

THE BIG QUESTIONS, GOD, BY MARK VERNON

Mark Vernon was once an Anglican priest and is an honorary research fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. He has degrees in theology and physics and a holds a philosophy PhD. He is famous for his book, How to be an Agnostic

Mark Vernon has his finger on the pulse in relation to spirituality that attempts to avoid superstitious leanings. He is good at identifying such spirituality and examining it. But is it really as logical and sensible as he might hope?

VERNON AND MIRACLES

Page 77 says that a miracle is simply any event that a person perceives as creating faith in God or the divine mystery.

That contradicts the meaning of the word. The word means wonder or marvel.

If Vernon's definition is right, then what we see miracles as signs of depends on us. If a Presbyterian sees a healing - through natural processes - thought to be by the Virgin Mary as demonic that is fine. If the Catholic sees it as the work of God that is fine too. Its so permissive that it serves no purpose.

It means that the door is opened up to seeing anything at all as a sign. It turns religion into feelings not faith. It becomes a matter of not caring about evidence but about what you want to feel is evidence. That's dangerous for fundamentalist fanatics show signs of being carried away by religious fervour.

And it refuses to deal with the many events that are claimed to be unnatural that many see as possibly supernatural - eg instantly vanishing tumours and men being raised from the dead. It even debunks them as follows. If a dove flying over your head is taken by you as God saying to you he loves you then what would he need to make cancer tumours for, to instantly put them out of existence at some point, as a sign?

The faith aroused would be irrational.

Vernon's definition of miracle is based on the fact that intelligent people cannot accept the traditional teaching that a miracle is really magic though tradition won't admit that. But rather than help believers in miracles, it hinders for it is no better than the traditional view for its just as stupid and irresponsible. It would be music to the ears of the charlatan miracle men.

Vernon asserts that God is the best explanation for all things. But he would only be that for some. And others who know more than those people would disagree. And the ordinary person has no time to investigate the matter. The fact that people decide that explanation x is the best explanation only means that it is the best they have come up with not that it is the best. But to say God is an explanation for all things is to say that he must have the power to do what cannot be naturally explained. Its implicit endorsement of magic and miracle.

Extraordinary evidence will primarily or solely consist of extraordinary spiritual and moral heroism in the person touched by the miracle. The person then becomes the miracle. But religion obsesses with the showmanship of the miracle. Catholics have less devotion for exceptionally good people than they do for apparition shrines where Mary supposedly appeared.

It is suspected that most sceptics of miracles are influenced by the arguments of David Hume against miracles. Vernon is a sceptic. He says he believes in miracles but he does not know the meaning of the word.

David Hume believed that we don't know for sure if the sun will rise in the morning but we assume it will for it has been doing it all our lives. It is said that this is a denial of the uniformity of nature. He said nature is uniform and that miracles are not believable for they claim it is not uniform. Believers in miracles say he is contradicting himself. But he is only saying that we need to assume nature is uniform. We cannot know that it is. And because that assumption is so important, a claimed miracle must be assumed to be based on lies or a mistake. He is not asking us to say there is no evidence for a miracle. He is asking us to say that it is not enough for us even if there is.

VERNON ON SACRIFICE AND ALTRUISM

Religion urges that we must sacrifice for the sake of God and the greater good. Sacrifice for a higher cause will be necessarily voluntary. This voluntariness gives us a sense of control. That is its appeal. It is easier to suffer when you

control it than to be at the mercy of what you have limited or no control over.

But if we voluntarily choose to give up things and suffer for the sake of feeling its our own choice then are we really sacrificing? No - we only make it look that way.

VERNON ON THE NOTION THAT YOU NEED GOD TO BE GOOD

Page 177, Vernon asks why be good without belief in God? Vernon answers simply because we can be.

The interesting thing is that he is actually saying its better just to be good rather than having a belief in God to make you good or to help you to be. He is right. The implication is that belief in God is a hindrance.

Being good because you can be means you are really good. If you need a belief or to think you have a relationship with God in order to be good that means you are not good. Your evil is contained but its still there underneath the hypocrisy and the do-gooder antics.

Vernon makes a major omission. It is pointless to say we need belief in God to be good without also trying to resolve the contradiction between loving the sinner and hating the sinner's sin - strictly speaking the sin is the sinner in the sense that there is no such thing as sin as such but merely a sinful character. Its an assessment of a person's character - the kind of person that there is. The omission is habitual among believers in God and people like Vernon who though agnostic seem to want to believe.

The most outrageous hypocrisy of the believers in God is in their doctrine that you must regard sin as punishable and therefore hate it but you must love the sinner. Punish the sin not the sinner. But you cannot punish a sin ever. Its impossible. What you do when you say you punish a sin is that you punish the sinner. Can we be hypocritical enough to pretend that the sinner had nothing to do with the sin? The next step is surely the sinner feeling they can sin all they want for sin is not a part of them but separate from them.

VERNON ON PRAYER

Page 102, says prayer is aligning yourself with what God is like and embracing his will whether it be good for you or not. This is the teaching of the Catholic theologian Herbert McCabe. The teaching advocates acceptance of what you cannot change instead of putting your hope in magic and miracles. Such hope can lead to unbearable disappointment. Anyway prayer is not just acceptance. If it is then how could there be any room for praying to saints as the Catholics do? Or Jesus, the intercessor, as all Christians do?

It's God we should be thinking about not saints. To call the saints his friends and to say to honour them by praying to them is to see something of him in them is not focusing entirely on God no matter who says it is.

Page 102, prayer is simply love. Like love, its unclear what may result from it.

But love is not prayer and prayer is not love.

The person who is loving will always be doing what is better than the person who is praying.

Page 103, says prayer is self-discovery. An example is how some people pray for nice weather as they go for a family outing but it is not the nice weather they want so much as avoidance of the bickering and rage that may ensue if the weather is awful.

This nonsense overlooks the fact that they could pray that the family will get along no matter what the weather is. If it's the peace they want they would ask for it.

Page 103, says prayer should not be for good weather but to be a preparation for appreciating whatever kind of day it is going to be.

Page 106, prayer is recognising that we are not self-sufficient.

We are reminded of that every minute of every day so we do not need prayer for that. Prayer would mean that you remind yourself of it but it is wrong to say that prayer is nothing but the realisation that you are not all-powerful.

It is said that you unite with God in prayer and so become more like him. The Calvinists believed in a hateful God who randomly chose them for everlasting life with him in Heaven and who was sending everybody else to the eternal torment of Hell. They soon became like their hateful God and persecuted those who disagreed with them and waged wars of religion. Worship a vicious god and you soon become what you worship. We do not want to become like the Christian God who uses our suffering as a means to achieving his plan. He uses it as a means and therefore us. Better to believe with atheists that suffering in itself is useless than to believe that!

VERNON ON SUFFERING

Buddha offered a method by which we could seek and hopefully find release IN suffering but not FROM it. This means that you stare it in the face and you accept it if you cannot change it because not accepting it makes it worse.

Page 178, Vernon believes that we feel aggressive towards those we depend upon because we need and love them and also want to be independent too. He gave the example of child feeling aggressive towards his parents for he wants independence but this conflicts with his love and need for them. This results in anger that is pushed into the subconscious or unconscious because of shame.

If that is all true, then it follows that we never really love the sinner and hate the sin. We do feel a conflict in us between caring for those we love and our urge to put ourselves first even if it hurts them. That means we have great anger towards the sinner. We might not let ourselves see it but its there. Thus to advocate a hatred of sin like Jesus did is dangerous and evil.

Page 179 says that we cannot fix ourselves so that we will be fully good people, and it says we can only improve ourselves by self-denial.

But arrogance and greed are self-denial in the sense that they put us in danger. We don't improve ourselves. Luck does.

Page 181 asserts that if we are good then we are godly even if we don't acknowledge or recognise God or godliness. But God means the being that is entitled in justice to complete service and worship. Serving goodness is not the same as God. Loving your wife because of her beauty is loving her beauty not her. Same idea.

Vernon argues that God if he lets us do evil, is doing it not because he wants to allow evil but because he wants (and has to let) us be responsible entities instead of puppets.

It is strange to argue that God wants us to be freely good if he gives us free will not so that we might do good or evil but so that we might have responsibility. Just because you can use the power of your responsibility for good or evil does not mean you have it for that reason.

Vernon is guilty of circular reasoning. "It makes sense for God to give us personal responsibility so that we might have personal responsibility." If that is the best God can do that he is evil for giving us free will. Why? Because its not a sensible reason and he must have a sensible reason if he is to be considered good. Free will, if we have it, has done harm beyond all imagining.

VERNON ON RELIGION BEING A CAUSE OF STRIFE AND WAR

Page 116, tells us that human nature involves being violent. Religion contains the violence and religious fuelled violence is really down to human nature not religion.

To this we say that human violence is contained by the fact that nobody can do exactly what they want in life. Life and resources and other people get in the way. But if you think that you are part of something bigger as in a divine plan you will reason, "I am chosen by God to bring pain and suffering to others. I do not see life and resources and others as limiting me."

Page 126, Vernon approvingly cites Julian Baggini who says that open-mindedness is to be valued and that he THINKS anybody who is sure they are right and exercises hostile opposition to the beliefs of others is violating it. That is really the stupid notion, "It's not open-minded to know you are right." The whole point of being open-minded is so that you can work out the truth and hopefully know that it is correct. Baggini senses the absurdity of his statement when he admits that he only thinks its devaluing open-mindedness to claim to be right.

Page 192, Vernon says that those who feel that God will judge all mankind at the end of the world, will find it a small step

to actually want to speed up the arrival of the last days.

True.

Page 184, says that Jesus commanded that we must be perfect. Vernon comments that he did not ask us to improve but to be perfect and thinks its because if we were all different levels we would start a habit of comparing ourselves to others to see how we are better.

But surely Jesus knew that we have to improve so that we end up perfect? Does Vernon think he was saying we must become perfect in an instant?

Page 172, when considering who evil can fit the existence of an all-powerful and all-good God some who suffer say "Why Us?" Vernon says the proper response is, "Why not us?"

That to me is callous particularly when related to God. Its a callous copout. An atheist can say it without any injustice or rancour.

CONCLUSION

Mark Vernon's scheme is really dressing up secularism and agnosticism as religious. If its the best religion can do then religion is nonsense.