

Matthew Parris The Times



Why do people debate the future of the church when they have not made up their minds about the existence of God?

Why, asked William Rees-Mogg in his column of March 29, do old people not go to church anymore? The question provoked a lively correspondence on the opposite page but mostly about forms of worship. One hesitates to blunder in, but might it be that old people do not go to church because they don't believe in God?

The propensity of my countrymen to discuss their church instead of discussing the reason for it – to discuss their religion in isolation from any consideration of the existence of a deity – has always amazed me. I wonder whether, perhaps, I have missed something obvious; whether part of my brain is absent.

How is it possible – would someone please explain – to hold and canvass vigorous opinions on whether women should be priests or the Church of England “established”, whether prayers should be said or sung, or the Bible read in the King James or more modern versions, what vestments should be worn, what music played, what bells rung, what hands clapped or incense used... how is it possible, I ask, so much as to begin such enquiries, or to feel remotely interested in the answers, without first determining the question to which they are mere postscripts? Does the God of the New Testament exist? Please accept that I am not here trying to persuade you that He does or does not, but to communicate my surprise that the question is so little, or so languidly asked.

For if God exists then our Godless existence falls apart. And if God does not exist then surely the church falls apart! We would be dealing with a superstition. A whole range of ancillary debates would just drop away as pointless.

Forms of prayer? Hats or no hats? *Thou or you?* What would it matter? Would we discuss how to address the Loch Ness Monster if we did not believe in the Loch Ness Monster? Would we pay money into a pension policy if the insurance company were a fiction?

I simply cannot understand why all those millions of my countrymen who mumble that they are “probably” believers can regard their uncertainty as less than a personal emergency. Why are they not driven to find out more?

The New Testament offers a picture of a God who does not sound at all vague to me. He has sent his son to Earth. He has distinct plans both for his son and for mankind. He knows each of us personally and can communicate directly with us. We are capable of forming a direct relationship, individually with him, and are commanded to try. We are told this can be

done only through his son. And we are offered the prospect of eternal life – an afterlife of happy, blissful or glorious circumstances – if we live this life in a certain manner.

Friends, if I believe that, or even a tenth of that, how could I care which version of the prayer book was being used? I would drop my job, sell my house, throw away my possessions, leave my acquaintances and set out into the world burning with the desire to know more and, when I had found out more, to act upon it and tell others.

How is it possible to be indifferent to the possibility, if one believes it to be a possibility, that a being of this order makes demands of this order upon you or me, and that in 30, 20, 10 years – perhaps tomorrow – we shall be taken from this life and ushered into a new one whose nature will depend upon our obedience, now, to his will? Far from being puzzled that Mormons or Adventists should knock on my door, I am unable to understand how *anyone* who believed what is written in the Bible could choose to spend his waking hours in any other endeavour.

There is quite a revival of interest at present in church law, and Christian forms of worship. Politicians have started talking about Christian values. There has also been a small flurry of books (such as the recent one by Bryan Appleyard) about the alleged “moral crisis” of the modern world, and the need for a new or revived moral order which (on inspection) bears a marked resemblance to the old Judaeo-Christian one. But the natural focus of all these arguments is never properly acknowledged.

It should be then we can make up our minds. The church and all its forms of worship, and the moral law to which it testifies, are all secondary facts: the primary fact (if fact it be) would be God. Those other things would follow from this, and without it would not follow.

No amount of breast-beating about the importance of a role for religion advances us an inch further towards a proof of the central fact upon which a religion must be predicated; and without which it must fall: the existence of a deity. Nobody of any intellectual stature since Bishop Joseph Butler in the early 18th century has candidly tried to argue backwards from the want of a religion to its validity. Yet this is the argument now being advanced, under cover of some intemperate vacuities about “moral panic”.

I fully accept that there is a need for God in this world. Whether, however, there is a God, is an altogether different question.

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