

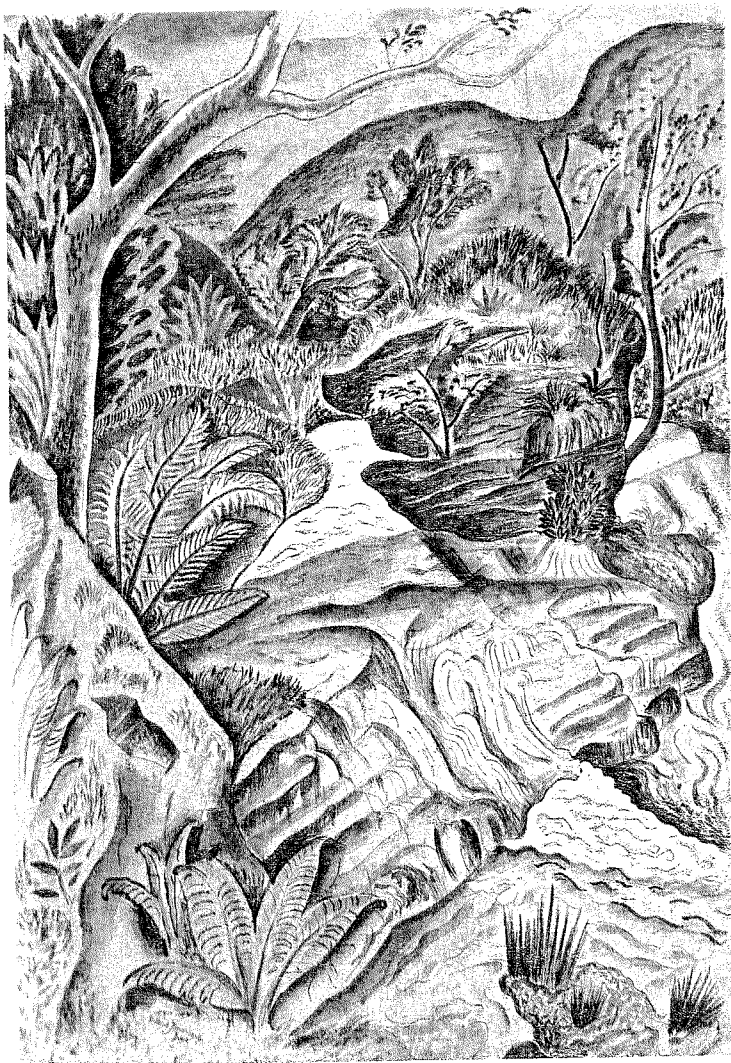
TOKENS OF TRUST

*An Introduction to
Christian Belief*



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Westminster John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE • LONDON



DAVID JONES The Waterfall, Afon Honddu Fach (1926)

ONE

Who Can We Trust?

I believe in God the Father almighty

A few years ago, the British philosopher, Onora O'Neill, argued in some broadcast lectures that our society was suffering from a crisis of trust. I suspect we may not need a professional philosopher to tell us the bare fact: pretty well everyone will recognize the sort of thing she means. But it helps to have an analysis of this condition. It isn't simply that we have become remarkably cynical in many of our attitudes, that we approach people in public life with unusual levels of suspicion. It's also, more disturbingly, that we don't feel the great institutions of our society are working for us. This means we are unhappy and mistrustful about our educational system, our health care services and police – let alone our representatives in government. But this is hardly something unique to us. Elsewhere we sense ourselves caught up in international economic and political patterns we can't control and which we don't believe work for our advantage. If we have noticed how things are beyond our national boundaries, we may feel that it's a system that simply doesn't work for human beings in general:

rightly or wrongly, 'globalization' is often seen as a development that takes power away from actual local communities and individuals. And the stories that emerge from time to time about enormous frauds and endemic corruption in some big companies or banks do nothing at all to help. Belatedly, people are writing long books about the need for ordinary human trust and relation-building in business life, and it's very welcome. But the damage has been done, alas; we have learned to be suspicious.

There's no doubt that suspicion can be good for us in many circumstances. We need an edge of critical response in any democracy, and it is healthy that we don't passively take for granted what we're told. But in the UK Baroness O'Neill and a good many others are suggesting that things have gone rather further than this, to the point where we just *assume* that things aren't arranged for our benefit. And when we feel powerless in the face of that, it isn't healthy. Mistrust is always connected with this sense of not being in control, of someone else pulling the strings. And this is a key to why it is such a problem. I feel mistrustful when I suspect that someone else's agenda and purpose has nothing to do either with my agenda or with what that someone else is claiming. They have a hidden advantage; I am being undermined. If I can't see quite how it all works but suspect that something hostile is going on all the same, the effect can be not only humiliating but paralysing. Trust will feel like risk and folly.

There's quite a bit more to say about this, and we'll be coming back to the crises of our society later on; but I want to begin with the question of trust and its absence because the opening words of

the Christian statements of faith, the creeds, are about just this. This doesn't always appear straight away, though. We say, 'I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth'. The form of words might initially remind us of questions like, 'Do you believe in ghosts?' or 'Do you believe in UFOs?' – questions about something 'out there' whose existence is doubtful, where the evidence is hotly disputed.

But, although there are unfortunately many, both believers and unbelievers, who treat the words like this, this wasn't at all what they originally meant. In John's Gospel (the ninth chapter), Jesus asks the blind man he's just cured whether he 'believes' in the Son of Man. He's certainly not asking (as he might ask about the Loch Ness monster) whether the man is of the opinion that the Son of Man exists; he wants to know whether the former blind man is ready to *trust* the Son of Man – that is, Jesus in his role as representative of the human race before God. The man – naturally – wants to know who the 'Son of Man' is, and Jesus says that it is him; the man responds with the words, 'I believe'.

He believes; he has confidence. That is, he doesn't go off wondering whether the Son of Man is out to further his own ends and deceive him. He trusts Jesus to be working for him, not for any selfish goals and he believes that what he sees and hears when Jesus is around is the truth. Hence the radical difference from 'believing' in UFOs or the Loch Ness monster. To believe in these doesn't make that much difference to how I feel about myself and the world in general, and it has nothing to do with whether the Loch Ness monster is reliable or not. If it existed, it would undoubtedly be useful to know if it was a creature of dependable

and regular habits, but that isn't what we have in mind when we talk about believing in it.

The words at the beginning of the Creed, in contrast, do make a difference in how the world feels and you feel. They are closer to the formula used by Buddhists when they make a statement of faith: 'I take refuge in the Buddha' – the Buddha is where I belong, the Buddha is what I have confidence in to keep me safe. And the Creed begins to sound a little different if we begin here.

'I believe in God the Father almighty' isn't the first in a set of answers to the question, 'How many ideas or pictures have I inside my head?' as if God were the name of one more doubtful thing like UFOs and ghosts to add to the list of the furniture of my imagination. It is the beginning of a series of statements about where I find the anchorage of my life, where I find solid ground, home.

Now it may be worth adding a word about one detail before moving on. Some texts start 'I believe', some start 'We believe'; for example, the wording of some of the new services replaces the former with the latter at Holy Communion, and this has caused some controversy. But the fact is simply that the creeds originally had more than one purpose. The shorter text, the Apostles' Creed, was probably used at baptism, the longer and more complicated text, the Nicene Creed, was worked out by councils of church leaders to try and rule out various faulty ideas. So it isn't surprising that the Apostles' Creed begins 'I' – it's a formula for an individual taking a step of commitment in baptism, just like the Buddhist phrase I quoted above – and the Nicene Creed (in its early forms, though it was changed later) begins 'We' – it's a statement of what has been agreed by a meeting and is to be said by the whole congrega-

tion together. It won't really do to say that 'we believe' is a general formula that allows individuals more latitude in what they individually sign up to: it sets out what Christians can expect each other to take for granted. You might even say that it tells us why we can trust each other in the Christian community. We're looking in the same direction, working with the same hopes and assumptions. So both 'I' and 'we' have their place, and not a great deal hangs on which of them we use at any moment.



But now to the hard question: *why* should we put our confidence in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth? Have we grounds for thinking him trustworthy? On the face of it, we might almost say that we had reasons for feeling rather unconfident.

Surely God, above all, is one whose purposes we can't fathom, whose 'agenda' is hidden from us, a completely alien intelligence, remote and transcendent? The sad truth is that a great deal of religion gives just that impression. God's mysterious ways are appealed to when we can't understand things (especially painful and shocking things), and we are encouraged to think about the vast gulf that separates us from God. But the Bible strongly suggests that this sort of religion is what we have to grow out of. Bad religion is about not trusting God, trying to avoid God or even outwitting him; about approaching

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God as 'the management', or the head teacher, perhaps, a presence that is at best critical or hostile, always to be outmanoeuvred where possible.

The Bible gives us various answers to the question of why we should trust the maker of heaven and earth and not regard him as an unfathomable alien intelligence. One of the plainest answers is that found in the Letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament, where the long and complex introductory passage (including one

of the longest sentences in the Bible) culminates in the claim that, in the events around Jesus Christ, God has at last made his purpose clear; he has revealed the mystery hidden for ages past, he has shown us what his agenda is. What once was mysterious – or at least shadowy – has now emerged into daylight, and the purposes of God that existed from the world's

foundation are now laid bare for us. Because of Jesus we can now see that what God has always meant to happen is – to pick up two centrally important words in the Letter to the Ephesians – peace and praise. This and this alone is God's 'agenda': the world he has made is designed to become a reconciled world, a world in which diverse human communities come to share a life together because they share the conviction that God has acted to set them free from fear and guilt. And this in turn is only one facet of a reconciliation that somehow affects the whole cosmos, that draws the diversity of the created world itself together so that it works harmoniously. This reconciliation liberates human voices for praise, for celebrating the glory of the God who has made it possible and has held

steadily to his purpose from the beginning. This is what God is after, and there is no hidden agenda, nothing is kept back.

Not that this tells us all we could know of God, let alone all there is to know about God. It does not exhaust the sense of mystery or wonder at this 'strange design', as one of Charles Wesley's hymns calls it. It simply assures us that we now know what God's aim in creation is; and it is an aim directed entirely towards the benefit of ourselves and the rest of creation; it is in no way a 'selfish' purpose. God has no reason for deceiving us. If the purpose has been hidden, it is not because God has arbitrarily decided to keep us in the dark. The revelation has to wait until the time is ripe, until the perfect vehicle of communication has appeared. Up to that point, we are still obstinately wedded to various fantasies about God and about ourselves in relation to God. For the first generation of Christians, it was also true that there were spiritual forces around in the universe who had a vested interest in persuading us to think falsely about God – diabolical and deceptive powers who are out to enslave us by creating fear and suspicion towards the Creator. Now they have been shown up, and God himself has communicated his purpose by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

So we don't get to know what God is 'like' in the abstract; we don't get a definition delivered in the language of ideas. We get a life that shows us what God wants to happen, one that makes it possible for what God wants actually to become real in and for all of us (just what this might mean is something we shall be coming back to later). We shall never get to know God as God knows God, and our human words will always fall immeasurably short of his reality; God

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cannot be for us an object at the mercy of our scrutiny, because God is always active, never just there over against us like objects in this world. The very activity of our thinking minds is what it is because God is activating them here and now. But precisely because we get to know God in what he does, not as an idea or an object, what we discover is his active will – what he wants, what his purpose, his longing is. And because of Jesus, we can understand that longing in terms of peace and praise.

Some of you may remember the great words towards the end of the medieval *Revelations of Divine Love* by the fourteenth-century hermit, Julian of Norwich. She is asked, does she want to know the Lord's 'meaning' in all these visions – does she want to know what his purpose is? And the answer is, 'Love was his meaning'. T. S. Eliot, who knew this text so well, wrote:

Love is the unfamiliar name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
That human power cannot remove.¹

At the heart of the desperate suffering there is in the world, suffering we can do nothing to resolve or remove for good, there is an indestructible energy making for love. If we have grasped what Jesus is about, we can trust that this is what lies at the foundation of everything.

You don't have to be a great theologian to notice that this leaves some immense questions unanswered. Some of these we shall have to spend more time on. But at this point, the significant thing is just to see the kind of answer that one of the writers in the Bible gives to the question, 'Why should we trust the maker of heaven and earth?'



However, there is another level at which the question can be answered, connected with what we have just been thinking about but going a bit deeper. In a nutshell, this is about saying that we can trust the maker of heaven and earth precisely because he *is* the maker of heaven and earth. And this isn't simply an appeal to the idea that God must know what he's doing because he's in charge. It says something, yet again, about the character of God.

God is the unique source of everything. Therefore, there is nothing God is forced to do. There is nothing alongside God, nothing by nature extra to God or beyond God. God is never one thing among others. So there can be no question of God having to do anything at all that he doesn't want to do. And because he cannot need anything, because he contains all reality eternally and by nature, the only thing that can 'motivate' his action is simply what he is, the kind of God he is. What he *does* shows us what he *is*.

Put slightly differently, this means that God can't have a selfish

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agenda, because he can't want anything for himself except to be the way he is. So if the world exists because of his action, the only motivation for this that we can even begin to think of is sheer unselfish love. He wants to give what he is to what isn't him; he wants difference to appear, he wants an Other to receive his joy and delight. He isn't bored and in need of company. He isn't frustrated and in need of help.

A word of caution here: some modern thinkers have been very tempted by language that seems to suggest that God is in some way in need of having something else around in order to become more fully himself. And this is tempting because it can sound very chilly if we say that God doesn't 'need' us; surely, when we love and are loved, it matters to know that we are needed. But I think we

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have to face a challenge here; we must get to grips with the idea that we don't 'contribute' anything to God, that God would have been the same God if we had never been created.

In terms of the inevitable give and take of human relationships, this would be a bit abnormal. But God, remember, isn't a reality on the level of anything else. In him is all he could need for his own happiness. And thus we have to bend our minds around the admittedly tough notion that we exist because of an utterly unconditional generosity. The love that God shows in making the world, like the love he shows towards the world once it is created, has no shadow or

shred of self-directed purpose in it; it is entirely and unreservedly given for our sake. It is not a concealed way for God to get something out of it for himself, because that would make nonsense of what we believe is God's eternal nature.

God is, in simple terms, sublimely and eternally happy to be God, and the fact that this sublime eternal happiness overflows into the act of creation is itself a way of telling us that God is to be trusted absolutely, that God has no private agenda. It may be a bit shocking and hard to absorb, but that's what it seems we have to say. When – rather

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rarely – in our world we see someone acting without any thought for themselves, without reward or consolation, wholly focused on another, we see a faint reflection of what God is naturally like.

From one point of view, the difficulty is that we might quite like to think that we were loved because we were nice and helpful to God. But this is a bit like imagining that God forgives us because we're good (rather than making us good by forgiving us, as the Bible claims). The love God shows, in creating us as much as in saving us, is completely free. He doesn't owe us anything. He has chosen that we should exist and he has chosen to treat us always as lovable – as it has been forcefully expressed: 'he has thought that we were worth dying for'. So as soon as we begin to get the notion of creation into focus, we are faced with this demanding insight about unconditionally generous love; and we can perhaps see why there is no ground here for suspicion, no need to step back and say, 'Wait a minute: what's in this for you?'

When we think about the Creator, we ought to have our natural suspiciousness checked at the very root; here at least we have reason for confidence.

As we shall see repeatedly, this belief in God the Creator doesn't unfold by a tidy process of argument. There really is a chicken and egg aspect to it. Human beings encounter God as the one who forgives them without condition and so they start reflecting on the freedom and power of his love. They see the existence of the whole universe in that perspective and come to develop the conviction that 'Love was his meaning' in everything. Or again, human beings are struck silent by the immensity and complexity of the universe, and they dimly start thinking about what concentration of unlimited energy would have to be imagined as holding it all in being; and so they understand more fully why God doesn't treat us according to our deserving, following rules and conditions in his love towards us. What we say about God as maker of everything and what we say about God who meets us personally in forgiveness and renewal ought to be as closely allied as possible; it is one of the failings of some kinds of teaching, I think, that creation and salvation are treated as completely different topics, whereas the Bible seems again and again to hold them inseparably together.



So: I trust, I have confidence in, I take refuge in, the God who has made everything and so can have no selfish purpose and has made

visible for us the sort of God he is and the sort of purpose he has in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. And in this light we can perhaps make sense of the words 'Father almighty'. As they stand, they offer a field day for Freudian analysis: isn't this the clearest possible example of wish fulfilment – to have an all-powerful father to look after me? Wouldn't we all like to have an authority figure who could sort out all our problems, who is always there on hand to help us out of situations where we would otherwise have to take responsibility? And isn't this a fantasy that is deeply dangerous for anyone who wants to grow up as a human being?

The answer to that has to be 'yes'. But it should drive us to ask more carefully just what we mean by the almightiness of God. It has always been tempting to think of it in terms of what we would like so as to overcome our limitations – the ability to get whatever we desire, to resolve our own and everyone's difficulties by a flick of the wrist. Given that fantasy, it isn't surprising that people from time to time produce various sorts of comic riff on the theme, in which we are actually put into what we imagine is God's position and discover that – of course – it isn't so easy (the recent film *Bruce Almighty* comes to mind). But if – once again – we pay a bit of attention to how the language of the Bible and Christian practice works, we might discover that this sort of fantasy is nothing to do with it. If 'I believe in God the Father almighty' means 'I believe that there is somewhere an unlimited power that can choose and perform anything it likes, and I need to be on the right side of it', that doesn't sound as though it had much to do with trust; an almighty power like that, a huge arbitrary will, could be very unsettling indeed.

The word translated 'almighty' in fact in the Greek means 'ruler of everything' or even something like 'holder of everything'; and this suggests a slightly different approach. It means that there is nowhere God is absent, powerless or irrelevant; no situation in the universe in the face of which God is at a loss. Which is much the same as saying that there is no situation in which God is not to be relied upon. The freedom of his love which we have been thinking about, implies that his love never exhausts its resources, whatever may happen in the universe in general or in my life in particular. There will be more to say about this later on, in a number of different contexts, but for the moment simply bear in mind the ways in which we can get the idea of 'almightiness' a

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bit wrong by thinking of it in terms of a great wish-fulfilment fantasy instead of seeing it as a way of saying that God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation – because nothing outside himself can finally frustrate his longing. So almightiness in this sense becomes another reason for trust.

What the Bible puts before us is not a record of a God who is always triumphantly getting his way by doing miracles (we'll be thinking about miracles in the next chapter), but a God who gets his way by patiently struggling to make himself clear to human beings, to make his love real to them, especially when they seem not to want to know, or to want to avoid him and retreat into their

own fantasies about him. And typically, the Bible sometimes does this by a very bold method – by telling a certain kind of story from the human point of view, as if God needed to be persuaded to be faithful to his people. Someone like Abraham or Moses, someone who has good reason to know something about what God is really like, is faced with a crisis. Things are going badly; surely God is going to give up and blast people into oblivion. So Abraham and Moses argue with God until they have persuaded him to be merciful. The writers of these stories knew exactly what they were doing. They didn't believe in a bad-tempered, capricious God who needed to be calmed down by sensible human beings. They knew that the most vivid way of expressing what they understood about God was to show Abraham and Moses appealing to the deepest and most true thing about God as they pray to him.

So in the first book of the Bible, in chapter 18 of Genesis, Abraham is arguing with God about God's plan to destroy the wicked city of Sodom. Surely, says Abraham, there must be *some* good people in Sodom. And if there are, 'the judge of all the earth' must be fair to them; he can't destroy the good with the bad: 'far be it from you to do that!' says Abraham. And God lets himself be bargained with, as Abraham haggles away, gradually reducing the number of good people there would need to be in the city for God to spare it. It's a story about a man who is discovering, bit by bit, that God really is to be trusted to do right, not to be unjust.

Even more poignantly, in the second book of the Bible, chapter 32 of Exodus, there is the story of Moses arguing with God. Moses has been on the mountain top, receiving the commandments from God; meanwhile, in the camp of the people of

Israel, his brother Aaron has been persuaded to make an image of God in the shape of a golden calf. God's anger is aroused, and he tells Moses to 'let him be', and he will destroy the whole rebellious mob and start again with Moses alone as the ancestor of a new nation. And Moses replies by saying, in effect, 'You can't do that; you have promised to be faithful to *this* people. Do you want the rest of the world to say that you couldn't cope with them after all, that you couldn't keep your promises?' And, he goes on a bit later in the same chapter, 'if you won't forgive them, don't make an exception of me: blot my name out of your book as well'. It's as if Moses is saying, 'I don't want to be involved with a God who changes his mind and isn't capable of forgiving and starting again with the same old sinful and stupid people.' What matters to Moses isn't his own safety and his own future; what matters is that the God he has believed in is still the same, still trustworthy because he sticks with sinful, stupid people and so demonstrates the absolute freedom of his love. If God were to tear up his promises to Israel, it would look as if his love were just conditional on their good behaviour. But instead there is this miraculous vision of a God who can still do something with this appallingly unpromising material.

It sounds as though the ancient Hebrews really understood the difference between a God who could do whatever he liked and damn the consequences and the God who had shown himself to them as a God of commitment and forgiveness, ready to be argued with, ready to be 'recalled' to his true nature by those who really understand him. The stories are, in one way, tongue in cheek. They invite us into precisely the fantasy we've been thinking

about: what would *you* do faced with the wicked city, faced with the disastrous stupidity of the people of Israel in the desert? You'd be very tempted to annihilate them, wouldn't you? Well, that's the difference between you and God, and between false gods and real ones; *this* is what almightiness looks like in practice. *It's the unlimited power to be there, to be faithful to and for a world that is deeply unstable and unjust and suspicious and uncooperative: the power to go on trying to get through at all costs, labouring and wrestling with the human heart.*

This is why belief, trust, in God the Father almighty is so different from wish-fulfilment and projection about some all-powerful character who can just do what he decides and get what he wants straight away. Instead it's the discovery of what Abraham and Moses have discovered, *a God who never runs out of love and liberty.* And although I shall have a lot more to say about the meaning of the word 'Father' when we come to concentrate more on what Jesus tells us of God, we already have more than a glimmer of understanding about it in these

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stories. God is to be trusted as we would trust a loving parent, whose commitment to us is inexhaustible, whose purposes for us are unfailingly generous; someone whose life is the source of our life, and who guarantees that there is always a home for us. So perhaps we can park Freudian fantasies of all-powerful fathers for a moment. If there's a problem here, it may be almost the

opposite – that we can risk projecting on to God the characteristics of an idealized mother, always accepting and soothing. That we need to free ourselves from that fantasy is something we shall be considering later. For now, what matters is to grasp the idea of a God whose power is made clear in his patience and his capacity always to bring something fresh into a situation. And again we can begin to see why the execution of Jesus could seem to the first Christians not a defeat but a decisive moment of divine power.



In the last part of this chapter, I want to turn to an issue that is going to be around quite a bit in Chapter 2: how can we know that any of this is actually *true*? So far, I've been trying to clarify what the words mean. But how does anyone ever get inside this language, get to the point where they can make it their own? Christians may be talking about a trustworthy God, but how do we know that this is a real God, as opposed to an impressive character in a book? In other words, does God exist?

You won't be surprised to hear that I haven't yet found the decisive new argument that will prove once and for all that there really is a God; but we do need to remember that the number of people who come into a living personal faith as a result of argument is actually rather small. Many centuries ago, a great theologian and pastor, St Ambrose, said that 'it did not suit God to save his people by arguments'.² Of course they have their uses. When people argue against the existence of God, it helps to have some points

you can make to counter the idea that belief is just completely irrational. But what is it that shifts people's imagination and vision and hope?

The Bible has no arguments for the existence of God! There are moments of conflict with God, anger with God, doubt about God's purposes, anguish and lostness when people have no real sense of God's presence. The Psalms are full of this, as is the Book of Job. Don't imagine that the Bible is full of comfortable and reassuring things about the life of belief and trust; it isn't. It is often about the appalling cost of letting God come near you and of trying to trust him when all the evidence seems to have gone. But Abraham, Moses and St Paul don't sit down to work out whether God exists; they are already caught up in something the imperative reality of which they can't deny or ignore. At one level, you have to see that the very angst and struggle they bring to their relation with God is itself a *kind* of argument for God: if they take God that seriously, at least this isn't some cosy made-up way of making yourself feel better.

And that is actually quite a serious point about where belief in God starts for a lot of folk. It starts from a sense that we 'believe in', we trust some kinds of people. We have confidence in the way they live; the way they live is a way I want to live, perhaps can imagine myself living in my better or more mature moments. The world they inhabit is one I'd like to live in. Faith has a lot to do with the simple fact that there are trustworthy lives to be

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seen, that we can see in some believing people a world we'd like to live in.

It puts quite a responsibility on believing people, of course. It would be much nicer for all of us if we could just rely on arguments, not on the uncertainties of human lives. But nonetheless, the remarkable fact remains. Some do take responsibility for making God credible in the world. This turn of phrase, about taking responsibility for God, I owe to one of the most striking believers of the twentieth century, one of the many who made God believable by their resistance to the nightmares of modern totalitarianism and violence. Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman in her twenties when the Germans occupied Holland – not a pious or conventional person at all, not someone with an explicit religious commitment. Her published diaries and letters from 1941 to 1943 show how, during this terrible period in the history of her country and her people, she became more and more conscious of God's hand on her life, at a time when most would have been likely to feel more deeply sceptical about God.

Imprisoned in the transit camp at Westerbork, before being shipped off to Auschwitz where she was to die in the gas chambers in November 1943, at the age of twenty-nine, she wrote, 'there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?' In a letter to a friend from Westerbork, she described her life as having become 'an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God', and she could write of sensing her vocation in the camp as being 'not . . . simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the heart of others. One must also clear the path toward You in



Etty Hillesum: witness to God on the road to Auschwitz

them'.³ It is plain that she saw her belief as a matter of deciding to occupy a certain place in the world, a place where others could somehow connect with God through her – and this not in any self-congratulatory spirit or with any sense of being exceptionally holy or virtuous, but simply because she had agreed to take responsibility for God's believability.

Of course it is a story from exceptional times – though, with the recent histories of genocide in our minds, we shouldn't imagine that they were as exceptional as they should be, and there are no doubt parallel records and stories from Rwanda or Sudan to be told. What makes Etty Hillesum special is hard to say exactly. It's worth noting that one of the people she met briefly in the Westerbork camp was Edith Stein – a distinguished philosopher of Jewish background who had become a Catholic and then an enclosed nun. Her order had moved her from Germany to try

and save her from the Nazi genocide, but the invasion of Holland had caught up with her. She too was to die in Auschwitz. Now she is recognized as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Much could be written about her witness, in her writings and in her death, not least in her willingness to die with her own people despite her conversion to Christianity. She is in every way a more obviously and conventionally holy person than Etty Hillesum, and a very great woman by any possible definition. But there is something about Etty's human passionateness, her bohemian energy and indiscretion and the slow and surprising character of her journey towards God that speaks to those of us who find it harder to be at home in religious institutions of any sort.

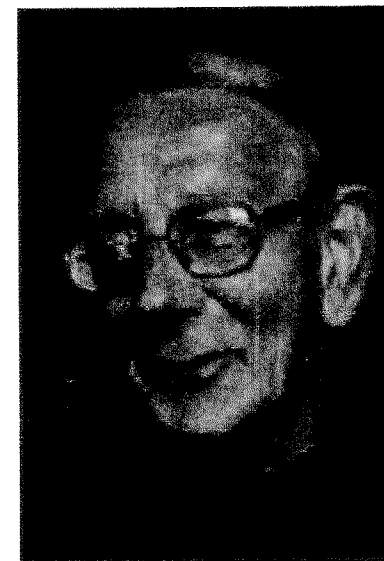


Extreme situations do make things clear. And if it is possible to take responsibility for God's credibility on the road to Auschwitz, that is a contribution – whether it comes from a Carmelite nun or an irrepressible young writer and teacher – to the sum total of human possibilities that cannot easily be written off. Even in less dramatic situations, though, we can see something of what it means to make yourself responsible for God. One of the surprise best sellers in the USA a couple of years ago was a book entitled *Father Joe: The Man who Saved my Soul*.⁴ Tony Hendra was one of the scriptwriters for *Spitting Image*, probably the most uninhibitedly scurrilous and outspoken satirical programme on British television in the 1980s; in his book, he describes his friendship from the age of fourteen with a Benedictine monk, Father Joseph Warrilow, a man who had

become a monk at the age of eighteen and had hardly ever left his monastery on the Isle of Wight. Over decades, Father Joe remains a point of utterly reliable orientation for Hendra, accessible and compassionate all the way through crises of faith, successes, failures, marriage and divorce and remarriage, problems with drugs, attempted suicide. He never tries to score points or win arguments; he is supremely himself, faintly comic and completely unselfconscious in appearance and manner, as steady as granite in his insight and his love. He patiently recalls Hendra to who and what he really is, time and again, puncturing illusions and ambitions.

The slow healing of Hendra's second marriage and his return to the Catholic faith are presented not as dramatic success stories but as the result of an unfailingly truthful presence in his life:

Father Joe:
friend and
conduit
to God



'Father Joe's wisdom, like the correct medication for a long misdiagnosed illness, began to have its effect', he writes about this process. He describes Joe as 'a saint of what could be done . . . a saint of imperfection' – a man who always started where God started, with the rather sad and shopsoiled reality which God seeks to make glorious. And when he finally opens his adult heart again to Joe, Hendra says, 'Like a tidal wave overwhelming the breakwaters of common sense came the thought that this slowly shrinking, mud-flap-eared old elf of a man was . . . God. Or a body God would from time to time inhabit.'⁵

'But I didn't believe in God', adds Hendra instantly. 'Father Joe would connect it for me, somehow, sometime.'⁶ This is a relationship in which – in a much less tragic and extreme situation than that of Etty Hillesum, though tragic enough in terms of human suffering and doubt – someone has become responsible for God, for making a connection that argument and speculation cannot make. I suspect that for many believers something not unlike this is going on a good deal of the time. We may be uncertain, still racked by doubt and inner anguish, we may be unable to give any very satisfactory account intellectually of what we believe; but somewhere in our horizon there are people who make the connection. Never mind that such people may themselves often be almost as anguished or struggling as we are: the point is that what we see is someone who is a native of the world in which we want to belong. Cardinal Newman once said that a magnifying glass can kindle a fire somewhere else even if it remains cold in itself.



Quite a lot of religion – and this is particularly so in England – seems to depend on a grateful awareness that someone else is doing it for you. Whole books have been written about how the physical presence of church buildings and cathedral choirs performs a vital social job in giving us somewhere to put our feelings of dependence and need. So many people are glad that *someone* is committed even if they're not sure they themselves want to be.

It's easy to make fun of this, and some Christians find it maddening. But it isn't complete nonsense. It suggests that many of us are becoming aware of dimensions in our humanity that are not properly looked after by any of the things that are normally supposed to make us feel all right. And if people are on the way to some bigger recognition, perhaps they need to go at their own speed and in their own way. They have to work out whether they really have enough confidence in those who are 'taking responsibility for God' to make them take the final step of belonging. And when they can do that, then they begin to discover something of what is involved in fully believing.

Of course there is a choice that can't be avoided eventually, a choice to take the risk and see if you can really be at home in the

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world of an Etty or a Joe. It's a choice that may be helped a bit by intellectual discussion but is seldom, if ever, settled by it. And when belief is rather weak in a society (like ours), the not very welcome question for believers, not least those who are supposed to hold positions of leadership and teaching authority, is whether we look remotely trustworthy. Often all we can do is to go on telling the stories of those who keep *us* going; I may not look very credible, but I

can at least point to someone who does. And as long as there are those who effectively and bravely take responsibility for God, the doors remain open and the possibility is there for others, perhaps very slowly, to find their way to a point where they can say, 'I believe'. Not just, 'I'm convinced that there is something called God' (on its own, that's too like believing in UFOs), nor even, 'I'm convinced that believers are talking about something real' (though that's a step in the right direction, and one that is often connected with the presence of trustworthy, credible people around), but the ultimate choice, 'I want to live in the same world as them; I want to know what they know and to drink from the same wells.' That's when we can truly say, 'I believe; I have confidence; I take refuge; I have come home.'



DAVID JONES The Waterfall,
Afon Honddu Fach (detail)