

Real faith, real world



What happens when strongly-held religious conviction collides with real life experience?

Mike Ovey, Principal of Oak Hill, introduces the underlying theme of this edition of Commentary

One of the surprising things about reading space opera (my preferred kind of science fiction) is the frequent references, amidst descriptions of embattled space fleets and warring star empires, to the German military thinker, Helmuth von Moltke. This is not quite what you expect.

Von Moltke is the one who said no plan survives contact with the enemy. He is getting at the point that we can plan all kinds of things in the abstract and make all sorts of suppositions about what will happen and how someone will behave, but when these grand plans meet reality, they come crashing down.

For some, that is a parable of how faith, whether Christian or any other, collides with the real world; it simply crashes and burns. Obviously the problem of evil and suffering can create just such collisions. For others, this is a parable of what happens when too-clever-by-half theologians have their vast abstract schemes cut down to size as they try to explain them to a seen-it-all church leader.

Now, there are grains of truth here. It is perfectly true that sometimes the collision between religious belief and real life experience shatters someone's belief. It is also perfectly true

that sometimes what sounded so good and so sophisticated in a seminar room sounds glib and arid in a marriage counselling session.

Sometimes that can make us wary and even a little afraid of having what we truly believe really meet real life. It can leave us living dual lives, genuinely loving our faith, but keeping it safely away from the reality that might prove too strong a challenge, or shouting so antagonistically that there is no real chance of discussion.

I imagine we have all wondered whether Richard Dawkins shouts so loud against God because he is secretly afraid God is there after all. Perhaps it is worth asking whether we sometimes shout loud because we are secretly afraid

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Richard Dawkins is right. (No, he isn't, in case you are wondering where I stand on that.)

But if the scriptures are what Jesus says, the very word of God, then they will be sufficient for the purposes for which God intends, to make us wise to salvation and to train, rebuke and encourage us. They will be sufficient for us to exist as God's people in the world while remaining not of it.

So we come to this edition of *Commentary* stressing the sufficiency of what God has revealed for addressing our world. Nick Tucker reflects on a world whose heroes, such as Lance Armstrong, have feet of clay (page 18), while Duncan Forbes writes on developing 'council estate Christianity', and what that really involves (page 14). My article picks up on how thinking Christianly and thinking in a worldly way inevitably produces dissonance – and why that can be good (page 11).

Seulgi Byun writes in the wake of the American election and how Christians in another context may see real life very differently from us (page 4). Chris Green does some lateral thinking on evangelism, looking at different styles which are suited to our individual gifts (page 22). Matthew Sleeman reviews two books which give excellent food for thought about the local church in the local community (page 28).

To cap things off, it is wonderfully encouraging to have two graduates write in this edition. James Halstead reflects on the sometimes violent reality of ministering in our world (page 8), while Martin Ayers picks up a reality that sometimes 'dares not speak its name' in evangelical circles: doubt (page 26). Martin thinks about how we deal with it and shift our thinking about it.

In that way, all of us want to affirm that our experience and reality can collide with faith, and that the collision can refine and improve our faith. But actually, as you think through the truth, power and reality of God's word, isn't it better to start putting things the other round from von Moltke, and say that in the case of God's plan, it's the plan that survives contact with the enemy? That's what we want to show here.

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