

It has to be subjective

In the ultimate interview, God says: "Don't blame me!"

SO, may we talk about religion? Australian broadcaster Terry Lane asks God in a book where Lane imagines himself conducting what would have to be the ultimate interview.

"Yes, if you must," answers God, "though I warn you that it is a subject with which I have little patience, because it usually involves blaming me for things that I have never done."

In *God: The Interview*, Lane, a former clergyman, emphasises two things which make a lot of sense for religion in a secular society. He accepts that his God talk comes from inside his own head – "but tell me, where else does God exist?" – and he advises people to run as fast as they can from anyone who says they can hear the voice of God as clearly as any human voice.

On the subjective element, Lane says his reading of theologians across the centuries has persuaded him that the only ones to be trusted are those who admit that all they are doing is talking to themselves.

On those who claim to know with objective certainty what God is thinking or saying, "they are the most dangerous people on earth." A sure give-away is that they furiously denounce anyone who presumes to question what they say God is or wants or says. They have to be right; and therefore everyone else has to be wrong.

It seems to me that Lane has summed up very neatly one of the distinctions between good and bad religion in the modern world, of whatever variety. It is one thing to have deep convictions about what lies at the heart of one's orientation to life. It is quite another to insist that that is the only valid way of glimpsing truth, so that anyone who thinks otherwise must be mistaken, deluded, heretical or lost.

Recognising the subjectivity of religion is crucial. It gives people of faith the freedom to think things through for themselves as they explore and savour the nuances of life in the light of their religious tradition.

At the same time they will recognise that their faith, being subjective, will always be incomplete and provisional. That makes it possible to respect and learn from the insights of other people – and increasingly, that will include insights from denominations and faiths other than their own.

They will be firmly committed to their journey of faith, but open about where it may lead. Christians, for example, will hold true to their belief that the heart of Godness is to be discerned in Jesus, but they will be less inclined than in past eras to conclude that every other faith must therefore be false.

It would be pleasant to think that the Christianity of the future will encourage and build on such a subjectivity, confident and searching, open and inclusive, finding its validity in the life that is lived. The churches will have to change to let that happen, however; and, views on authority being what they are, that will not be easy.

It is a fact of history that when the church was most convinced it knew the mind of God, confirmed by a literal and selective reading of certain parts of the Bible, the worst atrocities were committed in God's name.

For hundreds of years church leaders believed they were doing God's will in burning witches at the stake. The youngest was only four years old.

The deeply pious Spaniard Tomas de Torquemada, a converted Jew, was certain he was doing what God wanted in hunting down Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism, but who were suspected of lapsing back into Judaism. From 1480 the Inquisition sent thousands of them to the stake in so-called "acts of faith".

The Swiss Protestant reformer Huldreich Zwingli believed he knew God's will when in the 1520s he sanctioned the drowning of Anabaptists in a lake for rejecting infant baptism.

To these can be added the ethnic cleansing of Canaan in the 13th century BC, when the conquering Jews under Joshua are reported to have slaughtered every man, woman and child. And the blood-letting of the Crusades for 200 years from 1096. And the murderous attack in the name of Allah on New York's World Trade Center in 2001.

In his interview, Lane has God noting drily, "Any unprejudiced reading of church history would have to make a chap an atheist. But I am here to set the record straight – I had nothing to do with it! Don't blame me!"

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