# Seeing Visions and Hearing Voices: Richard Holloway at the Edinburgh International Book Festival

Image (c) Colin Hattersley

Richard Holloway is 81 years old and looks about 60. Nevertheless, the author, ex-Episcopal Bishop of Edinburgh, former chairman of the **Scottish Arts Council** and champion of causes from the **Big Orchestra** to **LGBT rights** is not too bothered about death – and that's not because he expects anything much on the other side:

> 'I neither expect nor want life after death…all the prospectuses I've read are boring.'

He is, however, concerned about the meaning of the life he still has. Religion is, for him, 'an unresolved lifelong obsession'; unlike his famous dog **Daisy**, he can't just 'be', can't avoid the search for meaning or what he calls his fascination with the *being of being*. If the world came from nothing and will eventually return to it, does our extraordinary experience of the universe also mean nothing? What about all the beauty, nature, art, music and poetry we see around us? 'We have dreamed such dreams'.

At the **Edinburgh International Book Festival** on Tuesday, Richard discussed his thoughts – and he is at pains to stress that that's all they are, he has no answers to give us – with **Andrew Franklin.** At the coalface of the search for meaning, he says, are the prophets – from **Mohammed** in his cave to **Moses** in Sinai and **Pascal** with the *Memorial* (his record of a transcendent experience) sewn into his coat; stories of people who claim to have heard the voice of God litter history, so what are we to make of these alleged first-hand experiences?

These days people who claim to hear voices are more likely to be medicalised than encouraged to start new religions. But what if – as **William James** suggests in ***Varieties of Religious Experience*** **(1902)** – some people really can make contact with the intelligence behind the universe? Do we dismiss them as nutters or do we believe everything they say? Well neither, says Richard – in fact, extremism is really what this talk is all about, and it's something that hurts him profoundly. Conservative religion (of any brand) 'locks us

into a static understanding of history' in its certainty that it is right. Opposition to the ordination of women and to LGBT rights are examples of some parts of the church clinging to its self-made rules; a circular argument that justifies itself by reference to itself.

Religions, says Richard, create structures for comfort but also for power and control; he doesn't like anything or anybody who thinks they're right and all the others are wrong. Prophets through the ages have been killed because they challenged the status quo, the moral certainty of people who think they've got the answer.

So just how do you justify your own moral code then? asks Andrew – what makes you know that gay marriage, for example, is right? Surely you need some kind of moral code – you probably wouldn't support paedophile marriage, would you? (He wouldn't.) For Richard, the only criteria for a moral norm are kindness, a bringing of all people into the human relationship, 'Above all, do no harm'. Moralists may complicate it but 'It's just common sense'. Nevertheless, he struggles to accept the atheist's view that there is nothing transcendent beyond ourselves, seeing it as another version of false certainty;

> 'It hurts me that this extraordinary experience of the universe could mean nothing…I cannot endure it and I cannot resolve it.'

He clings on to 'what little shreds of religion I have left'.

What then, says Andrew, is the difference between the schizophrenic and the true prophet? Richard has just been chairing **Andrew Scull's** session on ***A History of Insanity*****;** Scull suggests that insanity is part of the human condition and that artistic genius is very close to madness, although there's no doubting it can also be very painful. Richard's view is that whilst only prophets have direct experience of

hearing a voice, even they can get it wrong, can misunderstand what they hear just as much as we can. We need to be stronger in interrogating them, to treat what people say with wariness (‘stay on tiptoe’), but not simply to reduce it to pathology;

‘People who do ‘neat’ turn into fundamentalist believers or fundamental atheists; neither is very interesting’.

It is thinking of what has come from nothingness – the ‘mindblowing’ beauty of the world – that keeps Richard on the edge of believing that there is some sort of meaning; he lives in ‘a permanent passionate state of unknowing’. He has had ‘one or two’ mystical moments himself, but doesn’t base his arguments on them. He’s glad religion is still around, but thinks it needs to be purged, and that it’s at its best when it’s weak. He’s very interested in the mystic tradition, in people like the **Sufis** who experience God without talking about it, and are indeed suspicious of talk.

‘The heart of religion is silence’

He even wonders whether it might do the church good to take a long sabbatical from all language and just get on with looking after the poor and challenging the corrupt systems of the world.

Living with a critical faculty and an ability for abandonment has, says Richard, led him to lead ‘a very uncomfortable life’, but if he has any advice for us at all it is to stay open to change, development, new ideas;

‘Hold on to all the craziness; in its most creative form it can give you flashes of insight and compassion, and it leads people all over the world to care for the poor and to challenge oppression.’

And with that he is off, bounding away (apparently Daisy can no longer keep up – I have sympathy) to sign books, speak to people and continue his energetic exploration of what it means

to be human. Richard Holloway may have serious doubts about religion, but few can doubt the essential humanity of this compassionate, thoughtful man.