

UNTIL THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION and a new way of thinking known as 'The Enlightenment' emerged, doubt about God's existence was rare. Belief in God was assumed by most, explained, argued for by philosophers and theologians. Along came scientific inquiry, which didn't rely on God explaining how the universe, its order, its laws, the evolution of life itself occurred. It focused on explaining the nature of things by repeatable observation and experimental testing.

The western church was shaken and divided by the sixteenth century reformation as people took their freedom to read scripture for themselves and re-discovered vital neglected aspects of its message. This generated criticism of abuses in the church and brought changes affecting many aspects of life, but it didn't much affect belief in God. A century later, philosophers started to claim freedom to think and interpret Scripture for themselves by reason and common sense, even if this challenged common religious beliefs and the practice of faith. They sought understanding to deepen their faith. They were seekers of a greater truth that would glorify God.

INSTEAD OF INSPIRING AND GUIDING THIS FREEDOM, CHURCH LEADERS TOOK FRIGHT. Their exclusive right to interpret scripture was under scrutiny. As a reaction, they declared philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza were atheists. Men who wanted first of all to think for themselves, to think openly about the faith instead of blindly trusting and obeying, were rejected. Distance was thus forced between new scientific reasoning, and philosophy as taught by the church.

The God revealed in scripture soon became unbelievable to this generation of philosophers, because God, according to the church, didn't allow free thinking. From then on, free-thinkers distanced themselves from the foundations of their discipline in religion. People learned to move away from living, in awareness of God's

presence, to living as if God didn't exist, or was so remote that it made no difference.

This movement also influenced thinkers within the church. Some argued that truth attained by reason alone, without reference to the bible would not lead people to God or salvation. Thus certainty of truth could be found in the scriptures alone, through establishing its literal meaning. Others, recalling ancient Christian ideas, said that attainment of truth required both reasoning and scripture, read in the light of centuries of Christian interpretation.

In the 19th and 20th century, critical scientific method applied to investigating the scriptures, yielded greater understanding of its origins, meaning, purpose and the possibilities of its interpretation. Literalism is but one of several paths to knowledge of God through scripture. How the bible can be understood is not nearly as simple as literal interpretation proposes.

New knowledge about the bible certainly led to a greater confidence that it is rooted in real human history, rather than invented mythology. It also led to rethinking common ideas about God and the meaning of salvation. This generated more conflict between philosophers and a church which didn't always succeed in valuing the full extent of Christian tradition. Nevertheless, the freedom to explore scripture, Christian and Jewish tradition, also other faiths has opened fresh perspectives on how God is at work in secular history and the bible. Many parts of the church, though not all, have benefited from new freedoms and knowledge, although some of its critics are reluctant to admit this.

THE 'DISAPPEARANCE' OF GOD FROM THE CENTRE OF LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD can even have meaning for faith itself, as some Christian thinkers have begun to understand. Fear of God dominated belief for many centuries. Human beings once

able to distance themselves from fearing God, find new freedom to be before God - freedom, rather than compulsion or the need to believe. This promises a far healthier relationship than one based on fear. It's also consistent with the teaching of the Gospel. The calling to human freedom before God issues from the good news Jesus proclaimed. The spirit of the Gospel teaches this, encourages humans to approach God in all freedom. Modern ways of thinking can assist a return to the Gospel against the constraints of old time 'religion'.

When we re-read scripture in the light of modern understanding it shows God wants us to be free. God calls us to become his children. To be 'children of God' is synonymous with freedom before God. This is clear in the teaching of the Apostle Paul. Christianity declares that God's true nature is seen in Jesus crucified. It is revealed in what believers regard as his self-sacrificial love and forgiveness. The 'God of old' seemed absent at his crucifixion, abandoning Jesus to his fate. But, it's God who willed that man should lose sight of him, and the ideas of 'God' born from our needs and fears, to be freed to re-find him in and through Jesus.

NOTHING CAN COMPEL BELIEF IN THE GOD REVEALED IN JESUS THE CRUCIFIED ONE. On the Cross, God doesn't threaten. We are free to believe or not to believe. God is revealed as absolute love, self-giving, always 'for us', not against us. God doesn't come to overwhelm us, insist on homage, revenge or punishment, but to help us towards new ways of being human.

The entire Spirit of the Gospel speaks of the way of the Cross - there's no greater love than someone giving their life for those they love. We cannot honestly make God in our image, clothed in our prejudices and fears. God is infinite love. Anyone who doesn't love isn't yet truly human, a child of God.

THOSE WHO SAY 'YES' TO LOVE CHOOSE TO LIVE WITH TRUST IN GOD WITHOUT LETTING GO OF FREEDOM. They don't discover the full truth of God immediately. Time is needed to get rid of worldly images of 'God' buried in inherited religiosity. Courage and effort is needed to resist the security which being dependent conveys. There'll always be need to return to the Cross to take freedom before God, with all its risks, to learn how to 'live in trust before God, without demanding anything, without making God hostage to our desires.

Christians are led back to the Gospel, called to abandon the 'I give to you so that you give to me' mentality. God calls us to let go of it, to unlearn a certain kind of religious spirit, made from submission, calculation, expressions of material needs and fears, to learn another type of relationship. God asks our love in developing brotherhood, compassion, freedom of mutual friendship at the heart of our search for truth. We progress in the freedom of God when we no longer feel a need for legal or ritual guarantees. 'Faith refuses guarantees, while religion gives them'. Christians seek to pass from possessing guarantees to living purely on trust. Freedom isn't contrary to humility before God, nor obedience to his Spirit. The more we advance in freedom, the more we advance in spiritual joy.

In the past two centuries, the church has been criticised and ridiculed by rationalist thinkers, claiming the unreasonableness of tenaciously held religious beliefs, and calling for its influence to be resisted. Sadly, religion has failed people on times. Belief in God has been used as an alibi to uphold what common sense deems wicked. Some rejection is thus inevitable.

The church has complained that the influence of modernity, has led to loss of belief, pride of the human spirit, bad faith, failing to realise how much it has been left behind by those who, react against authoritarianism, and the imposition of

religious externals between man and God. The Church has been partly responsible for modern man's loss of belief. Although it now seeks reconciliation with modernity, it hasn't learned much from an era which saw its influence disappearing, and traditional belief in God vanishing. The Church today may re-value its rich ancient tradition, but only by understanding not banishing developments in culture and philosophy, can the spirit of the Gospel prevail.

MANY PEOPLE TODAY CHOOSE TO LIVE WITHOUT GOD AND RELIGION. They don't deprive themselves of freedom. They take the same freedom they see in others. They share God's love in the love they give to others. Christians believe that God loves such people no less. The value of the Cross still prevails. 'Greater love has no-one than to lay down one's life for a friend'. Self-sacrifice is the measure of being able to love freely.

Dialogue between all kinds of religious believers is vital to enable them to disengage from conflict and become peace makers. Development of friendly and fraternal relationships between people of different cultures is important for life in a diverse society. Christians are called especially to foster reconciliation wherever they can. One cannot be Christian solely in a private religious realm. Christianity is chiefly a practice concerning everyday life, rooted in the Gospel Jesus proclaimed and the God he reveals.

Humans may not *need* to believe any longer, but the free choice of active faith in God can enable anyone to become more fully, truly human, what believers think God wants for all.

Any questions or comments
arising from this leaflet?
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Christianity for 21st century people

5. Do modern human beings *need* to believe in God ?

The opinion has long been held that belief in God and in a supernatural order has been invented by human beings in order to help them cope with man things in life that they find impossible to explain or understand. Practical reason and science have exposed the folly and futility of religious belief and practice. Or have they?

Is religious faith an expression of human need and ignorance?

Can we live without it?

Can religion justify its existence in the light of what reason and science reveal?

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