

Stephen R. L. Clark

Understanding Faith: Religious Belief and its Place in Society.

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British philosopher Stephen Clark, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool for twenty five years, is an enormously prolific author, having published (by my count) at least fifteen books and some one hundred and forty articles on a vast range of subjects. Clark is probably best known for his defense of animal rights in such works as *The Moral Status of Animals* (OUP, 1977) and *Animals and their Moral Standing* (Routledge, 1997); but he is also known for his work in the philosophy of religion (e.g., *God, Religion and Reality*, SPCK, 1998), political philosophy (e.g., *The Political Animal*, Routledge, 1999), and environmentalism (e.g., *How to Think about the Earth*, Mowbrays, 1993). Other works include books on Aristotelian philosophical anthropology, Berkeleyan economics, biology and Christian ethics, G. K. Chesterton, and a host of articles on everything from scriptural exegesis to global warming.

Understanding Faith, Clark's most recent book, is in some ways a difficult work to evaluate. On the one hand, it is (as usual) very erudite without being ponderous. Clark writes in an accessible, conversational style that is not affected by the copious references in the many footnotes (most chapters have more than sixty notes and some almost a hundred). And he certainly discusses a great many interesting subjects. On the other hand, there is a diffuseness to his style that makes it hard to determine, oftentimes, why certain topics have been included, or where the argument is going. Chapter 5, for example, is a fascinating discussion of whether non-human animals can be our friends. Clark thinks that this depends on what friendship means and whether there can be different sorts of friendship. He argues that friendship does come in different forms, but that there is a common core that makes it possible for at least some animals to be our friends (113, 115). But what has this to do with understanding faith? Is it that 'Animals become our friends, we become their friends, when they look back at us, and we are confronted by the mystery of the Other which is at the root also of our own being' (124)? Clark doesn't say. Another whole chapter (Chapter 4) is devoted to the differences between Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists on the question of whether there are objective moral values, with Platonists arguing that there are and the others arguing that there are not. Clark sides with the Platonists (101), but again: What has this to do with his title? Is it that belief in the objectivity of moral values is a matter of faith? In part, yes, but not entirely. (I return to this matter later, when I address the question of what Clark means by faith.)

Is there, nevertheless, a core argument in Clark's book? I think there is, but it must

be teased out, since Clark himself does not present it clearly. Begin with his motive for writing. Clark tells readers at the outset that he found himself more and more exasperated with ‘militant’ atheists and decided that it was time to respond to them (1, 3). Unlike ‘casual’ atheists, who adopt a ‘live and let live’ attitude (5, 7), militant atheists regard all religion as inherently evil and pernicious, both intellectually and socially, and think that (as much as possible) it should be eradicated. Clark’s only example is Richard Dawkins (21, 79-80, 83-4), but there are others—Christopher Hitchens, for example. Militant atheists are missionaries, crusaders, and would-be Inquisitors (5-7, 24, 83, 181, 202, 248). In this respect, and in many others, Clark thinks that militant atheists resemble religious zealots; Protestant fundamentalists and Islamic extremists are examples. Unlike ‘casual’ believers who also adopt a ‘live and let live’ attitude toward non-believers (7) and believers in other creeds, religious zealots are ‘militantly’ religious: they condemn non-believers or believers in other creeds as ignorant or evil, and they wish to convert or (as much as possible) eliminate them. Presumably, Dawkins does not advocate burning religious believers at the stake: ‘[we scientists] are content to *argue* with people who disagree with us,’ he writes in one place, adding ‘We don’t kill them’ (*Humanist* Jan/Feb 1997). However, he is on record as claiming, seriously, that parents who give their children religious education, or allow them to be given it, are guilty of child abuse (see, e.g., *The God Delusion*, 2006, 186-8; also 18, 224).

Why does Dawkins think that? Because he thinks that religious people are infected by a mental virus (3, 5-29, 40, 77): ‘It is fashionable to wax apocalyptic about the threat posed by the AIDS virus ... and many others, but I think a case can be made that *faith* is one of the world’s great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate’ (*ibid*). This is why children should be inoculated with a sound secular humanist education. Clark, an Anglican (2), does not agree, even though he readily agrees that religion can be dangerous and that religious people have often committed serious wrongs in the name of their religions (5, 25, 83). But he thinks Dawkins goes too far. Specifically, he thinks that Dawkins in his diagnosis, if not in his solution, is quite similar to religious fundamentalists, who have often thought—and some still do think—that non-believers, and those who believe otherwise than they do, are possessed by demons or devils that must be exorcized (3, 19-21, 25, 44, 72-9, esp. 77, 176, 214, 251, 267). Here it’s proper religious education that can inoculate the young and proper religious ‘therapy’ that can cure the diseased. Think, for example, of fundamentalist pronouncements on homosexuality. (Some recent authors have even merged the two ways of thinking. Thus, e.g., physicist Frank Tipler writes that ‘demons still exist, but they should be thought of as forms of computer viruses, running on the computer that is the human brain’, *The Physics of Christianity*, Doubleday, 2007, 136.)

A main strand in Clark’s argument is, therefore, that militant atheists and militant theists are, in important respects, flip sides of a single ignorant, dogmatic, and intolerant common coin. So if we find ourselves troubled by, for example, Christian or Islamic fundamentalists, as Clark thinks we should, we should also be troubled by militant

atheists (21, 56, 77-8, 122-3, 255-6). On this matter, I think he is just right. On others I think he is as well. I mention three, all of which deserve more attention than I can give them in a brief review.

One is the stale charge that while science is a matter of evidence, religion is just a matter of groundless belief. Thus Dawkins: 'Faith, being belief that isn't based on evidence and is often belief contrary to the evidence, is the principal vice of any religion Science ... is free of [this vice]' (*Humanist, op. cit.*). And, Dawkins again: 'Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence' (*The Independent* April 1992). This is an old canard that Clark dissects in a fine chapter, 'Understanding Scripture' (Chapter 3), which cogently argues, 1) that reflective religious people have good reasons for believing what they do, even if their beliefs may not pass scientific muster, and 2) that even militantly atheistic scientists have faith in a lot of things, else they would not do the work they do and could not, in any case, ever trust their findings (30-1, 37, 50, 146). A second point on which he seems right is that militant atheists often set up straw men, which they confidently proceed to knock down, then declaring, triumphantly, that theism has been refuted. In Chapter 8, which explores the concept of God, Clark argues that just as scripture can't be read apart from the context of a community that collected and endorsed it, the God of belief must be understood in terms of the common practice of believers. Of Dawkins, Clark writes: 'Judged as theology such works as ... *The God Delusion* are really very bad, not because they draw atheistical conclusions, but because they show no metaphysical or historical understanding of the doctrines they oppose' (188-9). A final thread—the third point—returns us to the first one. This is the mistaken claim, made by both militant atheists and religious fundamentalists, that there is an irreconcilable conflict between religious belief and Darwinian evolution (125). In Chapter 6 Clark carefully investigates, but finally rejects, that claim. Properly understood, evolutionary biology is neutral: it neither conflicts with nor justifies the faith of religious believers.

So what is that faith? In a book with Clark's title, one might reasonably have expected a focused discussion of how thoughtful religious people understand their faith. But this is not what he provides. Instead, he offers a diffuse collection of reflections tenuously held together by the notions of trust, hope, confidence and assurance. (Surprisingly, there is no entry in the index to assist one in locating these reflections in the text.) In the most general sense, all 'sane' people are confident of the reality of the physical world, including other people, even though they can't prove it (10-12, 195). They usually also believe in some sort of moral objectivity, else they could not justifiably condemn as wrong ritual sacrifice along with child abuse, which Dawkins does (79-80; see 43, 88, 100, 184). Many also hope for a more just, humane and peaceful world, and believe that, with effort and good will, this can be achieved (11, 14, 26). At the heart of the scientific vocation, moreover, is a basic belief that must be taken on faith: the belief that the universe is not random, capricious or arbitrary, but is instead lawful, orderly and

understandable (30-1, 37). And for scientists, as well ordinary folks, belief in truths about the world, independent of but partly accessible to us, is an article of faith (2, 14-15), as is the belief that truth is one or that all truths converge (80, 185). So what is it that religious believers have that non-believers lack? Clark quotes the classic Christian scriptural definition of faith from Hebrews 11:1 in two different, not obviously equivalent, translations: 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen' (22-3; King James) and 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (268; RSV & NRSV). Assurance and conviction of what? Of redemption and resurrection, among other things (3, 153). Are these attitudes of hope and confidence baseless, as militant atheists maintain? No, they are not, as Clark argues in Chapters 3 and 7, though the evidence for them is seldom properly scientific.

What, then, of the place of religious belief in society? As noted earlier, Clark thinks that organized religion can be, and often has been, a dangerous institution; but he also thinks that its best impulses—the desire for a more just and peaceful world and the belief that this can be achieved by men and women of commitment and good will—can be directed by tolerant, thoughtful people into channels that promise a hopeful future (213, 224, 268-9). We must strike a balance between authoritarianism and libertarianism, in order to respect individuality and promote the common good (224), and we should be accepting of 'faith schools' as 'a check against the deliberate or unthinking destruction of minority communities within a broadly liberal state' (234; also 229, 238). '(W)e must learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools' (268, quoting Martin Luther King). These may seem like platitudes. But as the Psalmist also reminds us (118:4-6), if only we would listen, they are truths to live by. And as Clark reminds us (in Chapter 7, 'Waking Up'), true religion is not a body of doctrine, but a way of living. I thank him for the reminder.

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