

## The Holy and the Unseen

Coming to Christianity as an adult, faith has not been an easy topic for me. I had a secular upbringing and was educated as a scientist. Coming from that background I understood “faith” in the religious sense as a sort of belief in magic, and viewed science and technology as an obviously superior replacement. I was aware of many more examples of the harms of faith than of its benefits. Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist, has offered a contemptuous definition of faith that I, in the past, would have agreed with:

“Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is the belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”

His emphasis on evidence marks his allegiance to the scientific perspective. Evidence is what’s visible, and holding beliefs that are consistent with evidence is the essence of the scientific mindset. To put your trust in an invisible power is anti-scientific. Such beliefs may have been necessary and excusable for the ancient authors of the Bible, we figure. Because they lacked science and technology, they had little choice but to believe in magic and gods to shield themselves psychologically from the uncontrollable forces in their life. But we see ourselves as fundamentally distinct from them, beyond childish fantasies, because modern science has revealed the true nature of the world and given us the tools to finally tame it and secure our well being. Of course, we may still acknowledge that faith could have some role to play in the realm of morals and values, but we would be much more comfortable explaining such things as the accidental results of evolution. But where faith collides with evidence, we know science should always win.

Many find Dawkins’ definition persuasive because it is not hard to find examples of people who do approach faith this way. It’s true that many turn to religion for the comfort of simple answers; or more disturbingly to take control by co-opting God’s final authority. It’s undeniable that a great deal of evil has arisen from that mistake.

But that doesn’t make Dawkins’ correct. Faith doesn’t require belief that contradicts evidence. According to the dictionary, faith has nothing to do with evidence, it is merely “complete trust or confidence in someone or something”. I like the definition in our scripture passage better: “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”. This positions faith as something that is needed when essential realities are invisible, but they don’t ask us to ignore evidence. In fact, they suggest where the evidence for faith may be found: “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” The apostle Paul made a similar statement: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly perceived, being understood from what has been made.” (Romans Ch 1 Vs 20).

So God isn’t in the material world because God created it, and therefore God isn’t visible. But we can still take this beautiful and terrible world as evidence telling a story about who God is.

As I reflected further on the tensions between science, technology, and faith, a quote from the famous science fiction author Arthur C Clarke grabbed my attention.

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”<sup>1</sup>

Something about the juxtaposition of technology and magic made me think about how even modern scientific pursuits are rooted in our ancient impulses for wonder and exploration of the unknown. I decided to go find the source, and it turns out it’s the third of three statements that have been dubbed “Clarke’s Three Laws”, from an essay called “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination”. The laws are:

1. When a distinguished ... scientist states that something is possible, [they are] almost certainly right. When [they] state that something is impossible, [they are] very probably wrong.
2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.
3. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

The first law struck me as speaking powerfully to the supposed conflict between faith and evidence. I still believe that when religious belief is directly and conclusively disproved by scientific evidence, it should be discarded. But I also think that conclusive proof is less common than we think. Clarke’s insight is that having a wealth of information and experience is often connected to failures of imagination. The more information and experience you have, the easier it is to come up with a credible story to explain what you’re seeing, and, the more convinced you become that anything you don’t know, the invisible stuff, doesn’t matter. But often it does matter. Sometimes it matters more than anything. That’s why the future continues to surprise us.

To my ear, Clarke’s laws express a sentiment similar to Paul’s in 1 Corinthians Ch 3 Vs 18-19:

*“Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become “fools” so that you may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness”*

The problem is not with wisdom, per se. The Bible is full of praise for wisdom. It’s a warning against wisdom without humility. Observations like these have moved me to evaluate Biblical narratives with much greater humility and curiosity. We know much that the Biblical authors didn’t, but while our ability to bend the physical environment to our wishes has progressed remarkably, our ability to discern the true sources of well-being, human flourishing, peace, and love, and to focus our powers in that direction have progressed much less, particularly at a societal level.

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Clarke, [“Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination”](#)

There's another way that living in the modern world sets us apart from our ancestors. In the internet era, the explosion of information that is effortlessly visible to us has no historical precedent. Always on, personalized social media feeds and a 24/7 news cycle customized to each and every demographic give the impression that all relevant facts are immediately available and that the TRUTH IS CLEAR. The sheer volume of evidence makes us more prone than ever to lose touch with our humility. More and more, we feel we have overwhelming evidence that THOSE PEOPLE are so terrible that Jesus' commands to show compassion, turn the other cheek, and love your enemies couldn't possibly apply. More and more, showing compassion and curiosity outside your own tribe is seen as evidence of moral complicity, a kind of betrayal, rather than an act of faith.

We should remember that even though the amount of information we are exposed to is overwhelming, the vast majority of what is real is still invisible to us. Daily acts of love and service are not newsworthy. When a teacher drags herself from bed at 4am to polish a lesson so it will be more effective for her students, you don't hear about it. When a safety manager goes the extra mile to design procedures that prevent injuries, neither you nor the safety manager ever hear about it. All the places where the world is working as it should, and where people sacrifice a little bit of themselves to keep things on track, are invisible unless you're directly involved. Remembering this ought to restore our humility. This is not to say that we should never take a stand, that we should just stay home and let "God's will be done". But if we are tempted to claim that the ends justify the means, that coming out on top matters more than how we got there because our cause is righteous, we should think twice. For Jesus to win the ultimate victory, he had to lose first.

Modern life trains us to expect many things to come easily and quickly, but the most important things still take time and effort, self-sacrifice, and faith. It has always struck me that while Jesus' miracles only changed the hearts of a few hundred people who witnessed them, and stopped when he left the world, the way he inspired his followers to love one another has transformed countless lives over thousands of years. Perhaps that alone should be enough to inspire us to venture a little way into the impossible, welcoming it from a distance.