

Faith and the Law

Bruce Houlder -St Michael and All Angel's Barnes 20/3/22

1. I am a lawyer. As you know, some lawyers represent Oligarchs – all the time! Do they have a soul? Well, I am not going to talk about that. I'm going to ask myself a different personal question, but in this very public space, and it's this. Whatever good I might think I do, or might have done, is it really the result of my Christian faith?

4. So here a Legal framework for that challenge. How does Christianity square up to other faiths, or those of no faith at all, in the goodness stakes? Islam, whilst revering Mary, as we know has some distinctive views on the rights of women otherwise. Solomon, a Jew of course, preferred to threaten to cut a little baby in two to resolve a maternity dispute. OK, he had his reasons, but God surely did not give Solomon instructions to do that, but yet we believe that wisdom comes from God.

5. But what about us so-called Christians? With the priests standing by, we used to boil people alive, we pressed Saint Margaret to death to encourage her to renounce Catholicism. We broke heretics at the wheel and, beheaded the poor on the Halifax Gibbet for stealing anything more than 12 pence. Monsieur Guillotine actually stole the design from Yorkshire. I recently finished reading Lord Sumption's account of the Albigensian Crusade in southern France. It is horrific. And now. Well, we only abolished judicial hanging just before I became a barrister, and today there are the most senior Orthodox priests in Russia who still publicly support the present war.

6. So, against that background how can I plead that what I do is inspired by Christianity. Now just stay with me please.

7. In my travels, particularly in Nepal, I was always impressed by the gentleness of Buddhists. In a more exacting way than Christians do, Buddhists believe that the human life is one of suffering, and that meditation, spiritual and physical labour, and good behaviour are the ways to achieve enlightenment, or nirvana. To use more familiar words, *redemption is a central ambition of their faith.*

9. But, in spite of all, I do believe that Christ is the redeemer of our sins. Is it *because* I am a Christian that I believe in a person's the power to change? But my neighbour might reply "*Even those with no belief can believe in the power of people to change. Just because your some of you might support Chelsea, it does not mean that God is on your side, now does it?* "

10. And despite all I have been saying, I still profess a faith in the crucified Christ. I respond to those beautiful words of Psalm 103. "*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*"

11. Is it in some subconscious way the certainty that that like flowers of the field we will all be blown away, and return to dust, that made me turn from what I hope had been a principled practice of the law in the criminal courts, to a more positive desire to prevent people ever coming close to the law if I possibly could? Whilst it is highly rewarding

work, I suspect part of the reason I do this now is based on an Old Testament kind of fear, that if I don't, I will lose my immortal soul. I don't have the confidence of Voltaire's creation Candide on his deathbed. When the priest came to give him the last rights he asked, "*do you renounce the devil and all his works*", he swiftly replied "*this is not time to be making new enemies*". I am happy to renounce them now.

12. So - is it virtuousness, or guilt that drives me, or fear of losing Christ's compassion before I too turn to dust? I think, being honest, that it is a bit of all three. I fear the all-seeing God that knows all the secrets of my heart.

13. As some of you might know, before founding my charity for young people, I spent over 52 years at the Bar and some 34 of these sitting part-time as a judge in the Crown Court. I also passed nearly 6 years running prosecutions for the 3 Armed services, who task only too clearly may be to take human life. These cases are present huge moral challenges in a battlefield context. But these are decisions I had to make on many occasions.

14. Those of us who daily read the news, particularly in these last 3 weeks, will find it hard not to believe that real and irredeemable evil exists, but we *must* hang on, must we not, to a belief in redemption even in the most challenging of circumstances? In the end I have no doubt that, every day, my faith has helped me do just that.

15. My belief will remain, however I find it challenged, that even young men that take up knives to kill, are all capable of salvation by God working within them whether they know this or not, and even in the total absence of belief or a guiding star. I remind myself; He is the Father who shows compassion to his children and must work through us on earth.

16. *So*, we now approach Christ's death and resurrection, we contemplate Christ in the wilderness. As you hear, Like Thomas, I still am filled with doubt on the question I have set myself. I hear still Our Lord's slight reproach, speaking first to Thomas, and then to the disciples "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" ([John 20:29](#)).

17. So what is my poor answer. My answer in the end is YES. I really do just *trust* that the good I try to do is *improved* by the Christianity I proclaim, as well as the good that lies, I hope, within me. It is also because that my faith compels me to encompass the experience of God's grace is working within me, and the image of the crucified Christ before me.

18. But why today ask a lawyer these questions? The American writer and activist James Baldwin might have said to me "Go tell it on a Mountain, that Jesus Christ is Born". What, he also had another more practical message. He wrote: "*If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law's protection most!—and listens to their testimony.*" That is what I hope I am doing now. I know that is what Christ asks of us too.

