

REFLECTION



Robbie Young reflects on the inter-relationship between love and freedom.

In most debates about religious belief and non-belief, arguments tend to centre around the clash between faith and reason. Historically there is the classic case of the nineteenth century English vicar who loses his 'faith' because 'reason' has shown it to be nothing more than belief in a childish fantasy. The big guns on the side of reason are figures like Marx, Darwin, Freud. But faith is not lacking in its defenders, whether they are theologians like Thomas Aquinas and John Henry Newman, or popular writers like G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis.

Either God or me?

But there is another pair of existential contenders in the field of religious experience: love and freedom. When freedom is taken as an absolute it may appear that love cannot exist. For what is love if not being somehow linked to the beloved, captivated, duty-bound. A text message must be answered, a birthday must be remembered, and an apology must be made for feelings that are hurt. Still, this form of love takes place between equals and an apology is softened by a forgiving kiss. The stakes are different when one of the partners is God. Now it would appear it's either God or me. The teenager with overly strict parents has only two choices: stay at home or run away. In all the great spiritual traditions love for God is expressed by submission. Even Jesus seemed to submit with his 'not my will, but yours be done'.

Freedom trumps everything

Recently I was walking in a park and I saw people doing what they normally do in parks: walking the dog,

Love and freedom

jogging, throwing Frisbees, reading a book, kicking a ball with their kids. It struck me that part, if not most of the underlying contentment that could be seen on their faces, was the fact of being free to do what they wanted to do. When you taste that sort of freedom it's very hard to settle for less. And it's not surprising if you want more of it: not just when you're in the park on a Sunday afternoon, but in every aspect of life: free to wear what you want, to say what you think, to choose your interests, your friends, your values, your beliefs. Once we get a taste of it, for many of us that sort of freedom becomes a non-negotiable. It trumps everything: traditions, customs, taboos, relationships. Even God. And perhaps, especially God. There may be those who are convinced by rational arguments against the existence of God. But for many the greatest obstacle to an acceptance of God tends to come from having tasted the exhilaration of a lifestyle that is freely chosen. Why should I feel obliged to go to church on Sunday when I want to spend the weekend hiking in the mountains, or take my kids to the face painting festival?



