

Hope, Faith and Redemption 2

Richard Norman replies.

Can there be hope without faith? Without faith in a divine providence, isn't hope for the future just whistling in the dark? This is a tough question for atheists and humanists, and therefore a good topic for dialogue between atheists and religious believers. It is a good question also, I would think, for the Sea of Faith movement. The book which Tony Carroll and I co-edited, aimed at promoting better dialogue between religious and non-religious people, has the subtitle *Beyond the Divide*, and I would like to pay tribute to the way in which members of the SOF network have pioneered the attempt to go beyond that divide.

In saying that it is a tough question, I do not want to exaggerate the toughness. Religious believers sometimes say, to people such as myself, 'If you're an atheist, doesn't that make everything pointless? What is there to live for?' That assumption seems to me to be, frankly, nonsense. Atheism does not in any way diminish the richness of human life – the rewards of creative endeavour, of the exercise of the imagination, of loving relationships and shared activities, all the good things which make life worth living.

So of course, for an atheist, there is day-to-day hope, but the worry is that such hopes may come to be seen as frail delusions when looked at in a larger perspective. Two things in particular may seem to threaten them. First, there is the fact of human mortality – that it will all end in death. This is the thought which haunted Tolstoy, who described in his *Confession* how it appeared to him to rob his life of all meaning. Our hopes are empty, he came to feel, if they all end in annihilation. Secondly, there is the threat of failure which hovers over all our projects and life-plans. The hopes around which we may have built our lives are inherently fragile, they may always collapse, revealing them to have been pointless. The Christian philosopher John Cottingham, in his book *On the Meaning of Life*, offers this imaginary example:

Consider David, a millionaire architect who makes it his life's work to build a hospital where medical facilities are sorely needed. He struggles against great odds to get the project completed, single-mindedly pursuing this goal... But on the day the hospital is due to be opened, the whole building complex is engulfed in a fireball and razed to the ground, with terrible loss of life. David now bitterly declares that his entire effort was pointless – a tragic and futile waste of energy and resources.¹

Cottingham concludes that without a religious faith in the eventual triumph of good, our hopes which are grounded in our purely human endeavours will always be vulnerable to a sense of fragility and futility.

These two fears come together in the thought that our lives may end with unredeemed failure or tragedy. If there is no future state to compensate, in which all will be redeemed, then what keeps us going? Are our hopes just whistling in the dark? I suggest that these are serious questions not only for atheists, but for non-realists whose attachment to religious belief eschews any idea of supernatural intervention or a providential future state.

Is there, then, a non-theist faith which can support our hopes? I want to look briefly at the concept of 'faith'. It is a word of which atheists tend to be suspicious. Atheists of a certain stripe are liable to dismiss it with contempt as 'belief without evidence', 'believing what you know ain't so'. A common response from religious believers is to counter that this is a misunderstanding of the word. Faith in God, they may say, is not 'belief that' but 'trust in'. It is not a ruse for smuggling in factual beliefs by the back door.

That response is all very well up to a point. There is a legitimate use of the word 'faith' to mean trusting in someone or something. But talk of 'faith' in this sense cannot avoid the problem of belief. We can only put our faith in something which we know to be real. Faith as trust *in* God presupposes the belief *that* there is a god. The belief need not rest on a cast-iron proof, but it

does have to be well-grounded. When I put my faith in a person, this may indeed be a 'leap of faith'. There is no guaranteed certainty that the person will not let me down. It involves a commitment which goes beyond rational prediction. But it is not just a fantasy, not just wishful thinking. All faith, including our faith in our fellow human beings, must have some rational basis.

For a humanist, a faith capable of sustaining hope can only be a faith in human beings, real human beings in whom we can place our trust. What kind of secular faith, then, can address the bigger challenge which I acknowledged, the need for hope which transcends our own lifetime, and which is capable of redeeming our own failures? People talk of 'faith in the future', appropriately perhaps, but as it stands 'the future' is just an abstraction. Likewise talk of 'faith in humanity'. We appear to draw sustenance from it, but 'humanity' is another abstraction. What can make it real?

Here is a possible answer: faith in humanity can be grounded in contemplation of the movement of history. Tony spoke of 'the victims of history', and asked: 'Is there any redemption of history?' Karl Marx provides one classic example of a positive answer rooted in history itself. He presents his theory of history as an assurance that the struggles and sacrifices of the present are leading to a better future. We could debate the successes and failures of Marxism, but here I want to observe that Marx inherits this faith in history from Hegel, and to look at what Hegel says.

Tony discussed the tradition of German philosophy deriving from Kant's idea of religious faith as a necessary postulate of moral action. As he put it, for Kant, 'without belief in God there is no practical ground for hope in the face of the tragic nature of life.' He went on to mention other post-Kantian thinkers who have addressed the problem of 'the place of the victims of history'. Hegel, I suggest, is a key figure in that tradition. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel observes:

A simple truthful catalogue of the miseries that have overwhelmed the noblest of nations and polities, and the finest exemplars of private virtue, forms a picture of most fearful aspect, and excites emotions of the profoundest and

most hopeless sadness, counterbalanced by no consolatory result...

He then asks:

But even regarding history as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals have been sacrificed, the question inescapably arises: for what principle, for what final aim have these enormous sacrifices been made?

According to Hegel, that principle, that final aim, is the progress of reason and the growth of human freedom. This is what can redeem the slaughter-bench of history. He refers to this belief as a faith in 'providence'. He uses explicitly religious language. He speaks of 'God' as the agent of history, giving it a purpose and a direction. It has always been a matter for debate whether Hegel was an orthodox theist. He also, and more frequently, refers to the moving force of history as 'spirit' (*Geist*) and as 'reason', so when he uses the word 'God', is this just a way of talking about 'the human spirit'? Some have read Hegel that way.

It was the reading of Hegel espoused by the so-called 'Young Hegelians', leading to Feuerbach and to the idea of God as a human creation, a projection of human qualities – the tradition which the SOF movement inherits. I do not think that Hegel's ambiguity can ever be resolved, but what we can say is that his faith in 'spirit' as the moving force of history is grounded in his understanding of distinctively human capabilities. It is grounded in the nature of reason, which Hegel sees as inherently progressive, not in the sense that progress is inevitable, but in the sense that reason is always 'going beyond itself'. For Hegel this is encapsulated in the word *aufheben*, the German word in which Hegel delights because of the way in which it is at once both negative and positive. For Hegel the exercise of reason is a critical activity which both negates what has gone before but also preserves what is valid in that which has been negated.

To give plausibility to Hegel's idea we could refer to the progress of the natural sciences, the way in which a new scientific theory does not simply eliminate earlier theories but retains and incorporates the truth in the theory it has replaced. We could look at human cultural and intellectual endeavour generally, and the way in which it builds on the past, on what has gone

before. A new artistic movement is shaped by the previous art which it has rejected. The same goes for the building of social and political institutions. The point is not that progress is inevitable. A civilisation can be wiped out by catastrophe. Our own society could be entirely wiped out by a nuclear war. Nevertheless it is the nature of human beings, as conscious beings, that we have a knowledge of the past which can inform our shaping of the future. In that sense, there is a progressive dynamic in history which derives from a distinctive feature of human activity.

All this may sound abstrusely philosophical, but I do think that we can take something from Hegel's idea of history as the work of spirit, and that it can help us to rescue some kind of faith in progress from the suffering of individuals and the slaughter-bench of history. However, it remains very abstract – not much of an advance on 'faith in humanity'. Can we make it more concrete, more real?

I suggest that one way in which we can concretise the idea of hope for the future in the face of apparent failure is to remind ourselves of struggles in the past which would have seemed failures at the time, and of all those past generations who may have died thinking that their efforts were a failure – that they were 'the victims of history'. I am thinking, for instance, of campaigners against slavery, participants in a long struggle, many of whom would have seen no outcome and may well have died feeling that they had failed. I often think of the Chartists, whose struggles for universal franchise and electoral reform seemed to have come to a dead end in 1848. Many of them must have felt that it had all been in vain, that they had been sacrificed on the slaughter-bench of history. We now know that we are their beneficiaries, that the objectives for which they campaigned have been achieved, and this can give us hope in turn when things seem hopeless.

Or think of the artists and writers and thinkers who died as failures – who must have felt that they had contributed nothing, had achieved nothing, that their lives had been in vain. Think for instance of Van Gogh, who died horribly, unrecognised, having sold only a single painting in his lifetime.

At a more day to day level, it may be helpful to think of the way we can be moved by the discovering of our own family history. We may learn of the hardship and suffering of previous generations of our family, who perhaps lived out their lives in poverty and obscurity. We are now the inheritors of their legacy, the beneficiaries of their struggles to survive and to create decent lives for themselves. This, I suggest, can serve as a reminder that future generations will in turn be shaped by how we live now. Sticking to what we believe in, even if it seems hopeless, will make a difference to the lives of those who are to come.

Hope for the future, then, can be grounded in a kind of humanist faith – a faith in humanity which is a faith in real human beings and human potential, in the continuity between ourselves and past and future generations. There is hope. But there is also the inescapable fact that people's hopes will not necessarily be realised in their lifetimes. The fact remains that someone's life may end in failure, in tragedy, in unbearable loss and grief – perhaps in the loss of a loved one whose presence was what made life worth living. For a humanist there is no promise of a future life in which all will be made good, in which we may meet our loved ones again, in which we may live to see the coming of God's kingdom and the triumph of justice. In that sense, there may be no redemption.

It is a strength of humanism, I suggest, that it can recognise the fact of tragedy. And it is a problem for the Christian tradition, I want to add, that in the end it has no room for tragedy. The Christian, or at any rate the orthodox Christian, must assert that for all the facts of loss and suffering and failure, in the end all will be for the best since everything that happens is part of God's purpose. We can see this as the obverse of the traditional problem of suffering, what is referred to as the 'problem of evil'. The traditional problem is the seemingly unanswerable question: if there is an infinitely powerful and loving God, why is there such terrible and undeserved suffering? The problem of tragedy which I am posing now is the obverse problem: there *is* in fact, as we know, terrible undeserved suffering, but it is difficult to see how you can acknowledge the fact if you believe in an infinitely powerful and loving God. Christianity, in a sense, offers an excess of hope, a promise that all

will be well, even when that promise rings hollow.

I said that it is a strength of humanism that it can recognise the fact of tragedy. It is also a strength of other religious traditions. It is no accident that the concept of tragedy is inextricably linked to tragic drama, in a tradition

which goes back to ancient Greece and

which grew out of the framework of ancient polytheism. The gods of the ancient Greeks are not all-powerful or benevolent. Even if you are their favourite, they may be unable to save you. If they take against you, they may destroy you, and there may be no consolation. Human lives may end terribly. All that is left is the possibility for the humans who are crushed by fate and by the malevolence of the gods to bear their tragedy nobly. That is the fate of Oedipus, of Antigone.

It is no accident that later writers of tragedy draw on the language of polytheism. Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear* says: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport.' Thomas Hardy, at the end of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, comments: 'The President of the Immortals had finished his sport with Tess.' All that we are left with is human resilience and human solidarity in the face of terrible tragedy.

I end therefore with two questions. The first is a question for adherents of the SOF movement. If God is a human creation, is it not valuable to draw on different versions of that creation? And when we are trying to make sense of the facts of human suffering and tragedy and the malign forces which destroy our hopes, could the language of polytheism and the religious ideas of the ancient world be a valuable resource?

My second question is this: Can the Christian tradition adequately acknowledge the fact of



Tess at Stonehenge shortly before her arrest. From BBC TV serial of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

tragedy? If it cannot do so, is that not a weakness? Tony refers to the German theologian Helmut Peukert who argues that 'only faith in God, who is the Lord of history, can provide hope for this universal solidarity with all the victims of history' which is 'hope in its full redemption'. Tony describes this as an *option* rather than a necessary requirement of reason. But is it an option which can do justice to the full range of human experience, including the experience of tragic suffering and tragic failure? Better, I think, to choose the option with which Tony ends, and which we can all share – that the religious and non-religious can work together to 'transform our world for the better', in a joint endeavour which 'honours the memory of the victims of history through further pursuing the cause for which they struggled.'

NOTES

- 1 John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p.66.
- 2 G W F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated by J Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p.21.
- 3 Ibid.

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