

THE MYSTERY OF DAPHNE DU MAURIER'S HUMANISM

©

By Christopher Clayton

In this one hundredth anniversary year of the birth of the celebrated writer Dame Daphne du Maurier Christopher Clayton examines in detail her beliefs regarding religion, god, life, death, morality and the supernatural. Was Daphne du Maurier in fact a humanist and how did her beliefs affect her writing?

One of the great problems of our time is how to live without religion wrote Daphne du Maurier over 20 years ago. It is a claim which rings even more loudly today. To be precise the renowned writer stated that it was the second great problem, the first being how to deal with the disintegration of the family resulting from the changing status of women . We do not know whether or not today she might have changed the order, in the light of the rise of religious fundamentalism, extremism and conflict . This year 2007 is the hundredth anniversary of Dame du Mauriers birth. It has been marked by an outpouring of republished books; an international conference held to coincide with the annual Daphne du Maurier Festival at Fowey where she made her home; television documentaries; even a BBC drama dealing with an aspect of her life. Daphne du Maurer the famous author of Rebecca, Jamaica Inn, The Birds, Don't Look Now, Frenchmen's Creek and numerous other novels, short stories, plays, respected biographies and a great quantity of other work has been described by Professor Nina Auerbach as "a complex, powerful, unique writer, so unorthodox that no critical tradition, from formalism to feminism, can digest her" ('Daphne du Maurier: Haunted Heiress'). She may at last be about to get the serious recognition she deserves.

So, now is a good time to examine her striking beliefs regarding religion, god, morality, life and death, the supernatural ----- and to identify the way in which her beliefs are reflected in her writing. Some people may be surprised to discover that they are expressed in terms which secular humanists might readily agree with. Was she in fact a secular humanist?

Her statement regarding religion was not by any means a passing remark. It was made in her essay 'This I Believe' which was published in 1981 in a collection which included and carried the title 'The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories, republished in 2005 by Virago Modern Classics as part of a major programme. Her essay contained a substantial and effectively expressed analysis of beliefs which today could plainly be labelled as secular humanism, to an extent that organisations like the British Humanist Association or the National Secular Society might readily circulate reprints to advance the world view they promote!

GOD?

"The image of a super-Brain, sitting before a blueprint of a million universes and commanding "Let there be light," does not convince me, nor that such a super-Brain should point a finger at the particle I am and demand subservience to its authority. The super-Brain, if it exists, has made too many errors of judgment through the ages to deem itself omnipotent, and so win our allegiance." She then goes on to describe the evolutionary process, saying "Races die out. Civilisations crumble. Not because an Almighty Ruler deals out punishment to offending sinners, but because certain particles of matter have failed to adapt to the changing circumstances of a particular period."

MORALITY

The non-theistic evolutionary view is something which she sees as readily reconciled with “a firm faith in all the finer feelings and qualities that have involved in man since he first stood erect”, because altruism is a necessary factor in survival. “Awareness of others, the feeling for his young shared by all birds and beasts, enabled him to keep his unit strong.” The possible inaccuracy of this assertion does not undermine the force of her description of evolution. She does not see what all this has to do with God unless it is just another word for Life, not omnipotent or unchanging, but forever changing.

DEATH

The dawn of religious instincts in man came through the first encounter with death which slew his father and mother so that his groping mind sought consolation in a greater Father and Mother, whether in the sky or in the bowels of the earth. Death featured strongly in her life and writing, her childhood fascination with Great Plague Games amusingly recounted in her autobiographical 'Myself When Young'. The death of her husband Major General Browning (responsible for Operation Market Garden portrayed in 'A Bridge Too Far') calls forth the hope expressed in 'Death and Widowhood' that he had found the 'peace which passes all understanding'. “ Yet I had seen his empty shell. I had seen the light flicker and go out. Where had it gone? Was it blown to emptiness after all, like the light of a candle, and does each one of us, in the end, vanish into darkness? If this is so, and our dreams of survival after death are only dreams, then we must accept this too. Not with fear and dismay, but with courage. To have lived at all is a measure of immortality: for a baby to be born, to become a man, a woman, to beget others like himself, is an act of faith in itself, even an act of defiance. It is as though every human being born into this world burns, for a brief moment, like a star, and because of it a pinpoint of light shines in the darkness, and so there is glory, so there is life. If there is nothing more than this, we have achieved our immortality.” Similar sentiments were expressed at the end of her family biography 'The du Mauriers' in which she questions whether immortality is true or a theory invented by man as a sop to his natural fear. None of us will ever know she judges yet finds it consoling to imagine that "we leave something of ourselves, like the wake of a vessel, as a reminder that once we passed this way." Ghosts are plentiful but not phantoms with pale faces, rather the happy shadow-ghosts of what has been.

CHILDHOOD SCEPTICISM

Daphne's life-long scepticism dated from early childhood. In her autobiographical 'Myself When Young' she recounts how as a young child unlike her sisters she struggled with fairies and Father Christmas whose feat of getting down everybody's chimneys all in the one night couldn't be done. If they were just invented to deceive children, then what about the pictures in her prayer book? "No Father Christmas might mean no God. And anyway, how could God balance up in the sky in all those clouds, for ever and ever, now and again booming down messages to the Children of Israel, who often disobeyed him?" People looked awkward when you kept asking why, why, whyYears later Daphne's daughter Flavia reported in her Memoir that the three children never believed in Father Christmas as their mother thought it all wrong to tell children such lies. There is an illuminating episode in Margaret Forster's biography 'Daphne du Maurier' when Daphne was at finishing school in France. A young curate had been preparing girls for

confirmation, telling them that they were all going to heaven so there was nothing to fear from death. Daphne, grabbing a wrought-iron chair, advanced on him threatening to bash him on the head and kill him. As he cowered in fear, she laughed, saying it proved his promise of eternal life was rubbish.

In 'This I Believe' she wrote that "The sceptic of seven who queried the existence of God in the sky, of fairies in the woods, of father Christmas descending every London chimney in a single magic night, remains a sceptic at fifty-seven, believing all things possible only when they can be proved by scientific fact". This was republished in 1981, just eight years before she died at aged eighty two.

BELIEF AND SCIENCE

Something Daphne did believe in was the possibility of ESP, telepathy, precognition, a sixth sense, the du Maurier dreaming true, 'an indefinable grasp of things unknown'. In 'Classics Of The Macabre' she wrote "Though not at all psychic ---- I have never seen a ghost or dabbled in spiritualism or the occult ---- I have always been fascinated by the unexplained, the darker side of life." She believed there to be a faculty, an inner untapped power 'not yet pinpointed by science' which 'to date' scientist were either not yet prepared to acknowledge or at least recognise the importance of. It was important to her. She hoped for its eventual transformation of the human condition, while admitting to dangers in such things as 'so-called spiritualism and quack hypnosis'. Many people have believed and still do in the eventual identification of such powers, which are featured in numerous works of science or speculative fiction. Sometimes they are wrongly confused with ideas of the supernatural, rather than aspects of the natural we do not yet understand.

Another area of interest was the 'exciting, even exhilarating 'new science of genetics and in the 'collective consciousness' of psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. "There is no cell in our bodies that has not been transmitted to us by our ancestors For this reason none of us is isolated in time, a mere expression of the present. In a very real sense, yesterday is within us" she wrote. In addition to her historical novels and biographies such beliefs are expressed in her celebrated historical cum science fiction novel 'The House On The Strand' in which an experimental drug appears to tap into ancestral memory.

Another example of her treatment of the outer reaches of science is 'The Breakthrough' in which there is a scientific experiment into life after death which has echoes of modern scientific enquiries into near death experiences.

However questionable such beliefs may be to some, we should remember her claim to believe all things possible only when they can be scientifically proved. One wonders how she would react to developments since her death, including the ideas of transhumanism for improvement of our species.

ANTICLERICALISM

What might be called a strand of anti-clericalism can be found in du Maurier. Her very first published short-story 'And Now To God The Father', Strand Magazine 1929, was about a high-society vicar who being more concerned about his upper class parishoners lets down a pregnant

girl who kills herself. In 'Way Of The Cross' a young boy who is a member of a church coach party visiting the Holy Land is shocked that they did not stop to help a the occupants of a car which has broken down by ---- the Good Samaritan Inn. 'No Motive' is about the inexplicable death of an innocent girl, the daughter of a vicar, who years earlier had been raped while unconscious and on discovering that she is pregnant believes that because she is a virgin she must be giving birth to the second coming of Christ. In 'Angels And Archangels' the same vicar referred to earlier is horrified to be replaced by a locum who ministers to slum dwellers and is hence removed from the church when the vicar returns. It is well known that Daphne was displeased by the film of her 'Jamaica Inn' not least because a squire had replaced the evil vicar in her story.

In the highly regarded biography of 'The Infernal World Of Branwell Bronte' Daphne examines with feeling the tragic life and death of the Bronte sister's talented brother in their Howarth Parsonage home, as he struggles with misunderstood mental illness and addiction. In an unfinished poem Branwell cites an Almighty God who framed Creation so well that in an hour it all rebelled, hurling our race into Hell for the deeds we have done "Though he has made us everyone!"

Daphne's fictional approach to the supernatural is not quite what some people might think it to be. I have a theory that one reason for the success of her work is that many of her stories are natural mysteries with a supernatural appeal. Ambiguity is the word which most effectively describes so much of her writing, as it does her life and personal relationships. 'Rebecca' has been described as a 'ghost story without a ghost'. Famously in the film 'Don't Look Now' the figure in the red coat is not the ghost of Sutherland's daughter but is ----- well, I will leave you to read the story or watch the film if you have not yet done so! Although 'The Birds' has a distinctly eerie quality it is far from being about the supernatural, rather it is a story of nature in revolt against humankind perhaps as a result of our tampering with the climate? Ambiguity is made explicit at the start of 'Monte Verita' in which a mysterious pre-Christian cult of eternal youth disappear from their mountain monastery just as angry villagers are about to attack. The narrator says he has three theories, none of which may be true. The first is that the inhabitants of Monte Verita vanished into the heavens in accordance with the 'long history of religious superstition and credulity'; second, they climbed to a crevasse between the peaks and 'so were lost' in a suicide pact; third, in accordance with a long established plan they stealthily came down into the valley to mingle unobserved with the people before going their separate ways. The reader is left to take their pick.

WHAT KIND OF HUMANIST?

If we agree with Nina Auberach who said at a du Maurier Festival gathering in 2007 that she did not see Daphne as any kind of 'believer', meaning that she did not believe in God / gods or the supernatural, we might then ask what kind of secular humanist was she? In 'The du Maurier's' there are various passages which indicate where her sympathies lie in respect of her Catholic and atheist ancestors. Both her great grandfather George du Maurier (creator of Svengali in 'Trilby') and great great grandfather Louis-Mathurin were atheists, passionate unbelievers without religion yet believing in 'a power that did not call itself God, but was a mixture of truth and justice' and in a morality in which cruelty was the only sin, kindness and truth telling the supreme virtues. Nevertheless, I have not found any evidence that she had contact with secularist or humanist organisations, in which respect she was the same as millions of people in the UK and world-wide who identify with humanist beliefs and values (as opinion polls show) but have no contact with

or even awareness of the humanist and secularist movement. Despite her trenchant views on God and her anti-clericalism it is clear that she would not have been drawn to militant atheistic secularists, those who are seen rightly or wrongly as reductionist materialists. As she put it herself, the instinct to be watched over is basic to us all, taking different forms depending on our upbringing and temperament, etc. "Which would mean that no religion was really better than any other, that each was right according to his notions, and that was that! The only Doom is out-and-out materialism, which denies this spiritual side to our nature" ('Letters From Menabilly'). 'Doom' was her code for any dire happening. She might have felt close to those humanists who are comfortable with the word and concept of spirituality as an expression of the highest or deepest human feelings. Humanists such as those who would identify with scientist Sir Julian Huxley: "I prefer to say that the spiritual elements which are usually styled divine are part and parcel of human nature" or possibly humanist educationalists like Professor John White in whose view 'the spiritual' has to do with the cosmic shudder we all feel from time to time when contemplating the existence of life, especially our own self-conscious life, and of the universe.....it is what the arts and contemplation of nature can bring about rather than religious knowledge, which should be top of the list."

'Letters From Menabilly' between Daphne and her religiously inclined friend Oriel Malet contain numerous expressions of her thoughts on religion from which it is clear that she was attracted to the aesthetics of religion, its spiritual warmth, fellowship and the inspirational lives of some individuals. Like C. Day-Lewis who coined the term 'churchy agnosticism' she had a love of some of the language and music of religion without a faith in what lay behind them. She wrote enthusiastically to Oriel Malet about Dorothy Kerin, the Anglican spiritual healer from the early twentieth century yet Malet admits that 'once again' the two of them looked at such matters from a different point of view, saying that as always Daphne was seeking for a 'purely psychological answer' to the healing. (Even Malet shows some unease at how Kerin's ministry seemed directed at the wealthy and influential, at princesses, duchesses and bishops!)

So, one form of humanism which I think might have appealed is that of theologian Don Cupitt's Sea of Faith Network whose strapline 'respecting religion as a human creation' would have struck a chord. It is plain from numerous sources that Daphne did believe with humanists that religion is a human creation yet despite her critique she found much in it to respect. Some humanists find the Sea of Faith approach with its 'agnostic C of E vicars and even bishops' difficult to reconcile with their secularism. I suspect Daphne would not have had as much difficulty.

Another form of humanism which I am confident Daphne would have appreciated is naturalistic Pantheism with its emphasis on naturalistic in contrast to supernatural and with its reverence for the natural world, from the beauty of nature around us revealed in du Maurier's Cornwall to the majestic mystery of the universe revealed by the Hubble telescope. Many naturalistic Pantheists in, for example, the World Pantheist Movement participate in ceremonies and rituals related to the cycles of the natural world. I can see Daphne nodding in appreciation of this quotation from Albert Einstein:

"A human being is part of a whole, called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures

and the whole of nature in its beauty."

Here we link with another strand of Daphne's beliefs, attracting her to paganism. She sometimes described herself as a pagan, particularly when reflecting on suggestions she should join some formal religion. There is a chapter in Sarah Walter's 'The Daphne du Maurier Companion' from Melanie Heeley entitled 'Christianity Versus Paganism: Daphne du Maurier's Divided Mind' which contains her poem 'Apostasis'. It begins

"I resent and cannot be reconciled
Anymore now than I was a child
To the Fatherhood of God, the God of the Sky."

She says she will not be mocked by fables of Palestine, of shepherds watching their flocks, of water to wine, martyred saints, of Mary and Jesus when from the passionate earth comes the sound and strife of Gaia, Mother of Man expressed in all the fire and water, mountains, valleys and plains of our world which has given life to humanity. Christianity, Daphne thought, is merely a 'recent upstart when compared with paganism, Catholicism was too modern for her, like living in a block of flats instead of a cave!' Gaia is of course both the goddess of the Earth in Greek mythology who sprang from primordial chaos and James Lovelock's scientific theory that Earth functions like a single organism with living and non-living systems interacting to sustain life.

CONSISTENCY

Daphne seems to have been remarkably consistent in her beliefs from childhood until towards the end of her long creative life. There was one odd 'abberation' (Judith Cook's description) when during the second world war she was attracted to and wrote a popular morale-boosting pamphlet for Moral ReArmament called 'Come Wind, Come Weather'. It contained simple yet effective homilies with little literary or intellectual merit. It does seem to have been a publication she preferred to forget, renouncing MRA after the war. Margaret Forster recounts how years later during a period of depression she told a friend who reminded her of earlier comforting certainties not to tell her to listen to God as no messages come from there, even though she would say 'dear God help me'. The late Judith Cook in her 'Daphne: A Portrait Of Daphne du Maurier' says in later life she still prayed nightly, a habit too hard to break, but recognised the only worthwhile prayer is for courage to bear the ills that come to us, including those we bring on ourselves. This sentiment is expressed in 'The du Mauriers'. She had decided hell was probably what we make it, not other people as Sartre had said. We know from Judith Cooke, Margaret Forster and Oriel Mallet that in the last years of her life she found comfort in reading a Catholic missal, attending a local Church and praying (or meditating?) in a chapel at her Kilmarth home. Yet she still dismissed any attempts to involve her in any sort of formal religion, sometimes reminding people of her 'paganism'. I am not in any position to speculate on what such personal things really meant to her towards the end. For much of her life religion could have been just a literary device, as has been suggested with regard to some of her stories, with God just a 'peg' which is a du Maurier word for someone who is the inspiration for a fictional character, as she discusses in 'Letters'. However, although religion was not something to be taken 'literally' it was surely more to her than this. I nevertheless point to the fact that the essay 'This I Believe' with its very clear humanist exposition, is contained in the very last book with which she was directly involved.

THIS IS MY ENDING

When as an active humanist I first discovered my favourite author's clearly stated humanist beliefs regarding god, morality, life, death and the supernatural I was pleased to categorise her as a humanist like myself. Now while I still see that her beliefs are remarkably like my own I doubt the desirability of applying any limiting categorisation to them. Just as some literary experts say that she cannot be adequately categorised into any particular form of writing, given that her work is uniquely diverse, so too any attempt to categorising her in regard to religious or non-religious belief may also be inadequate. Perhaps a sceptical agnostic pantheistic humanist is as near as we can get!

In Daphne du Maurier's first novel 'The Loving Spirit' Janet Coombes meets her as yet unborn son by the cliffs at Castle Point to comfort him in his despair. He asks "Tell me, is there a God? He looked into her eyes and read the truth." For many of us, like Daphne, what that truth is will continue to be a mystery.

The end

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