

Warwick Lent Address  
**What's New About God?**  
*Canon Dr Alan Billings*

Thank you for the invitation to be with you tonight. It has given me a chance to get my own thoughts in order and hopefully it may provoke you into some reflection as well.

You've asked me to speak on, 'What's new about God?' Since God is the same yesterday, today and forever, that's either a very short talk, or you meant something else by it. As I mainly write books from a sociological perspective, I've assumed you are asking me to say something about where God is in terms of our contemporary society. That is not a question about the truth of God, but about the role God plays in people's lives, whatever the truth. So the question I will seek to answer is this: 'Where is God in our culture today and is it different from yesterday?'

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My starting point is this. If we look across the contemporary world, we can see a spectrum of different cultures where God's presence is differently felt. At one end of the spectrum there are very religious cultures where God is ever present. He cannot be avoided. The United States would be an example of that. At the other end there are atheistic cultures where God is never present. He never enters people's consciousness from one day to the next. North Korea would be an example of that. So where are we on that spectrum, and are we in the same place now as, say, fifty years ago?

If I look back over the course of my lifetime, and the lifetime of anyone who was born before about 1960, it is very clear that a huge change has occurred in the way God is to be found in the general culture. That change is unique in British history and it's probably irreversible, at least for any foreseeable future.

Let me illustrate what I mean with an anecdote.

Last month a political colleague of mine asked me if I would officiate at the funeral of her husband. He was one of our local MPs, who had died suddenly just months after the general election. But neither he nor his family were religious, so his widow was asking me to take a non-religious funeral. This is not the first time I have been asked to conduct such a funeral and it probably won't be the last. But it would never have happened at any point in the history of this country prior to the last few decades.

It's not a comfortable position for a priest to be in. You know you will have to suppress almost everything you might want to say and do, when you come to mark the end of a human life. No prayers, no gestures, no words of commendation or committal.

So I thought I ought to say, 'No, very sorry, but I can't help'. But then, as a priest, you also feel constrained not to refuse when a grieving person asks for your help. You hear the words, 'I was bereaved, and you comforted me not'. Well, that's not quite what Jesus said; but you see the moral dilemma.

There were so many mourners – several hundred in fact – that the dean of Sheffield kindly let us hold the funeral in the cathedral. This added to my discomfort, especially at that point where I had to say that the next piece of music would be, 'Sympathy for the Devil' by

the Rolling Stones.

But there was something else about the occasion that jarred – something that I have noticed in other non-religious funerals. People found it hard to behave as consistent non-believers. In the tributes, people spoke about the deceased as if he were still alive, or had gone somewhere. They spoke of his passing, not his death. They speculated about what he might now be thinking, since his funeral was being conducted by a priest in an Anglican church.

No one wanted to say, or perhaps even think: He is dead. His life is no more. The mood was unrelentingly upbeat. In a strange way, we could express almost any emotion except grief.

But, of course, if death is our ultimate destiny, at a funeral we can only look back, to a life lived and over. That person has ceased to exist. They do not share the occasion with us. There is no future reference. And for the deceased, there is no past either, for there is nothing. Yet there was no sense of that.

And it was interesting to note that when I met the family a couple of days before the funeral to familiarise them with the building, they stayed behind afterwards to light a candle before an icon of the Holy Family.

The point I am making is not that the family were really believers after all. That would be patronising to them but also a misreading of what was happening. No, what I think we see here is a cultural shift taking place, a shift from a culture that takes God for granted to one where God is not assumed. But it is an incomplete shift, so that people may well behave in ways that seem inconsistent. We are like people swimming in the sea who are caught in strong but cross-cutting currents.

In this culture, people who say they are non-religious, can nevertheless find that some religious legacy still clings to them. In the case of funerals, some clearly want a continuing relationship with their dead, something that was possible in a religious culture through the rituals of prayer, lighting a candle, or holding a requiem mass. If there are no secular alternatives and religious practices are no longer easily available, they will often seek to create a secular equivalent - hence all those roadside shrines to people killed in road traffic accidents.

This incomplete cultural shift is producing other curious situations. For instance, eight years ago, after living elsewhere for twenty years, I moved back to Sheffield where I had first been a vicar. One Sunday I went to evensong in the cathedral and saw there someone I had known all those years before. I was surprised to see him because I had always thought of him as a non-believer. So after the service I went across to say hallo. And I asked him why, as an agnostic, he was at evensong. He seemed puzzled and hurt.... and said, 'I may be an agnostic, but I'm an Anglican agnostic.'

Perhaps the most surprising example of this incomplete shift from a religious to a non-religious culture I found in a book by Baroness Mary Warnock. Lady Warnock is a moral philosopher, a non-believer and a fierce critic of the Church. Nevertheless, she believes that Christianity has a role to play in her life and that of communities, especially at times of disaster or moral perplexity. She believes that the Church knows how to handle funerals or memorial services, or public occasions such as a service of thanksgiving when a war is over.

'Such ceremonies', she writes, 'are a bond, and an expression of shared emotion that society would be greatly worse without'.

The sort of thing she has in mind is the way one of my former students, Tim Alban Jones, the vicar of Soham in Cambridgeshire, helped to manage the collective emotions of his little town after two local children, Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells, were murdered there by the school caretaker. Tim opened the doors of the church for people to come in and light candles, lay flowers and say prayers. Hundreds did so. Then he, with the local Methodist minister, conducted funeral and memorial services of great sensitivity.

In her book, called *Dishonest to God*, Lady Warnock goes on to say something even more astonishing. She writes this:

Moreover, some people at least, though they do not believe in a personal God watching over them, nevertheless sometimes need to behave as if there were such a being; their emotion may be a sense of a generalised gratitude, a generalised remorse, a generalised sense of pity and sorrow for the sufferings of others. For many such people, of whom I am one, the rituals and the metaphorical language of religion, their traditional religion, are the most accessible and the most fitting expression.

What I have been describing points us then to an incomplete shift from a culture where God comes easily to people to one where God's absence, not his presence, is assumed. Increasingly, therefore, we find people like the former poet laureate, Andrew Motion. He says that yes, he sometimes knows the presence of God, but his faith is like a badly wired lamp: it flickers on and off.

Many people today are stuck between a religious world that is slowly passing away and a non-religious world that is not yet clear to them and which has yet to build the resources – words or rituals – that would help them navigate their way through life's ups and downs in a godless world. They behave, therefore, in ways that are not always consistent or predictable. So God has gone from being taken for granted to being pushed to the edges of people's consciousness most of the time.

Two other factors have played into this cultural shift.

The first has been the very aggressive and proselytising atheism of the 80s, 90s and early 2000s, mainly associated with the evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins. He and others commanded a great deal of media attention at that time and many were mesmerised by their relentless message.

Their principal point was that this world is all there is. But they also had a subtext – which was that Christianity was essentially about beliefs and if you couldn't subscribe to a range of beliefs as Dawkins' outlined them – such as a literal understanding of certain biblical passages – and you were not a weekly church attender, then you were not really Christian at all. This immediately ruled out large numbers of people who, I am suggesting, live in that betwixt and between world that is now the general culture of the majority. The Dawkins version of Christianity drove poetry out of religion and subjected the Church to a kind of rolling ofsted – the idea that the influence of Christianity is only captured in the annual statistics of church attendance.

At this point the Church made a serious error. It should have made it clear that Christianity was not primarily about beliefs and that the Church of England in particular would always provide a spiritual home for those who only find themselves in congregations occasionally. Instead, the Church began to change patterns of worship in ways that made it more difficult for the occasional attender to attend at all and pursued evangelistic activities that suggested that those whose faith owed more to poetry than prose were scarcely Christian. The modern Church, in other words, with its single focus on church growth, is assisting the cultural shift towards a non-religious future.

The second factor playing into the cultural shift of our time is the appearance across the country of other faiths in substantial numbers - a direct result of immigration. These faiths, principally Islam and the religions of the Indian subcontinent, have been relatively untouched by the secular mindset, so that paradoxically within the general culture that I have described, we have these significant subcultures where God is as central as ever. Although some of these faiths, particularly Islam, have sought converts, they have not had much success; but they are set to grow, because unlike Christianity they are more successful in replicating themselves through their children. But what their presence in strength does is to put a question mark against the thesis of Richard Dawkins that there is something inevitable about a future without God. They also make clear that religious pluralism will be a feature of Britain in the future. God will be present but in many guises.

So, putting our pieces of evidence together, what is the answer to the question, Where is God in our culture today and is it different from yesterday?

I have suggested that there is an incomplete cultural shift going on from a religious culture in which the presence of God is taken for granted, and could be realised relatively easily and naturally - even if he apparently played little part in your life most of the time - towards a majority culture where God's presence is not assumed. Many people are between these two worlds.

But it will only be possible for those in this position to find God – or be found by God – if they have access to a certain type of congregation: one that welcomes the doubter and the confused and the not sure and gives them – and perhaps gives God too – a certain space.

The philosopher Roger Scruton describes this kind of Christianity as the Christianity of the traditional parish church, 'a quiet, gentle, unassuming faith that makes room beneath its mantle for every form of hesitation'.

This is not the the kind of faith that the modern church wants to encourage or support. God's presence, then, in the general culture is set to fade, only being found in the subcultures of the different faiths, including the Christian minority. That is a major cultural shift and we are right in the middle of it.