

# I was Religious but now I'm ...

John Breadon describes a difficult journey that is not yet over.

It won't take you long to spot that a great deal of this paper sounds suspiciously like fillet of Cupitt reheated. True enough. I owe much to Don's work, make no mistake. I've been reading him since I was 20 and I've just turned 43. My address, like myself, is a work in progress. I'm still in the early stages of reassessing the Christian faith as I've only just recently, 'officially' at least, left. Over the past three to four years a rupture has taken place in my psychological and spiritual life. The headline is: John has left the priesthood. But I know I've left so much more than this. My belief in anything superior to the passing show of nature has collapsed. I am a thoroughgoing creature of this world now, and this world is more than enough. But this is not to say I'm finding the transition from heaven to humanism easy. For one thing, who are my spiritual friends and comrades now? There is much in popular, contemporary 'New Atheism' that wearies me. But yet I cannot proceed any longer with what I now call 'refined religion', attempting to sift the good from the bad. Involving myself in this process of differentiation is something I simply no longer want to do.

My paper, like my life, aims at delineating the whole and not just a part. Our emotional as well as our intellectual energies matter, for they both influence the choices we make, the sort of people we turn out. At times over the past three years I have felt, much more often than I would have liked, what I can only name as liminal terror. As we are creatures composed of historical strata like the Earth itself, many of the fault lines that have broken to the surface recently have their origins way back. But in terms of remembered time, since leaving my 30s and

entering my 40s, my emotional life has been in fairly consistent tumult. How, I ask myself, can I live well – as I stagger or dash, I'm not sure which, towards my 50<sup>th</sup> year? The three sections of my address are as follows. (1) The imagination and white martyrdom; (2). Losing my (refined) religion; (3) Whispering to the bull.

## 1. The imagination and white martyrdom

A potted biography up until about my 28<sup>th</sup> year. I was born in Co. Down, Northern Ireland in 1973, and

baptised in Bangor Parish Church – though my early Christian formation was according to the theology and rites of the Methodist church. Bangor Parish Church stands on the ground of one of Ireland's great monastic centres. Such was its importance that when the *Mappa Mundi* was created in about 1300 Bangor was one of only two places in the whole of Ireland (ancient Hibernia on the map), Dublin being the other. One of the many spiritual



St Columbanus

travelling companions in my life is Saint Columbanus, who lived in the seventh century and established a network of monasteries in Gaul. He spent a few years at Bangor Abbey before setting off to shake up Roman Christianity. A recent biographer of the saint says this about him:

*[a] temperamentally volatile itinerant Irishman – typically Irish – a handsome man with a poetic temperament, volcanic temper and a mind rigorous in pursuit of intellectual satisfaction.* (Carol Richards, *Columbanus: Poet, Preacher, Statesman, Saint*, 2010)

Well, I've got to model myself after someone! There were very few books in my childhood home and even fewer family holidays. Love was rather scarce too. My emotional gaps and vulnerabilities were surely created in this tense and rather unhappy family home. But, *nil desperandum*, there was plenty of Christianity and church-going to distract me from my home worries. Christianity, or at least our peculiar Northern Irish Methodist version of it, was my family's sole self-transcending narrative or mythos. The faith I was born into was of course itself subject to centuries of secularisation. Irish Methodism of the 1980s was a long way from the fervent, intense, Christocentric faith of the Wesleys. I had no great piety forced upon me at home, neither did I receive any significant spiritual nurture at church. Basically, children weren't taken terribly seriously in the 1970s and 1980s – at least not in the small seaside towns of Ulster I grew up in. Besides religion, to be honest, there wasn't a great deal to do, though we never went as far as locking up the playground swings on Sunday. As well-behaved teenagers are wont to do in the North of Ireland, I passed briefly through the shadowy valley of evangelicalism. I remember telling my agnostic brother-in-law when I was about fifteen that he couldn't be sure of his salvation unless he was born again. How I wince to remember such things now.

Turning sixteen, I found myself at a decent grammar school having risen as high academically as my Secondary Modern would permit. It was during the sixth form that I fell deeply in love with books. How I lusted after the light green spines of Penguin's Twentieth Century Classic range! I adored all the classics I studied then – *Hamlet*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Waiting for Godot* amongst them. Replacing religion with art is a tempting possibility for many of us – Matthew Arnold thought it likely. Since my A-Levels I've conducted many an intense relationship with fiction and poetry.

The great text behind the classics encountered in my sixth form, and without which full understanding of them would be impossible, is of course the Bible. It's an issue of real importance for us at this conference: once a text has got under your skin, once you start seeing your own life interpreted through its symbols and stories, can it ever really be removed? So my dilemma as I seek to become post-Christian is this: I may have rejected the church and her doctrines but does this mean I'm cut off from her scriptures as well? I hope not. The church may not quite be as open and polyphonic as I would like it to be, but the Bible surely is.

Back to Columbanus and the seventh century. He set sail from Bangor in a small boat with a few of his

brothers from the Abbey with nothing to protect him but his wit, his faith and his intelligence. In Celtic Christianity there are three types of martyrdom. The red sort – dying for your faith, the green – going out into the barren places to be alone with God – and then there is the white. This is the one that speaks most to me. White martyrdom for Columbanus and his men meant leaving the safety of home for God knows where – and they did so in a small insubstantial boat. Like Columbanus I left the North of Ireland in a boat (albeit a well-equipped ferry) not knowing what to expect from the little university town of St Andrews where I was headed. As it turned out providence was kind to me. My white martyrdom turned out to be nothing of the sort. I spent four blissful years at St Andrew's. At St Mary's, the theology faculty, I came into contact with Dr. Daphne Hampson, amongst many other fine teachers. She taught me that theology could be a personally risky as well as an endlessly creative venture. The heretical company I kept didn't please everyone though – especially my co-religionists in the Christian Union. As members of the decidedly heterodox Anglican Society we were thought to be a louche bunch of post-Christian, Jung-loving, crypto-Buddhists.

After St Andrews came a spell as a postgraduate at Birmingham. Two of the three writers I focused on – Dennis Potter and Jeanette Winterson – were, like me, raised as conservative Christians. Around the time when I should have been completing my thesis I found myself training for the priesthood at Westcott House in Cambridge. Let me jump to the ordination service itself at Lichfield Cathedral and one vivid memory from that day. Bishop Mike Burke, the suffragan bishop of Wolverhampton, as he was leading us through the oath of canonical obedience looked at me and said, 'Can I just check you've not got your fingers crossed behind your back?'

## 2. Losing my (refined) religion

As the dust begins to settle on my decision to leave the priesthood and the Church, I discern two related yet separate strands. One is related to my complete loss of faith in those big theological non-negotiables – especially belief in a real God. The other strand, of more recent provenance, relates to my rather sudden estrangement from the Church of England itself. What do I mean by 'refined religion'? For some 23 years liberal or progressive Anglicanism was my brand of refined religion. It gave me all I could ask from a community – fellowship, intellectual refreshment, spiritual encouragement and challenge. I've taken the phrase 'refined religion' from Philip Kitcher's book *After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*. In it Kitcher dissects the mental gymnastics that liberals

put themselves through to make religion acceptable to the modern soul. So what happened?

Liberal Anglicanism – since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier – has been very adept at reducing Christianity to ethics, though without ever going the whole hog and completely internalising its theology of God (only a few radicals have tried to do this!). Up until the mid-1980s the C of E was doing a pretty good job of secularising itself. To give myself the necessary intellectual heft I marinated myself in many of the works of key liberal theologians. A partial list runs something as follows: Schleiermacher, F.D. Maurice, Hensley Henson, Paul Tillich, John Robinson, Alex Vidler, John Macquarrie, John Spong, Maurice Wiles, Harry Williams, Don Cupitt, and Richard Holloway. To these men I must add the work of many feminist and liberation theologians including Dorothee Sölle, Carter Heyward and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

But as conservative theologians have long pointed out, shaving away more and more of God's transcendence eventually leaves one, at best, with a rather vague and, to me, a rather powerless Tillichian Ground of Being. Over recent years I've found it harder and harder to keep faith with such a divine homunculus. Clearly, many highly intelligent, humanistic theologians, such as John Caputo and Graham Ward, would disagree with me. But no matter how spirited or imaginative or intellectually nimble their theologies might be, I now find them irritatingly imprecise in language and fundamentally untruthful.

This is fighting talk, I know, but let me try and explain to you what I mean by looking briefly at Caputo's own recently published spiritual autobiography, *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*. I simplify, but Caputo holds out the hope – or as he would put it, the impossible hope – of being both a modern person and a person of faith. What he means by 'person of faith' is far from straightforward, but it most certainly isn't someone who believes six impossible things before breakfast. In prose that can turn from clear to obscure in the blink of an eye he presents his case for holding on, albeit with a weak grip, to God talk. Here I make what might well be the most important point of my address. Do some of us hang on to the ghost of the Judeo-Christian God largely out of nostalgia – or perhaps out of some subterranean feeling of disloyalty? Caputo loves to bend and play and recycle language as all postmodernists do and so he never settles on one expression for long. He styles his theological project one moment as a completion of Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity', the next as 'religion without religion'. Or perhaps it's better

described as a 'theology of nihilism' or 'faith in the unconditional' or the 'mysticism of the rose'. Or if none of these shoes fit, try this one: 'becoming religious is a matter of learning how to smile'. At one point he imagines a lost ancient scripture in dialogue form. To the question 'what is the resurrection of the dead?' the answer comes back:

*A newborn baby, a new morning, another day, more time, a recovery from mortal threat, a remission, a repetition, making a leap when it is impossible to move an inch, a comeback, a second chance, a new ...*

And when I reach passages like this I'm very near the book-throwing stage:

*The proper way to speak of God is to say not that God exists, but that God insists, while we are called upon to make up the difference. We are asked to pick up where God leaves off, to fill up the existence that is lacking in the insistence of God. God insists, but the weight of God's existence falls on us.*

I think that my feel and touch for existence – which is rooted in, I hope, deep attention to the glorious and inglorious swerves of the quotidian – is pretty much the same as Caputo's. But the line that separates us is this: I believe that open-minded and open-hearted humanism can do justice to the gift and grace of everyday life, Caputo does not. In many ways liberal postmodern theology is simply refined religion taken to the max – its refusal to decide, to remain with endlessly open possibilities forever. For years I lived and thought like this. And then one day, quite recently, it all felt rather absurd to keep on doing so. A mysterious package arrived one day and in it was Occam's razor; I felt I had to start putting it to some use.

So, am I now, as I stand before you today, somewhat bereft of community, narrative, ritual and life-enhancing spiritual practice? In many ways, yes, of course I am! So what exists out there which will help me not just 'go on' – Beckett style – but to 'go on' well? There is the Sunday Assembly movement. I recently had my first experience of this a few weeks ago in Reading. It was jolly and fun and the people were mostly kind and clever and good company. But it was based too much around loud music for me. And there were a few too many middle-aged folk living it up as old teenagers. Or what about Mark Green's largely US-based humanistic-atheistic paganism? Here I think there is more to explore and develop. And when I move to Chester in the next few weeks I'll certainly be looking into what sort of pagan groups populate the North West. But I suspect that



atheist pagans may be as scarce on the ground as atheist Christians.

The community I currently feel most at home in is humanistic psychotherapy. About three years ago I came within an inch of a full mental collapse. I can't lay all that was wrong with me at that time at religion's door, but it surely played a part in creating the many splits in my identity that left my psyche dangerously fragmented. After more than a decade of therapy study and many years in the client's chair, I finally feel like I'm on the road to healing. Brian Thorne, a former professor of counselling at UEA, has probably done more than anyone to promote Carl Rodger's Person-Centred Therapy in England. At the end of his book *The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy* he lists some key ethical and spiritual maxims that have guided his work and practice. They've become, of late, something of an alternative creed for me.

- *Be open to the world both inner and outer. Embrace and seek new experience, new ways of seeking and being.*
- *Tell it the way it is. Reject hypocrisy, deceit and double talk. Be open about your relationships and sexuality.*
- *Do not live in a compartmentalised world. Strive for a wholeness of life.*
- *Seek new forms of closeness, of intimacy and shared purpose. Seek new forms of communication both verbal and non-verbal.*
- *Welcome risk-taking so that you may be vitally alive as you face change which is the only certainty of life.*
- *Care for others with a gentle, subtle, non-moralistic, non-judgemental caring.*



### 3. Whispering to the bull

My last and longest quotation is taken from a short story by the American writer Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor was a Roman Catholic but she lived all her life in the company of Protestant fundamentalists in the American Deep South. She completed the trinity of writers I studied for my PhD. The extract I'm going to share with you is taken from one of her finest stories, *Greenleaf*. It is a tale about a vain woman's obsession with a bull. For O'Connor, who was God intoxicated, everything that lives and moves possesses great sacramental power. It can carry, in

miniature, all of God's love and judgement.

*She remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief. She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her changed – the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky – and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable. Mr Greenleaf was running toward her from the side with his gun raised and she saw him coming though she was not looking in his direction. She saw him approaching on the outside of some invisible circle, the tree line gaping behind him and nothing under his feet. He shot the bull four times through the eye. She did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear.*

I love this brutal and brilliant story now in a wholly non-religious way. One of the attractions of religion is partly in the hope that at some point the Mystery (capital M) of the universe will be disclosed to us. We want nothing more than for someone to come along and whisper the answer to IT ALL into our ears. But my reading is not a comforting one, alas. We cannot outrun forever life's relentless, pitiless bulls: evil happens, disasters strike, we are betrayed and let down, we watch everything we love fade and disappear. But though we are suspended in an unthinking void, this Earth can still be a home to us; we can still find in each other, and in the love we rightly owe ourselves, what we need to utter at least a few ecstatic Yeses to all that comes our way.

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