Lecture three: Transforming the Present - future hope in the here and now[1]

If we look at the signs of transcendence around us in ordinary life - in order and play, hope and humour, in the strange sacrificial nature of death itself - even more, if we believe in a personal God of perfect creativity, profound love, total justice, and a God of Christ's resurrection - then we can, even must, believe there really is a life for us beyond this one: an eternal *fulfilment* of this whole creative impulse that God has set in being What's more, inspired by key biblical images, unfolded with Greek philosophy and some contemporary scientific thinking, we can even try to imagine a little what it might be like. Heaven will be a radical act of re-creation: a reality which wholly re-configures and transcends the space and time and matter of present existence. All that is something of the ground I tried to cover in the first two lectures.

But you may also recall the findings of research I mentioned in the first lecture: in fact this belief is *not* widely held even amongst churchgoers. Only 42% of mainstream churchgoers expressed any sure and certain hope of life beyond death in any form. In the course of the lectures I have touched on some reasons for this unbelief. They tend to fall into one of two kinds: there are those who simply cannot accept it could be true, even though they might wistfully wish it to be so; and those who simply cannot see the point of such a belief - or, more seriously, think it might actually be a damaging or irresponsible belief. So far I have offered just outline responses to both these sorts of concerns. But because I recognize and respect the force of disbelief, or agnosticism, I now want in this final lecture to face it more fully, and add some more robust responses. First, I will say more about why we can maintain the *truth* of this belief. And then I will say more about why it *matters*: how and why it transforms this life positively.

The issue of how we can maintain the truth of it, why it isn't just wishful thinking, is one I raised briefly in the first lecture, but I now need to say more - not least because the attempts I made in the last lecture to describe what life beyond death might be like, may have made matters worse! Trying to explain such mysterious things can strain credibility rather than bolster it. Is it really possible to believe a radically 're-organized space, time and matter?' Does it connect at all with other ways of understanding reality, from science or philosophy? If it doesn't, it all becomes all the more vulnerable to the critiques of the positivists - positivists of all sorts, from Durkheim to Feuerbach and Marx, from Freud to Freddie Ayer. Their questions have not gone away just because we're now in a generally more credulous post-modern age. In one way or another they keep asking: *are you really making any sense at all?* Above all: *how do you know you haven't just made this belief up?* We mustn't underestimate the force of this question. Even though we may know that we haven't consciously invented these beliefs ourselves, that is not the main case of these sceptics. They are pointing to a more sophisticated process to

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

account for the belief. They trace ways in which we may have made it up collectively and unconsciously, not just individually and consciously. We have done so, they say, out of some of our deepest needs and instincts: our need to bolster morality or social cohesion, our need to reassure ourselves in the face of the chaos outside in the world and inside ourselves; our need to compensate for the parents we have lost and the dreams which remain unfulfilled…and so on. Such things inevitably drive us to create an illusion of life beyond death. This sceptical account becomes even more compelling when much of the evidence in apparent support our beliefs seems to come in private and unverifiable experiences - or only in those ambivalent signs of experience we began with in the first lecture - or even just in that 2,000 year old story of Christ we explored last week: a story which may have convinced many in the past but which now is increasingly seen only as one story amongst others. What then *is* the real cash value of this belief in the currency of truth, rather than as mere wish fulfilment?

In fact the charge that we *must* be creating the belief according to our needs, the charge of wish-fulfilment, can be cleared away quite easily. The fallacy in this argument is well known. To suppose that if we can identify a social or psychological origin for a belief (especially in our needs) this necessarily undermines its truth, is simply wrong. The mere fact I want or need something to be true, or that society wants or needs something to be believed to be true, does not settle the question of its truth. The need and the wanting may be a psychological or social mechanism by which the belief arises - but that has no necessary bearing on whether it is true or not. The simplest of analogies will illustrate this point. You believe your partner loves you, and has your best interests at heart. Someone then points out that because you badly want this to be the case you must be deluded by your wishes, and the love simply isn't there. Well - that might be the case! But, equally, it might not. There is no real *argument* here at all, only a suggestion prompted by associated ideas. It is no more an argument than suggesting that because we are hungry for food, food doesn't exist. In fact, if anything the reverse is more likely to be the case. Our deep hungers are sometimes a positive sign of the reality of that for which we hunger. It is a simple point, but it is often overlooked, and so the fallacy still needs to be unmasked when it is operating. [It is called the 'genetic' fallacy: i.e. the view that because we identify a genesis or origin for a belief in our desires that somehow discredits the content of the belief. It doesn't!]

However - that is just ground-clearing. Is there anything more positive to support the truth of the belief? Can we appeal to positive evidence of direct experience? What, for instance, of so-called near-death experiences? Such experiences are often cited. One has been especially influential: the experience of one of the most ferocious sceptics of belief, arch-positivist AJ Ayer, who consistently denied any possible meaning or truthfulness in such belief. That is, until June 1988, when he was 77 and his heart stopped for 4 minutes (apparently after choking in smoked salmon which had been smuggled in to his hospital bed by his former mistress!). He recovered - and then confessed the experience had completely changed his mind. He described having seen bright light and something like a river to cross. It is the

sort of account which forms part of a large body of well-documented evidence of so-called near-death and out-of-the body experiences. They are experiences which apparently show the persistence of consciousness after the body is clinically dead. They are told in different ways using different images according to people's previous belief systems, but most have some kind of family resemblance. Strong light, for example, often features (you can read it in accounts which range from a 6th century middle-eastern holy man to a 20th century American worker trapped dead under heavy machinery for 15 minutes). And of these experiences Freddie Ayer's has often been deemed one of the most convincing, precisely because he was an atheist. It was, after all, an experience against expectation, not projected out of his expectations.

Such experiences as these have been subject to serious interdisciplinary study. Are they convincing? In fact even sympathetic enquirers are cautious. Theologian Carol Zaleski, for example, has written a careful, serious, and sympathetic book about them[2], yet even she finally takes them only to be psychological phenomena which help reveal the deepest beliefs we actually hold, rather than compelling us to accept the truth of those beliefs. Interestingly, Ayer himself apparently reverted to his atheism once he had fully revived. So it did not convince him in the end – and if it doesn't even convince the subject of the experience, its evidential value for the rest of us fades: a reminder that it is the very privacy of these experiences, their intrinsic subjectivity, which is their Achilles heel: they do not provide good *public* evidence. [This is true, it must be said, of many religious experiences, including those of Christian mystics*:* many remain essentially private, publicly incommunicable, and therefore unverifiable].

On the other hand it could be said that they provide a different kind of public evidence: namely, the evidence of transformed lives of those who have undergone them (and in fact there is a further, final, twist to the story of AJ Ayer which could be used to support this: those closest to him testify that he *was* a changed person later in his life, even though he said he had not changed his beliefs). After all, a marked and lasting transformation of someone's life can provide a kind of public evidence to the truth of what lies behind it: some kinds of truth are generally deemed to be better revealed through life more than thought: 'by their fruits you shall know them…?' So some studies persist in taking these experiences seriously as public evidence. They have tested them by tabulating clusters of them, uncovering remarkable common features even where no collusion seems possible - of which the presence of light is just one. The early experiences of Christ's resurrection are sometimes audited in a similar way. They can be seen as multiple testimonies which have uncanny real resemblances to each other - and they certainly led to transformed lives. With this kind of public evidence, therefore, what philosophers call '*inter*-subjective' evidence, perhaps we can after all appeal to experiences as positive, empirical, evidence. Not proof, of course, but evidence nonetheless? And some may find this helpful…

[2] Carol Zaleski, *The Life of the World to Come* (Oxford, 1996)

Yet I wonder whether this is really the only or best kind of path to tread in the search for truthfulness. Subjecting experience, even 'special experiences', to the methods of empirical enquiry may play some part - but is it really secure as a method of enquiry into matters of transcendence? How we could ever really establish the truth of a belief about something which transcends this empirical world, simply by using the empirical tools of this world. It is like trying to capture the ripples of moving water by straining it out with a sieve. And so when pressed for the truthfulness of the belief in terms of reasoned evidence, I would settle for something different: not compelling evidence, but just some signs that there are some significant connections with other forms of enquiry. I would look for knowledge from elsewhere (including the natural sciences) which at least help show how the belief is imagin*able*, conceiv*able*. For this is a real and legitimate tool to support truthfulness, especially when taken cumulatively with the pressure to believe from those other sources I outlined in previous lectures: those signs of the beyond in ordinary experience, and the particular events of revelation of the Judaeo-Christian faith tradition. To draw these beliefs alongside other knowledge and show points of imaginative connection, does add real weight to them.

I touched on this briefly in the last lectures with the reminder from modern physics that matter is now seen to be less solid, more like energy: as such it is more conceivable that it could assume a very new form able to support our personal identity, our mind and spirit, in a radically different way to our present bodies. Writers like John Polkinghorne, the distinguished mathematical physicist, now offer further suggestions. He takes us into the imaginative connections set up by the world of computer technology. He asks us to imagine that you and I are something like a computer soft-ware programme, a dynamic pattern of information, with our current bodies something like the hardware of computer systems through which we operate. Conceiving ourselves like this, like a software programme, we can see ourselves having an enduring, identity which, crucially, can also be operated through different systems. It is another image, therefore, of how our identity, mind and spirit, can be reformed and replayed through different systems after the decay of our particular current system, after our bodily death. There are problems with pressing this too far, as with all analogies. But at least it serves to indicate that the belief we have in after life which is about a reality beyond our current experience has points of conceptual and imaginative connection with forms of knowledge which already lie *within* current reality and scientific theory.

Another example is the belief I explored last week of a 'new heaven and earth': that is, a new environment we shall inhabit which - to be plausible - must be conceived to radically transcend our current configuration of particular finite matter and space and linear time. Could *this* ever be made thinkable with images drawn from other kinds of knowledge and discourse? Again, it is not wholly impossible, according to Polkinghorne.[3] Mathematical physicists can 'readily think' that space-time-matter is not just as we currently experience it. Instead it can already be conceived as a sort of whole within which time is not linear as we now experience it, and matter is not bound to

[3] cf. e.g. John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (SPCK 2002)

particular points of space and time as it is now. In short, it is a picture of reality not far from precisely the sort of image of eternity that theology compels us towards: a state which combines both a perfect completeness and a continuing dynamism. This picture of an eternal universe, configured in this new way, would allow it to co-exist already with our present universe, as a different dimension alongside it, but capable of being accessed at any time. That connects well with the theologian's concerns. It allows us to think of God holding both dimensions (the eternal and the temporal) within His overall purpose. It helps us think of the new heaven and earth already held alongside this first creation so there can be a continual process of redemption and resurrection as the dying parts of our creation are projected and transformed into this other eternal dimension. Drawing on the previous image of computer software, it helps us imagine how all the best aspects of this world's information patterns - of persons, communities, relationships, animals and this whole created order, everything from its mountains to the music of its stars - could all be constantly strained out of the old decaying order into the new, into 'an inheritance kept in heaven for us…' (to recall that evocative biblical phrase). It may all seem far-fetched, even to christian believers, but it is actually quite common talk amongst physicists: even unprovoked by theologians, they readily talk of conscious life being 'downloaded' out of space and time into a 'parallel' universe of such a different kind.

Drop these pictures of information patterns, software, second dimensions, instantly if they are unhelpful or just bizarre. The point is not to press them. The point is only to show that the sorts of things that we are impelled to believe by our theology about the *other* world are not wholly unconnected with images and discourses which have arisen *within* our known world - whether from IT or mathematics. And this is what we should expect. As I have insisted before, there are good theological reasons why the otherworld *should* have some resonances with the reality of this world.

In such ways, then, the meaning and truthfulness of what faith and theology impels us to believe, however difficult, can still be maintained. In such ways we may say '*there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio'* - but without having to appeal to a mystery beyond *all* thought and imagining: without silencing the quest for truth by an appeal to totally unconnected transcendence. We are suggesting instead that that the imaginings of theology really can connect with the imaginings and rigorous thought of science and philosophy

So muchfor the first question about whether it could all really be *true*. Now to the second question. Even if it could be true, what is the positive point of it all for this life? If anything, doesn't it in fact demotivate and damage living fully in this life - the accusation not only of Karl Marx but many others since. I briefly raised this issue too in the first lectures, but need to revisit it because it is such an important issue for both moral and theological integrity. It is, after all, just as much a theological imperative to believe fully in 'life *before* death' (as the Christian Aid slogan puts it), as to believe in 'life after death'. So it matters greatly to show how the latter reinforces rather than undermines the former. Indeed, the fact that this is a serious theological issue cannot be stressed

enough. Biblical affirmation of this life is huge. Think, for example, of the Johanine emphasis on eternal life 'now', or the concern of the Synoptic Gospels with the Kingdom of God ‘in the present’. Even when the focus of the Gospels is on the resurrection narratives - i.e. precisely when one might expect an otherworldly emphasis - what is striking (and what distinguishes them from comparable accounts in Graeco-Roman world), is actually their *reticence* about the next world. The risen Christ tells us little about the world to come which he briefly entered and from which he returned. Instead, his emphasis is on comforting the disciples, and commissioning them for service in this world. All this makes it so theologically essential to show how belief in afterlife does not weaken this life. In fact it makes it essential not just to refute Marx’s charge that afterlife dulls this life but to turn it on its head and show how the afterlife positively enhances this life - just as Michael Ramsey claimed, as you may recall, in his assertion that the otherworldly nature of Christian faith should increase our reverence for this life.

But how does this happen? How is the charge refuted, and then turned on its head? Well, first it simply needs to be recognized that the charge has usually been levelled against gross caricatures of the belief in afterlife. In some Victorian belief, hope of heaven had indeed become, as one commentator puts it, completely ‘romanticised, just a family reunion, more like a middle class suburb in the sky than the City of God’ - a place for the privileged.[4] And so it had become easily used, as another commentator has it, just as ‘an analgesic, a cosmic aspirin…to dull the pain of our [present] lot’.[5] But of course those are only parodied ideas of heaven. They are the precisely the sort of ideas about heaven which are indeed just projections of wish fulfilment. They portray a heaven which is simple continuity with this world, and especially with the self-indulgent pleasures of the privileged of this world. They have no regard for the *dis*continuity and mystery of real transcendence I have been arguing for. They are very far from the eternity which is made out of the imperatives of fulfilling justice, perfecting communion, completing love. [True, the church’s teaching of heaven has not always reflected this moral character and social challenge of heaven. In that sense the charge remains. But the response to that is to provide a proper view of heaven, not drop the notion altogether].

So - correcting the caricatures goes some way to mitigating the moral charge against heaven. But there needs to be more. For what lies behind the charge is not just the way the belief has been distorted in a particular social context. It is the suspicion that there is something *intrinsically* life-denying, or morally paralysing, about *any* belief in heaven - just because it is a hope beyond this world and this life. Any such hope, it is said, even if it is a hope for justice, is flawed because it is always the hope of a future which we cannot fully realize here. As such it is like the backwash of a tide on a beach, constantly washing off our efforts to build lives now. The mere fact of expecting something beyond our control after this life relativises everything we do now, reminds us that it’s all in the end just temporary sandcastles, no more than the grass that

[4] Cf. Michael Wheeler, *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians* (Cambridge 1990) p121
[5] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope Against Hope* (DLT, 1999) p55

withers and the flower that fades - and so not worth the effort. Eternity simply stops us trying. So it is better not to believe it at all.

But this too is a flawed argument. It fails to grasp something underlying all these lectures whose implications I now need to make clearer - which is the proper understanding of the relationship between present and future, between time and eternity, between history and heaven: a relationship which, when made clear, should nail once for all the charge that eternity is either an irrelevance or worse for our life here. For as I began to sketch out in the last lecture, it is vital to understand that eternity is not just a next stage to history, something which will simply follow on and replace what has gone before: it does not succeed this life as if it is just the next thing on in linear time. Instead it is a new kind of complete and perfect reality and perhaps (as suggested in this lecture) more like a different dimension already standing alongside every point of time now. Moreover, in this eternity, although new things may happen, there is also a completion and perfection of everything that has already happened, including what happens in time. In short, this eternity takes into itself all good things from time and history, holds them in completion, and does not let them slip back again into the stream of lost time.[6] And from this picture, the moral implications flow inexorably for this life. It means that everything we do and are and strive for here and now is potentially eternal. Everything now is touched with possibilities of existing in eternity, whatever it leads to in time. As such it has infinite value now. This is indeed the reverse of the charge being made: in fact only when the tide of linear *time* is all there is, do our efforts now get washed away - whereas with this backwash of *eternity*, everything good in time can retain its value even when time has apparently washed it away. A remarkable 95 year old man once expressed it like this in a letter to me, recalling an incident from his own still vivid memory. He was describing the efforts to hold back the Fenland floods of 1952*…* A sandbag team had toiled all day and seemed to have succeeded. Then when the last sandbag was placed - the whole dam was swept away. But was it then wasted labour? ‘No!’ he wrote: every effort to secure life, every bit of co-operation with our fellow men and women, was ‘like a building block in the City of God’ - it will always stand.

This sort of relationship between time and eternity manifestly means that eternity gives us more moral motivation for this life - not less. And it is certainly a genuine part of the theological tradition. It is grounded in the basic structure of resurrection hope. For throughout biblical narrative and doctrine 'resurrection' is thought of as happening to *all* time and history, not just to the end of it. That is the meaning of a 'general' resurrection: the potential is for all to be raised, wherever they lie on the linear pathway of time, not just those at the end of it. In other words, it is precisely all human history, not just its end, which has the potential to be taken up into the new heaven and new earth. That is why God is described as God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (earlier figures of human history) as well as God of Bill and Sally and ourselves, and those who follow us. It is why God is described as 'the Lord of the living and

[6] In Karl Barth’s words, our inheritance in heaven is a transformation of this world, not just new things following it

the dead'. It is why, in the healing of nations at the end of time, every tribe and tongue can be represented. For it means that nations, tribes and tongues whose impact in history may have long since vanished in the stream of time, will still be raised - precisely because their value is potentially eternal too. They were not just expendable means to some evolutionary end which left them behind in the march of linear time.

This biblically grounded vision is taken up eloquently into some of the best traditions of christian poetry. I think for example of the Gray's celebrated '*Elegy in a Country Churchyard*'. It is an extraordinary piece of work, a pre-romantic vision, not sentimental but spare and visionary, even in its apparently homely images. It portrays precisely this potential for eternal value in the stuff of this ordinary life - it is about the value of unknown lives buried beneath the tombstones. In worldly terms they were 'small' people who left no measure or trace in empirical history. Their lives followed no measurable progress to any known glory. They lie without any visible sign of their value and achievements, just like discarded sandbags in a failed project. But by placing them in a christian graveyard, the poet has deliberately asked us to see this different vision. He wants us to see that they lie there for resurrection. So 'let not ambition *mock* their useful toil/their homely joys, and destiny obscure/ nor grandeur hear with *disdainful* smile/the short and simple annals of the poor' . As C.S.Lewis later put it, we all carry 'an eternal weight of glory' - whether or not that weight was recognised here and now, whether or not any empirical trace of it is left as the passage of time progresses here.

It is a vision which also cashes out not just in a general motivation to value people, but in specific ethical imperatives. After all, in the light of this eternity how could we ever give up the global search for peace, justice and care of the earth, just because we may not always see its fruits in time? For even just the effort of seeking such goods is already a mustard seed of eternity. In the light of this sort of eternity, how can the weak and elderly ever be left to go to the wall just because they may no longer leave much mark in time? For they carry eternal value as much as anyone else. It is also a vision which teaches us to value ourselves, as well as others. For it is you and I who also carry this weight of glory, not just others: in the light of this eternity we cannot possibly think of *ourselves* as having no worth, whatever state we are currently in…

Crucially, it also does all this in practice, not just in theory. In other words, this is not just rhetoric about the effect that a proper hope of heaven should have in principle, without any evidence that it works like this in practice. For example, in a survey of beliefs of women in a NE housing estate, the effect their beliefs actually had on them (specifically their beliefs about afterlife) has been carefully charted. The findings are given by Ellen Clark-King in *Theology by Heart*. She first describes their struggles to bring up families in difficult conditions, their work for better social facilities - and then summarizes thus: 'their [belief] in life after death is [clearly] not a… tranquilliser, making the women content with daily deprivation in the hope that all will be made better after death. It has a far more positive effect than this. Knowing that they have an eternal destination after death and an eternal dimension to their own self...gives them self-worth [now], a basis for action, a foundation for self-

determination. Without this eternal dimension it would be all too easy for these women to look at themselves with the eyes of contemporary society and judge themselves and their families as failures. [With] it [they live] this life with greater courage and confidence'.[7] This is evidence from *lived* experience of belief - the best counter of all to Marx's charge.

Lived belief of this kind also engages positively with another contemporary moral concern. It is perhaps not everyone's concern, but has increasing expression in much contemporary film, theatre and literature. It is the post-modern wariness about endings. There is a moral reluctance about coming to conclusions. Many contemporary fictional plots, in so far as there are any discernible plots, resist any conclusions which tend to seal all that has already happened, and limit its meaning. It is the fear that if the narrator closes down the story the characters cannot re-narrate their lives in any different perspective - which means they will never be able to find redemption of the past (as well as never having any new possibilities for the future). The ethical issue being raised in this way is simply this: it is the call to avoid oppressing other people by concluding their lives for them in any way, by trying to fix their meaning for them - by telling them that they are only fit for this or that, or they must only live in one place ('the rich man at his castle and the poor man at his gate', the asylum seeker always sent away - and so on.). Instead, we should always give space for others to develop. It is a positive moral concern which extends to ourselves as well: it means we should not limit or close down our own lives, but always look to open them up. We will all have had the instinct for this: the nagging quest for some way to re-narrate our lives, to do things differently and tell a different story about ourselves. Even just a new job or holiday might do it, we think. At worst this may just be an urge for novelty or self-indulgence. But at best it is looking for redemption: that is, rather than giving up and writing ourselves or others off, it is looking to a new future which also helps 'redeem' what has already gone before (which itself gives further courage for that future). Just what the women of the North East were doing. And the point is that this resonates with exactly the kind of thing that christian eternity is offering. It offers precisely a conclusion to this life which does *not* close things down. Instead but opens them up. It does this by including what has already gone before, all previous time, as well as its own new kind of time, so it *can* 're-narrate' life On our own we cannot make this happen: however hard we try from our human resources we eventually die powerless to really make our past story have lasting value, however much we try to re-narrate it [like TS Eliot's old man in *Gerontion* who sits dramatizing his past life in a sentimental reverie, trying to give himself a new take on his life, but it's ultimately just a sad fantasy]. But with God, and with the hope of this sort of heaven it is quite different - then there is this real possibility, a real hope..

Which brings us finally to hope itself. Hope in itself is a positive moral disposition. It's long been seen that hope is an essential moral dynamic for life: 'dum spiro, spero – as long as I breathe I hope…the breath of my soul is hope' That's why it has been ranked as one of the three great biblical gifts (faith, *hope*, and love), and classically held as one of the key christian virtues.

[7] Ellen Clark-King, *Theology by Heart* (Epworth 2004) p181

More recently it has been championed again by such as Ernst Bloch in his philosophy of hope and theologian Jurgen Moltmann in his theology of hope. But now note too how this is especially true of *otherworldly* hope. After all, hope for this world alone is always vulnerable to disappointment: neither scripture nor history and experience lead us to expect steady, visible progress towards the Kingdom in this world ; we shall always live a roller coaster of advance and retreat in moral and social progress. But a hope which reaches beyond this world as well is not vulnerable to such disappointments. It is also a more specifically morally satisfying hope than hope just for this life. For with hope for this life alone, even if we did eventually achieve a lastingly better future in this world, that would only be experienced by those at that particular time in which it was achieved. It would exclude those building blocks washed away in the process of getting there. It would mean most people will have only ever been means to an end they will never share, not part of that end. This is hardly a morally satisfying situation. It can encourage an ethic of crude utilitarianism which too easily justifies sacrificing people in the present *for* this supposed future good. In contrast, hope for a radically new heaven and earth which includes all that has gone before, creates a quite different ethic. It means we are always working for a final end of *everyone's* fulfilment. It helps guard against the headlong rush to get into a better future using some people just as means (for how can we do that when they too are ends, and eternity belongs to them too?). It is a hope which moves us forward without treading the present under foot.

All this is entailed in the texture and shape of the sort of otherworldly hope I have been suggesting in the course of these lectures - and I hope you agree it is a long way from the caricature of some of its critics. I am still grateful for the critics. It is often they who best test and purify belief. They certainly helped galvanise these lectures. But even if I have not answered adequately all the difficulties they raise, I hope at least I have said enough to keep hope alive: enough to show it really is possible to attend to ordinary human experience and see the rumours of angels in it; possible to scrutinize the theological tradition, and find the rumours shouted aloud; possible to press that tradition hard for its conceptual and imaginative possibilities, and find them. I hope that I have said enough, therefore, to show that we need not lose our nerve about hope itself, which is so life giving, not life diminishing. And so while I respect those who in honesty cannot believe, I have no qualms in offering this belief. Far from it - why should we deprive people of this hope by our silence?

Towards the later part of his life, Michael Ramsey, when asked to compile a final anthology of his works, his editor asked what he would most like included. There was a moment's silence, then Ramsey simply replied: 'Tell them about heaven! That's where we are going; that is what we were created for. Heaven is the meaning of our life here. Tell them about heaven..' I believe we can and should. And I believe we can do so with integrity.

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