

*An entertaining and sympathetic article in the Lifestyle section of the Sunday Telegraph of October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014.*

## **Meet the Atheists' Favourite Vicar**

**Pop star turned broadcaster - and priest - Richard Coles**  
**tells Sally Saunders about sex; drugs and rock'n'roll**

The Reverend Richard Coles's diary must look a bit different from that of most vicars in the shires. On the day we meet, it reads something like this: 10am: junior school harvest festival. 2pm: interview and photo shoot. 8pm: book launch party at the Ministry of Sound in London.

But then, Rev Coles is not like most clergy.

His claims to fame are fast becoming too numerous to mention: Eighties pop star (in *The Communards*); long-time radio broadcaster; the inspiration for the BBC sitcom *Rev*; part of the gay group portrayed in the latest Brit-hit *Pride*; popular guest on the likes of *QI* and *Have I Got News for You*... the list, it seems, is endless. The best description is his own: "'The atheist's favourite vicar', although I don't know what that really says about me," he says darkly.

I am meeting Rev Coles in his "man shed" in the garden to discuss his autobiography, *Fathomless Riches*, or *How I Went from Pop to Pulpit*, which was released this week. It is a book that is sure to raise a few eyebrows in the church, I suggest. "For a clerical memoir, there's a lot of sex and drugs and rock and roll," he admits.

Quite. The book does not pull a single punch. The memoir proper begins with an unlikely encounter with a naked man in a lay-by on Christmas Day, and goes on to detail the ups and downs of life as a gay man in the Eighties and Nineties. It's not for the faint-hearted, and has already ruffled a few feathers.

Rev Coles does not want to offend ("If anyone is upset by it, I can only apologise"), but it seems he has a greater purpose, and rather than titillating, he wants to inspire. The preface to the book discusses St Paul's Damascus conversion, with Rev Coles later recounting his own epiphany, and subsequent devotion of his life to God. This, he says, is the reason for his complete openness, and warts-and-all discussion of his past.

"Religious people see it as a confessional in the tradition of St Augustine, and although I would hasten to say I am not comparing myself with St Augustine, I wonder if I can make this look not completely implausible," he says.

This is important to him, to show people his journey, the depths as well as the heights he had hit, and make it still look "possible" to have faith. He is unflinching in his portrayal of his drug use and casual sex, and equally honest in describing the horrors of losing friend after friend to Aids when the disease first swept the homosexual community.

He sees frightening parallels with today. "I think it's a bit like Ebola: something terrible but far away that doesn't really affect 'people like us'. But then, certainly with HIV and Aids, it did affect people like us.

"It was very near. Going back to it now I think lots of it has been buried because it was such a catastrophe."

One of the darkest aspects of the autobiography is when Rev Coles describes how he lied to friends, claiming that he was HIV positive, after a row with then-bandmate Jimmy Somerville. The Communards split up shortly afterwards but it took Rev Coles years before he admitted his deception.

However, the disease did shine one tiny ray of light. After years of not speaking to Somerville ("In a band there's so much tension, it's a bit like an ex-husband, too much water under the bridge") the pair were reunited by the loss of a friend. "We realigned when we lost an ex-flatmate of Jimmy's, and have stayed in touch ever since. He's coming tonight, actually." Tonight being the book launch party at nightclub Ministry of Sound.. "I just couldn't resist it," he says, smiling.

He seems to love the .lightly incongruous nature of the event, but then in his career it's nothing new.

"I find myself with a curious double ministry," he says. "I have my parish here, where I am the vicar, but because of the wonders of having been famous, and having this platform, I have another kind of ministry as well.

"In the church I am very accountable, to the parish and the deanery; in the media thing I am not really accountable, I am out there on my own as a sort of busy, recognised religious person.

"I feel like I am a missionary of the 1880s going on the Zambezi getting darker and darker and further away from home and I am thinking, how am I going to stay here?"

"I spend much of my time in a broadly liberal secular world but I don't belong to it, I belong somewhere else. There is a tension there."

But Rev Coles is prepared to put up with tension to get his voice heard. "I think that Christians should have confidence, we have always been part of the mainstream conversation, and if we don't join in often what you hear gets hectoring and mad, just people on the margins.

"I think of the peace and comfort with which the Church of England has long fitted into the mainstream of people's lives, and I would like it to be there still." He has his own ways of fitting into this "mainstream conversation". Many people know him as the presenter of Radio 4's *Saturday Live*, or as a guest on TV panel shows, particularly *QI*, where he has a foil in Stephen Fry. "Like me he has one foot in a very traditional world, one foot in a very radical world," says Rev Coles. "It's a little bit awkward sometimes actually, I feel very much like the poor man's Stephen Fry." One difference is the two men's opposing stances on religion, although Rev Coles says this sometimes slips his mind. "There's something of the archdeacon about Stephen," he says, smiling. "Sometimes when we get into a deeper discussion I imagine we are both canon of Barchester cathedral."

So is a cathedral where his ambitions lie now? Has he got designs on a bishop's hat? "I don't have any ambitions," he says. "I am looking forward to retiring, or at least having more time. When I was young I wanted more stuff, now I am older, I want more time.

"There is a place I love in the west of Scotland, we go there every year. I want to be there walking the dogs on the beach with David [his civil partner, with whom he has a celibate relationship].

"I want to walk around looking at stuff." It is not surprising he wants to walk, rather than sit: Rev Coles is so busy with a "million jobs" as a vicar and a broadcaster that he seems to be in perpetual motion. Does he know why?

"I am pained by a sense that I do nothing with my life. I have a real terror of being called to account by God at the end of my days and Him saying, 'What have you done with what I gave you?'

"I don't fear Him telling me off for being naughty, but I have always felt that I have not done enough."

With such motivation, don't expect Richard Coles to disappear any time soon.

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