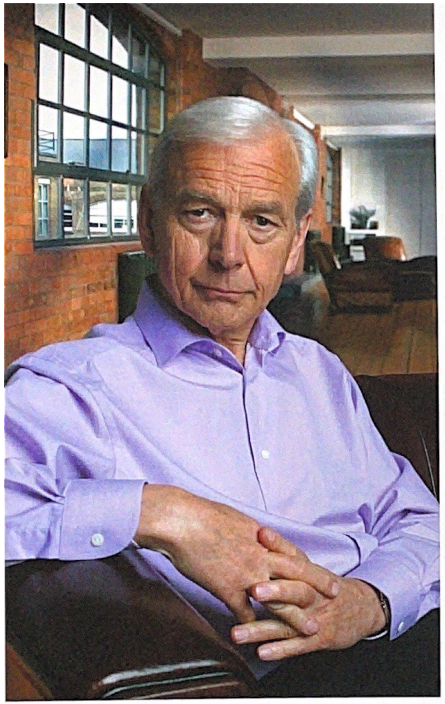

On death and DOUBTING

One of Britain's best known and at times most controversial broadcasters, **John Humphrys** shares his reflections on two big subjects. Interview by Kay Parris

Two pieces of John Humphrys' work stand out from among the accolades and awards adorning his long years as a British broadcasting institution.

He has fronted the BBC's highest profile TV and radio programmes – including six years on the nine o'clock news in the 80s, and 22 years this year presenting Today on Radio 4. He is also the author of six books and a great many newspaper articles.

But two projects have elicited outpourings of feedback from listeners and readers, quite beyond compare to anything else he has done.

The first, in 2003, was an article in the Sunday Times in which he depicted his father's death after a long struggle with decline and dementia and railed against society's increasing compulsion to "keep people alive because we can."

The second, Humphrys in Search of God, was a series of three interviews with British faith leaders broadcast on Radio 4 in 2006.

Like the Sunday Times article, these interviews came from the heart. They reflected Humphrys' genuine struggle to reconcile himself to the idea of belief or unbelief in God, long after he had abandoned his Christian upbringing and a 50-year nightly prayer habit.

'My father should have been allowed to die'

Both topics inspired books. In God We Doubt, which shows Humphrys settling for the position of agnostic or "failed atheist", was published in 2007.

And when I talk to John Humphrys in December 2008, he is just finishing work on a book exploring society's approach to death, which is due for publication in the spring.

"It's about the way we approach death and why it has changed so much over the last couple of generations, and therefore why we need to think again about such things as euthanasia," he explains.

"We simply don't come into contact with death any longer the way we used to. We don't expect to see children dying in childhood, the kind of thing that was commonplace when I was a kid, and we don't die at 50 any longer."

Photo: BBC Pictures

He admits he could hardly have picked a more painful and difficult subject. "God", as he refers to the faith venture, was difficult enough, but at least he knew where he stood on that. Trying to come to terms with attitudes around any kind of mercy killing was harder.

"I've now reconciled my position on it, but I had to do a lot of thinking and research on this incredibly difficult question."

He relates the story of what happened to his father, George, in the last years of his life.

"He had become senile, though at first we didn't realize what was going on. You get angry with him because he's becoming a different person and becoming unpleasant and all the rest of it.

"Then eventually, and it's always later than it should be, you realize the severity, that there is something happening to his brain. It begins to fall into place and you then try to help him as much as you can but it is very, very difficult.

"He had wanted to die when my mother died, he couldn't see any point in continuing to live. He was drinking a bottle of whisky a day and he refused to live with anyone else and eventually he collapsed, and he should have been allowed to die.

"But because we can now do things we couldn't do before with old people, he didn't die. He lived for two more years and they were fairly wretched years that cast a shadow over his whole life."

The Sunday Times article spelled out the misery of George Humphrys' final years – longing for death, crying out for help from a mental hospital bed, refusing food and water, until at long last being allowed to die in peace. The response from readers was immediate and extraordinary – an avalanche of letters from people who had shared the anguish of living through the longterm decline and protracted death of relatives.

Humphrys won't give specifics about his position on when may be the right time to help or allow the end of life, this being "the core of the book." But he does say he believes his is a majority view:

"I'm absolutely convinced of it for all sorts of reasons, it's just that most people feel terribly guilty about holding this view, about taking this approach. And to that extent this is a self-help book saying you don't have to be riddled with guilt as most of us are. It's a perfectly understandable position to take, but we must address it as society. There are already up to 800,000 people suffering with dementia, and that's increasingly exponentially. It will be a million in about 13 years time, simply because we are living longer."

Of course there is a connection between the two topics that have inspired Humphrys' biggest ever postbags. In considering the right to die in a manner of one's choosing and the point at which one's life can be considered irrevocably not worth living, one is reflecting on the nature of life and death itself. And that is true of any search for the meaning or existence of God. In fact Humphrys' in Search of God inspired even more letters than his article about his father's death.

'I don't believe in God, but I don't believe either that the whole thing is just a bizarre accident'

"The God mailbag was the biggest I've ever had. I never did count the number of letters, but when the letters came they just kept coming, they're still coming."

Where is he at now with his searching?

"I don't believe in God, but I don't believe either that the whole thing is just a bizarre accident. Or at least, if it is, something has to explain our spirituality, which clearly does exist.

"Obviously I can't explain it. Who can? No living person can satisfactorily do that because it's not something that a clever theological mind can address and come up with an answer. If we could there would be no such thing as faith."

So going back to the interviews, with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and the leading Muslim academic Professor Tariq Ramadan, what feedback did he get from listeners on how persuasive they were?

"Most of the criticism, such as it was, was criticism of Rowan Williams. They thought he was too milk and water. They wanted the Archbishop of Canterbury to be a bit tougher, to tell me to snap out of it, really, and he didn't do that.

"But mostly the letters were saying, you've missed the point. Here are 10 reasons why you should believe, and those are the letters I still get regularly."

I wonder what impression an outsider might get from reading those letters about the state of religion in this country today – the good and the bad of it.

"You'd be a fool if you didn't recognize that there are aspects of religious faith that are damaging, you've only got to look at 9/11 for the most obvious clichéd evidence of that.

"But the people who wrote to me overwhelmingly seemed like thoroughly decent individuals, who were genuinely concerned that I should find the faith that has made them so happy. Lots of them were very, very intelligent.

"Some weren't of course, some were simply barking. But most were intelligent, thoughtful letters. But what they miss – and I've given up trying to explain this because if you do reply and I always try to, you get another one back – but what they miss is that because it works for them doesn't mean it works for anybody else.

"Faith is peculiarly and uniquely personal. It has to be. Hysteria isn't, and the kind of thing you get with, I ▶

'Listeners wanted the Archbishop of Canterbury to be a bit tougher, to tell me to snap out of it'

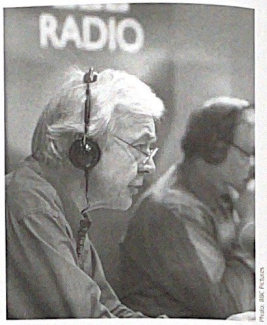

Photo: BBC Pictures

▶ don't know, the Toronto Blessing or something, it seems to me is a result of mass hysteria. But personal faith, belief in a personal God is by definition a personal thing."

Would he still consider himself a "devout skeptic" as he describes himself in his book?

"Yes, my position hasn't changed. I know a couple of things. I know that I don't believe in God, that's a certainty. What I'm not certain about is whether that will ever change, because it would be supremely arrogant to suggest that it won't.

"I might wake up tomorrow morning and find a shimmering figure in the corner of my bedroom calling me to Jesus. Well of course that's possible. It's happened to some people or they imagine it has, and it could happen to me though I think it's very unlikely.

"I think it's even possible that I could be persuaded – though I do think this is very, very unlikely, possibly as unlikely as the last scenario – that I could be persuaded intellectually to believe in God, but then it isn't faith of course."

I wonder how often certainty is available to us, but Humphrys is having none of it.

"Well the vast majority of the letters I got admitted no doubt at all. That's the point. For them God is real, it is inconceivable that it could be otherwise."

But for many others surely it's an inspiring possibility?

'I might wake up tomorrow morning and find a shimmering figure in the corner of my bedroom calling me to Jesus, though I think it's very unlikely'

"My guess is if you break down faith it's a certainty for more people than it's an inspiring possibility."

Taking into account the world we actually live in, not the one we might perhaps wish we lived in, I ask, what kind of a God was it that Humphrys hoped to find?

"That's sort of a trick question really, I don't think there is an answer to it. If there is a God you would hope it would be the sort of God portrayed in the New Testament – the God of mercy, the God of love and all that.

"But the problem is that if the God that exists in the minds of many people is indeed a God of love or mercy, he's bloody hopeless at it. He's not very good at it, because the world's such a wretched place for so many billions of people.

"I'd turn the question around slightly I suppose and say it would be very nice if a God emerged who said I've got it all wrong. I'm going to change things and make this world a much nicer place. It's fairly unlikely to happen. But in a way the reason it's a trick question is because there is only one answer to it isn't there? You would have to say you want it to be a nice, kind, cuddly God who's not going to let babies die in agony. How could you possibly want anything other than that?"

You couldn't want any other kind of world than that. But could there be a God that is our whole life force, yet where the responsibility is all ours?

"Oh well a life force, well there is similar language to that in my book. You can argue obviously that that does exist in the lives of many people, because of the extraordinary individuals who do superhuman things, act in supremely unselfish ways. The difficulty for people like me is trying to reconcile that with the straightforward Darwinian argument."

He means of course the Darwinian argument as it is used to reject the possibility of God. But I had the impression from his book that Humphrys doesn't really buy that particular line of thinking.

"Well as it's conveyed to us by someone like Richard Dawkins, no I don't buy it. He makes a pretty poor fist it seems to me of explaining away the unselfish nature of so many people. He doesn't do a terribly good job of persuading me at any rate that it is all to do with inevitable evolutionary processes.

"What he fails to get a grip on is why there is this apparently genuine unselfishness – and it's apparently purposeless from a point of view of furthering the species – where does it come from, why is it there?"

So is Humphrys saying there might be some hope in a moral absolute that gives a spiritual dimension to our lives?

"There might well be and anything that's extra physical, well that's supernatural, it's spiritual. But how many books are we going to going to write about defining what spirituality is?"

I wonder whether at this point there might be any mileage in looking again at one part of Humphrys' 2006 interview with the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Sacks suggests, if I understand him correctly, that by our very consciousness of suffering, we know what the moral law is – that there is a way things should be, that such consciousness points towards the idea that there is a meaning to life – and that therefore for him there can be faith in a meaningful created universe.

Humphrys is entirely unmoved, making the point that:

"There is a huge difference between a moral law and faith. Ask if I have faith in humanity and that becomes a different question. In some ways I do but that doesn't mean there is faith in the supernatural."

The interview ends with me asking John Humphrys his current thoughts on three of the "big questions" that, he says in his book, have haunted him at different times in his life:

Why did the universe come into existence?

"I haven't the first idea."

Why is there suffering?

"Because that's the way it is, because sometimes we are selfish and because we live in a world where accidents happen."

Finally, tentatively, but since he does say in the book that it has been one of his big questions – Where is God?

"Since I don't believe in God, well he, she or it isn't there at all. It all stumbles at the final hurdle really doesn't it, where is God?" ■

Next month: *Kay Parris meets world renowned physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne*

The Welcome Visitor: Living Well, Dying Well by John Humphrys with Sarah Jarvis, will be published in April, Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99, hardback
In God We Doubt, by John Humphrys, Hodder & Stoughton, £7.99, paperback