

Thinking Things Through

Three Books



In Acts 16:30-31 the jailer asks Paul and his fellow inmates “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” Every Christian has a different story about how they came to believe. Paul tells us, “So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17) but it is interesting to see how people arrive at the place of faith. We are influenced by all manner of traumas and life-crises as well as by smaller things such as people we have met or books we have read. I would like to recount three different books which had an impact on my thinking about profound issues such as what man is and what his relationship to God could or should be.

Imagine it's the 1960s and you are entering your final year of primary school and they have introduced a new subject onto the curriculum; Science. Imagine finding yourself enthralled by science and the possibilities it seems to hold. Out there in the big world science is breaking down barriers nearly every day. Dr Christian Barnard has just completed the first successful heart transplant operation, Concorde is taking to the skies and the Apollo astronauts are preparing to go to the moon. Premier Harold Wilson talked about the “white heat of technology”: it seemed to me that we were at the dawn of a wonderful new era of scientific progress. During my science lessons I came across Charles Darwin and learned as much as I could about the *Origin of Species* and what it meant, and became immediately convinced that religion in all its forms was about to be made extinct: there would be no room for that superstitious nonsense in this brave new world. Only your granny and men in dog-collars believed any of that religious mumbo-jumbo now.

Fast forward to the early 1970s and as a seventeen year-old I came across a book, ***The Naked Ape***, by Desmond Morris. Morris was a zoologist who studied mankind in the same way that he might study any primate. The book was a bestseller and stirred up a lot of controversy. In some parts of the world it was banned, but I was convinced that its way of looking at man was the future. It seemed to me that the book must surely, to any reasonable person, represent the last nail in the coffin of religious belief. Morris portrayed man not as a fallen angel but as a risen ape. I was convinced: God was dead and long live man. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who got the credit for originally announcing that “God is dead” and Jean Paul Sartre who, in my

view, took this idea to its logical conclusion in asserting that "If God is dead, everything is permitted." Tennyson spoke of "Nature, red in tooth and claw", and this fitted neatly into my world-view. It seemed clear to me that nature had developed in such a way that the strongest and fittest thrived and the weaker ones, if they survived at all, took the crumbs from the table. Only the irrational could argue against this. Now and again I came across some well-meaning humanist / atheist who argued that mankind was more successful when men worked together rather than competed, and that we should frame our lives, laws and morals around that premise. I thought that this idea was just laughable. What if he had a nice girlfriend? Why wouldn't I just thwack him over the head with a stout club and steal her for myself? If God was truly dead and all that stood between me and his (soon-to-be-ex) girlfriend was some utilitarian manmade law, then he was about to suffer a very sore head.

This was the mindset in which I lived my life. I pretended to believe in right and wrong, so as not to be sacked or arrested but in my heart I believed that we were all simply naked apes competing for food, wealth and sex, and behaved accordingly. For a number of years this view was my guiding star. In living this view I did not have to worry about sin as it had ceased to exist. For me, sin was an outmoded idea dreamt up by God-botherers and had no relevance in the modern world. I did, however, continue a search of sorts for "truth." I didn't know what truth was but thought it was worth the search and that I'd know it when I found it. So, where else would I look but the world of art and aesthetics? I should say though that in many ways the adult world was a disappointment. Not only had Santa Claus proved to be untrue (a bitter blow) but the optimism of the 60s had given way to the harsher realities of the early 70s. The comic books I had read as a boy had promised a future in which everybody travelled with a jet-pack on their back and there were colonies of people on the Moon and Mars. Alas, it didn't pan out that way. There was still greed, war, famine, economic upheaval and creatures like Bruce Forsythe to convince me that the human race was not making the kind of progress that I had hoped for.

Then I came across an essay by Leo Tolstoy on art, beauty and truth. I was well impressed and subsequently read a biography of him which talked about the spiritual crisis he had endured in middle age after achieving fame and fortune as a writer. I got hold of his book **A Confession** (after St Augustine) and was, as they say, gob-smacked. Tolstoy thought, discussed and wrote about religion and the place of man in the universe exactly as I would have done myself, had I only been much cleverer. He was like a big brother really, who had years ago trodden a path which I now felt myself to be on. Tolstoy had achieved a great deal in terms of worldly success and yet, increasingly, he felt that it brought him no pleasure. He said: "All this was happening to me at a time when I was surrounded on all sides by what is considered complete happiness. I was not yet fifty, I had a kind, loving and beloved wife, lovely children, and a large estate that was growing and expanding with no effort on my part. I was respected by relatives and friends far more than ever before. I was praised by strangers and could consider myself a celebrity without deceiving myself....And in these circumstances I found myself at the point at which I could no longer go on living...I had to deceive myself in order to refrain from suicide." Although I was never suicidal, I understood completely his state of mind. The famous T S Eliot poem, *The Wasteland*, opens with the somewhat discordant line "April is the cruellest month...." and I suggest that, prior to his embracing Christianity, Eliot felt the same way as Tolstoy and I. For most people the resurgence of nature in

April is a time of anticipation of the summer, but for Tolstoy, Eliot and me, it was a cruel trick. And we weren't alone in coming to that conclusion. Solomon says in the book of Ecclesiastes: "And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy....Then I looked on all the world that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."

In *A Confession*, Tolstoy strove to find an answer to the mystery of life. He searched through philosophy and science but found no answer to his questions. He didn't understand how the rest of the human race could continue with their lives if those lives did not have any meaning. He describes his conclusion at this stage based upon the Russian aristocrats whom he knew personally: "As I looked around the narrow circle of my colleagues I saw nothing but people who had failed to understand the question [of life], or who had understood it but drowned it in the intoxication of life, or who had understood it and had put an end to their lives, or who understood it but through weakness continued living in despair." Tolstoy and I began, in our different ways and times, to conclude that we may have missed something, or been getting something wrong in our search for truth. The flaw was our reliance on rationality. It had never occurred to us that rationality might itself have limits. He presents this conclusion more eloquently than I could: "Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life, yet the vast masses [of Russian peasants, who had faith in the Christian God] recognise that this meaning lives in irrational knowledge. And this irrational knowledge is faith, the very thing that I could not help rejecting. This God..., the creator ... the devils and angels and all the rest that I could not accept without going mad." In time Tolstoy accepted Christianity, as did I, without going mad. Tolstoy worshipped with the Russian Orthodox Church before going on to plough his own Christian furrow, influencing people such as Ghandi and Dr Martin Luther King. Although he gained notoriety as a Christian writer and thinker he was in my view, compared to myself, somewhat disadvantaged in that he did not have access to the good people of Castle Buildings CU or their Thursday lunchtime meetings. Had he done so, he might have spent less time travelling up religious cul-de-sacs and instead received an invaluable grounding in the scriptures.

A while later I came across the third of my three books: C S Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. Lewis began with first principles and demonstrated how man is made by and for God. He also worked his way to a position in which Tolstoy, Eliot and I had found ourselves, that is where a person must question their own ways of thinking (which patently don't answer the big questions) and put rationality to one side. He described how a person begins to feel the law of God pressing on us: "It begins to look as if we shall have to admit that there is more than one kind of reality; that....there is something above and beyond the ordinary facts of men's behaviour, and yet quite definitely real, a real law, which none of us made, but which we find pressing on us." For me, who was by now becoming aware of the "conviction of sin", he made sense. His measured, urbane style was, to me, worth a thousand market-square preachers. "It is after you have realised that there is a moral law," he said, "And a power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that power....that Christianity begins to talk." Lewis then went on to build the case for becoming a Christian and for me it was compelling. This was perhaps an example of the right book coming along at the right time. Lewis made a big impact

on me and helped me with that difficult process of transferring head-knowledge to heart-knowledge. Other people have suggested that the journey from the head to the heart is the longest journey in the world. It requires humility and a certain humbling before your Creator which is not easy but has to be done. Poor old Pontius Pilate. He had the way, the truth and the life standing in front of him and did not recognise Him. I have been blessed in that I've been given the truth. If I could only just put it all into practice as I'm supposed to. I'm continually prodded by scripture to not just believe but to **live** the life. James has been known to rattle my cage. He says: "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin." (James 4:17). Oh dear. That's me he's talking to.