

# Belonging without Believing

Brian Mountford welcomes atheists to church.

## Globalisation

What has really struck me this academic year is the international nature of my college's community. 61% from abroad. I have graduate supervisees from Vietnam, China and Austria. Take Vietnam: Hinduism and Buddhism from the South, Confucianism, Daoism and Communism from the North, Catholicism from the French, and their own indigenous animist religion – spirits and ancestor worship. Today in the globalised world there's a religious supermarket out there; people who think of themselves as Christians may also practice yoga, speak of good and bad karma, or transcendental meditation; they may recognise the similarities between the traditional dress of the Christian nun and the hijab worn by many Muslim women.

But just a few years back things were very different. In the non-conformist chapel I attended as a child there was a wall-plaque dedicated to Frances and May Nathan, who had been missionaries in China with the *China Inland Mission* in the late nineteenth century, and who had been killed in the Boxer Rising of 1900. They were revered as martyrs and proudly remembered. It seemed right in the 1950s that people should go out into the extremities of the world to convert the 'heathen' to the 'one true religion' – Christianity. In 1955, the church records say, we commissioned and valedicted (wonderful verb) one Betty Bullwinkle to do mission work in India.

Our parents had just been through a World War, which itself had global reach from Europe to Japan, from America to Burma. We were shown with pride, the map of the world with a great band of pink shading from North America, through Africa, India, and Asia to Australia. Yet we lived in a uniform society: white, bonded by war, made equal by a narrow range of incomes, and as a nation observing Sunday. Religion was enjoying a post-war revival, with Billy Graham drawing bus loads to London's Olympia to hear him preach. We had little difficulty with the idea that Christianity was the only way to salvation.

That claim bred confidence and was part of what we call the Christian meta-narrative – the big story – that can give a framework to a whole culture. All the major religions have a big story and these have influenced different parts of the world. Christianity has: creation, fall, Jesus, redemption; Judaism: creation, slavery, deliverance, Promised Land, exile; Buddhism: Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama): the Buddha who finds the path to Enlightenment. But the Christian meta-

narrative – the Christian big story – doesn't work quite so well as it used to. After our college Carol Service, I received an email from an undergraduate who said she had had to leave half way through because she found it too religious!

In our a multi-cultural, globalised society, with 61% of Oxford graduate students from abroad, we not only have students from a wide range of religious backgrounds, but also large numbers who consider themselves to be post-religious, who think religion has little or no meaning or relevance in the contemporary world. There are now wider meta-narratives, of course: scientific rationalism and liberal democracy. Some colleges, indeed, struggle with the anomaly that they are multi-cultural, multi faith, secular institutions and yet perhaps the largest building in their grounds is a Christian church. King's College Cam bridge has agonised about this for years.

Or there's the case of Churchill College, where Winston Churchill, after whom it was named, once offered to pay for a chapel. One of the Fellows, Francis Crick (who with James Watson discovered the molecular structure of DNA), said he'd resign his fellowship if that were to happen, since 'religion is obviously a fantasy'. So they got round it by building a chapel in a field away from the main buildings of the college. Crick still resigned. Churchill pointed out to him that he didn't have to attend, but it was there for those who wished to. Later Crick sent Churchill a £5 note in a letter saying, 'Here's five pounds towards building a brothel – you don't have to attend, but it would be there for those who'd like to.'

So we've moved from a modern society of clear national identities to a post-modern global society where some brands of cars and food outlets are literally worldwide – sometimes referred to as the Macdonaldisation of society. Now we live in a multi-cultural society, created by easy travel and migration. But we learn, not simply from rubbing shoulders with people from all over the world, but by having immediate access through the internet to any information we care to Google. We are forced to see religions as social phenomena rather than embedded 'truths'. That is to say, we can't see our own faith (if we have one) in isolation from other faiths and world views; we are obliged to see our own views side by side with, and in comparison to, other faiths which have equally valid histories.

Moreover, scientific rationalism asks many difficult questions of traditional ideas about God, creation, and the metaphysical. Although these questions have been around for over two hundred years, they've become

particularly virulent in the post-modern period, especially post 9/11, which seems to have been a watershed in the globalisation of religion, I suppose because it symbolises the great clash between Christianity and Islam.

I find young clergy, on the whole, very conservative. Why should this be? Backs to the wall of secularism – if you're going to be a priest today, it is likely to be a very serious decision indeed – a long way from the old career idea of politics, the army or the Church. If society mocks your beliefs, then you had better be able to defend your orthodoxy. Such clergy still fall into the trap of their default apologetic position being a God who is a sort of puppet master in the sky. But I find my congregation much less fussed about orthodoxy – and I think that's broadly true of religions: that the clergy think in orthodox terms, and the people do and think what comes naturally – except for a few fanatics who make themselves semi-professional Christians.

In Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, there is a marvellous chapter where he describes the coquettish seventeen-year-old Milly:

In church she looked more lovely than in any other place, wearing her feather-weight mantilla embroidered with leaves transparent as winter... her back was straight... the sign of the cross correctly performed. Small boys might suck sweets with impunity around her or giggle from behind pillars; she sat there with the rigidity of a nun.

Milly was a scheming young madam and church was a brilliant theatre for her trickery. This vignette of Catholic life just illustrates, it seems to me, the diversity of why people go to church at all. It's certainly not to express doctrinal conformity.

The Church has tried to impose 'orthodoxy' – the 'correct' opinion (or currently agreed opinion) and discouraged free thinkers. Catholics were taught *'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus'*: outside the church there is no salvation. But actually, successful Christianity has always developed and mutated its ideas and beliefs. There have been countless battles and differences of opinion. There have always been those prepared to go against received opinion or, more importantly, raise ambiguity in opinion.

The artist, for one, is able to do this. There is a work of art in Oxford, not much commented upon

these days, which raises the paradox of religion in a rather compelling way – Epstein's Lazarus in New College Chapel. The positioning of this piece is all. This great figure struggling to shake off his restricting bandages is striding out of the West door. In other words, the church is his tomb and his shackle, from which he is determined to escape into the light of day. Over the years, many a good sermon has been preached on this because the artist is allowed to be paradoxical and controversial in a way that most preachers feel they cannot be.

## Christian Atheist – Belonging Without Believing

Now I'd like to make a few points about my book *Christian Atheist*:

### 1. Discussion with Philip Pullman

The book's genesis was a discussion I had with Philip Pullman, who said to me:

I am a Christian Atheist; a Church of England Atheist; a Book of Common Prayer Atheist. You could add a King James' Bible Atheist, if you want. All those things go deep for me; they formed me; that heritage is impossible to disentangle, like a piece of barbed wire fence embedded in the bark of a tree.

I know lots of people in this position. Should the Church embrace this sort of position, or reject it as unorthodox? To give just one more example, I asked a choir member, 'Are you high church or low church?' The reply: 'I'm Anglo-choral!'

### 2. Hard versus soft atheism

I think we could make a distinction between hard and soft atheism. Richard Dawkins is the high priest of hard atheism – scientism. On the other hand there is Julian Barnes, who says, 'I don't believe in God, but I miss him.' And now Alain de Botton has written *Religion for Atheists*, in which he says:

One can be left cold by the doctrines of the Christian trinity... yet at the same time be interested in the ways in which religions... promote morality, engender a spirit of community, make use of art and architecture... in a world beset by fundamentalists of both believing and secular varieties, it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with



Epstein's Lazarus in New College Chapel, Oxford

a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts.

This is the soft school. The soft school can, of course, spill over into the agnostic and *devout sceptic* area, whereas the hard school wants empirical evidence for everything. Doubt is an important part of faith. Faith inevitably runs into challenges and paradoxes. Quite apart from the intellectual challenge of science and philosophy, there's the emotional challenge of bitter experience: illness, bereavement, disablement in war, bankruptcy, the death of a child – each can make a person doubt God's benevolence. These experiences can raise questions that undermine faith and bring a person to rail against God.

In the Psalms I find many examples of what you might call 'protesting faith' – a challenging of God which we might almost think of as rude or disrespectful. Yet for all its robustness, the questioning of God remains loyal. Other significant biblical examples of this robust challenge are when Jacob wrestles with God at the river Jabbok and when Job, plagued with boils and financial loss, argues the toss with God but remains faithful.

In English literature, too, we find evidence of religious doubt which is protesting but loyal. Philip Davis, Professor of English at Liverpool University, observes that in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, when Evangelist points the Man, the potential Christian, to the way of salvation, he asks, 'Do you see yonder Wicket-gate?' Bunyan simply writes, 'The Man said, "No". But it is not an angry, anti-religion "no". He knows the right answer would be yes, but reluctantly he has to be truthful and say no. Then he is given a second chance by Evangelist who asks, 'Do you see yonder shining light?' Of course, a St Paul or a Billy Graham might say, 'Hallelujah, yes, I see the light,' but the Man manages a less than certain, 'I *think* I do'. However underwhelming that may feel, it's nevertheless a form of belief and perhaps the very essence of belief. It's positive and has the same ring as 'help thou mine unbelief'. Davis cites other examples, including the mighty Luther who declares, 'Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.'

### 3. Interviews with Christian Atheists

I decided to interview some Christian atheists. From these interviews it emerged that the things they valued most about religion were: community, a moral compass, aesthetics (a sense of transcendence). The main reason my interviewees don't believe in God is that they think the idea of a metaphysical God irrational, unreasonable, and inconsistent with what science seems to tell us. Why should you have to believe six impossible things before breakfast to be a Christian or to find values, morals and metaphor important? Rather than 'orthodoxy' what interested them was 'orthopraxy' – right practice/behaviour.

### 4. Reason versus. values, morals, and metaphor

On this point, the philosopher, Mary Midgley, makes the distinction by quoting Nehru, who said that hunger and poverty could be solved by *science* alone. She asks, but what about good laws, good institutions, history? She also says:

'Science cannot provide answers to everything (scientism). Such a view leaves no room for morality, art, imperfection and all the other things that make us human'.

In public life it's difficult to agree on thick complex issues, so we spend a lot of the time thinking about thin, process measures. How do we measure this? How do we judge that? We have league tables in schools. In a recent news story it was said that UK nurses will be rated on how often they smile – thereby reducing to simple arithmetic the most complicated, subtle, and important human interactions.

My view is that somewhere in this leap between reason and humanity; somewhere between beauty and transcendence, we find God. Not that God is in a gap – God is the source of our being – but that many people encounter God through the same aesthetic and moral experiences that seem to make Christian Atheists want to stand alongside religion. That makes me hopeful and even evangelical about it. I want to include people of that persuasion in the Church.

### 5. Action not Beliefs

In the first three gospels Jesus' teaching is not so much what must I believe, but what must I *do* to inherit eternal life. (St Paul puts the emphasis more on belief – justification by faith not works). My colleague Roger Teichman, who is an atheist but sings in his wife's church choir, says:

Evensong is an oasis of what life is for – contemplation... Perhaps the exercise of contemplating *what is* inevitably poses the question, how shall I *be*?

And, in Roger's view, the strongest strand of Christian thought is the ethical one. He suggests:

The big thing, the grand idea, is Christ's teaching on attitudes to the sick, the poor, the deformed, and the sinful, where we find an exceptional openness and inclusiveness.

In fact what I think Jesus saw was that faith grows through acting lovingly; through trying to be what God happens to be like...

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Canon Brian Mountford is Vicar of the Oxford University Church of St Mary the Virgin and a Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford. His most recent book is *Christian Atheist: Belonging without Believing* (O Books 2011). This is a shortened, edited version of the talk he gave to the London SOFIC conference in March.