

DOES GOD KNOW ME?

An interview with the Rt. Rev. Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, by Francis Bennion on 6 August 1992

FB: With the advance of science many people in Britain today are indifferent to the idea of a God who is the creator and must be adored and worshipped by his creatures. What they really want are answers to questions like the following. Is there really a personal God? Does God really know me, in the sense of being aware of my existence and life history? If so does God care what becomes of me? Can it really be true, as Christianity says, that when I sin it hurts God? When I pray does God really hear me or is it my imagination? Does God really answer prayer, or is it coincidence? Is God really going to judge me when I die? After that will my existence really continue in some sense? If I have been judged adversely will I really suffer everlastingly as the Bible tells us?

To answer some of these questions, and give his personal view on the question of a personal God, here is Richard Harries, the Bishop of Oxford.

FB: Bishop can I begin this interview by asking you - yes or no - *does* God know you?

RH: Yes, God does know me.

FB: You answer yes to that question. Now I have to ask you to expand on that answer, and help readers to understand what it means to you to answer affirmatively the question Does God know me?

RH: To say God knows me assumes that God is personal and as you rightly suggested people find it very difficult to believe in a personal God. One needs to be very careful about use of the word personal in relation to God. Clearly God is not a person in the same sense that you or I are persons. What we call personality is a reflection, perhaps rather faint, of that reality which is in God and which cannot be less than personal. To put it another way, in the Bible God is assumed to be, and is addressed as, a person but very often impersonal imagery is also used about God. God is very often called *a rock*. In recent years we've had the idea that God is the ground of our being. All these impersonal images are necessary because they qualify a very crude anthropomorphic area of our idea of God's personality. So God is personal in the sense that God addresses me, God listens to me, God is concerned about my wellbeing and growth. But all that has to be qualified by an awareness that what we call personality is only a very cloudy, distorted reflection of that ultimate reality which is in God.

FB: So that means that God has knowledge (in the sense that we understand knowledge) about the events of our lives from birth onwards. Would you say it does mean that everything about us, everything we have done, even everything we have *thought*, is in a real sense known to God?

RH: Everything is known to God. That is what we mean by God. God is that by definition. That is the God who is believed in by Muslims and by Jews and by Christians as human beings. As finite moral beings we have a limited capacity for entering into the situation of other people. Understanding a little bit of how they feel, entering in their joys and sorrows through an effort of sympathetic imagination, we transcend ourselves and see life however fleetingly through their eyes. Now I believe that God has this capacity in a unique degree. God's awareness is not hindered or

distorted by selfishness or narrowness of vision. He's able totally to transcend *his* being in order to fully enter into *our* being. Moreover I believe that what we mean by calling God '*God*' is that he is able to simultaneously to do this at every point of the Universe.

FB: You use the word 'awareness' Bishop, and that brings me to another point. It partly concerns the meaning of knowledge. There is a sense in which there is knowledge if the agent has information stored up as it might be on a computer disc or in an encyclopaedia, but there is no awareness of that knowledge. If I have an encyclopaedia on my shelves then all kinds of information are in a sense known to me because they are accessible to me. Does God as it were keep in mind at all times the knowledge of me that he has? There's a distinction between possessing the knowledge as the computer bank possesses data and constantly being aware of it. Which would you say is the case with God?

RH: I would say God possesses knowledge of us in the first of those two alternatives, without totally ruling out the second. When you are aware of another person you are aware of them in the immediacy of their presence, but you cannot totally divorce that immediate presence from your memories about that person. Part of what it is to relate to a person who is sitting in front of you is your knowledge of that person derived from experience of that person in the past. Now if *we* have that capacity then God by definition has it in supreme degree, so that his perfect apprehension of us at any one point of time is an apprehension which takes into account, is fully aware of, the totality of our being.

FB: Does that raise the question of time itself ?

RH: It does indeed, and of course that has intrigued and worried theologians and philosophers down the years. There is a movement in theology to say that God's understanding or knowledge of the future is limited. This is in contrast to a more traditional view by Boethius the Christian philosopher in the sixth century that eternity is the simultaneous apprehension of all time. This is the traditional view that God does know all that has been, all that is, and all that will be in one simultaneous moment of apprehension. Well of course there are difficulties about that view, and some modern theologians are not at all happy with it.

FB: Yes it involves knowing the future before the future has happened. But there is a theory that the future doesn't really *happen* at all, because there is in a sense a comprehensive reality which comprises the past, the future and the present. If God is outside the system of time as we understand it, does that affect the way he knows you or knows me?

RH: I think what I want to say is that God is in a sense outside time, being eternal. He has created time; time is an aspect of his creation. Therefore being aware of the whole of his creation he's also aware of time. I take it to be an aspect of the kind of God and the divine love in whom and which I believe that God as it were limits himself in some way in order to enter into our experience of time. And of course particularly through the Incarnation, in a very particular way he limits himself in order to enter the flux of time. So God by definition is eternal or everlasting, but having created time, time becomes an aspect of the experience of God. If you like, this is an aspect of the created order into which he enters and which he bears within himself.

FB: Would you say that the concept of time is essential to the concept of humanity, in that we are in a state of progression? For example take the question of sin. If there is a temptation to do something which is sinful then there may be a period while we are wrestling with the temptation, then there may be an outcome - a sin committed or not. All this seems to take place within a necessary concept which we can call the context of time. Without this context, sin is impossible.

RH: I would agree with you.

FB: And so that leads us to the question of judgement, which I mentioned in the introduction: the question of judgement which again is a temporal concept. It can take place after the death of a person - I don't think anybody's really quite sure when it is supposed to take place. Would you tell us your view on that Bishop?

RH: Well I think that there must be a sense in which judgement takes place after the moment of death for the individual. Tradition has been of the resurrection of the dead at the end of their days and a final judgement then. But I think in practical existential terms there must be some kind of judgement after death. One of the reasons why people find difficulty in believing in a traditional understanding of God is that the kind of God that is depicted is very often one which is morally less advanced than our highest human ideals. The idea of a God who ruthlessly judges humanity and sends the vast majority of humanity to everlasting punishment in Hell is one that most people would find difficult to give moral credence to, let alone any other kind of credence. Therefore I think we need to be very careful talking about judgement. I think myself that the most important kind of judgement is the judgement that we ourselves are aware of when we meet a higher standard. We see this in ordinary everyday terms, let us say in literature. A great work of literature sets up criteria in the light of which everything else is seen and done. I think that that when we die we go close to the perfect goodness and sublime holiness of God, and we see ourselves fully as we are. That for most of us will be a pretty searing experience. Now the Christian hope of course is that the grace of God in Christ holds us to himself. Therefore we are at one and the same time conscious of the searing nature of God's truth and the searing nature of God's love. But that's not God as it were saying You go there . . . It is us *confronted* by a God who is at once holy and loving.

FB: You mentioned the changed views of the nature of God, that the Old Testament God is a venerable and awful figure that perhaps we now think is below the level of our own civilisation. That's quite a remarkable concept. Does it mean that our idea of the nature of the God who knows us is very defective, that it is as it were dependent on the views of people (in the case of the Old Testament) who lived thousands of years ago and may well have got it hopelessly wrong? Is it this God we are talking about when we say Does God know me? Is it much more than a creation of the human minds of different ages?

RH: In the Hebrew Scriptures we have an understanding of God which in part reflects the culture and customs, and the value judgements, of the time. What I think is so remarkable about the understanding of God revealed in the holy Scriptures is not that this is a crude judging God, but this God is depicted as a *faithful* God. As the Hebrew scriptures unfold the sense of the undeviating faithfulness of God is more emphasised. The New Testament believes that this is above all the truth about God, but I certainly don't think the Hebrew scriptures have to be dismissed. I think that the Hebrew scriptures, like the New Testament and every other form of holy Scripture, need to be examined critically in the light of our own highest ideals and standards - which are in themselves of course formed by the culture and the religion in which have been born and are reared.

FB: So does that really mean that God holds himself from us in a sense, holds information from us about his true nature - rather as the parent of the young child might feel it impossible to communicate to that child the true nature of the parent?

RH: I don't think that we know, nor can we possibly know, God in himself. Orthodox Christianity, that is Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox, draws a distinction between God's nature, his very essence, and his *energies*. They say that God in his essence cannot be known, but through God's energies something of him is known. By those energies we are changed into the likeness of God. We have some kind of parallel for this in ordinary human relationships, because it's never possible for any one human being fully to reveal themselves to another. This is obviously much more so in the case of God, who is beyond our comprehension. But I think in connection with the great

religions of the world that God does disclose his mind and the purpose in his heart to us in so far as we are able to grasp it. Of course Christians believe, and I believe, that God has shown himself to us in the human heart and mind of Jesus Christ.

FB: Could I turn now to the question of prayer as a communication between you and God. Perhaps we could look at the human analogy of the earthly father and the young child. The child is asked Does your father know you? Of course he says yes, he knows me. We talk together. I tell him things. He tells me things. Is that a reasonable analogy for prayer. Or is there much more to prayer than that?

RH: I think that's where prayer quite naturally starts; in the idea that a conversation, a dialogue, takes place. I think that prayer can be perceived along those lines as entirely natural: and it's entirely natural for every culture.

FB: Would you say in your experience of God in prayer that it *is* a dialogue?

RH: Dialogue implies two-way conversation. Obviously in prayer one is most conscious of talking to the Father. But we also in prayer seek to listen. That listening takes the form of quietening the heart and mind and trying to be still; and trying to be silent. I certainly don't believe that for most people there are voices in the head, or ticker-tape across the mind. Hearing the voice of God is more like deriving a sense of conviction about a particular course of action. I think that it's when people are trying to make decisions, or trying to discern the pattern and the course of their life, that they 'hear' what God is saying to them. I've certainly been conscious in my own life of the importance of trying to wait upon God, of trying to discern the movement of his spirit.

FB: It's sometimes said that thought depends on language, that there can be no thought without words.

RH: I believe that, yes.

FB: You were suggesting that there's more to communication, as between you and God anyway, than verbal communication?

RH: Silence has always played a major role in prayer. The ideas of waiting in stillness upon God in order to try to discern his leading is very important. When it comes, if it does come, then what comes is a conviction which is inevitably formulated in terms of words. I mean, if a person is trying to discern whether they should become a chartered accountant or offer themselves for the ordained ministry, and they pray about this, and they wait upon God, and perhaps eventually in the end they decide they should become a chartered accountant - that decision is formulated in terms of words. Now those are human words. They're words which are percolated through that person's personality. There's no getting away from that, but they will believe if they've prayed about it, waited upon God, and sought his guidance, that the decision is as it were suffused with the divine leading and a divine calling. So God would not speak your name in any real sense. Most people don't hear voices, they don't hear a literal voice; though some people do claim to actually hear God or Christ or the Virgin Mary speaking to them by name in the inmost place of their hearts. But I think that although we don't hear our name addressed, we can feel that we are being addressed personally. In the struggle to discern God's purpose to our lives, that *personal* struggle, we're conscious of struggling with a spirit.

FB: So you have no doubt when God is talking to you, rather than talking to somebody else. It is addressed to you in a personal sense, whatever it is that the message may be?

RH: Well of course all this can make it sound much simpler and clearer than it is in the experience of most people, because most people don't hear voices, most people don't get any obvious and easy answer to the problems with which they are wrestling. They may have to live with a problem and

with indecision and anxiety about it for a long time, but that waiting and that struggling may of itself be of the utmost significance.

FB: Some religions, notably the Roman Catholic religion consider that on the other side of the divide there is not just God but there is the Virgin Mary, there is an array of saints who are interceding for us, and so on. There is then the problem of how do you know which of those entities you are communicating with. Can you give us any view on that?

RH: Well first of all I believe in the communion of saints. I believe Our Lady is in the presence of God with the whole company of heaven. But it is quite clear that the saints with whom people claim to be in contact will be saints that are related to their own culture, and their own time, and their own personality. You could argue that there is no objective reality in that at all. On the other hand I would argue that we do have objective realities here, but as in all God's dealings with humanity there is a kind of scooping, a kind of relating to us in terms of culture. If we're talking about a family in say Italy it will be natural for that family to relate to God in terms of the Virgin Mary and not in terms of Jesus Christ. In other words of course there is a cultural element in it - but that doesn't mean to say there isn't a vein of reality behind it all.

FB: Have you felt yourself to be in communication with the saints at particular times?

RH: I've not felt in communication with an ordinary saint. I do find it helpful to say Hail Mary sometimes. That was particularly so when my mother was very ill. Now that may be a very obvious psychological connection with the role of Mary but I do find her very helpful. I would say that our Lady does play a role in world affairs.

FB: So would you give an affirmative answer to the question Does Our Lady know me?

RH: I think I would want to say that both God and Our Lady know me.

FB: Can I finally ask: Does it cause any distress or embarrassment, or worry you, to think that God does know everything that you do, everything that you think?

RH: I am happy that it should be so.