelation, and the other on “self-created” meaning. It looked like an impasse. But a quick and inevitably thin exploration of recent thinking in the worlds of mathematics and physics led me to recognise that a binary division between revelation and “self-created” meaning was a gross oversimplification. Instead, what we seem to inhabit is a world in which both revelation and self-created meaning play a part. It was Charles Causley’s poem “Kelly Wood” which led me towards this tentative conclusion. And I had drawn on the insight of Niels Bohr when referring to the world of sub-atomic particles that the language to describe that world needed to be the language of Poetry.

And it is at this point that I return to my lecture title: “Seeing and believing: is religion just a point of view?”

I want to answer it by saying two things; firstly, that Christianity consists of both revelation, in the traditional sense, and also “self-created meaning”, but this is also true of mathematics and physics and other branches of human enquiry and endeavour; secondly, that Christianity *is* a “point of view”, but in the *strong* sense of that phrase, that is, it radically shifts perceptions, beliefs and behaviour.

The difficulty for those of us who espouse the Christian faith is that our critics are plonkingly literalist in their understanding of what they imagine we believe, and that we ourselves, especially in our hymnody, sermons and in some of our worship, have also become plonkingly simplistic. We insist on talking of God in banal prose when we should be giving ourselves time and space to explore God’s poetry ... but that must wait for another day.

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert. January 2012.