

Skeptics and the Church Proper 13A

A Sermon Preached
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Rona and I agreed several weeks ago that I would preach today, and I had no idea what the lectionary texts would be. When I started to prepare, I must admit that I was a bit downcast to learn that today would be Loaves and Fishes Sunday and that the gospel would be the one we just read. Don't get me wrong. I love the stuff we do on Loaves and Fishes Sunday. The ingathering of food for the hungry and homeless in our community is a wonderful thing. It's just preaching on the text that I find a bit daunting. Really, what more can be said about the "feeding of the five thousand"? But there was more to my uneasiness than that. Most of the physicians I work with on a daily basis are religiously very skeptical – especially when it comes to stuff like miracles. This particular story just does not appeal to skeptics – like many of the folks we each know and love. Frankly, it doesn't readily appeal to me. This is one of the Biblical texts that cause modern, scientific folks (particularly if it is presented as literal history) to wince, roll their eyes and say, "Right. Why should I be interested in a guy passing out extra fish and chips to a bunch of Galilean peasants in the first century? What's the value of this kind of superstition?"

But I was very intrigued by our reading from *Isaiah*. This section of the book, called by many scholars "Second Isaiah," was probably written during or shortly after the Babylonian captivity. This is some of the most beautiful poetic language in the Hebrew Scriptures. It paints an optimistic and hopeful picture of a future where God feeds, instructs and cares for His people – where people come to our community because God has "glorified" us – made us noticeable and desirable. Nature, itself, will join in our worship and problematic plants like thorns and briars will turn into beautiful trees and shrubs in our presence. But is this picture what the history of the Jewish people was really like? Is this what the history of the Christian Church was really like? Is this really what we think the history of the Jews or the Christian Church is going to look like? The skeptics among us would, with good reason I think, say, "No way."

In fact, skepticism with regard to all things religious and Christianity in particular seems to be on the rise. I don't know how many of you have seen the documentary, *Religilous*, with comedian, Bill Maher, but it very troubling. Maher does not play fair in the film: he interviews some of the most silly and least thoughtful Christians on the planet; but he does ask folks like us some very common sense questions about our faith, questions that are very difficult to answer. Richard Dawkins, an outspoken scientist and atheist, has written several best-selling books attacking religion – as has the journalist and author, Christopher Hitchens. Even novelists, like Phillip Pullman who wrote the trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, (which included *The Golden Compass*),

are increasing skeptical about the Christian worldview espoused in the West and express this skepticism in their writing.

So, the question I'd like to address today is this: "What do we do with skeptics (those persons who raise doubts about common beliefs – especially our beliefs)?" How do we respond to folks out in society who are skeptical about the commonly accepted tenants of our faith? How do we respond to folks within our Church who are skeptical of those tenants? What do we do with the doubts and criticisms of our tradition that inevitably assail us – that come to us, not only from our enemies, but also from our friends, our own children, and even ourselves? How should we respond to skeptics – in particular those who have left our churches? Do we attack them? Do we fix them? Do we ignore and despair of them? Do we well tell them not to let the door hit them in the backside on their way out? And what about their troubling ideas and questions? Do we reject them? Do we refuse to hear them because they trouble our settled notions of truth? Do we frantically construct arguments to defeat them? Or... do we welcome them and continue the dialogue of faith and doubt?

As many of you know, Nellie and I recently spent three weeks in Scotland walking the western highlands and touring Edinburgh. During that trip and in the preparations for it, I became more familiar with three famous Scottish skeptics who have significantly influenced modern Christianity. Their lives and stories may, I think, be instructive.

Our first Scottish skeptic, David Hume, believed by some to be the most important English speaking philosopher of the 18th Century, was born into a strict Scottish Presbyterian family in 1711. He was raised as a Christian. He was mentored as a young man by Francis Hutcheson, the most respected Christian philosopher and educator of his day and Lord Kames, a justice in Scotland's high court, and a staunch Scottish Episcopalian. In spite of this, Hume became a religious skeptic and wrote essays challenging the accepted Christian notions regarding human nature, human behavior and miracles. Though never publicly identifying himself as an atheist, the objective of much of his philosophical writing was "to unmask and discredit the doctrines and dogmas of orthodox religious belief." He challenged and questioned virtually every article of the Presbyterian Christian faith. He eventually joined the "Select Club" in Edinburgh which met regularly to drink bottles of claret wine (beer hadn't yet become popular) and debate the philosophical and theological questions of the day. Most of his friends and the other members of that club were Christians – primarily moderate Presbyterians.

Because of his beliefs, Hume was denied several university positions for which he was the most qualified candidate. Eventually his ideas became so troubling that the General Assembly of the Kirk (or state Presbyterian church) in 1756 proposed to publicly censure Hume – and would have done so had not his influential Christian friends written letters and testified on his behalf, pointing out his affability, his moral uprightness and the importance of

his role in their academic philosophical dialogues. Hume's Christian friends seemed to believe that his intellectual rigor and honesty were important to the development of their own theology and faith.

In one of his letters, Hume recorded an interesting story about an interaction with a local believer in Edinburgh. The historian, Arthur Herman, tells it this way: "One day, after he (Hume) had bought his house in Edinburgh's New Town, he was going home by taking a shortcut across the deep bog left by the draining of the North Loch. As he walked along the treacherous and narrow path, he slipped and fell into the bog. Unable to extricate himself, he began calling for help as darkness started to fall. An old woman, an Edinburgh fishwife, stopped, but when she looked down and recognized him as 'David Hume the Atheist,' she refused to help him out. Hume pleaded with her and asked her if her religion did not teach her to do good, even to her enemies. 'That may well be,' she replied, 'but ye shall na get out o' that, till ye become a Christian yourself: and repeat the Lord's Prayer and the Belief [i.e., the Apostolic Creed].' To her amazement, Hume proceeded to do just that, whereupon, true to her word, the old lady reached down and pulled him out."

No one believes he was actually converted. At about 63 years of age, Hume developed abdominal cancer and died rather peacefully a year later in the presence of his friends, who up until the end tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade him to accept the Christian faith. It was rumored among the common folk that Hume had made a Faustian pact with the Devil. It is also said that, after his death, his friends held a vigil at the tomb for eight nights, burning candles and firing pistols into the darkness lest evil spirits should come to bear away his soul. His mausoleum in the old Calton cemetery bears the following inscription: "Behold I come quickly. Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory, through OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST." David Hume, it seems, was respected and loved by a Christian community which met in pubs and argued about philosophy, religion and what it means to be human – and the members were, by their own accounts, blessed for having included the skeptic, David Hume.

Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, was also born in Edinburgh into a strict Christian family – but later, in the mid-nineteenth century. Stevenson's family were engineers who had become wealthy designing and building deep-water lighthouses all along the rugged Scottish coast. They were the beneficiaries of the capitalism that began to blossom in Scotland during the late eighteenth century.

Despite chronic poor health in childhood and tuberculosis which he probably contracted in adolescence, Stevenson graduated from law school in his early twenties. But instead of pursuing the law, Stevenson decided that he wanted to be a writer. He began writing essays and poetry and socializing with local artists. He also rejected Christianity. In January 1873, his father came across the constitution of the LJR (Liberty, Justice, Reverence) club, of which

Stevenson was a member. That constitution began "Disregard everything our parents have taught us". Questioning his son about his beliefs, Stevenson's father discovered the truth, leading to a long period of dissension between Stevenson and both of his parents:

"What a damned curse I am to my parents! as my father said "You have rendered my whole life a failure". As my mother said "This is the heaviest affliction that has ever befallen me". O Lord, what a pleasant thing it is to have damned the happiness of (probably) the only two people who care a damn about you in the world."

Soon Stevenson identified himself as a Bohemian – a free thinker with informal and unconventional social habits. ". . . he already wore his hair long, but he now took to wearing a velveteen jacket and rarely attended parties in conventional evening dress. Within the limits of a strict allowance, he visited cheap pubs and brothels." Eventually, he fell in love with a woman ten years his senior who was married to another man. When she finally divorced her husband, Stevenson sailed to New York and traveled across the United States by train (almost dying along the way) to San Francisco where she was living and married her, becoming a dedicated, faithful husband for the rest of his life.

Stevenson not only rejected Christianity as a personal practice, he also became publicly critical of many Christian doctrines he had been taught as a child. In particular he wrote about the damaging effect of Christian morality on the human personality when it demands that we continually categorize all our thoughts and activities as being either good or evil. His opinion on the disastrous effects of this psychological dualism was most famously illustrated in his book, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In that book Dr. Jekyll scientifically creates Hyde – not as an opportunity to recreate in evil pursuits – he creates Hyde as a repository for the dark, sensuous tendencies that he finds in himself and cannot control. Jekyll creates Hyde in order to preserve Jekyll's purity and moral superiority . . . and it destroys him. Stevenson argued with his parents and friends that, "The soul demands unity of purpose, not the dismemberment of man. . . ." In another work he wrote: "If your morals make you dreary, depend upon it they are wrong. I do not say 'give them up,' for they may be all you have; but conceal them like a vice, lest they should spoil the lives of better and simpler people."

With extraordinary insight, Stevenson in his essay, "Lay Morals," pointed out that many people, especially Christian leaders, have a tendency to focus their morality on attacking the evil they perceive in others who indulge in physical passions in which those leaders, themselves, would secretly like to indulge. "A strange temptation attends upon man: to keep his eye on pleasures, even when he will not share in them; to aim all his morals against them." According to Stevenson, this singular focus on attacking and avoiding sensual pleasure – rather than on simply doing good – makes a person more, not less, likely to commit evil (would that some twentieth century Christian leaders had read more Stevenson). In that same essay Stevenson also

wrote, "God, if there be any God, speaks daily in a new language by the tongues of men; the thoughts and habits of each fresh generation and each new-coined spirit throw another light upon the universe and contain another commentary on the printed Bibles"

It seems that Stevenson largely gave up on Church attendance and participation for most of his adult life. But at the end of his life, while living in Samoa, he became very involved in social justice issues as an advocate for the native Samoans against their British rulers. He also became close friends and met regularly with a group of native Samoan Christians at the end of each day, as was their custom, for family prayers in Stevenson's home, Valima. He even wrote prayers for many of those services, some of which were preserved and later published by his wife. Here's one of the "Valima Prayers":

"We beseech thee, Lord, to behold us with favour, folk of many families and nations, gathered together in the peace of this roof; weak men and women, subsisting under the covert of Thy patience. Be patient still; suffer us yet a while longer—with our broken purposes of good, with our idle endeavours against evil—suffer us a while longer to endure, and (if it may be) help us to do better. Bless to us our extraordinary mercies; if the day come when these must be taken, have us play the man under affliction. Be with our friends; be with ourselves. Go with each of us to rest: if any awake, temper to them the dark hours of watching; and when the day returns to us, our Sun and Comforter, call us up with morning faces and with morning hearts—eager to labour—eager to be happy, if happiness shall be our portion; and if the day be marked for sorrow, strong to endure it. "We thank Thee and praise Thee, and in the words of Him to whom this day is sacred, close our oblations."

When Stevenson died suddenly and unexpectedly of a brain hemorrhage in Samoa at the age of 44 in 1894, the Samoans buried him with a Christian funeral. Earlier Stevenson had written, ". . . sick and well, I have had splendid life of it, grudge nothing, regret very little . . . take it all over, damnation and all, would hardly change with any man of my time." Robert Louis Stevenson, skeptic and wayward Christian, was loved and respected by a Christian community that lived largely in poverty and economic oppression on an island on the other side of the world from his native Scotland – and they were blessed for having done so.

Richard Holloway is a contemporary Scot who was born in 1933 and was ". . . drawn into religion as a small boy from the back streets of an industrial town in the west of Scotland." He became a high church Scottish Episcopalian. He was educated at Kelham Theological College, Edinburgh Theological College and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. As priest he served in churches in Scotland, England and the United States. He was a mentor to Rona Harding when she went to seminary at St. Andrew's. In 1986 he

became the Bishop of Edinburgh, and in 1992 he was elected primate of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

But Bishop Holloway had a passion for social justice and the pursuit of truth. He became increasingly outspoken and involved in progressive causes. At the Lambeth Conference of 1998 he supported measures proposed to improve the status of homosexuals within the church, but that experience proved to be, in his words, “. . . the most traumatic experience of my life.” He expected dialogue, debate and classic Anglican compromise that, as he said, “would allow us to go on working together till some kind of creative consensus emerged in the future.” What he did not expect was the harsh uncompromising tone of the debate that actually occurred and the sort of “hateful glee” expressed by some of the bishops on the winning side of the most contentious controversies. This experience of what seemed to him “blind prejudice and ugly hatred paraded in the name of Jesus” radically altered Holloway’s attitude toward Christianity. In his book, *Doubts and Loves*, he wrote: “We get riled with each other when it is difficult if not impossible to establish the truth in disputed areas. We don’t beat each other up over multiplication tables, but we get very agitated about religion and politics, because it is impossible to establish their incontrovertible truth.”

After more struggle and soul-searching, in 2000 he resigned his position and left the church. Richard Holloway became a thorough-going skeptic and started writing books questioning the basic assumptions of orthodox Anglican Christianity. He also became a commentator for the BBC and was frequently interviewed on British talk shows.

Unlike many other critics of religion, however, Holloway has been consistently humble, understated and respectful in his observations. But, he is very articulate, and he writes masterfully. He is, in many ways, the worst kind of opponent. He knows us from the inside. He has seen us at our best – and at our worst. He understands our most persuasive apologetic arguments – and he often doesn’t buy them. “Like an ancient galleon that has spent ages at sea,” he writes, “Christianity is encrusted with customs and attitudes acquired on its voyage through the centuries, and it is making the tragic mistake of confusing the accidents of theological and cultural history with eternal truth.” In his work, he argues, among other things, that we ought to take God out of ethics and that all scripture should be interpreted as metaphor rather than history. He is not sure that the God of the Bible even exists, and he is concerned that Christians too often choose doctrinal correctness over the obvious immediate welfare of fellow humans. He also argues that some standard Christian dogma is frankly toxic to many vulnerable segments of our society.

So what do we do with that skeptic some British tabloids have called the “barmy Bishop”? Well . . . he’s back. Richard Holloway now attends Old St. Paul’s Church in Edinburgh where he usually sits in the back, but where he occasionally preaches and serves communion at the altar. Tucked away in a

narrow Old Town close under the North Bridge, Old St. Paul's is not a well known church. Most of the attendees seem to be university types, young adults, musicians and a few homeless people. Services are filled with incense, transcendent choral music, and contemporary, but very High Church, liturgy. The rector is an elderly African male and the curate is a young Englishwoman. Everyone in the service we attended seemed to love and respect Richard – even the tweedy middle-aged Scott who ushered us to a seat. Richard preached the day we visited (a lovely, insightful reflection on fitting a backpack and taking on the yoke of Jesus). It was a gentle, helpful, encouraging message, not at all confrontive or “in your face.” After his sermon, Richard said the creed with us and during communion placed a wafer of unleavened bread in my hand telling me that it was the body of Jesus. It seems that the Christian community at Old St. Paul's loves and respects the skeptic, Richard Holloway – and that the members of that community are blessed by his presence among them. I certainly was – in spite of my not being much of a skeptic.

Doctors love to give advice, so in closing I'd like to propose some modest suggestions for dealing with skeptics – to include ourselves when appropriate:

- 1) if the skeptics in our acquaintance are our enemies, we should love them – Jesus said so; this probably means trying to do them some practical good – remember, even the Edinburgh fishwife eventually pulled David Hume out of the bog;
- 2) if our skeptics are not our enemies – just our neighbors – we should love them – Jesus said to do that too;
- 3) we should probably refrain from simply labeling skeptics as heretics and ignoring them;
- 4) when skeptics talk to us, we should consider listening to them because their voice, like that of Balaam's ass, may be the voice of God coming to us through a very unexpected source – even if they're not sure they believe in Him;
- 5) when we do listen to skeptics, we should consider choosing to be more interested in becoming truthful persons and persons with passion for pursuing truth than in becoming persons who possess and must defend the truth – the skeptics will help us.

It is, after all, just possible that some of our skeptics are the new prophets and that responding to their skepticism in love will be the very activity that, ironically, ushers in the kind of community envisioned by Isaiah in today's lesson.

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