

# Writing *The Young Atheist's Handbook*

Alom Shaha, who grew up as a Muslim in south London, talks about how he became an atheist and wrote his book.

I am a science teacher at a school in Camden. I love teaching and think it is the most important thing I do. I am a classroom teacher and one of these classroom teachers who don't expect people to sit in silence and listen to you. I don't think silence in the classroom is a good thing. I prefer dialogue to lecture so if you want to ask a question just put your hand up. I'd much rather have a conversation this morning than just stand and talk at you.

I'm a physics teacher and the subject of God kept coming up in my lessons. I've written a book called *The Young Atheist's Handbook*. It was my students who inspired me to write the book. You might think God would come better into a biology lesson where you might teach the students about evolution, for example. But a physics teacher has to teach the Big Bang theory, which is a scientific creation story. It's different from other creation stories but all cultures throughout history have come up with their own creation stories. We want to know where we are coming from, we want to have answers to those big questions. The Big Bang theory is an answer to that question. But it has a great difference: it is an *evidence-based* theory.

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## science teachers are asked whether they believe in God far more often than any other teachers

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As I was teaching this subject on one occasion a few years ago, one of my students came up to me and said: 'This is an atheist school and you are teaching us this nonsense because you want us not to believe in God.' Then she went off on a rant about how I was trying to brainwash everybody into not believing in God. I explained to her very calmly that I am not out to convert people away from their religion. I want to

encourage people to think. Thinking is a wonderful activity.

She wasn't the only student to bring up the subject in my lessons and – I have discussed this with other science teachers – science teachers are asked whether they believe in God far more often than any other teachers, except perhaps RE teachers. I mean to say, geography teachers and history teachers are never asked whether they believe in God! But every year at least one student will ask me whether I believe in God or not. I usually say, 'No I don't.' But sometimes I say, 'What do you think?' And they often reply, 'You are probably an atheist because you are a scientist.' I think there is something slightly worrying about that. Dawkins says you can't be a scientist if you believe in God, but I can think of lots of very good scientists who do believe in God.

The mistake Dawkins and so many atheists make is that we are rational creatures. We are not. We are capable of being rational but I believe that in pretty much everything that is important, our feelings override our rationality. We are driven by feelings and I think basic beliefs come down to feelings rather than intellectual thought. It is a very simplistic understanding of belief to suppose that if you just think hard enough, you come to the conclusion that God doesn't exist and then you just get on with life. It doesn't work like that, as any psychologist of religion will tell you.

I'm from Bangladesh and I teach in a very diverse school where there is a large proportion of Bangladeshi children. For many of them I'm the first Bangladeshi teacher they have ever encountered. It's very exciting for them as most of the staff in the school are white. They say, 'Mr Shaha, Mr Shaha, are you from Bangladesh?' I say, 'Yes.' So they say, 'You must be a Muslim then.' Then I say, 'No, I'm not. Actually, I'm an atheist,' and you can see the look of disappointment on their face. It's really heartbreaking, because they think, here's someone like us, how exciting, here's a Bangladeshi teacher, a role model. And then they think I'm not so exciting any more, I'm

not like them. The moment that they find out that I am an atheist, suddenly some kind of barrier comes down and they feel that they can no longer relate to me and I think that's sad.

Q. A lot of people here would call themselves Christian atheists. Do you think it is possible that there could be people who would call themselves Muslim atheists?

I think that's a possibility and it's a possibility that I'd like to see happen very soon. In fact, a friend of mine has just started something called the Muslim Humanist Association, which is being populated by people like you describe. But because identity is tied up with religion so strongly in Muslim communities, it's very difficult from backgrounds like mine to say, 'I'm Pakistani but I don't believe in Islam'. Those two identities seem to be so intertwined. I was thirty-eight when I wrote my book and it was only at that age I was comfortable to meet other brown people and speak out in public, or for them to meet me and openly say to me: 'I'm like you, I don't believe in all that stuff either.' One of the best things about writing my book is that I've had lots of emails from around the world, from Indonesia, Australia, Turkey from people saying to me, 'Thank you for writing your book.' Then I know I am not alone.

Q. Like Philip Pullman, I define myself as a cultural Christian, because of the way I've been brought up in a Christian family. Could you define yourself as a cultural Muslim?

I don't want to define myself as a cultural Muslim. I want to leave the label Muslim behind. But I would like to see people who don't believe in God calling themselves cultural Muslims. I think we will see a move towards that and there are people trying to make that happen. I've written a whole chapter about my understanding of these issues in the book, and the chapter is called 'Coconut'. For those of you who don't know, 'coconut' is a term of abuse hurled at people like me. It means brown on the outside and white on the inside. It's a very insidious term. When



Alom Shaha speaking at the 2013 SOF Conference in Leicester

they call you a coconut, what they are saying is: 'You ought to be this way. Your skin is brown, so you ought to believe this, you ought to like this kind of food.' Nobody has the right to tell me how I ought to be. We live in a free society. I should have the freedom to be who I want to be, listen to the music I want to listen to, eat the food I want to eat, and believe in whatever I want to believe in. I live in the West, I have those freedoms, so don't you dare call me a coconut.

It's an insidious term because it's used to apply pressure on people from particular communities. And it happens in all communities. Black people are told what blackness means, as if blackness means something. If you don't behave in this way, you are not really black. It's a massive problem for black people being atheists. Belief in God is so tied up with their sense of identity, particularly in America, particularly in African black communities. If you don't believe in God you are considered not fully black. How ridiculous is that! As if not believing in God changed your skin colour, as if not believing in God stopped you being a victim of racism. There's fierce pressure on people from these communities to conform to a sense of identity that others inflict on them. That is the injustice that I've come up against and that's one of the reasons I wrote my book.

Q. A lot of us here would describe ourselves as ex-Christian atheists but Christianity has been an important influence. The basis of my socialism owes a lot to the New Testament and when I read your book, I gathered from it that you had a very negative experience of

growing up Muslim. So are there any aspects of Islam where you can say: I don't believe in Allah any more, but this is useful, this is constructive?

When you say, 'My Christianity led to socialism', for example, that's *your* Christianity. There's a Christianity in the United States which says that homosexuals should be killed. I'm not going to sit here and romanticise Islam. Islam has oppressed me and has oppressed lots of people I know. It's Ramadan at the moment and I can tell you I have friends who are compelled to lie. I have a good friend who wakes up every morning, pretends to his wife that he is not having breakfast, goes to work and makes himself a cup of coffee. I think he is spineless. He is a grown man, living in the West and he should have the guts to say to his wife: 'I'm not going to fast.' And there are young people who live at home with their parents who are not going to say to their parents: 'I'm not going to fast.' They risk being ostracised from their family and all sorts of other problems. To some extent I can sympathise with someone who is married who does not want to shake that marriage. But what I want to criticise is this romanticisation of Ramadan, this wonderful spiritual time. Did I get anything from Islam? I don't think I did. Actually, I *do* know what I got from Islam. It was something to rebel against and make me think.

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As a science teacher, I get to see young people engaging in big ideas and battling with them. And they like that and they like to be challenged intellectually. As a physics teacher, I'm supposed to be teaching about mechanics and thermodynamics and what not. It's not really my job to enter into theology in the classroom. I have a particular job to do and I have to get on with it. But I felt young people wanted to talk about these things. I knew that I could take complex ideas and present them in a way that was more digestible, perhaps. And so I came up with the idea of *The Young Atheist's Handbook*. I took the idea of the book to an agent, who said, 'It's a very noble idea but nobody is going to buy it.' But as I was leaving she said, 'You are an interesting chap, so why don't you just write the story of how you came not to believe in God?' So I went from an idea of writing a very straightforward sort of text book to writing a very

personal narrative, which actually provides all the information I wanted to put in the other book, but is much more readable.

What my agent realised was that story-telling is a much more powerful way to get across ideas. Scientists collect the data, they look at the evidence and they come to a conclusion. So I thought I would just collect the evidence and the arguments and let people come to their conclusion. That is not how we work. If it were, we would not have any climate change deniers. As humans we are not creatures who are naturally rational. Science, as we know it, is only about four or five hundred years old. It's a very particular way of thinking. But story telling is fundamental to human beings. Story telling crosses the cultural boundaries, gender boundaries, age boundaries. So that was a stroke of genius my agent had: make the case for atheism through your personal story.

I spent about a year writing the book and it made me think really deeply about faith, about God and so forth. I tried to put an intellectual argument against the existence of God but it is true that I probably had an emotional response against Islam, an emotional response against my upbringing. The book is very much a story; it is not a factual account, because our memories are poor. It is a *post-hoc* justification for who I think I am. I am not necessarily sure that it is an absolutely true account. But what I do know is that I don't believe in God.

The fact is that in the traditional arguments for and against God, the against side always wins. But the God most people have, I suspect, is the God of their childhood. He's some entity that watches us and judges us. And you realise very quickly that that's a problematic God. Certainly, the God of the Old Testament is so human as to be ridiculous. As a child, if you've got an imagination, you can find holes in that God so readily and the only answer that adults ever give you is not an acceptable answer. So what happens? People may want to cling on to God so much that they wriggle away from any challenges. I totally understand people want to believe in God. If you happen to be able to believe in God, God gives you love, comfort, solace, meaning, help – all those things that we need as human beings. If you actually believe in God, congratulations! I'm genuinely jealous.

But I call myself a humanist because I think all those things – love, comfort meaning, purpose, solace – we can find in each other. Some of us aren't lucky enough to do so. You might live in an environment where you don't meet the people but I am lucky enough to have done so. I think that in God those things can only be imaginary. The love of Jesus

Christ that some of my Christian friends claim to have would be a marvellous thing because the love that I experience from some of my fellow human beings is so amazing. Imagine being loved by a supernatural being! I think love is the only thing that makes it all make sense. To love and to be loved are the greatest gift that evolution or God or whatever has given us.

In ancient times people could believe in human-like supernatural beings. But theologians today cannot just talk about God in terms of a man in the sky, because that idea is so patently ridiculous in a modern age. So they end up with some very peculiar definitions of God, one of which I'd like to read from Karen Armstrong. She is from a religious background, she used to be a nun and she is clearly very smart. A lot of atheists think that religious people are stupid but that's demonstrably untrue. I'm a great admirer of Karen Armstrong and I thoroughly recommend her books. Her book *A History of God* is a fantastic book. It's an academic account of the evolution of the idea of God and you understand that God is a human construct and yet she says she believes in a Catholic God. I scoured her latest book, *The Case for God*, to find out what she means when she talks about God. And this is what Karen Armstrong has to say when she describes God: 'God is the spirit of a scarcely perceptible timbre of a tiny breeze in the paradox of a voiced silence.' And what that sentence is is a deepity. A deepity is term for a sentence that sounds extremely profound but actually has no meaning. This is the trouble with theologians: they won't define God.

Q. The God you don't believe in is not the God that I believe in. But what I wanted to ask you was this: The theme of this Conference is *For the Common Good*, so where does your talk fit into that?

That's a very powerful statement: the God you don't believe in is not the God I believe in. I think that actually you are right because I don't have a concept of God that I can believe in. And I have not come across any such concept. I suspect that if you could explain your concept to me I still would not believe.

But let's talk about this theme of the Common Good. I think we risk leading to somewhere where there is division between those who believe and those who don't and I think that would be hugely damaging for humanity. I saw a Muslim commentator called Adam Deen on one of those Sunday morning shows. He ended up saying Muslims, Christians and Jews should unite against those non-believers. So when you have alienated everyone else what do you do? Just fight amongst yourselves!

I think one of the biggest problems with religions is not personal faith. The problem is that organised

religion and people who identify with a particular mass religion put up a barrier between themselves and the rest of the world: 'I'm a Muslim, you're not.' 'I'm a Jew, you're not.' I think it is hugely divisive to look at the world in those terms.

One of the problems I have with the British

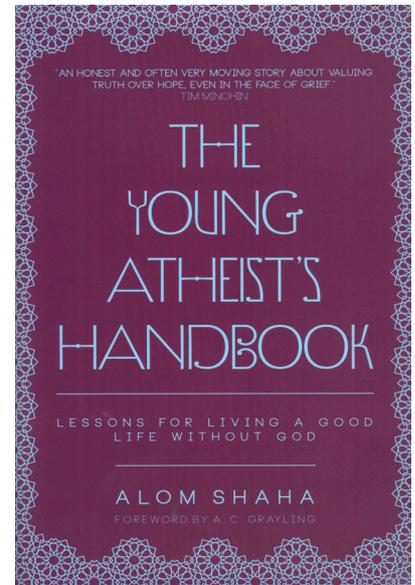
Humanist Association, and humanism in general, is that there is a requirement not to believe in God. I think humanism is the only philosophy that I've come across that has the power to spread globally – if we could just accept that people could be Christian humanists or Muslim humanists or Jewish humanists. I'm proud to be a member of the BHA but I am not convinced that we should exclude people from being members if they believe in some kind of personal God. Humanism could be a powerful force for good, for the common good.

Q. I've been very interested in your book. I've been a member of the BHA for fifty years. I actually agree with you. I don't know if you are also a member of the National Secular Society, which could be called the militant wing, but they have recently said that they are open to religious secularists.

I think that's right. Secularism is something that benefits all of us and it is hugely problematic if we equate secularism with atheism. I'm glad that the NSS is changing its stand on that. I think empathy is the solution. Empathy is the key to making the world a better place

Q. I wonder what your view is on the efforts made in this country towards multiculturalism or whatever you like to call the policy, which includes allowing different groups to continue to practise quite a wide range of cultural and religious things. Is this helpful for the common good in the long term? Or are there any limits on it that you see?

That's a very good question. I think we should never stop people practising their religion or their cultural practices in any shape or form, as long as they don't hurt other people. However I think policies dating back to the 60s and 70s which encouraged the ghettoisation of communities, which encouraged



people like me to think of ourselves as first and foremost Bangladeshi or Muslims, were misguided. I'm not an expert but someone who is an expert called Kenan Malik has written a book called *From Fatwa to Jihad*, which looks at the British Asian experience in the context of multiculturalism, both as a government policy and as a lived experience. It is very important when talking about multiculturalism to separate those two meanings of the word.

Unfortunately, we use the word multiculturalism interchangeably to talk about the sense of multiculturalism that means you can go out for a Chinese meal tonight, if you wish, or listen to music from all over the world – that's multiculturalism at its best – or to talk about policies where we housed Bangladeshis on the same housing estates or which gave grants to groups to gather together young black men in youth clubs. Multiculturalism spans a wide range of activities and policies, some of which have been problematic and continue to be problematic. I think it's an incredibly complex issue but I don't think we should infringe people's liberties. For example, I am deeply against the ban on the veil in France.

Q. Can I take you back to your earlier statement that all those things that we attribute to God such as love and hope and charity can be found in human beings? Although I have abandoned belief in a God out there, the thing that I shall always cherish is what I call Christian morality. So my problem is that what Christians have done is say we did not make these rules, they came from on high. In other words these are absolutes, whereas if you bring it down to the human level you can say you don't like it this way. You get a sort of mish mash of morality, which has no ultimate solution.

I think it is a flawed argument to talk about Christian morality. There is no such thing as Christian morality. Christian morality is human morality. If you want to talk about Christian morality as treating your neighbours nicely, that morality has been around forever. In the Mid West of America some Christians say homosexuals must die. Why don't you give that as an example of Christian morality? If Christians say it, it's Christian morality. Richard Holloway has written a book called *Godless Morality*, because he has realised that this position of falling back and saying God told us how we should be is completely wrong. In questions of morality there is nowhere else to turn but to ourselves.

Q. When you suggest that humanism has *the* answer, has this not potentially the same danger as with any good idea, that is, saying this must be everybody's answer?

I think one of the key tenets of humanism is do no harm to your fellow human beings, so that would also encompass allowing people to have religious feelings. Humanism has certain principles, for example, that morality comes from us, not from any other authority. That's demonstrably true. Humanism differs from religion in that we do not make claims based on supernatural beings. I think humanism is a philosophy that will encourage people to make a better world.

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Alom Shaha teaches physics at Camden School for Girls in London. His book, *The Young Atheist's Handbook* (reviewed in *Sofia* 106) was published by Biteback Publishing (London) in 2012. This is a shortened, edited version of the talk he gave to the SOF 2013 annual conference in Leicester.

## God of Small Things

It was late. I was in my room  
above Botany Bay, the cherry blossoms below  
hidden in darkness, the windows  
two black rectangles against the night.  
I faced a page of quantum mechanics,  
the equations spilling down the sheet  
in ordered progressions of uncommon logic.  
I was trying to understand some  
intractable movement from one line  
to another and stared at the page, puzzled.

Quite suddenly, I grasped it, the elegant  
equations coming into clarity, then dissolving  
in front of me. It was as if I had glimpsed  
for a moment beyond the numbers and symbols  
to the luminous totality of the reality beneath,  
the intricate structure at the base of everything  
opening like a door onto a passageway  
that I didn't know existed.

I came back to my senses and the room,  
dazed and changed. The cherry blossoms still  
swayed below, there yet concealed in darkness,  
hiding their daylight brilliance, like the world  
I had just encountered, fleeting but actual –  
and everything I had known to be certain,  
questioned.

Noel Duffy

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Noel Duffy lives in Dublin. His debut collection *In the Library of Lost Objects* (Ward Wood Publishing, 2011) was shortlisted for the 2012 Strong Award for best First Collection by an Irish poet. His second collection, *On Light and Carbon* is forthcoming from Ward Wood.