

The Manchester Sermon 2013:
Putting Aside Childish Things

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This evening's reading is First Corinthians, Chapter 13, verse 11, from the King James Bible: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

Who has become a "man"? In this instance, a woman. And what "childish thing" might we put away today? The very vehicle driving the survival of this passage by the Apostle Paul for two thousand years: religion. Behold, then, the anti-sermon sermon.

Truthfully, I put away the "childish thing" of the Presbyterian Church when still a child. As I grew more vocal in my family about not sharing my parents' religious convictions, my mother chided that on occasion it was normal—if always upsetting—to "question your faith." But I'm not sure I ever had a faith to question. I cannot recall ever swallowing without reservation the creed that I was fed from toddlerhood. I never sensed the presence of a Being looking out for me who was not one of my parents, any more than I ever believed in Santa Claus, who *was* my parents. There was always a little confusion about deity in our household anyway—where in practical and emotional terms, "God the Father" usually went by the shorter appellation "Father."

I have never embraced a religious faith. I do not understand religious faith. When it has been explained to me, I have only been able to construe that "belief" distinguishes itself from "knowledge" by being something you realize is far-fetched and unsupported by any evidence, and you profess it anyway. Mind, I will not try to sell you on the idea that I'm still profoundly "spiritual"—not a word I quite understand either, except as a lower grade of "religious" that commits you to nothing in particular while still making you unaccountably annoying at dinner parties. Ardent believers might pity

me for this hole in my soul, which impoverishes my inner world, separates me from the communion of the devout, and denies me the comforts of a personal relationship with God and the promise of life everlasting. There may be none so blind as those who will not see, but so far I haven't felt deprived.

As well as a philosophical position, my alienation from religious faith is a personal matter. Both my parents have dedicated themselves professionally to Christianity. My mother was a researcher for the Presbyterian Church and later an executive in America's National Council of Churches. My father graduated from a seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and earned a doctorate from Harvard's Divinity School—though it jars on my ear now that Harvard would have a School of God. He was a pastor in the small town where I was born, then an assistant minister at the church where my family worshipped. He became an academic in the Religion Department of North Carolina State, then in the Divinity School at Emory University in Atlanta. The pinnacle of his career was becoming the president of a theologically prestigious, liberally-minded ecumenical institution in New York City, Union Theological Seminary, for sixteen years. I relate these achievements with a conflicted mixture of bewilderment and pride.

So you can imagine that I was raised up to the eyeballs in church. My brothers and I were compelled to attend Sunday school and worship services every week. We were roped into Bible School every summer. Joining the church in my early teens wasn't a decision but simply a requirement, after which I was drafted into a church youth group that met Sunday evenings. My parents' friends and colleagues were all ministers, church officers, Biblical scholars, and theologians. Whenever my family took holidays—which

nearly always involved my father's attendance at some religious conference—we spent our leisure time visiting churches. Indeed, my parents' boxes of slides include few images of me and my brothers growing up. Those boxes are stuffed instead with photos of stained-glass windows, ornate altars, and foreshortening steeples. It was a standing joke with my younger brother that whenever my father snapped a picture—of a church, of course—he'd wave at us kids to get out of the way.

To my sorrow, at a midpoint in my childhood our father abandoned his animated after-dinner readings of the storybooks we adored—CS Lewis's Narnia series, *The Wind in the Willows*, *All Hallow's Eve*—and read from the Bible instead. One of my more consternating memories from junior high is of having an essay due at school the next day, composition of which I was obliged to put aside. My father had suddenly got a bee in his bonnet about how important it was that I read the book of Luke from start to finish that very afternoon.

Because my resistance to religious dogma began at an early age, I wiled away many a Sunday morning as a kid playing Hang Man or tic-tac-toe on the Order of Service with my younger brother, slipping the program between us while trying to avoid our mother's sharp eye. I performed tiny, unperceived acts of defiance, like keeping my eyes open during prayers. As the assumption carried on that we kids would simply adopt our parents' catechism without ever being asked, even as I grew older and more of a person in my own right, my defiance grew more overt. I would refuse to recite the Apostles' Creed—though I would at least, to keep from embarrassing my parents, stand with the congregation. I often refused to sing the hymns, which in some ways was a shame, since they were the only part of a service that I enjoyed. Whereas when very young I was

mostly bored, by pre-pubescence I was furious, and spent the whole interminable hour seething in my pew. It enraged me that I wasn't allowed my own views. It enraged me that I was supposed to publically proclaim my belief in "the Holy Ghost, the holy Catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting" when I believed in no such fictions. By the time I was twelve, my father had literally to drag me into the car on Sunday mornings by the hair.

Yet I confess that when my own father assumed the pulpit I was transfixed. I loved the often funny or touching anecdotes that illustrated his sermons. He was a fine orator, able to bend his tone into a musically ministerial minor key, using the rise and fall of a line to land with a poignancy that raised the hairs on my neck. When he lifted his hand over the congregation in benediction—*The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth*—he made me feel protected, and blessed, and safe. He's always been a handsome man, six feet tall with a square JFK jaw and the same glinting, far-away hazel eyes that he handed on to me; watching his formidable figure sweep down the aisle in a flowing black robe at the end of the service induced both an awe and a self-congratulatory sense of being well connected: my father was *the man*. Why, I have continued to find my father's public oratory moving, resonant, and trenchant throughout my adulthood, even as my ideological opposition to the institution to which he's devoted his life has grown only more entrenched.

As for why I have so little patience for religion, I don't want to pull a Richard Dawkins here, since Britain's most famous contemporary atheist can put off audiences with a caustic contempt for belief in fairy tales. I couldn't hope to match the eloquence of the late Christopher Hitchens in his debate with Tony Blair, in which Hitchens railed

forcefully against the idea of any benevolent, all-powerful God who would allow the wickedness and undeserved suffering that permeates human affairs. So I will try to be succinct:

False certainty creates refuge from an ambiguity that is intrinsic to this life as I understand it. Surely that ambiguity provides one of life's great pleasures: contemplating the enigma of "what is this universe we're a part of?" and "what are we supposed to do here?" Religion is flattening, and anthro-centric; it makes the world too known and so too small. The stories on which most religions are based are patently incredible—sons of God born of virgins and angels descending from the heavens—making religious belief indistinguishable from superstition. Thus religion represents to me an earlier evolutionary stage. It is a calcification of our forefathers' efforts to explain the world with magic—so maybe the "man" in First Corinthians who must put away childish things is more generally the human race. Worse, faith has divided more than united peoples historically, and for centuries has driven wars across Europe and the Middle East, while today fundamentalist Islam motivates delusional young men to enter bustling marketplaces strapped with bombs. Faith is used to raise one group above all others, because in contrast to dehumanized "infidels" these chosen people have exclusive access to the so-called "truth." Religion often imposes oppressive, joyless practical restrictions on its adherents, when life is hard enough—restrictions frequently placed most onerously on women. Religions are prone to obsess narrowly about sex, thereby casting "morality" as farcically petty.

Because I have no visceral grasp of faith, virtually no characters in my novels profess religious beliefs—which, considering many of them are American, is

demographically perverse. But for me to craft a character with strong religious convictions is to make that character unfathomable to me. An equally conspicuous omission: despite the subject matter having saturated my upbringing, I have never written a novel that wrestles specifically with religion. To comprehensively take on any larger issue in a novel, an author should give expression to rounded, often opposing views, and my views on religion are two-dimensional. I could never write a novel about faith without becoming more sympathetic with faith—more sympathetic with people who espouse faith, and with the inclination to faith.

Yet privately I have wrestled with a religious conundrum for most of my life. I've great respect for my parents, for their fine characters of course, but also for their intellects. These are very smart people. They have high IQs. So how could they possibly believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, born of the virgin Mary? Given his considerable academic achievements, what inspired my gifted father, with a smorgasbord of challenging disciplines at his fingertips, to get a doctorate from Harvard's *Divinity* School? How has this sharp, insightful couple, deeply engaged by international politics, not shared my perception that churches have riven the peoples of this Earth far more than brought them together? In college, my father was a history major. I don't get it.

Just now, however, I am not in the mood for exasperation. I'm sorry to report that my father is gravely ill. At 85, he may not be much longer with us. I face the prospect of losing him, and my frustration melts away. At such a sombre juncture, I yearn to locate where the callings of a seminary president emeritus and his apostate daughter the novelist might intersect.

Both literature and liturgy celebrate the power of The Word—written, spoken,

and sung. Purely as text, the Bible rings with great poetry. The cadences of the Apostles' Creed—*from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead*—still give me chills. Familiar hymns uplift me—“*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing ...*” Some hymns can make me cry—which is as much as I could hope to accomplish with any novel. Honed by generations, the incantations of religious ceremonies can transport even us disaffected folk, and I am grateful, ironically, to have been steeped in these traditions, to which I continue to respond, for if I hadn't grown up with these *sounds* in my ears I doubt I'd find them quite so moving.

Fiction and religion alike grapple with difficult moral choices. My father and I have both made a living from exploring the consequences of one's actions, and from groping to construct what constitutes a good life, a just life, a worthwhile life. Much of what my father has deployed religion to pursue I also celebrate—civil rights, the redress of political injustice but also the setting aside of historical grudges—as I have addressed in my own work the mysterious origins of evil, the iniquities of American healthcare, or the puzzle of how much we're obliged to personally forfeit for single members of our families. To a surprising extent, Christian values are my values, and in its own conniving, underhanded way my secular writing also elevates love, decency, charity, loyalty, responsibility, sacrifice, clemency, and the Protestant work ethic.

Both good books lower-case and the Good Book in capital letters push readers to dig below the surface, to find deeper wells of experience beneath remembering to buy butter at the supermarket and ferrying the kids to school. Clerics and fiction writers alike urge their audiences to feel more profoundly, to achieve perspective, to empathize with their neighbours, to think—although novelists may do a slightly better job at getting

readerships to question received wisdom and challenge authority, if only because religion is hawking received wisdom, and ecclesiastical representatives of established churches *are* authorities.

My father and I are both preachers of a sort, and we have both been drawn to vocations that are pastoral. In the course of his duties as minister and educator, my father has comforted the bereaved, counselled the confused, and tried to pass on what wisdom he has gleaned in the form of text, private guidance, and sermons like this one. (Well. Not that much like this one.) In the best of my own work, I hope I have also helped my audience to better understand themselves and their brethren, to accept their disappointments, to inhabit their joys, to examine the darker corners of their characters where malice, envy, spite, and selfishness hide, to face death, and to relish the infernal complexity of life on this planet in the meantime.

In different manners, ministers and purveyors of less sacred texts each foster community. Humanists are often criticized for not offering the social solace of the church. Yet the readership of a particular book constitutes an ad hoc fellowship, a group of people with a common experience through which they can exchange ideas and connect with one another—although I'm leery of putting a worldwide church on a par with a book club. For that matter, I'll grant religious affiliation this advantage: the many fellow congregants who have supported my parents during my father's accelerating infirmity—by buying groceries, or offering lifts to hospital—embrace a *doctrine* that defines care of the sick as an obligation, one that secular friends would be too free to regard as a choice.

Most of all, of course, religious and secular literature are both intimately involved with *story*. I'd be the first to admit that the story of Jesus—from dangerous popularity to

persecution, crucifixion, and resurrection—is a compelling narrative. In fact, I had to laugh at myself for finishing the entire first draft of my second novel, *Checker and the Derailleurs*, before I realized that I'd stolen the plot wholesale from the New Testament. So maybe my father's forcing me to read the book of Luke in a sitting at the age of thirteen wasn't wasted on me after all.

Yet fiction and religion do part ways in one crucial respect: I know, and my readership knows, that *my stories are made up*. Indeed, the most destructive interpretations of sacred texts are literal. Fundamentalist readings of the Bible or the Koran insist that stories that could be illuminating as metaphors actually happened in exactly this way and represent the irrefutable, factual truth. Literalism leads to inflexibility, and fanaticism. Certitude about the truth of stories that are scientifically impossible encourages an irrationality that spreads to everything, and starts ominously to resemble mental illness.

Now, I've never been sure whether my intelligent father believes that Jesus of Nazareth was physically raised from the dead, or if he thinks instead that Christ's teachings live on after him and that's pretty much the same thing. I don't know if my father believes in the literal truth of Christ's feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, or if he imagines that more importantly the Redeemer fed his flock in a metaphysical sense.

But I'm not sure it matters. I will always find my father's choice of occupation curious. Yet while I may have concluded that the influence of religion on human affairs has been on balance malign, my father and I have both struggled to be good: to be good writers, good leaders, good thinkers, good citizens; to be good children and, in his case,

with remarkable success, a good parent. We have both struggled to discern what it *means* to be good, which is not a simple matter, as my father would readily agree. I have far more in common with my father, and with other religious people, who are also struggling to be good, and also struggling to understand what it means to be good, than I differ from them.

Thus maybe the “childish thing” that we secularists need to “put away” in adulthood is our ridicule, our hostility, our incomprehension—our beloved bafflement that anyone buys this twaddle. Maybe we need to put away the atheist’s belief in a superior access to the “truth,” which can duplicate the very false certainty, and the very claim to membership of a privileged elect, that as religion’s antagonists we would disavow. For too long, I myself have depended on rejection of faith as a substitute for faith, and as I advance into my own old age it would behove me to shift my focus from what I don’t believe to what I do. Surely it’s time to release those bitter memories of being dragged to church by the hair. How much better with my father in the twilight of his life to seize not on what divides us, but on what we share.