

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## “Where Is Your God?”

When we call ourselves “the faithful”, we aren’t making a proud claim for our virtue, but saying that faith in God is the ground bass of our life, the note which sounds beneath all the jangling of everyday variations. Like the pedal-line of an organ piece, it holds together and determines the tone of every other part of the music.

### **Embattled Faith**

In the past this view of faith has often had to survive life in a contrary world, the loud playing of different music. Muslims referred to non-Muslims as “infidels”, Jews spoke of “the nations” or even “the sinful” to define The Rest Of Us. This embattled feeling sets the faith against all the world, and gives us two things: the danger of dismissing or despising everyone outside, and the comfort and warmth of our relationship with the chosen insiders, our fellow-believers. Now, I think I see this changing.

### **Religion As A Vice**

There was a radio poll the other day, including a lot of influential pundits and public figures. People were asked to name their list of ten Deadly Sins (the Church only had seven, but there’s inflation for you). It was interesting to hear that *religion* came into several lists as a deadly sin. I was greatly cheered to hear this, as at least it makes clear that religion is far from being a harmless dead habit from the past. Of course, the thought was that religion results in hatred and bigotry between people that aren’t as sensible and enlightened as we ourselves are: that religion is terrorism, from the nursery onwards: that it can do nothing except domineer in the most sacred and personal area of the human soul. In its commonest form this thought gets expressed in the line: *All Wars Are Caused By Religion*.

### **Everyone Needs Faith**

In my book you can’t live any coherent life without faith, without some ultimate reality which sets the keynote, which unites the mess and founds the meaning of everything else. Simply wanting to live a good life demands some idea of goodness. In a human lifespan everything is in motion, everything is changing fast. We need an index, a register, a scale against which to set this daily torrent of alteration; it must be flexible enough to adapt

to loss and gain, firm enough to ground good judgment, and deep enough to embrace the fears, the hopes, the ideals, the treasure-trove, the boredom, and the horror which characterise our roller-coaster experience. The signs are that our culture at large has identified *the self* as the only appropriate article of faith. We’re all interested in ourselves; we may claim to know ourselves, and it seems foolish to live without believing in ourselves - in the sense that we hope to make something worthwhile of ourselves. For those who are filled with passion and talent and strength, endowed with health, beauty and wealth, this looks right. Personally, I feel that such a faith would exclude me, as I can’t close my eyes to the broken, wounded, poor reality that I’d be setting at the heart of “my” world. I’m a very limited, often deluded, sometimes negative Westerner with a plank in my eye. If I’m denied any god to believe in, I certainly wouldn’t replace him with myself!

### **Dark Before The Dawn**

They say there’s no time so dark as the last of the night. Let’s admit that those who have endured stupidity and small-mindedness from religionists have good reason to mistrust the religion they peddle. Such religion is only selfishness in fancy-dress. But the answer is not to replace it with a more blatant selfishness. We must go on loving our human nature, in all its need and poverty, and to do this we must transcend all the weaknesses it suffers, follow its longing to soar, to risk, to spend itself for what’s great, eternal, and generous. Maybe for a while we will find it difficult to name God, to embody in its fulness the glory of our faith, as the past did. That doesn’t mean we go down helplessly into a morass of all the mean, private, narrow things we’ve learned to hate. We don’t need to re-invent the wheel, and we shouldn’t have to. The prophet Habakkuk lived in a time when enemies had taken over, and Israel was foundering in oppression. To the eyes of Christian faith, triumphant evil has already made its masterpiece, and it is known to us in every detail; we took part in it, we learned our weakness and need as never before. But that was the moment when the question was answered, *Where is your God?* We mustn’t cease to proclaim the truth we learned then: the vision is for its own time, and it will surely come. *Fr Philip*