

‘A heartening book, confronting the hardest questions with wide knowledge and deep wisdom.’

*John Carey, Emeritus Merton Professor of English Literature,
University of Oxford, and Chief Literary Reviewer, Sunday Times*

‘In a world so blatantly imperfect and bearing no obvious hall-marks of purpose, the challenges facing Christianity are severe. Richard Harries is one of those who realize that and takes the challenges seriously. Those of us who are not in the end persuaded by his Christian defence can nonetheless appreciate the sensitivity and intelligence with which it is mounted. It is the best case that could be made.’

Andrew Copson, Director, British Humanist Association

‘Mingling intellectual rigour with spiritual wisdom, Harries helps his readers to grasp the relevance of the insights at the core of the Christian faith.’

*Alister E. McGrath, Andreas Idreos Professor of Science
and Religion, University of Oxford*

‘*The Beauty and the Horror* is the most compelling exploration of suffering in the world that I have ever read . . . Written with grace and clarity, this is a book of rare power – such that, once you have finished it, you know you have been changed.’

*Ian S. Markham, Dean and President,
Virginia Theological Seminary*

‘With all his characteristic clarity of thought, Richard Harries probes how we can find God in suffering and horror, as well as beauty . . . The result is a profound statement of what it means to have faith in the living tradition of Christianity, guided by hope and love.’

*Jane Shaw, Dean for Religious Life and Professor of
Religious Studies, Stanford University*

‘What has the Bishop to say to Ivan Karamazov or Albert Camus? They posed the most formidable cases against belief in God in the past 150 years. But is there Beauty as well as Horror? Richard Harries offers us the fruit of a lifetime’s deep reflection on this question in a book that will help many, both believer and non-believer, to reach beyond the shallow assumptions of atheistic rationalism.’

Lord Sutherland of Houndwood, former Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, King’s College, London, and Vice Chancellor, University of Edinburgh

THE
BEAUTY
AND THE
HORROR

RICHARD HARRIES



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For Luke, Toby, Ben and Sophie

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1

Life – so astonishing and so appalling

The beauty

One evening I arrived a little early for a speaking engagement at the ‘Words on Water’ literary festival in the theatre at Keswick. With half an hour to spare I walked along the edge of Derwentwater to Friar’s Crag and looked out over the lake and mountains. Above the hills on the horizon a pale sun shone through the mist. I stood still, reluctant to move or avert my gaze, so transfixed was I by the beauty and stillness of the scene. ‘How can anyone bear not to live here all the time?’ was the thought in my mind. It is a very unusual person who has not had some such experience, perhaps looking at a landscape, a flower in the garden or a newborn baby. In these moments we are moved in a way that only poets seem to be able to convey. There is a sense of wonder, even awe, so that we want simply to shut off the chattering mind and be still. There is also an elusiveness about such experiences. We cannot quite grasp the scene or the moment, or its meaning. Strangely, we want to pass into it and become part of it, but we can’t. The poet Edward Thomas wrote about this experience in his poem ‘Glory’, which contains the line ‘I cannot bite the day to the core.’¹

There is too sometimes a sense of poignancy, for this like all moments will pass. We are brought short before the passingness of things, the brevity of life, and at the same time the continuity of life without us. A friend writes of walking along with his wife one day before breakfast and seeing the sight of their shadows holding hands on the cobbles. He asked her if she would promise to bring back their grandchildren to see their shadows holding her hand. He sees experiences like this as spiritual moments. It is a moment that combines beauty, tenderness, poignancy within an overall sense of mystery, the mystery of life itself.

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The Spirit of God is around you in the air you breathe.
His glory in the light you see and in the fruitfulness of
the earth and the joy of his creatures.
He has written for you day by day his revelation as he
has granted you day by day your daily bread.

However the problem with religion, for many people, is that it seems to tie such experiences up too neatly in human words. It wants to contain them in a way their very elusiveness denies. We know that anything put simply does not do them justice. As the painter de Chirico wrote, 'There is much more mystery in the shadow of a man walking on a sunny day than in all the religions of the world.'²

As will be stressed later, a sense of ultimate mystery is fundamental to any true religion, but the point now is that you don't have to be formally religious to sense this.

A magical moment for me is a familiar walk on the coastal path from New Quay to Llangrannog in Ceredigion. As the sun sets in the west the sea becomes a sheen of silver and the glory of the last light of the day almost overwhelming. Whatever difficulties some philosophers might find with it, the old word 'beauty' comes to mind, a beauty that at once draws us and escapes us, lures and eludes. That is a scene of dramatic light and colour, but a similar sense of wonder can be aroused by the sheer existence of something, however apparently ordinary. Still-life paintings are not fashionable at the moment but the best of them have a capacity to evoke a sense of the sheer 'isness' of some particular thing in its unique individuality. On a bookshelf I have a postcard of a painting by Francisco de Zurbarán, *A Cup of Water and a Rose*. It shows a pottery cup on a silver plate beside a small rose, all in delicate greys and pink – an ordinary household scene, but the objects confront the viewer with their sheer existence. They might not be, but they are. That is cause for wonder

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enough. But this is not just existence in general. The cup and plate and rose stand before the viewer in their unique particularity. Anything can have this effect on us, a leaf on a tree, a shell on the shore or a living being. Most of us go about our daily business taking things for granted. But some people seem to live with an extraordinary intensity, almost bowled over by the reality of the world about them – Thomas Traherne, William Blake, Walt Whitman and Stanley Spencer, to take just a few examples of very different people who shared this intensity.

Duns Scotus was a philosopher who, unusually, focused not on great universal truths but on particulars in their individuality; not just their ‘thisness’ in general but their ‘thisness’ as this or that unique object, their *haecitas*. The philosophy of Scotus found poetic expression particularly in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose language breaks all the usual bounds in order to convey something of this effect on him. The artist Stanley Spencer was another person almost overwhelmed by the strength of his astonishment. He wrote:

When I lived in Cookham I was disturbed by a feeling of everything being meaningless. Quite suddenly I became aware that everything was full of special meaning, and this made everything holy. The instinct of Moses to take his shoes off when he saw the burning bush was very similar to my feelings. I saw many burning bushes in Cookham. I observed the sacred quality in the most unexpected quarters.³

The intensity of his feelings can be gauged by a remark he once made, probably about his friends the Slessors.

I remember having some friends I was always meeting in the evenings and did not see anything special about them until one day I went to have breakfast with them, and seeing them at breakfast gave me wonderful feelings about them. I was so overcome that I could not eat my breakfast, not even bread and butter.⁴

The beauty referred to in the title of this book is above all the kind of beauty people like Hopkins and Spencer and other artists have tried to convey. It is the beauty of existence as such, the fact that something might not have existed, or might have existed differently,

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but there it is, as uniquely itself. The experience is also one of wonder and awe, but I use the word ‘beauty’ because this implies an evaluative element. In such experiences, we respond to that which we recognize as having value; it is worthwhile in itself for itself, and this both excites and draws us to it.

The horror

However this joy in being alive, this exultation in existence as such, coexists with another very different reaction. In the small hours of a morning in 1961, Samuel Beckett was sitting over a drink in a Paris café with his fellow playwright Harold Pinter. Pinter suggested that Beckett’s work was an attempt to impose order and form on the wretched mess mankind had made of the world, but Beckett disagreed.

If you must insist on finding form, I’ll describe it for you. I was in hospital once. There was a man in another ward dying of throat cancer. In the silence, I could hear the screams continually. That’s the only kind of form my work has.⁵

Advances in palliative care since then have made such a scene much less likely in the West. Strong painkilling drugs administered at the correct intervals can control almost all forms of physical pain. But that does not alter the fundamental point that in so many ways and in so many places the screams of sufferers continue to cry out.

‘Don’t kill me, Mum.’ These were the last words of an eight-year-old boy as his mother pushed him under the water in the bath and killed him. Some years before she had killed her two young babies but it was thought, tragically, that she was now in her right mind and her older boy was safe.

On 24 March 2015, Andreas Lubitz deliberately flew the plane of which he was the co-pilot into a mountain, killing all 150 people on board. That was horror enough. But the horror is intensified at the thought that as he went on board he greeted his colleagues in the usual way. Yet behind his ‘Good morning’ was not just a depressed

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mind but one fixed on bringing about the deaths of everyone on board. Many people suffer from depression, but planning and executing the deaths of others in such a way is something very different. What goes on behind the facades we put up? What is going on in the minds of those who commit terrorist atrocities or child abuse? Such questions strip away all that we take for granted about what is normal, the assumptions we work on day by day.

These are just examples of the kinds of story one can read or hear about through the media every day, from many different parts of the world. Recently it has been the horror of whole families of refugees being drowned in flimsy rubber boats. The cries are unceasing, the horror unending. One that has haunted me all my life dates from the time when I was working as a curate in Hampstead. I used to visit a lady who had a cancer that had spread and eaten up her face. It was partly hollowed out so that you saw straight into the back of the mouth and throat. What was particularly terrible is that rather than seeking medical help at an early stage of the illness she had been persuaded that if only she had faith enough, God would heal her. Her sense of isolation was total.

That is horror enough but there is horror of a more fundamental kind involved in the very fact of being human. In the modern world, it is above all Samuel Beckett who has expressed this. I have been fortunate enough to see two great performances of his play *Happy Days*, the first with Peggy Ashcroft in the starring role, the second with Billie Whitelaw. In the play Winnie, the main character, sits in the centre of stage in a pile of sand. In the first part of the play, the sand is up to her waist, in the second up to her neck, with a fierce light blazing down from above. At the edge of the heap of sand is her husband, Willie, trying, but not able, to crawl forward. There is a revolver he might be able to reach. The rising pile of sand is an obvious but powerful symbol of our mortality, as is the revolver of the latent violence in so many of our close relationships. But the genius of the play is in the poignant monologue of Winnie as she tries to keep her spirits up. She fiddles with the objects in her hand-bag and tells herself little sayings and prayers, always trying to look

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on the bright side of things. In one way, the play superbly depicts a view of life, partly philosophical and partly religious, that has been very common in history, namely that we are essentially souls imprisoned in bodies, longing for our release. That is not a view most of us share today because we know that body and mind are a unity, that we are a psychosomatic whole, that what we do physically to the brain affects the way we think and feel. We are embodied selves, to use the current jargon. But this does not take away from the fact that our conscious self can feel very vulnerable to the way we are at the mercy of the physical side of our nature, our genetic inheritance and the extraordinarily complex organisms that make up each one of us. We can think wonderful thoughts but all the time we are dependent on the millions of operations going on in our genes, which are the product of billions of years of evolution, an evolution at least partly dictated by the struggle to eat and avoid being eaten.

I think it was this kind of nameless horror that was behind some of Beckett's more challenging plays, not just the horror of decrepit old age as in *Endgame* but something else, as in *Not I*, which consists of a large illuminated mouth on stage uttering a loud, non-stop monologue of increasing anxiety. Again, I was fortunate enough to see a powerful performance by Billie Whitelaw, and such was the intensity that at one point my wife and I just had to put our heads down and stop looking.

It is, I suspect, this more fundamental fear that lies behind one of the most famous utterances in modern literature, the last words of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*: 'The horror! The horror'.⁶ It is not surprising that these words were referred to by T. S. Eliot in the epigraph to his poem 'The Hollow Men', a poem written at a time when his personal life was bleak but that also reflected the breakdown of spirit and the sense of total meaninglessness felt by so many in the aftermath of the First World War. A similar nameless horror is expressed in Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*, which became one of the iconic images of the twentieth century, with its portrayal of a person on a bridge whose scream seems to fill the whole universe.

‘Joy and woe are woven fine’

Life has its wonderful moments. The English scholar John Carey, having won an open scholarship to Oxford University from his small Surrey grammar school and waiting to start his studies, describes his first visit to France with a few friends in 1952.

On our last night we stopped on our way back from dinner, lay on the sweet, dry grass – a bit drunk, I suppose – and talked dreamily of all the things we had seen. I gazed up at a sky full of stars and thought that life was unfathomably wonderful.⁷

Unfathomably wonderful, yes. But also, at times, unbearable. Indeed one recent argument is that it is so unbearable we can get by only with palliatives such as drugs or drink. This view holds that religion, though untrue, is like art and love a useful palliative provided we know it is an illusion.⁸

The beauty of life and the horror of life; the sheer wonder and awesomeness of being alive, together with an acute awareness of the prevalence of cruelty and evil in the world and the sense of nameless horror that can sometimes come over us as we become aware of ourselves as a thinking being bound up with a vulnerable body. That is the theme of this book, together with the question of whether we can find God in such a contradictory world. If life were all beauty and goodness there would be no problem. We would live our lives as an instinctive paean of praise. If life were all horror, again there would be no problem. It is difficult to see what reason there would be not to commit suicide. But the almost universal experience of humanity is that it consists of both. As William Blake put it in his poem ‘Auguries of Innocence’, ‘joy and woe are woven fine’. There is the puzzle.

One example of how closely woven they are is experienced when we watch some of the wonderful nature programmes on television, especially those by Sir David Attenborough. We might be admiring a tiger in all its grace and beauty, as well as its skill as it hunts its prey. Then it pounces and we may have to watch a gazelle, an equally

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beautiful animal, being torn to pieces. No less telling are the more positive examples that can emerge out of human cruelty and suffering. A Somali terrorist group attacked a bus in northern Kenya, spraying it with bullets before demanding that all passengers get off. Muslims were to go on one side and Christians on the other, so that the former could be spared and the latter killed. However the passengers refused to split into two groups and the Christians were given some Muslim attire to hide them better among the other passengers. As one of the Muslims said, ‘The militants threatened to shoot us but we still refused and protected our brothers and sisters. Finally they gave up and left.’⁹ A heroic and beautiful act in the midst of terror.

Terri Roberts heard that there had been an atrocity near her home. That was bad enough. Then she learnt that it had been carried out by her son. He had gone into an Amish school, ordered the boys to leave and then shot ten girls, killing five and injuring five, one of whom was left with permanent brain damage. He then turned the gun on himself. It is difficult to imagine anything more appalling to live with. Then at the funeral she found that members of the Amish community not only came up to her to sympathize with her for the loss of her son but surrounded her in order to shield her from the press. Their care for her has continued, including welcoming her help in feeding the badly damaged child at mealtimes.¹⁰ A beautiful community response in the midst of horror. The horror is not lessened, the suffering remains, nothing is resolved. But there is something else to put beside it. Perhaps we can all bring to mind experiences or scenes in which this is the case. A friend recalls the image of a wounded American soldier on a stretcher being loaded on to a helicopter and his sergeant holding his hand and kissing his forehead.

Dante begins his great work *The Divine Comedy*: ‘In the middle of life I found myself lost in a dark wood.’¹¹ You do not have to be in the middle of life to find yourself in that wood. You can wake up to it when young and be conscious of it in your dying days. The mystery remains. But this book sets out on a journey to explore one

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particular perspective on that mystery. Can we find God in a suffering world? This does not take away the contradiction between the beauty and the horror but seeks to offer a framework in which we can live, and live better, with it. It is a book that tries to avoid cheap polemics and easy answers, taking seriously all the time the very understandable objections that might be made against the perspective from which it is written.

2

Asking the right questions

Giving our own meaning to life

Some of the people I much admire have no religious belief. They care for their families and work to alleviate suffering or protect the human rights of others just because it seems to them the right thing to do. It is obvious that you do not have to be religious in order to possess admirable qualities. Courage, integrity, idealism and generosity are shown by people of all kinds of belief and non-belief. It is arguable that the real heroine of George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* is not Dorothea but Mary Garth. Eliot writes of her:

Mary was fond of her own thoughts, and could amuse herself well sitting in twilight with her hands in her lap; for, having early had strong reason to believe that things were not likely to be arranged for her peculiar satisfaction, she wasted no time in astonishment and annoyance at that fact. And she had already come to take life very much as a comedy in which she had a proud, nay, a generous resolution not to act the mean or treacherous part. Mary might have become cynical if she had not had parents whom she honoured, and a well of affectionate gratitude within her, which was all the fuller because she had learned to make no unreasonable claims.¹

What is interesting about this description of Mary's stance on life is that it makes no reference either to religion or a moral philosophy. Rather it is part of her proper pride in herself that she chooses not to be mean or treacherous. She simply does not want to be that kind of person. What is also interesting is that her stance on life might have slipped into cynicism had she not been formed by loving parents whom she honoured.

People give a variety of reasons for the values they regard as important but very often it will be as it was for Mary Garth: they

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want to be a particular kind of person. Furthermore what is in fact decisive is not so much any consciously chosen religion or philosophy that we might adopt but the shaping influence of our parents or those who provided the environment in which we grew up and first learnt to relate to others.

So you do not have to possess any thought-out philosophy to exhibit the kind of truthful no-nonsense love Mary Garth showed for the feckless Fred who wanted to marry her.² More widely, you do not need to have any religion or system of beliefs to find meaning in your life. People find meaning in many ways. Anthony Storri, the psychiatrist and author, said for example that it was music above all that gave meaning to his life. Many today would say something similar, if not about music then about one of the other art forms. When I was Dean of King's College, London, a student who was going to be ordained lost his faith. It was a traumatic experience for him but he told me later it was reading Shakespeare for a month or two afterwards that had helped him through. For others, the meaning of their life is found through doing what they can to make the world a less cruel place. For very many, the meaning is found in their family life, especially bringing up their children and enjoying their grandchildren, or their work.

In all these instances, the meaning of life is in the meaning we attribute to it. A powerful academic justification of this view is provided by the eminent legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin. In his book *Justice for Hedgehogs*, he argues that moral values are objective, existing in their own right, and that they can be neither undermined by science nor justified by any theological or metaphysical belief. He further argues that it is important for all human beings not just to recognize these values but consciously to live life well in their light. In this way, our life takes on meaning. He recognizes that there is something mysterious about wanting to live well – that is, to live a life we can take pride in – in a way that there is not about, for example, wanting to eat and drink well. He writes:

We are charged to live well by the bare fact of our existence as self-conscious creatures with lives to lead . . . It is *important* that we live well; not important just to us or to anyone else, but just important.³

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