

Faith and Uncertainty

Thought for the Day

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Well, let's see – yesterday Pope Benedict visited Scotland, and tomorrow is Yom Kippur – so what is there to talk about?!

Actually something about as different as I can manage: last week I came across a remark by Michael Faraday, the great 19th-century scientist, that “there is nothing so frightening as someone who knows he is right”. It struck me how closely this was echoed by our own late great Jimmy Reid, when he turned his back on communism because, he said, he could no longer abide its smug conviction of its own certainty.

Uncertainty is a fact of life, not just in the simple sense that we can't calculate all the odds on what lurks in our future, but in the deeper sense that even science can never be complete. Even if that elusive particle, the Higgs boson, is discovered in the subatomic debris beneath Geneva, heralding the prospect of a unified Theory of Everything – and, incidentally, probably another Nobel prize for Scotland – that will not be the end of physics, any more than the collapse of the Soviet Union was the end of history. Scientists will go on disagreeing, debating, arguing, and refining and improving their theories.

Nor, as Stephen Hawking claimed last week, will it be the end of religion, not only because science and religion are not in opposition, or because science itself makes quasi-religious claims, but because ultimately both go beyond what we can observe, and so require faith. And so does life: as the soon-to-be-beatified Cardinal Newman said, “Life is for action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith.”

So here we are, back to this week's religious news after all! Tonight and tomorrow, on Yom Kippur, Jews everywhere will spend a day in contemplation of life's uncertainties, pondering the year ahead, and resolving to strive to make the world a better place for ourselves and for others. In the words of an ancient prayer: may the old year end with its torments, and the new year begin with its blessings.

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