

Faith and Future

These days, in our secular European society, faith is no longer talked about as something to be sought after, least of all as a highly esteemed virtue or as a gift from heaven. On the contrary, it is mocked, frowned upon, or rejected outright. A book by the philosopher Sam Harris, called “The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason” (New York: Norton, 2004), seems to sum up the current mood with its call to reject faith in all its religious expressions, because of the intolerance it generates. The idea is now prevalent that faith in God is a mere vestige of mankind’s evolutionary past, a superstitious remnant in the mental equipment inherited from primitive ancestors.

The faith that Harris, and other ‘New Atheists’, condemn refers to the bundle of beliefs and customs that “define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your behavior to other human beings”. In itself that would not be a bad thing, except that “some of our cherished beliefs about the world... are leading us inexorably to kill one another. A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion.” They criticize faith, in this sense, because they identify it with religion and religion with violence and intolerance, especially when it embraces a sectarian view of the world, divided into a faithful “in group” (us) and a faithless “out group” (them). But is this really the right way to define faith, as synonymous with exclusive and divisive forms of religion?

A more accurate and useful working definition of “biblical” faith is given in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11,1). Faith strengthens hope. It may have its origins in the past, but its main focus is now on the future, since it leads to the attainment of unseen objectives in the future. And the objective may not be religious but secular and worldly. If your objective is to be rich, then you need have faith in money, in order to want to accumulate it and become wealthy. If your objective is to be cured of illness, then you need to have faith in the medical or surgical skills of your doctors, nurses and pharmacists. If your objective is to be successful, then you need to have faith in your own abilities and ambition. In whatever area of activity you are engaged, you need to have faith to achieve your aims. In order to live at all, even as a farmer, you need to have faith in the fertility of the earth and the regularity of the seasons. Without faith in something or someone, you cannot even think about, let alone plan, your future. Faith is the road that leads us to the future we wish for, or dream of. And this brings us back to religion, and specifically to the Christian religion.

As a community of like-minded people, Christians share a very special objective, which is nothing less than the attainment and completion of the kingdom of heaven on earth. It is their daily prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven... Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. Taught and inaugurated by Jesus Christ, faith informs us that this heavenly kingdom *will indeed be* fulfilled, in the future, in a universal society whose members all know and willingly practice the loving will of God. In this society there will be no more evil, because the ‘old’ human nature of its members will have been completely

transformed, or redeemed, by the love of God in Christ. It is an ancient and unique vision of future harmony, health and peace, inspired by the Scriptures (Revelation, chapters 21-22) and sustained by Christian hope. As stressed by the Catholic Theologian Walter Kasper, “It is a future *for* the world, but not a future *of* the world” (*Faith and the Future*, 1985). However, there is strong resistance to the attainment of this blessed objective by those with wealth and privilege in the present time. So the road to this destination is strewn with challenges and hardships. There is a need for great faith, but not a new or blind faith, because it is the continuation of the same historical faith in the mission of Jesus Christ, in the Gospel, in the mission of the Church founded on its preaching, and in the prophetic vision of its fulfilment. This is not just the mindless practice of ritualistic religion, or the irrational assent to doctrine, but faith in the biblical sense, as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11,1). This is faith operating creatively in the will, and plan, of God for the future of all mankind, and without this faith, the future of the world will remain in the hands of those whose faith is bent on the attainment of selfish and personal ends, those whose faith leads to the “worship of idols” and the destruction of the earth (Rev 11,18), as the Bible says.

In so far as we share the Christian vision of the future perfection, in a renewed creation, then let us unite with all Christ’s people and pray for the faith to attain it, so we may be able to respond positively to Christ’s piercing challenge: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18,8).

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