God Says Yes To Me
– at evensong in an Oxford chapel, 2010

'God says yes to me' is the title of a short poem by the American writer Kaylin Haught. 'I asked God,' says its opening line, 'if it was okay to be melodramatic.'

The poem provides the springboard, the trigger, the text, for this evening's meditation on your theme this term at St Hugh's entitled 'God Matters'.

> I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
> and she said yes.
> I asked her if it was okay to be short
> and she said it sure is.
> I asked her if I could wear nail polish
> or not wear nail polish
> and she said honey
> (she calls me that sometimes)
> she said you can do just exactly
> what you want to.
> Thanks God I said
> and is it even okay if I don't paragraph
> my letters?
> Sweetcakes God said
> (who knows where she picked that up)
> what I'm telling you is
> Yes Yes Yes.

At first reading, the poem is an assertive affirmation of the *via positiva*, an embracing of totality — 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive'. At the same time it's a feisty and defiant rejection of all those voices in the weft and warp of humankind's religious traditions which dwell on what is *haram*, unclean, polluted, forbidden.

If God did not exist, the poem is saying according to this interpretation, it would be necessary to invent him, or her — not primarily or mainly to explain stuff not yet explicable, but to contain, control and police the young, and all other beings similarly inclined to be naughty, disobedient, uppity, rebellious, er, diverse.

'There is a chapel in the garden of love with "Thou shalt not" writ over the door', observed William Blake, 'and priests in black gowns are walking their rounds, and binding with briars my joys and desires.' Let us think and dwell, say the black-gowned priests and their equivalents in all religions, on the dire consequences of primal disobedience — 'the fruit of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe'.

Kaylin Haught's poem says No to what she sees and hears as wave on wave of forbidding, commanding, controlling, fearful, ungenerous, restraining, constraining injunctions and assumptions in discourse about God matters, and in the woeful institutions and rituals in which God-matters discourse is daily, routinely, nourished and deployed.

What do we say to Kaylin Haught's poem? Like God to her, do we say yes, yes, yes? E M Forster said he could raise no more than two cheers for democracy — 'one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism', but in view of various omissions in democracy discourse, he could not give three cheers. Can we, for analogous reasons, say no more than 'yes, yes' to Kaylin Haught? Or only yes? Or, even, only ye-es?

Our problem is that the priests in black gowns walking their rounds believe that they too have received a God-given seal of approval. That being the case, what are the grounds on which we say yes to Kaylin Haught but no to them?

(Occasionally, a black-gowned priest does not believe they have a divine seal of approval. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, for example, had the good grace to acknowledge that God, or any way Jesus, didn't approve of people like grand inquisitors — we have corrected your work, they said to Jesus, for you over-estimated humans' capacity to enjoy freedom. But such good grace in rare in your average black-gowned priest.)

Our further problem is that soldiers, rulers and commanders, and those who vote for them, are told by black-gowned priests that they too have God's blessings showered on them. As the young Bob Dylan didn't quite say:

> I've learned to hate Islam
> All through my long life,
> When the next war starts
> It's them we must fight.
> To hate them and fear them
> To run and to hide
> And accept it all bravely

With God on our side.

Are humans prone to be horrible to each other because they are prone to be religious? Or are they prone to be religious because they are prone to be horrible?

Amongst theologians, sociologists, political scientists and psychologists, and in many other disciplines, the jury's out on this question. But at least we can note that just as conflicts can be gendered or racialised so also they can be religionised, with each side demonising and satanising the other, and at the same time idealising itself – its own saints, standards and symbols, and its own authority structures, though not always in exactly that order: 'Cry God for Harry, England and Saint George!'

This week *Der Spiegel* reported that 58 per cent of respondents in a recent survey in Germany agreed that 'the practice of Islam [in Germany] should be significantly restricted' — incidentally, this view was particularly strong in regions of Germany where there are in fact very few Muslims! Also, 55 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement 'I can fully understand why some people find Arabs unpleasant'; 39 per cent said they do not feel 'safe and comfortable' in their immediate surroundings; 17 per cent agreed that 'even today, Jews have too much influence'. More than 90 per cent said they felt 'it is useless to become involved in politics'.

Two weeks ago, *Der Spiegel* ran a major article in which it claimed that such attitudes and beliefs are widespread and on the rise throughout western Europe, and may be found amongst younger people as well as older, and in all social classes, and in all parts of the conventional political spectrum. The article was entitled 'Continent of Fear'.

Ruth in the Jewish scriptures, whose story was rehearsed in our first reading here this evening, saw love for another human being as more important than religion. 'Where you go, I will go,' she said. 'where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.'

St Paul, quoted in our second reading, said 'in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek'. In modern times, he might say 'there is no longer Jew or Arab', or 'no longer Christian or Muslim'. And he might add and emphasise that the line between good and evil does not run between Christian and Muslim, or between west and east, or between us and them, or between religious people and non-religious, but through every single human heart.

But in this continent of fear, and in the wider world of fear, will the voices of Ruth and Saint Paul be heard? Heard by soldiers, rulers, activists? Heard by clergy?

The jury's out.

The jury may be gone for some time. In the meanwhile, as we watch and wait, we may do well to travel not only by the *via positiva* but also the *via negativa*, the path that says *neti, neti* — 'no, no' or 'not this, not that' — nothing we say of God is true, God wants to save us from God, the God to whom we pray 'Teach us to care and not to care'. The skills we need have traditionally been known as discernment of spirits — the intolerable wrestle to distinguish between God on the one hand and our various human constructions, projections and wishful thinkings about 'God' on the other.

It's not only religious people, of course, who have to be able to tell the difference between what is real and what is desired. The capacity to discern spirits is required of everyone, regardless of whether and how they feel about God matters.

A secular counterpart of discernment is negative capability — 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

Engaging in discernment or negative capability, it follows, is a political act.

And requires, amongst other things, political skills.

'I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic'.

So let us say at least 'yes, yes' to Kaylin Haught? Or should it be 'no, no'? Or a single yes? A single no?

Or ye-es?

No-o?

Amen?

Source: talk by Robin Richardson at evensong in the chapel of St Hugh's College, Oxford, 17 October 2010