

## **'Reflections On The State We Are In'**

**by Karen Armstrong**

Well, I listened to the other two talks, and was struck by a sense of familiarity. Even though we're constantly being told that we're facing imponderable change and that change is accelerating very fast, we're still bumping up against difficulties and problems and concerns that we've been struggling with for centuries.

Very often, especially in a world that's changing very fast, religious people want to hold on to things. They want things to be the same; they want to have a sense of continuity and tradition. But religion must change. If religion doesn't change, it dies. If a religious tradition hasn't got the flexibility to look at the peculiar and unique circumstances with which it's struggling in its own particular modernity, look back at the traditions and the wisdom of the past and apply it to the present in a creative act, then the tradition will fail. And religious people are very pragmatic; they vote with their feet. When a religious idea ceases to appeal or ceases to work for them - that means when it ceases to give them some sense of life's ultimate meaning and value - then they vote with their feet and depart.

We've been looking at the state of the economy and the state of technology; now we look at the state of religion in this country. And things aren't looking too good. In London, my home town, the churches are emptying and being transformed into warehouses and art galleries and shops. Compared with the United States of America (and I'm not lauding American Christianity; I think it has many, many problems) but in America, over 90% of the population claim to believe in God and over 60% attend a religious service on a regular basis. Over here, it's 35% of the population who claim to believe in God and only 10% who attend a regular religious service. So people are voting with their feet, not because they're disgusted or anything, but because when they go to church they somehow feel that it isn't giving them a sense of life's ultimate meaning and value for which we pray, which we need, when we confront the tragic and difficult circumstances in which we live.

Now, one period of major change is called by historians the 'Axial Age'. It's called the Axial Age because it was pivotal in the spiritual and cultural development of humanity, and it stretches from about 600 BCE to 200 BCE. At this time, all over the civilised world, the great cultures had all reached a particular stage of advancement. They'd progressed, all of them, to a similar level; and because their social conditions had changed, the religious ideas of the past, the old paganism which had served their forebears remarkably well, no longer worked. All over the civilised world the great confessional religions, which have continued to nourish humanity to this day, evolved. Taoism and Confucianism in the Far East, monotheism in the Middle East, Buddhism and Hinduism in the Indian sub-continent, and Greek Rationalism in Europe.

We continue to go back to these major developments; let's just have a look at some of their findings. Number one is that they all developed in the market place. Here instantly we think of Will Hutton, and his preoccupation with the Market, admittedly on a scale in which the people of the Agora in ancient Greece would not have imagined; but nevertheless at this time there was a major shift in culture from the priests, the temples and the palaces, to the market place. People were beginning to develop a competitive market system, and the economy was beginning to drive forward human culture.

When thoughtful people looked at the new economy that was emerging, they reacted rather like Will Hutton; they saw huge inequalities; they realised that only a few people, an elite, enjoyed the fruits of civilisation and culture. The vast majority of people were peasants, and civilisation and culture were built on their backs. The great pre-modern civilisations, before our own capitalistic economy was evolved, all depended upon a surplus of agriculture. The peasants laboured, but took no part in that; now people were very aware of the aggressive

nature of the new economy. Admittedly, it's now become aggression on a massive scale, but they were concerned even then.

So, religion is not a matter of going into some desert or onto a mountain peak or into the country. The religions that we know all developed in the market place, in a cut-throat environment of high finance and trade. So when we look at the market today, when we think of the astonishing things that Will Hutton told us, then we have to say yes, we're still in that world, and it's not impossible to find a religious solution. Indeed, we have to, because we are, just as Will was, concerned about huge inequality, and about injustice.

And that brings me to my second point: that all the great civilisations of the world which evolved these new, confessional religions, all insisted that the one litmus test of any religious experience or any religious idea was that it issued in justice and practical compassion. The Buddha said that after achieving enlightenment a man must come down from the mountain top and return (note) to the market place, and there practise compassion for all living beings. The prophets of Israel insisted again and again, when they reformed the old pagan practices of the Hebrew tradition, that it was pointless to have a wonderful temple liturgy, lovely prayers, lovely warm glow at your sacred sites; that God was nauseated by the sacrificial liturgy in the temple if the people of Israel were not looking after the poor, the oppressed, the orphans and the widows, the vulnerable people of society. The prophet Amos has a vision of God roaring aloud in horror from his sanctuary on Mount Zion in Jerusalem when he looks at the injustice that is being perpetrated, not just in Israel, but throughout all the countries of the Middle and Near East. The prophets were convinced that compassion and justice were central to the religious experience.

Now, this was not just some 'pie in the sky' idea. As I said, religious people are very pragmatic and practical; they believe that charity and compassion work if you do them. Why do they work? Because they require that you displace yourself from the centre of your universe and put in the other; that you learn to recognise that other people beside oneself have sacred value; and you learn to look at the sacred, not just in holy shrines and places and liturgies and churches, but in every single human being with whom you meet.

The third thing, is that all the great religious traditions insisted that faith was not, as we tend to think today, emotional assent to a set of abstract doctrines. Rather, faith had to be created by means of religious practice; 'I believe in God or Nirvana' made no sense unless you were *living* a religious life. The Buddha put it this way: when asked if Nirvana existed or if a Buddha continued to exist in Nirvana once he'd achieved enlightenment, the Buddha said this was a totally meaningless and improper question. It was an improper question because we have no words or concepts or ideas with which to describe such realities. But, said Buddha, if you live in a certain way, if you don't crowd your mind with stimulants, if you always try to speak about everything with accuracy (something we very rarely do - we like to embellish or embroider or slant something according to our own egotism); but say it how it is, said Buddha. If you practise meditation, the disciplines of concentration and Yoga that have opened up people's beings all over the known world to deeper subconscious currents of existence, and if you practise compassion to all living beings, said Buddha, then you will know that Nirvana exists. You will have created within yourself a sense of the ultimate, and then you will have intimations of Nirvana even though you'll never be able to prove one way or the other that Nirvana exists.

We've all had that kind of experience when we've listened to a great piece of music or studied a great work of art, and felt deeply touched within ourselves and lifted momentarily beyond our normal, mundane concerns. We feel, for those few moments, that despite all the depressing evidence to the contrary, life has some ultimate meaning and value, even though we'd be hard put to it to explain that conviction in rational thought; and that is what religion should do for us.

We can see very briefly this happening in Islam. I choose Islam because it's the latest of the great world religions to emerge on the world stage and we know so much about its development; far more than we know about Christianity, for example. Islam appeared in the 7th century, at a time when the Arabs were beginning to develop a market economy, and were beginning to abandon the old tribalism. Now that's something that Patrick Dixon was talking about last time. The old tribalism, because of the pressures of the market, was breaking down, and thoughtful people like Mohammed, in particular, were deeply concerned about the new inequalities that were appearing in mercantile Mecca. The bed-rock message of the Koran is not a doctrine. The Koran has a very negative view of theological speculation which is so important to us today in our church. We're constantly haranguing people about their beliefs and trying to drag people back into line because of what they think about utterly ineffable and indescribable matters.

But the Koran says that all such speculation is self-indulgent whimsy. The basic message of the Koran is that it's wrong to build a private fortune and good to share your wealth equally, to create a just and decent society where poor and vulnerable people are treated with respect. Mohammed moved his people from the tribal society which had turned bad and murderous, because they no longer spoke to the condition of the people, though it had served them well for centuries in the pre-capitalist era, and helped them to form a new community; a community based not on blood ties, but on a shared ideology. And this was considered blasphemous by the people. He was accused of atheism; he was persecuted. When you're moving to a new solution for your people at a time of major change, your religious ideas may seem atheistic and blasphemous to many people who are still embedded in the status quo! The highest point of value, the most sacred value in pre-Islamic Arabia, was blood; the kinship, the tie of blood. In asking Muslims to leave their tribe and form a super-tribe based not on blood but an ideology, was as drastic as if the Pope had abolished the Mass. Mohammed suffered for this, but it spoke to the condition of the people of Arabia, so that by the end of Mohammed's life, in 23 short years, he had produced a full-blown monotheism; something that it had taken the people of Israel hundreds of years to reach. He also united the whole of Arabia in a political organisation that had moved them from tribalism to the more universal vision.

Now, in a sense what has changed? We're still worried about the market, though it's the pace of change that concerns us, and the pace is massive. But also we have to admit that the religions seem not to be answering people's understandable perplexities in these circumstances. Hence the point about our emptying churches. Now, why? In 1882 Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead. You may be familiar with the parable. He imagines a madman rushing into the market place - again, notice, the market place - one morning and saying, 'Where is God? I'm looking for God.' And the people around, the rather supercilious bystanders, look at him and say, 'Well, do you think He's gone on holiday or might have emigrated, or run away?' And he said, 'No. God is dead. We've killed Him.'

Now, in a sense Nietzsche was right. For about two hundred years the people of the West had been developing a new kind of society that would replace the old agrarian-based societies, and it was based heavily on rationalism. Philosophers and church people alike were saying that the one criterion of true faith was that it should be rational; that you should be able to prove God's existence, and be able to say: 'I believe that God exists', You began your religious quest with an assertion that God existed: a purely notional assent to an abstract belief, which made no sense outside practice: mysticism, the practice of meditation, the spiritual life.

Because people like Nietzsche, people like Kant (who was profoundly religious in his own way), all believed that prayer and ritual were superstitious nonsenses, they concentrated on Reason. Kant decided that you couldn't prove the existence of God one way or the other; but without the practice of the good life, without the practice of the rituals that open up your heart, like great theatre, without the practice of compassion. As the Buddha said: 'These

notional ideas about what is Nirvana make no sense unless you're living in a certain way.' We've got to be God-creative; and we weren't doing that any more. (There were a lot of people in Europe who were doing that, and Nietzsche didn't bother with those). But there were, and there have been, an increasing number of people who think that reason and logic are the main criteria of religious truth; who think that faith has become an acceptance of certain doctrines or beliefs. And people say, 'Well, I don't believe in God, so therefore I'm not going to live in a religious way. I'm not going to practise compassion to all living beings or attend rituals or practise meditation. There's no point if there's no God.' But the point is that prayer and ritual all *create* faith rather than just a notional assent; so if you're not living in a certain way, you'll kill the sense of God.

Now, mysticism: we don't do that any more. We just made a good start of it in Europe; we were rather late bloomers because we had a difficult time during the Dark Ages and got knocked back a few centuries. We were just starting to create a very good mystical tradition in the 14th century when along came the Protestant Reformation, which didn't approve of mysticism because it was non-Biblical, and was associated with monasteries which Protestants didn't like; and the Catholics decided that most of their mystics were oddballs and fringe people and rather dangerous and should be kept a close eye on by the Inquisition. So we relegated our mysticism to the fringes of our religious life. The whole idea of entering into the Self, to discover that the divine is not just something 'out there' but something that is profoundly united with ourselves, with our being, we don't do.

Mysticism is very difficult for us to do today. The first letter in Patrick Dixon's 'FUTURE' was 'Fast' - everything's going so *fast* these days! We now expect instant feedback, instant communication; this is the era of the fax, the telephone, of instant gratification, fast food. Mysticism takes a long, long time. The spiritual life takes a long, long time. It's not a question of just walking into a church and getting 'zapped' by an experience; you have to go at it day after day, saying your prayers, *bored*, doing, living in a certain way and gradually, without your noticing it, you're being transformed.

Now we don't have time for that, and we certainly don't have time for the long slog of it all, the hours in prayer, the hours spent meditating, the hours not getting, apparently, anything back. We want things back fast. So it's difficult for us to live a spiritual life, and I don't know what we're going to do about that. It requires a lot of silence, too, quiet acres of nothing much happening. We never have a moment of silence in our lives, even in the lift we have piped music, or in the supermarket. God forbid that there should be a second's silence in our lives. Talk shows are jabbering people's opinions for 24 hours a day. People escape from silence. We can't live with it any more; and again, traditionally religion and the sense of the divine has been born out of silence, and in our 'fast world, instant communication' existence, I don't know what we're going to do about that.

Then there's community. Remember what Will Hutton was saying about how the various segments of society don't know one another any more, that the upper sector have opted out? They don't understand the alienation of the people at the bottom of the spectrum. The people at the bottom of the spectrum don't feel that the people they're stealing from are human beings like themselves; they're in a completely different order. We've lost a sense of community. Now, religious people say, 'Aha! People have lost the sense of community because we've lost the sense of God.' I would put it the other way around; I would say we've lost the sense of God because we no longer practise the disciplines of compassion that make God accessible to us.

In the Hindu tradition when you meet another person, you join your hands and bow, because you're acknowledging the sacred presence that you're encountering in the other person.

Judaism and Christianity and Islam all teach the same thing - that the divine is found in every single human being with whom we come in contact; that we learn to reverence the sacred

and the divine even in people who shock us. In Hebrew the word for holiness is 'Kadosh' - 'other', separate. Sometimes the whole 'otherness' of other people, even people from different cultures that sometimes shock us, can give us a sense of the 'otherness' and separateness that is God. And if we are living in a society that makes it very difficult for us to see one another as human, let alone sacred, (and the two should be the same thing), then we're going to lose all sense of God. We're going to lose all sense of the divine. You cannot have a sense of a transcendent God unless you also have a sense of God as immanent in every single human being with whom we come in contact, whether that person belongs to our ethnic or religious or ideological group or not. And as Will Hutton was showing so eloquently, we're losing that.

So no wonder people are not going to church. And indeed, are the churches stressing this? So often, what they're doing is haranguing the faithful on their religious beliefs, or their sexual morality, or whether women should be priests, or whether people should be married, or what kind of contraception people can use. When do you hear them talking about compassion and acknowledging the sacred in the other? I remember one point during that acrimonious debate about the ordination of women, the former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, got up and said with tears in his voice that it was a shame, and *shameful*, to be quarrelling about women in the full glare of the media when there was a whole world out there in lostness, waiting for the message of Christ.

So we are, in a sense, losing the plot. And we need somehow to get back from a strong sense of faith as acceptance of certain religious notions, which has proved to be barren, and getting back to creating a sense of the divine by a wonderful theology. Theology in every tradition but our own - and our own only in the last 300 or 400 years - is supposed to be like poetry. And poetry is supposed to fill us with awe and wonder and joy and delight. Often theology is deadly dull; the most uninspired, dreary stuff is churned out; but it's supposed to be like poetry. One of the Greek Orthodox theologians who evolved the doctrine of the Trinity in the late 4th century - Gregory of Nazianzus - said that when he thought of the Three in One, his eyes filled with tears and he lost all sense of where he was. But when you think of some of the conundrums that we have in our hymns - 'Three-in-one and one-in-three, holy sacred Trinity', etc., does it bring tears to our eyes? No, it does not! We've come to expect our theology to be statements of fact, whereas it's supposed to be like a great poem, to lift us, as a great poem does, into an apprehension of something sacred and wonderful.

We need all this. We're living, as Patrick Dixon pointed out, in a frightening world. Nietzsche made his madman say that human beings have lost all sense of orientation, flying into infinite nothingness. We'd lost all sense of what was above or below or where we were, because we need a spirituality to give us some sense of equilibrium.

Ritual and liturgy! I'm sure it's wonderful here in Chelmsford; but I've been to lots of other places where it's utterly tedious, where people just grind their way through it, and it's mechanically done and people gabble through the sermon; but it should be like great theatre. Theatre began in Greece as a religious celebration. Even today, in a wholly secular context, theatre can give us a sense of utter transcendence and awe and wonder and mystery. We should spend as much time on our liturgies and making them like that as we would if we were producing a Shakespeare play. That's what we should be doing rather than beating our heads against the intractable question, the notional question, 'Does God exist?' If we create a liturgy, if we live in a compassionate way, as Buddha said, we'll know that the divine is there, that the sacred is a reality, a reality that gives meaning to our existence; but not the other way around.

Now, as Patrick Dixon was saying, something has to happen. Something has to change. And so what is changing? There are changes, some positive, some negative, that have been happening in the last century. We've just run through three of them. One is comparative religion, and that corresponds to the universalism, the universal vision that we were thinking

about last time. In this century we've had the opportunity, for the first time in human history, really to understand other people's religious faiths. Before, travellers would bring back accounts of strange and peculiar and exotic goings-on in places like India. Now we understand what the faith was behind it. Other people's religious activities always look peculiar from the outside. When you understand the faith that is behind these rituals, you realise the profound unanimity that exists across the whole religious spectrum. And this is going to have a momentous impact. We'll never be able to see either our own or other people's religions in quite the same way again. People are already moving from one tradition to another with ease. More Christians read the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber than Jews. Jews read Paul Tillich and Harvey Cox. There are Christians who practise Buddhist meditation. We're not *leaving* our own tradition to form some huge, amorphous world church (that's an appalling thought; one of the great troubles of our century has been these great conglomerates and amalgamates); but nevertheless we're beginning to see that we have a great deal to learn.

We have a great deal to learn from such a tradition as Buddhism, for example, with its reticence in speaking about the divine. We make God so acceptable. We're constantly second-guessing the divine, saying what he wants, what he believes, what he expects, making him just like us. You can make God a member of the Labour Party or a member of the Conservative Party. You can make him just like us, instead of seeing God as a being. As he says in the book of Isaiah: 'My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my thoughts above your thoughts.' And Buddhism, with its refusal to speak about the ultimate; Judaism with its refusal to speak for the same reason, to utter the divine name of God, is a powerful corrective against that limiting way of speaking about the divine which the Buddhists find blasphemous.

And the awful, tribal way we have of running down other people's religions! I'm thinking, for example, of Islam, which is a religion that suffers greatly in the West and has done for a thousand years. From a position of pure ignorance the media run it down. I like to think of the prophet Mohammed's great saying at the end of his life. When he gave his last sermon and he spoke in Mecca to his own tribe (many of whom had not converted to Islam - they were not forced to), and he said: 'Oh Koresh, God has called you from the haughtiness of paganism with its pride in ancestors, but remember,' he said, 'all men come from Adam and Adam came from dust, so there's nothing to be proud of anyway.' And then he quoted this wonderful verse from the Koran: he said 'Oh people, we have formed you into tribes and nations so that you will know one another; not so that you will oppress one another or so that you will convert one another, but so that the experience of living in community with other difficult beings - and who is harder to get on with than members of your own family sometimes, or your own particular tribe - the experience of coping in the community with otherness will give you a springboard to learning to deal with other ethnic religious groups.' And that is one of the great religious challenges of the 21st century.

Universalism, globalism: one of the global effects has been our understanding that other people have had a valid faith, and we must accept that. I'm often shocked by the breathtaking ignorance of the people who I hear condemning, for example, a religion such as Islam. They know not the first thing about it, but they think, because the media tell them a few highly exaggerated facts, that they are experts, and they have a lovely buzz of righteousness; there's something in us that loves to exclude. There are some people who, if they got to heaven and found everybody there, would be miserable that there was no one roasting that they could look down on from the celestial paradise.

The second religious reality that's happening in our century is the tribal one. You remember you were hearing last week that the more universal you become, the more tribal other people want to become, too. Fundamentalism has erupted all over the globe, and not just as an Islamic phenomenon, though you'd think it was if you listen to the press. It's erupted in every religious tradition as a response to our problems. Modernity has aroused great fears.

Patrick Dixon said 'Some of you are looking utterly appalled at what I'm telling you.' When you think of the horror that we've been thinking, about Aids, the terror of the way our economy is going. Terror!

It's no wonder that fundamentalists are expressing their terror in religious forms, and this is a problem for religious people. Very often fundamentalists begin their journey into terror not by attacking other religions, but by looking at their own co-religionists, who they think as being too accepting of this modernity. A huge divide in every faith exists between the people who are so-called liberals and the people who are so-called fundamentalists. Our job, as religious people, is not to denigrate these people, but to meet them in a spirit of compassion and understanding - real compassion; feeling with them because we share these fears, though we may not express our terror in the same way.

Only a tiny minority of fundamentalists resort to violence. Most of them are trying, struggling, to live a religious life in a secular world. I'm writing a book on Fundamentalism at the moment, and in every fundamentalist movement that I have encountered, there is a massive fear of annihilation. Fundamentalists feel that their own co-religionists, plus the secular societies in which they live, want to wipe them out. And when we have that kind of terror and our backs are to the wall, then we become aggressive. So we must listen; and of course we get a sense of horror, especially with our own co-religionists and their own hard line, especially when they attack us; but what did Jesus say? Turn the other cheek. Don't let your own egotism get in the way.

Listen. We're not good at listening. Perhaps Buddha should have said, when he was saying those four things: 'Learn to listen.' How often do we really listen to the other? We're usually thinking of the clever thing we're going to say next while somebody else is talking. Christian fundamentalists in the United States, who comprise 25% of the population of North America, manifest their fears in their demonisation of many institutions of modernity. Those little microchips that you were hearing about last time, that carry your whole passport and medical history just in a chip under your skin; that kind of thing is the 'Mark of the Beast' for fundamentalists. The United Nations is a Satanic body for American fundamentalists; so is the World Council of Churches. In the face of anything that is universal, they want to accentuate the tribal, because they're afraid of being lost; and in America they have felt marginalised, insulted and humiliated by the liberal establishment of Harvard and Yale, and by their liberal fellow Christians. That's a religious failure on both sides. We must listen, because no society can afford to have the major fears of these polarisations and anxieties unaddressed within it. We're all frightened. We should listen to the fears of others; compassion means: to *'feel with someone'*.

Finally, atheism. Often religious people throw up their hands in despair and say, 'Oh, atheism: terrible, terrible.' I think it's fine! Historically atheism has always been a rejection of one particular form of faith. At early stages of their history, Jews, Christians and Muslims were all called 'atheists' by their Papist contemporaries, not because they didn't believe in God - obviously they did - but because their ideas about the sacred were so radical and so different that they seemed utterly blasphemous to their neighbours.

Atheism has therefore usually masked a stage of religious transition, as it did for Jews, Christians and Muslims in the early stages when people were making a quantum leap forward in religious thought and experience and evolving something new. I think that this is what's happening again today. If people deny the particular conception of God that has grown up in the last few hundred years in the Western world only, that's no great tragedy, because the idea of God has constantly changed in markedly different ways. Jews say that the God who is all-compassionate, all-powerful, all-benevolent, responsible in some sense for everything that happens: *that* God died in Auschwitz. Similarly, when we pray to God and say 'help us', listen to those market forces that we were talking about. Do we really think God is going to

swoop down and prevent the markets from collapsing, or else make them collapse in order to teach us all a lesson? Nonsense!

We look at our experience and we have to have a different conception of God. If the old idea of God works for you, and it makes you - that's the litmus test - a more charitable, compassionate person, then for goodness' sake, run with it. But if it's not, and if it fills you with perplexity, then don't despair. You know how it is in a restaurant when you've had a very strong-tasting first course; they'll bring you a sorbet to cleanse your palate so that you can taste what's going to come next. And perhaps for many people who have been fed a really bad diet of theology - really facile, lazy, dull theology - perhaps such people need to cleanse their minds of this before they can taste what is to come.

Go back for a few moments to what I was saying about theology being poetry. I am not a poet, but I have friends who are, and they will say that they have to listen for years to a poem as it declares itself to them, coming sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, image by image, word by word, from the unconscious; declaring itself as though it were something outside themselves. They have to listen to it. You can't sit down at your desk and say: 'Right, I'm going to finish this poem by mid-day today and fax it in to my editor.' You have to wait. People say to me sometimes, shouldn't we have a meeting to find a new way to define God in the 21st century? You can't create a poem in a committee; you have to wait. The British poet John Keats said that when a poet puts himself into the frame of mind where he is listening to that poem coming up, he has to put himself into a state of negative capability, when the mind is capable of resting in half truths and uncertainties 'without any irritable reaching after fact or reason'. We look at the difficulties we face, the problems of genetic engineering, the horrible problems of the African continent with Aids, this immorality, apparently, of our market economy, and what can we do about it? We're so used to the instant fix-it approach that we expect religion to provide us with instant answers. Will we look it up in the Bible, as though the Bible were some kind of holy encyclopaedia where you look up 'M' for 'market' and find a few quotes, and that tells us what to do? Of course not! You have to wait prayerfully in the darkness, living with a problem, but prayerfully, open, in what mystics used to call 'the dark night of the soul' or 'the cloud of unknowing'. It often seems to me that religions are at their best when they help us to articulate and formulate a question and at their worst when they seek to answer these questions; we come zooming in with our instant answers. There aren't instant solutions to these impossible questions. They're impossible because they've never happened to human beings before. We need to wait, creatively, in silence, and that may mean atheism. It may mean being in the dark.

I'd like to close with a consideration of Abraham, 'the father of those who believe' says St Paul. If you look at the Biblical text, it's very difficult to know what on earth Abraham believed. He doesn't seem to have any beliefs. When God appears to Abraham, he does not start off with a theology lesson. He doesn't say, 'Well, look, Abraham, I'm the creator of the world and there's only one of me, and I'm self-sufficient and the problem of evil is such-and-such; let's get our theology straight before we begin our life together.' Not a bit of it! He erupts into Abraham's life as an imperative: 'Get up and go! Leave everything behind and go to an open-ended future, to the land that I will show you.' Now, I'm not saying you should jettison tradition. Tradition is there; it's a rich repository that we can use. But we need to use the whole of tradition, not just our favourite bits that endorse our little opinions in the here and now. Traditions are all pretty complex.

Abraham got up and went. The man of faith had no certainty. He was constantly in the dark. If you read the Biblical text, he's always arguing with God, always asking God difficult questions; and God provides extremely unsatisfactory answers. At one point, Abraham falls into a dark trance of grief and despair; a horror descends upon him when he looks forward to all the terrible things that will befall his descendants in Egypt.

In his last communication with Abraham, God takes him up the Mount of Moriah and asks him to kill his own son. He leads him up to the absolute brink of meaninglessness, and that's the last time he speaks. Abraham has no certainties. We often think faith is a cast-iron certainty; religion should give us all the answers - look up abortion, look up euthanasia, look up genetic engineering, look up the market - in the Bible; there'll be a quote, or something will tell us (or someone should tell us) exactly what to think, when; but it's not like that.

For Abraham faith is a constant struggle in the dark with no solutions, and often a lot of botched jobs. The Muslims have a great word for this. They call it 'jihad'. That does not mean 'holy war' despite what the newspapers will tell you. 'Jihad' means struggle - the constant struggle to implement a divine imperative in the flawed conditions in which we live. This struggle demands all our creative expertise. We're not supposed to be just sitting in pews and waiting for the tradition to tell us what to do and then we say: 'Oh, that's it,' and then go out and repeat it all. We're supposed to be agonising and struggling like Abraham. It's a 'jihad'; it's a struggle.

If you want to see what the struggle is, look at the Cross. That, for me, is the meaning of the Cross. How difficult it is in a murderous, cruel, heedless world, to bring about the kingdom of God. That's what it will do for you; it may even crucify you. It's hard; there won't be certainty. But Abraham did have one lovely religious experience, and this brings us back to Will Hutton and his horrifying vision of our utter lack of fellow feeling with people in different segments of our society. Abraham was sitting in his tent one day at Mamre near Hebron in the hottest part of the day, a real middle-eastern afternoon, and saw three strangers approaching. Strangers in Abraham's day, as in our own, are potentially dangerous people. Very few of us would bring three complete strangers off the street into our own homes, but that's what Abraham does. Instead of not being able to empathise with people at the bottom of the social spectrum, as Will Hutton was saying, or being able to see that the people whose wallet you're stealing are human at all, Abraham goes out to three total, potentially lethal, people, who are not members of his ethnic, religious or ideological group, and brings them into his own encampment - drags them in, virtually. And he doesn't just give them a glass of water and a sandwich; he prepares for them an elaborate meal, pouring out on these three total strangers all the refreshment and compassion he can, to help them on their journey through life. And then it transpires, in the course of the ensuing conversation, that one of those strangers is Abraham's God. The act of compassion created a divine encounter, not the other way about.

By pouring ourselves out for the stranger (Will Hutton was saying, there are many people in our society who are strangers to us - people in our ethnic and even ideological company); by knocking out our own egos, giving everything we have, *then* we'll get a sense of God; but not the other way around. Our challenge is to look at our society with all its heartlessness, disease, alienation, loneliness, with our very difficult modernity. Our religious challenge is not to formulate lovely doctrines and harangue other people about whether they use birth control or not. It is to bring that sense of utter compassion, that fellow feeling, and to cultivate it. If we have problems about wondering whether there's a God out there or not: leave it. We can't solve it one way or the other. Live in a certain way, says Buddha. Live in a compassionate way. Knock out the ego from the centre of your lives, to bring in the other, and then you will know that even though you are in the dark, and even though you can't find a solution for genetic engineering, or Aids, or whatever, immediately, you will find some ultimate meaning and value which we call God.

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Comments by The Provost:

Thank you very much indeed for a wonderful talk. I've said before that I have a horror of people who, like me, stand up and then summarise a talk; and I refuse to do it. But you've

given us lots of things to think about which I'm sure we will want to think about. If there's one phrase that's standing out for me, it's that, at the moment, anyway, we're in danger of losing the plot. We go on about this, that and the other, but how do we here, people in churches like this, start with compassion; so that's something I'm hanging on to, which I think is a great challenge.

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Question: About the morals and motivation of the market, and the influence of Christianity in controlling conscience about market activity.

Answer: First of all, let me make it quite clear, I was not comparing the markets to religion. What I was saying was that the religions developed in the context of market economy. As an antidote to an aggressive market economy, primitive as it seems in an ancient market economy of the 5th century BCE compared to what we've got in Wall Street or the City today; but people were worried, and that impelled them to religion. I wasn't comparing the market with religion; I was simply saying that the markets were, surprising as it may seem, the context in which the great world confessional religions grew up. Our perception of this basic injustice kicked off Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, monotheism and Greek rationalism. The Greek philosophers used to talk in the 'agora', the market place; and *that's* what we should do today. The perceptions of injustice, the perceptions of worry, the worry about capitalism - with the very stern injunctions we have from Jesus about not laying up treasure for yourself on earth but giving everything you have to the poor - this does not go with taking out shares in Telecom!

How do we reconcile this? It's hard. Religion is meant to be an antidote; it grew up in the market place out of a worry. They're not similar. But of course religion is like any other human activity: it can be abused, just as sexuality can. Sex is supposed to be all about tenderness and sharing and love and appreciation of the other, but it can be used cruelly, exploitatively, pervertedly, and destructively. Religion is no exception. Because religions are extremely powerful; in a sense they're more powerful than the markets, not just dealing with little figures on a screen, but dealing with huge emotions. Religions touch the basic emotions of fear, loss, separation, desire, pain, yearning and longing; it's an explosive thing. All the religions start with this highly idealistic sense that they're going to pour themselves out in compassion and develop something mystical and wonderful; and then come in the control freaks, and the whole of our religious lives should be a battle with that, a 'jihad' with that; an attempt to look at the human ways in which we want to mitigate the religious demand and we Christians have a particularly difficult religious command. People often say to me: 'Oh, Karen, I don't know why you bother with all this theology. I get all the theology I need from the Sermon on the Mount.' Well, I must say I wonder whether they've ever read it! When you look at what they're saying, the Sermon on the Mount says: give up your jobs, don't worry about tomorrow, clothes, food, something will happen; don't lay up treasure for yourselves on earth... The Gospel requirement is constantly reiterated, to give away what you possess. Judaism and Islam are much more realistic than that. They just say you must give a portion of what you possess to the poor. That's management. Give away everything? Don't do it!

So do we just throw up our hands in horror and forget the whole thing; take out our shares and increase our fortune and say, oh, you know, it was different in those days? But nevertheless that is the requirement; and I don't know what we're going to do with it. I haven't given up all my possessions to the poor, and I live in a nice house. 'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. This is hard. The total image of the Cross, of a divine being, (in some form Jesus expressed God), that abdicated power and accepted extreme powerlessness, is again very hard for us to follow.

We're all little control freaks in our own lives. The father of a family, the mother of a family, the child, can start controlling other people. It's the way we feed our egotism, to make ourselves feel important and to put other people down, or somehow force our will upon them. But the Cross is saying that you have to abdicate all that. Because it's so extreme, I think that it almost opens out the possibility of just abdicating the ideal; and just 'Let's be practical about this! We can't live like that in this day and age!' And probably we can't; because Jesus thought the last days were upon us; so did St Paul. They weren't expecting it to go on for two thousand years.

Here we are with a difficult injunction. I wasn't saying that the religion and the market are comparable and the same, but that the difficulties of one sparked off the other. In the case of Christianity, there was such an extreme solution that perhaps people just abdicated early and wanted to make it manageable, to normalise it. They had to normalise it because Jesus didn't come back as they were expecting. Something had to be done about that radicalism.

Question: You speak of 'knocking out our own ego', but in order to love our neighbour, don't we first need to love ourselves? Hasn't the Church got it terribly wrong in emphasising our unworthiness?

Answer: Absolutely. Guilt is pure egotism. I think the church, by rubbing our noses in our own wrongdoing, is increasing our sense of ourselves. When I was a young nun, I cannot tell you how my nose was rubbed in the sense of my own failure. As a result I think it was impossible for any of us to have a true religious experience because we were so obsessed with our wretched, puny little selves that if God had arrived in a chariot in front of us, we couldn't have noticed him. Our whole being was concentrated on our dreary little selves; and it's dreary indeed.

I think, of course, we should love ourselves; we should love our neighbour as ourselves. Now that's quite a tough thing to do, especially when Jesus says, 'Who is my neighbour?' and we find it's somebody who doesn't belong to our ethnic or religious group. It's anybody. How many of us can really say we love our neighbour as ourselves?

We must love, we must celebrate ourselves - but not keep on ploughing drearily on about what sinners we are, because that is often concerned with our own performance. We want somehow also to 'fulfil' ourselves; that means getting bigger than just us, and 'egotism' (we all know what it is to be egotistic about something or selfish) is where we need to denigrate other people. In *'Paradise Lost'*, 'Faithless' arrives in the Garden of Eden and looks at Adam and Eve; and when he looks at them in their beauty he feels himself impaired. This is that mean little bit of us which, when we look at somebody else's fortune, feels a sinking chagrin. Their good fortune makes us feel less. It's hard to love your neighbour as yourself, because we're so protective of our poor, bruised, damaged, miserable self.

I've just seen *'The Horse Whisperer'*. Robert Redford's character at one point takes this damaged, wounded horse, a beautiful creature, and just looks at him. I was just in floods of tears. We all want somebody to look at us like that, with total acceptance and total respect, without making any judgement or lunging forward. Just looking with love, respect, admiration. The horse, after a whole night of being looked at like that, relaxes. That's what it means to love your neighbour as yourself. Of course, we must look at ourselves like that, too. Look at our own wounds; not keep beating ourselves up. But there is an egotism and a selfish mess which the spiritual writers say does hold us back from our best selves, because it endlessly nibbles away at other people and it just diminishes us. When we're constantly worried about how we're doing, whether other people are doing better, then we're less than ourselves, and we're no longer living up to that self that we could be.

