

Signs of Transcendence – the beyond in the ordinary¹

'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', the philosopher Wittgenstein famously remarked at the end of the *Tractatus*. And that, you may think, should certainly apply to any attempt to speak of transcendence, what lies beyond this life, life beyond death. How can I speak of that which none of us knows? I have not been there, and I don't suppose you have either. So should we not be silent? Perhaps. And so - in mitigation - I am not, in these lectures, going to try to say too much about the *nature* of life beyond death - what it might be like. My main concern is to explore the bare belief that there *is* something beyond death, not to speculate too much on what it's like. I want to put some hint of heaven on the map, rather than offer a detailed travel guide to what heaven might be like.

How will I try to do this? I will look first for some general pointers to the beyond in ordinary experience: 'signs of transcendence' which are embedded in the deep structure of ordinary, general, experience. That will be the main substance of this first lecture. In the second lecture I will look at more explicit pointers from Christian scripture, history and experience, how and why the belief took such a firm hold specifically in Christian faith. Here I will also venture just some pictures about what it might be like, what kind of images and conceptualities Christian faith has used to describe eternity - though still withy caution! In the final lecture I look further at the credibility of this belief in the light of other knowledge, and at its moral credibility – i.e. how belief in afterlife shapes and guides the way we live here and now. In doing all this I am going to concentrate primarily on the christian form of the belief, rather than its form in other religions. This is certainly not because I want to imply other religions have no light to she: it is simply because I want to avoid the presumption of speaking about other traditions which I do not know as well.

That is the outline of what I want to do. What are my warrants for trying to do this? They are unashamedly theological. That is, the moment we assume any reality of a transcendent creator God we should expect some imprint of that transcendence will be accessible to us in his creation, and in ourselves: eternity will be 'set in the heart of man', as Augustine said. Assume any reality of a redeemer God and we should also expect marks of transcendence will be left not just generally in creation but also in specific, saving, events. As they have - from the burning bush to the cross and resurrection of Christ there have been extraordinary, 'godful', events which so stretched and transformed the normal fabric of life that they have let in cracks of eternity.

There are philosophical warrants too for thinking and speaking of what is beyond ordinary empirical experience, at least in idealist philosophy. - though I cannot go into that now. There are even warrants, of a kind, in recent science. In its talk of quantum fields and subatomic realities, science is attempting to talk of invisible realities beyond direct experience: realities

¹ Includes material abridged and revised from Vernon White, *Life Beyond Death. Threads of Hope in Faith, Life and Theology* (DLT 2006)

beyond experience which leave a sort of trail of effects within our experience. Not unlike like the trail of the eternal God...

To be sure, these encouragements to speak of the beyond still require us to be cautious. They always require us to stretch the language and thought we use. We shall need to remember that we shall almost always be using language analogically: that is, using words which express both a likeness and unlikeness with their usual meaning. This is something that poets have always appreciated, and something that theology certainly should always appreciate. So, for example, however confidently we may come to say 'I believe in the resurrection of the body' we must never mean it woodenly and literally, as if some exact resemblance of our present material bodies is brought back out of the grave. It will be no more like that than Robbie Burns' 'love which is like a red, red rose' will be, literally, like a fragrant, prickly plant! Instead, we will mean our resurrection 'body' symbolically: it will mean a radically new way of being ourselves (as we shall see in later lectures). So we will always be stretching our language when we talk of what lies beyond. Nonetheless, in this analogical way, we *can* still try to speak...

But there is another preliminary question to set the scene, too. Even if it is warranted to talk about this subject, and even if it is true, why is it important? Why does it matter to put heaven on the map? One answer was given 40 years ago in another series of lectures: the 'Holland' lectures (named after Henry Scott Holland, author of that famous - or infamous - prayer which includes the phrase 'death is nothing at all'). The lecturer himself was, in fact, not Holland but the former Archbishop Michael Ramsey, and the book which emerged from the lectures anything but infamous. *'Sacred and Secular'* was remarkable book: deceptively simple, characteristically lucid, and profound.² And in this book he gave this answer to why heaven matters. He agreed that any language used to express an otherworldly dimension is difficult to express credibly and has to be symbolic, but he insisted that we have to try because essential Christian faith is inseparably both this-worldly and otherworldly: that is, all the really distinctive things it says about this world actually depend on its beliefs in the otherworld. So if we stripped out all talk of an otherworldly dimension we would actually diminish our attitude to this world.

He gives three examples of this: i.e. examples of essential Christian attitudes to this world which spring directly from keeping our nerve about the 'otherworldly' dimension. First, belief in eternity as our final destiny deepens our reverence for other people now; second, the perspective of eternity deepens our humility now; third, the possibility of eternity makes creative fortitude in the face of suffering more possible. For Ramsey all this is at stake, and that is why we must not lose our nerve about making the case for eternity. I will return to all these points in especially in the final lecture. But for now they can simply serve as headlines about why this belief matters.

² Michael Ramsey, *Sacred and Secular: a study of otherworldly and this worldly aspects of Christianity* (Longman, 1965)

Of course, even if we agree it matters, we might still want to ask whether there is still any need to argue the case. Ramsey, after all, was writing back in the 1960's - at a time (I quote) when 'modern man capitulated easily to hard-nosed rational secularism and reductionism'. In other words, it was an intellectual climate when the otherworldly or supernatural beliefs of Christian faith were particularly under threat. Arguably, that climate has now changed 40 years on. We are now generally more hospitable to spirituality and mystery – and those prophets of secularism of the 1960's & 70's who predicted an inexorable secularization have had to back-track. In spite of Dawkins' new atheism we generally now live with the more fluid, playful sensibilities of post-modernity, less persuaded by rationalism or secularism. We are more able to entertain a variety of spiritual beliefs, from astrology to reincarnation. Institutional religion may still be declining, but this general spirituality has not. So - perhaps this is no longer a battle to be fought? Maybe life after death is no longer a difficult, declining, unfashionable notion?

Perhaps - but I'm not so sure. Although there is this plethora of new beliefs, the element of rationalism has not gone away. My hunch is that it will remain a major player. Even if its extremes in Dawkins and Hitchens has begun to sound shrill and tired, the general movement of reductive rationalism will always return, not least as a counter to some of the excesses of the new spiritual climate, and the irrationalism both of laissez-faire spiritual consumerism and fundamentalism. Its underlying challenge will not go away. And in any case, even given a more fluid world of many spiritual beliefs, the form they take is often very shapeless and shifting. They do not necessarily include specific belief in personal life after death of the sort I want to deal with: they don't necessarily encourage the notion of individual personal life beyond death, granted by a personal creator God. Indeed, the whole point of them is that they can offer spiritual meaning in life *without* such beliefs. So clear belief in personal life beyond death still remains rare, I suggest. Ramsey's concern is still justified, and likely to remain so.

What is notable too, is that this is even the case within mainstream churches. Some of the evidence for this comes from a sociological survey carried out in the mid 1990's by Douglas Davies. It showed that as many as 32% of Anglicans and a similar number of Methodists said they believed personal life simply came to an end at death. Only a third professed belief in some sort of spiritual survival. Only 4% believed in resurrection of the whole person. The report comments dryly: 'Given that [resurrection] lies at the heart of [Christian] worship and theology...one might, perhaps, have expected to see the idea of the resurrection being chosen more often by more than 4% of the churches' members'. One might indeed! (And while it is true that a more recent survey of churchgoers in one very particular context showed more belief, when I asked Professor Davies for his reactions he maintained that there is nothing to suggest anything different from his earlier findings in overall trends).

Reasons for this overall decline in belief are many and varied. I've already mentioned, the persistence of straightforward rational secularism: the ready recourse to rational and natural explanations for what had previously been thought to be supernatural. What we used to think lies beyond this life is

easily seen simply as projection and illusion, wishful thinking fed by our psychological or biological needs - the main story line of Feuerbach and Freud, Durkheim and Dawkins. There are also these alternatives spiritualities to hand. But there are other reasons too. There are political reasons for sidelining belief in after-life. Belief in afterlife has long been held suspect because its hopes and rewards can so easily be used manipulatively by the powerful to keep the poor content with their this-worldly lot and de-motivate them from improving that lot. That was the Marxist story line, and that too hasn't gone away. There are also social reasons. Because of changes in society we have become distanced from death. The medicalising of death and dying in hospitals, and the rationalized disposal of bodies in crematoria and mass municipal graves because of population growth, has meant we are only rarely in touch with people dying in our homes: only rarely do we bury our own dead, only rarely do we walk through churchyards amongst our own departed. All this has the overall effect of removing the mystery of death and mortality from our midst, replacing it with an impersonal and industrialized process - and thereby suppressing any thoughts of what might lie beyond death. More subtle social changes have also affected our beliefs: for example, changes in our experience and conception of *time*. Because of our culture of consumerism, with its offer of instant gratification, the experience of linear time (i.e. having to *wait* for one thing to follow another) is fading. The present is all. So any sense of a beyond, any sense of 'after', fades. All these intellectual and social changes have acted cumulatively with christianity's overall decline as a whole world-view in which belief in after-life has often been packaged with discredited and incredible images of bizarre 2nd comings of Christ, lurid details of heaven and hell. Being so packaged, its overall decline has accelerated, and its particular beliefs in afterlife even more so.

To be sure, there are ripostes to be made to all this. The last point about difficulties generated by traditional imagery surrounding the belief simply returns us to the need not to take language too woodenly. The moral point about the political misuse of the belief can be countered by the positive use of it, such as Ramsey's trio of reverence, hope, humility. The pressures from rationalism can also be dealt with, and will be: I will return to all these points in subsequent lectures. But for now I just wanted to underline the force of these challenges, in order to set the scene as honestly as I can: that is, in order to acknowledge a situation where, for all these reasons, specific notions of transcendence, and life beyond death, do still face a cold climate. It is a climate which *has* caused us to lose our nerve within the Church. And that is why it is important to re-establish confidence in it, and remake the case for it.

So to the business of actually make that case. And in the first instance, as indicated, I want to begin by considering positive signs of transcendence in general, shared, human experience: i.e. signs which in traditional theological terms, we pick up through general revelation, rather than through the special revelations of Christian faith and history - which belong to next week.

What does it mean, to appeal to general experience? It does not mean general experience must yield signs for everyone. General experience cannot be generalised safely like that! So I am simply seeking signs in what many

may recognize as ordinary experience, not what all must recognize. Likewise, I do not mean that our general experience is nothing but signs of the transcendent. I do not mean the world is so graced, so 'charged with the grandeur of God', that eternity flows effortlessly and seamlessly and naturally through all experience. For while nature may indeed be graced with signs of God, it must also be at a distance from God in some respects: it must include 'space' between the infinite creator and finite creation. That is necessary for our creaturely freedom. And as such, this space will mean there is often a sense of absence as well as presence of the divine signs and sounds. Sometimes vast tracts of aching silence. It also means that even if we do pick up signs they will be ambivalent, not decisive. So although I am appealing to general experience for signs, we must accept their limitations: they will be neither universal, nor compelling. Nonetheless, I am convinced that there *are* such signs worth looking for: there are 'intimations of immortality' if you like Wordsworth's phrase; 'immortal longings' if you prefer Shakespeare's.

So - where should we look first? One place to begin could be the experience of death itself. After all, if we are looking for what might lie beyond a threshold, why not look most closely at the threshold itself? And I will. But I don't want to *begin* there. In my own experience, death has not so far been a particularly eloquent sign of transcendence. The force of my first brushes with death - a long time ago, travelling in Africa in younger days - was not to offer me signs of the beyond. Instead, the experiences merely raised the stakes of life and energized me for more adventure. The insouciance of youth, no doubt! Even later as a parish priest, when I frequently encountered the death of others, the effect was similar. Yes, I certainly spoke and thought and listened with people about life after death. But the usual outcome for me of these encounters was not so much to provoke me to think more about what might happen next to the dead or dying: it was more about the meaning of the life they had just lived. I was often moved in awe and admiration at the mystery of the lives people had led - but less struck by what lay beyond. And even when my encounter with death became much sharper through personal bereavements, which more closely touched the raw nerve of my own mortality, even that did not particularly sharpen my sense of afterlife. If anything it was the opposite: death has seemed an even more impenetrable barrier, the after-life *less* clear and certain. So death itself has not really been, for me, the place to renew belief in after-life...nor the source of it.

I don't for one moment cite my experience here as in any way normative, but simply to illustrate in general that proximity to death itself may not necessarily in itself be the best or only place to look for clear signs of transcendence. And this is an important point to make, not least to help deflect those anthropological theories which have assumed too readily that we only arrive at our beliefs about God and afterlife from our encounter with death and which therefore go on to suggest we have invented belief in both afterlife and God - chiefly to give us solace in the face of our mortality. The anthropologist Malinowski, writing at the turn of the last century, was celebrated for this sort of view. My point is that this simply doesn't work. The connection between death and religious belief in afterlife is nothing like as clear as Malinowski wants. My own experience is just one small pointer to this, but there is more

systematic evidence too. Recent research at Southampton University, for example, suggests that most of the very elderly are *not* more inclined to think of afterlife, or believe it, just because of the proximity of death. This, and the simple fact that many religions do not even include the promise of afterlife anyway, refutes Malinowski's claim that the fear of death has caused us to invent religious belief about after life.

So - if we don't need to look primarily at our reaction to death for signs of eternity, perhaps we should look instead more closely at *life*. And someone who has done this consummately is sociologist Peter Berger in a little book called *A Rumour of Angels* (published in 1969 - but I have not seen it surpassed in its suggestiveness)³. In it he describes exactly what we are looking for: what he calls 'signals of transcendence' from ordinary human experience of life; signs found within our 'natural' reality which appear to point beyond that reality. They are accessible signs. They are not deeply buried symbols which have to be excavated from the unconscious (as with Jung's archetypes), but signs which 'belong to ordinary everyday awareness'.

Here are two examples. One is our sense of what he calls 'order'. What Berger means by this is the widespread instinct that ultimate reality is somehow 'all right', good, rational, purposeful. Although our current experience of reality is *not* all right, and there may be no evident reason to think ultimate reality will be either, there still is a widespread sense of it: it is a sort of 'faith' people live by whether or not they are conventionally religious or consciously subscribe to it. It is powerful and pervasive, more like an instinct than a belief (which is why it often persists even against all evidence).

By way of example Berger points to the familiar situation of a child beset in the night with nameless threats and fears, calling out for its mother. What is the mother's instinctive response? She will take the child in her arms and say, in a thousand different languages and different ways, much the same thing: 'don't be afraid – *everything is all right*'. What is she doing? asks Berger. Reassuring the child? Of course. But is that all? She knows she has no certain power to make everything all right - no parent can guarantee this, much as we long to, yet still she cries it out with a kind of conviction, not just as a white lie. So it seems there is something else. For Berger she is revealing precisely this profound instinct about an ultimate order, in which all will be well – and she is therefore appealing to something which would have to be grounded in a reality *beyond* our mortal experience. It is not that she necessarily has any conscious rational belief in this. It is rather that her instinctual behaviour is itself a sign of this transcendence - a pointer to something beyond, something deeply written in to widespread, even universal, human experience, and displayed in this almost primordial cry.

Another of Berger's signals is the sense of play – especially the joyful play, as known mostly by children. Why? Play involves the suspension of normal time (as exasperated parents will know well!). A game creates its own time, different from the rules of time by which the rest of the natural or social world

³ Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Penguin, 1969)

is bound. Most normal adult living is linear: it is an inexorable march towards the next thing and ultimately - as Heidegger puts it - a 'living-into-death'. But joyful play suspends this process. So the play of children points to what Berger calls the 'deathlessness' of childhood: i.e. the instinct of eternity - the instinct that the linear progression to death can be arrested or transcended. Adults can have this too of course. Even we can sometimes play! In some poignant moments adults have literally played in the face of death: the fabled Christmas Day football match in the 1WW trenches; the music of the Vienna Philharmonic as Soviet troops were entering the city (and did the band really play as the Titanic went down?). Such playful behaviour is transcending normal time. It is, again, an instinctual sign of transcendence, an intimation of a state beyond our normal patterns of linear time. But perhaps it is most compelling when it happens with children, for that is when we see so clearly an immortal longing which is created simply out of a celebration of life itself. It is a positive sign of transcendence - not at all generated by fear of death.

There are other such signals too. Humour, for example. The sense of incongruity in this life, which lies at heart of humour, is the hint that things in this life actually do not fit, do not entirely add up. Humour sees this, and so hints implicitly at a beyond where the fit is possible. There is also the simple but extraordinary experience of pervasive hope, with its astonishing resilience throughout the whole of life. Where does such hope come from and what does it point to? (I will return to this in my final lecture). There is also the experience of journeying and never quite arriving, story-telling without ever quite reaching a satisfactory end: the sense of being in an unresolved story or journey is a widely and deeply held experience; it is an instinct of some sort of destiny which lies beyond the linear march of this story and its end in this life. All these are signs and pointers to a fulfilment beyond what this world affords. Even the atheist Nietzsche acknowledged their force, almost against his will. He saw it, for example, in the very notion of absolute *truth* and its transcendent claim on us, for where does this come from when our actual experience of life has no absolute, only compromise? And so he called truth 'divine'. He also saw it in the longing of 'delight' which implies a real object but one which begs an eternal home: 'all delight *desires eternity*', he wrote.

Turn from philosophers and sociologists to poets and we shall find yet more signs. Although shaped by a particular culture, they are still able to resonate widely. From our own western tradition, for example, and to pick up Nietzsche's hint, there is this recurring motif of longing: the inconsolable longing; an unfulfilled desire for something we do not quite know: 'a world of love to somewhat, but we know not what...' (Traherne). In the romantics like Wordsworth this longing sometimes seems to be identified with memory, moments in his past, as in: 'Intimations of Immortality from recollections of early childhood'. At other times Wordsworth seemed to associate it with beauty, something which dwells in 'the mind of man and the light of setting suns'. But in fact the point is precisely that the longing does not settle exactly *in* any of these experiences, either of memory or beauty, past or present, for it remains precisely a *longing*. That is why it points from within experience to something beyond experience. And that is why the more astringent later romantics and post-romantics will often express a similar longing in the

absence or silence of things. Thus we find Thomas Hardy, in one of his poems, looking at a young girl dancing through the *empty* spectacles of an old man. It is an image of longing for something which is not actually seen at all - yet because the longing is there, and we cannot long for something entirely unreal and unknown, it remains a hint of something that is really 'somewhere'. They are longings for what we don't know or see, yet still seem to half know. They are somewhere, even if that somewhere is beyond.

What all these poets are trying to express is a texture to life which simply will not be resolved within this life - because they know that even if we do get hold of what we think we have longed for, we find we haven't. Even if we get access to good memories, natural beauties, and reciprocal love, the ache remains. Even when we have access to good homes, we remain homesick. Something always remains unfulfilled because we still do not fully 'inhabit' these good experiences in a way which settles it. We remain slightly outside our experiences of what we love and desire, never wholly within. It is a bitter-sweet experience - and it is out of that bitter-sweetness that we realize it is a sign of something truly beyond. 'In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country', wrote C.S.Lewis, 'I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you - the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence. But we cannot name it, because it is a desire for something that has never actually [fully] appeared in our experience'.⁴ Such longing is powerful indeed. As Jewish-Christian mystic and philosopher Simone Weil has said, 'the reality of [this] *hunger* is not a belief but a certainty'. And it is by no means just the preserve of the privileged few: i.e. those who happen to have the precious sensibility of the poet or the luxury of such feelings because they already have the basic necessities of life. Writer Penelope Fitzgerald ponders this when she considers her own homesickness in her autobiography. It is only a 'small wretchedness' compared to others, she says. But it is still a window onto something similar in the experience of the truly deprived. It connects us (I quote) 'to the haunting faces of the [truly] displaced...and rejected...[those who] even before they set out on life's journey...seem wary. *The children who are homesick without ever having had a home to remember*'.⁵ No mere self-indulgent nostalgia, then, this inconsolable longing: it can belong to anyone.

Another place where we might we trawl for such signs is the sheer fact of creativity. This too can be seen as a sign of transcendence. That is how George Steiner in his book *Real Presences* analyses creative experience. Any real artistic, literary or musical act of creation is not only creating out of ourselves, he says, but also responding to something which has come from beyond ourselves. In artistic creation, then, we do not just create meaning, truth, beauty, purpose, as some post-modernists would have it: we are also responding to meaning which is coming to us from beyond. When creative people articulate their creativity, says Steiner, they say they want what they have created to find real connection with what lies outside themselves, some real answering response. And this in turn begs the critical question: what is it,

⁴ CS Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory' (1941)

⁵ Penelope Fitzgerald, *A House of Air* (Harper, 2005). [Emphasis mine].

ultimately, to which they are connecting and responding? Is it just the presence of other finite creations around them? Or is it an even more profound and 'ultimate' presence?

As I hinted at the beginning, we could also trawl the discourse of natural science, and look at the world it depicts. Here too, increasingly, a world is described which sometimes seem to point beyond itself: a world which wants further categories of explanation to help it understand itself. Simon Conway Morris does this as a secular evolutionary biologist who sees strange navigations and convergences in biological processes of a kind which point beyond their immediate empirical end.⁶ Mathematical physicists and cosmologists likewise find features of the universe which intuitively cry out for an explanation from beyond themselves. There is the fact of the extraordinary finely tuned order and balance of the universe; or the fact of the amazing energy of fertility and fecundity, with its constant birth and death of other stars. When these are set alongside the undoubted transience of the universe - the ultimate death of ourselves and of our universe - this presents a paradox: i.e. the paradox of a finely tuned and fruitful universe which is condemned to ultimate futility. It is the perception of this as a paradox, rather than just as brute fact, which is so interesting. It is like humour. It is something which doesn't fit. There is a gap - and so we need to 'mind the gap'. This isn't a gap *within* a scientific explanation which might soon be filled by new knowledge, but a gap opened up by the limited kind of explanation that science can give - and so it needs something from a different order of reality to provide it. It is another sort of sign of transcendence.

All this trawls though natural experiences and perceptions of life itself for pointers to something beyond it. None of it requires specific beliefs in God or life after death. But it is a context in which such beliefs become more credible and accessible. And it all emerges without needing any particular focus on the experience of death itself - forestalling any jibe that we are only dreaming these dreams because we fear death.

Nonetheless I do finally want to return to death itself, notwithstanding its ambivalence, some would say its absolute opposition, to the idea of eternity. *Is* there anything about death, almost in spite of itself, which takes us beyond itself. In his book *The Meanings of Death* John Bowker offers a fascinating overview of the huge variety of responses to death in different cultures and contexts and religions⁷. But within that variety there is something significant which they do almost all show. They interpret death as 'sacrifice'. They frequently accord a kind of dignity to the dead in the fact that death is a making way for some other new life. So death is not just seen as an outrage and an enemy to be resisted and feared, but widely seen as a necessary condition through which life can be regenerated. This is something we now know about in other ways too. It is rooted in biological reality. We now know, for example, that the ageing process which ultimately kills us is the same process which matures us to a point where procreation and new life is

⁶ Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solutions* (Cambridge, 2003)

⁷ John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge 1991)

possible. We also know it is rooted in cosmological and evolutionary reality. The process by which stars and species change and die is the same process which allows complexity and other new life to emerge, and perhaps that is the only way it could emerge. As Bowker says - 'there could not be a you or me... or a universe without the death of stars and the death of succeeding generations of organic life'; so 'if you ask "why is death happening to me (or anyone)?"', the answer has to be 'simply because you are an event of the universe; you are a child of the stars, as well as of your parents, and [so] you could not be...in any other way"...'⁸ In other words, scientific theory now readily confirms what many religious and cultural views of death had intuitively grasped long ago: seeing death as a sort of purposeful sacrifice.

But how might this be a sign of transcendence for the one who dies as well – i.e. a sign that death is a gateway not just to life generally but further life for the dead themselves? By two stages. First, this sacrificial nature of death brings into focus the extraordinary meaning and value of life as such. When life has been bought in such a costly way through the death of others, life itself assumes extraordinary meaning. When all the extraordinary textures of human awareness - our loves, dreams, aspirations, our unique thoughts, feelings, relationships - are being lost in order to create their possibility in another, they assume an even greater depth of meaning. This leads to the second step. For the sense of such profound value which sacrifice evokes challenges the very sequence of transience in which it is emmeshed. If what comes through these natural sequences of biological birth and death has such depth of meaning, it challenges those very processes of transience, for it implies a transcendent, eternal, basis to that meaning. So we are back by another route to George Steiner's real presences. In the presence of life which comes about *through the sacrifice of death* we find ourselves responding to a transcendent meaning in it that we have not created. This wonder evoked by the sacrifice of death is something we sense particularly when we encounter deliberate self-sacrifice - in war or peace. But in fact doesn't *all* death move us like this? Even involuntary death, involuntary sacrifice, the death which we resist, can move us to feel that such life cannot just be part of an endless sequence of transience – and so it too drives us to this sense of a reality which no longer depends on endless processes of transience and sacrifice. It may even point to a sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Is this perhaps the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection?

But that begins to anticipate the next lectures. It moves us out of the realm of what might be called general revelation into the world of specific christian claims: special revelation. That is a move I shall certainly need to make, for as I have said, none of these so-called signs of general experience is compelling. Nonetheless, I believe they are still important. They set a context in which a more specific faith can take root for all, not just to those already with faith. And so that is what I have tried to offer in this first lecture. Having sensed a failure of nerve about it, even within the Christian churches, and in spite of the limits of language, I have tried to speak of the possibility that something that does lie beyond this life. It is a beyond which can found, in

⁸ Bowker, op. cit pp215-16

traces, right within this life, in ordinary experience, in our sense of order, play, longing, creativity, death and sacrifice. Here, almost everywhere, I can indeed find 'that part of us all that lives outside of time' as Czech novelist Milan Kundera has put it: I find signs, however ambivalent, of a real eternity...

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