

Imagine ... Christian Atheism

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Hallelujah! At last I finally feel saved. I am sure that I shall not be spared the accusations of hypocrisy levelled at me by those who are themselves truly 'Saved' (and thus promised a ticket to Heaven) for I am a church-goer who believes in neither the virgin birth nor the resurrection, and above all one who does not believe in God(s), supernatural or otherwise. Importantly for me, I do feel saved, in part, from any unease at being a non-believing but otherwise enthusiastic member of a Christian community by my recent discovery, at the late age of 67, that there is something called Christian Atheism. Wikipedia defines it as:

A form of cultural Christianity and ethics system drawing its beliefs and practices from Jesus' life and teachings as recorded in the New Testament Gospels and other sources, whilst rejecting supernatural claims of Christianity .

So for me, and many others I suspect, it feels sufficient greatly to admire Jesus for his care for humanity; his teachings as to how we should treat the poor, the outcast and so on; and to take him, as best we can, as our prime role model, for a life well lived:

Although Jesus is still a central feature of Christian atheism, ... to the Christian atheist, Jesus as an historical or supernatural figure is not the foundation of faith; instead, Jesus is a 'place to be, standpoint'. Christian atheists look to Jesus as an example of what a Christian should be, but they do not see him as God, nor as the Son of God; merely as an influential rabbi.¹

Thus, it now feels OK to be an integral part of a community which professes to put Jesus' teachings into practice. It feels OK for me personally to have openly enjoyed my 48 year long association with the Church of St Thomas the Martyr, Newcastle, and the friendships this has engendered over these years. It feels OK to be a church warden (currently undergoing a third six-year stint), working with others to preserve

and improve the building for effective service to its community, a city centre church where Jesus' teachings can be lived out. All this without the need to sacrifice my intellectual integrity?

In a BT advertisement from 1988 Maureen Lipman starred as a grandmother, heralding her grandson's exam results. On hearing that he had passed sociology she was ecstatic : 'That's wonderful, you've got an "ology"! – a patina of respectability given by a label. Similarly, I have found a respectable 'spiritual label', I feel. And so, I here declare myself, to be a Christian Atheist. At this it feels that the burden of any sort of pretence has been lifted off my shoulders.

How do I justify being Christian?.

Jesus lived, I believe (or someone like him). It would be difficult to deny this, since independent historical references are made to him (or someone like him). He was a great teacher, his consistent message one of fairness and of unconditional love. A great body of mythological baggage (mostly relating to Old Testament writings and 'fixing' the new story to suit the old) has been glued onto one man's simple, single-issue life by those seeking to give him unique status (thus enhancing their own, and their chance of the afterlife they suppose this promises them). So, of course the historical Jesus had to be given a special conception, a specially picturesque birth (conveniently prophesied) and, later, a special death ... followed by an even more special (and quite incredible) resurrection – this difficult for the educated mind. Virgin birth and resurrection are both metaphors to me.

The Resurrection was also a metaphor to David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham (1984-1994):

What seems to me to have happened is a series of experiences which gradually convinced a growing number of the people who became apostles that Jesus had certainly been dead, certainly buried and he wasn't finished. And



SOF member Peter Lumsden (d. 2007) regularly preached Christian atheism at Speakers' Corner, Hyde Park, London.
image: huffpost.com

what is more he wasn't just not finished but he was 'raised up', that is to say, the very life and power and purpose and personality which was in him was actually continuing, so that he was a risen and living presence and possibility. ²

To Don Cupitt, God is a metaphor. For me, Jesus' most important teachings relate to life, not afterlife. He challenges us to care for those less fortunate than we are ourselves. So, we should seek to feed the hungry, house the homeless, bring justice to the underdog, comfort the victims of violence and war, and so on. And we should seek to change the position taken by others. This approach, essentially a humanist philosophy, can be fostered, surely, within communities today without their having to worship any form of God, without any promise of, or belief in, a totally unsubstantiated afterlife. Jesus lived. Jesus was murdered by the state. Jesus is dead.

Most people out there, many struggling to make sense of the lives they *do* have, have neither the time nor the inclination to think about the matter, and why should they? Many of

these, asked at the bus stop their personal philosophy might understandably respond: 'Life's a shit and then you die'. What comfort is the promise of an afterlife, better luck the next time round, to a family facing grinding food poverty, long-term unemployment, homelessness and the like?

Christian atheists are united in the belief that any satisfactory answer to these problems must be an answer that will make life tolerable in this world, here and now and which will direct attention to the social and other problems of this life. ³

How do I Justify being an Atheist?

As an ardent disciple of Richard Dawkins, I feel there is no scientific justification whatsoever for any external/supernatural creator or governor of our state of being. There never was and there never will be. As Dawkins suggests, where there are unknowns these will all be explained in time by science, maybe not in our immediate lifetime but eventually. A similar message can be taken

from the writings of the neuro-surgeon Henry Marsh, where he says:

Neuroscience tells us that it is highly improbable that we have souls, as everything we think and feel is no more or no less than the electrochemical chatter of our nerve cells. Our sense of self, our feelings and our thoughts, our love for others, our hopes and ambitions, our hates and fears all die when we die.⁵

Marsh, also a philosopher by training (PPE, Oxon), expresses marvel at the ongoing mysteries of the mechanics of the human brain, its hundred billion nerve cells in each one of us, and how and where consciousness, thought and memory might reside. But the answers for him as for Dawkins, will come, one day, from science and nature, rather than from magic.

As propounded by the SOF Network, religion is a human creation. Thus, for me, though not for all members of that organisation, God is necessarily a human creation. End of story. No need, then, for generations of Christian apologetics, tens of thousands of books across the ages seeking to justify a God or an afterlife which simply do not exist! (Alas, all those trees!). For me there is far better evidence of the non-existence of a God out there than for his/her/its existence. I have, in my time, wished for ‘miracles – not for myself but, for example, through the healing of a sick or otherwise afflicted child. The following reflects my feelings:

As someone who was a pastor for ten years, I think my faith died the death of a thousand unanswered prayers. I prayed for children with cancer, adults in need of transplants and children dying around the world from preventable starvation. Sadly, god [sic] never showed up. If god was good, he wouldn't let a child suffer from cancer and die in the arms of her parents.⁶

My own disillusionment comes, in addition, from a 40-year interest in World War One, as an amateur historian of the period. Here, one sees around twenty million unnecessary deaths worldwide. What loving God, with any control over affairs, would allow the terrible end suffered by most of the 750,000 innocent British men (and women) who died, and the needless despair and destruction caused to the families of combatants?

In response to unheeded, unremitted suffering, today as in the past, one must conclude surely that the God whom/which Bible-believing literalists worship is either powerless (useless) or powerful, but doesn't attend to the right problems (worse than useless?). The faithful suggest that their God does not answer *all* prayers. If they are not meant to be answered they will not be. Similarly, ‘God helps those who help themselves’, and so on. Hmm. I remember a discussion with a fellow SOF conference attendee declaring himself to be a white witch. Yes, he said, he ‘cast spells’ (my words). What of those that did not succeed? His response; they were not appropriate, destined to fail. Hmm.

Primitive tribesmen worshipping the sun have far more justification for their faith, I feel, than the masses who unthinkingly worship a Christian or other established God. The sun warms them each day, ripens their crops and then retires to sleep each night just as they do. The next day, in answer to their prayers they might suppose, it/he is there again to serve them. And so things will continue for at least 4 billion more years, long after the wider civilisation has abandoned its blind faith in totally invisible, totally inactive gods.

Conclusion

Until relatively recently a number of SOF members met as a sub-set ‘Sea of Faith in the Churches’. Perhaps its participants were already way ahead of me? Presumably they had reconciled their ongoing association with the superfluous trappings of ‘organised religion’ with an urge to live, alongside those of like mind, the kind of life which Jesus preached during his three years or so of ministry, driven by the challenges of everyday life out in the real world, real life, which for each one of us will have a finite timespan and which for each one of us will end in personal oblivion, job done.

An exciting possibility, surely, is that for Christian Atheism one might be able to substitute Hindu Atheism, Muslim Atheism and so on – thus giving us common ground (such as many seek within the Network) with members of other faiths prepared to prize the wisdom, poetry and compassion of their own great historical trad-

itions without adherence to any supernatural scaffolding. Can we not unite to seek a better life here on earth for as many persons as possible, living a peaceful and plentiful dogma-free co-existence, something John Lennon envisaged in his song *Imagine* ... exactly 50 years ago?

Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too.
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can.
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man.
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world.
I hope someday you will join us
And the world will live as one.⁷

In a particularly prescient conclusion to his book, written over twenty years ago, the late author Ludovic Kennedy took the bull by the horns. Having clearly explained throughout preceding chapters why for him there was no God, he addressed, finally, some of the existential threats that are only now really touching the world's consciousness:

Today I believe most people are content to accept the world as it is. It is less the distant past that exercises most people's imagination than the future; the problems that unite us all are those that threaten the survival of life on the planet; the destruction of the rainforests and global warming leading to a dramatic rise in sea levels and unpredictable changes in climate; the population explosion; where energy is to be found after all the oil has run out; an out-of-control global virus.... I do not believe that this time we will be foolish enough to ask 'God' to come to the rescue. ⁸

NOTES

1. Altizer, Thomas J. J. and William Hamilton. *Radical Theology and The Death of God*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966..
2. Channel 4, *Credo*, 29 April 1984.
3. Lyas, Colin. 'On the Coherence of Christian Atheism.' *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 45 (171), 1970.
4. Dawkins, R. *The God Delusion*, Bantam Books, 2006.
5. Marsh, H. *Do No Harm*; Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2014, p. 200.
6. Dave Anfensen. Comment on patheos.com website discussion on article *The 'Christian Atheist'. What would it take for Douglas Murray to believe in God?* – launched October 19th 2020 by Erik Strandness.
7. 'Imagine' by John Lennon. (part lyric) Apple Records 1971.
8. Kennedy, L. *All in the Mind? A farewell to God*. Hodder and Stoughton 1999. p 274.



'Imagine'.
John Lennon
memorial in
Central Park,
New York.