

The devout sceptic: a creed for those of little faith

Despite repeated attacks from militant atheists, God is not dead. Many who doubt can still take comfort in sacred mysteries

BY JONATHAN GAISMAN

One of the richest moments in the New Testament comes in Acts chapter 17, when Saint Paul travels to Athens. It tells of the convergence of two worlds which the modern reader usually regards as separate: the biblical and the classical. The Jewish convert to Christianity encounters “certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks” who ask him about the new doctrine which he is preaching; he is taken to the Areopagus (where the Evangelist tells us parenthetically that the Athenians spend their whole time “either telling or hearing some new thing”). Paul is already displeased that the city is “wholly given to idolatry”, and now he sees an altar inscribed “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”, which stimulates him to give an extended sermon on the true nature of God, “in whom we live, and move, and have our being”. Some of the locals regard him as a “babbling” and mock his account of the Resurrection, but he gains adherents, including a certain Dionysius the Areopagite. Overall, however, this is an occasion where one’s sympathies are no less with the Greeks than with the Apostle. For did they not have a point in describing one of their gods (amid the familiar pantheon) as unknown? Did not the Jews par excellence worship a God who had no name except “I AM” and whose presence in the Holy of Holies was hidden behind a veil? Were not the Athenians expressing an age-old but also contemporary thought in identifying the *deus absconditus*—the hidden God?

These hard questions provoke yet harder ones. Can we believe in God and, if so, in what sense? Can we believe in the God revealed in the New Testament and, if so, how? Such questions persist in the minds of many, even (perhaps especially) in the minds of non-believers. They particularly trouble those who might wish to believe, but feel (or are made to feel) that they cannot respectably do so. This is a time in which the borderlands between faith and doubt, and between doubt and agnosticism, are heavily populated. We may take, as a paradigm inhabitant of these places, an intelligent rationalist who is, in Leslie Stephen’s phrase, a devout sceptic: why should and how can he believe in the Deity, or have a Christian faith? Or is it axiomatically obvious from the given premises—intelligence and rationality—that he cannot? Is God so concealed, assuming Him to exist at all, and so abstracted from the world of time and space, that worship of Him (or him) is an exercise in futility?

Those who occupy this territory see unattainable certainties on either side. For example, many Roman Catholics are strongly motivated to adhere to their faith by obedience to a mother Church of high antiquity and authority (the latter largely self-conferred). To say this is not to denigrate their beliefs, but our sceptic cannot put his trust

in princes, even princes of the Church (and to do so may lead to an unnecessary loss of faith when Church leaders are found personally wanting.) Evangelical Anglicans at Holy Trinity Brompton and its many daughter churches seeded through the Alpha course believe that they are born again into a personal relation with Jesus; but their exclusive creed appears to our subject to be based on a combination of naiveté and literalism—to say nothing of a wilful disregard of much modern textual scholarship—which treats any point of view other than their own (even other Anglican professions) as wrong-headed if not positively dangerous. Jews and Muslims have the advantage of supranational cultural loyalties with which to buttress faiths that make relatively modest metaphysical demands—perhaps enviably so—when compared with the baggage of Christian metaphysics. Many believers of all these persuasions believe that religion is given by God, whereas the sceptic is pretty sure that religions are made by men in an attempt to express an idea of God, and are therefore bound to exhibit all the flaws (as well as all the sublimities) of human creation.

On the other side, the sceptic is beset by atheists and materialists whose reductionist certainties strike him as no less unattractive than the extremism of faith in its most assertive forms. These include people who will use Occam’s razor to exclude the possibility of God, but have no difficulty in conjuring up an infinity of unknowable parallel universes, in order to explain the inconvenience of the apparent fine-tuning of the physical laws of our universe to convey (in Paul Davies’s term) the appearance of purpose, or to account for the existence of something rather than nothing. Or they may be people who ridicule the idea of faith in God as a metaphysical assumption for which there is no scientific or rational evidence, but to whom it has never occurred to realise that their own beliefs rest on no more concrete a foundation. (Thus the atheist’s essential case that the only truths that we should accept are those for which there is an empirical or scientific basis does not itself have an empirical or scientific basis. The notion that the only things worthy of belief are those which are objectively verifiable is not itself an objectively verifiable belief. As Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus*, it is impossible for a proposition to state that it itself is true.) Or they are those who pick off with a flourish their opponents’ weakest arguments like so many low pheasants, while ignoring all the more challenging ones. Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* is a now notorious example of this unsporting and evasive technique, but the book ▶

‘Can we believe in God and, if so, in what sense? Can we believe in the God revealed in the New Testament and, if so, how?’



© ENGLISHHERITAGE/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

The convergence of two worlds: "St Paul Preaching at Athens", 1737, by Giovanni Paolo Panini

is worth mentioning one last time if only to alert readers to its superlative savaging by Terry Eagleton in the *London Review of Books*, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching”. This article should be read in its entirety, but as he starts out: “[Professional atheists] invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be.” (Dawkins’s approach has also been criticised by thoughtful non-believers, for example Tim Crane, the sub-title of whose book *The Meaning of Belief is Religion from an Atheist’s Point of View*.)

Many of us conduct our inquiry into the possibility of faith by employing the same rational apparatus that we use for other mental activities—our work, for example. This is such a natural and prevalent tendency that it takes a moment to realise that there is no necessary reason why we should be doing any such thing. It may sound paradoxical to say so, but it is not always irrational not to use our faculties of reason. Unless we are convinced that reason is the only legitimate means of approach, we should start again. It should be self-evident that science can only answer scientific questions. There is no logical basis for the assumption that it can answer any other questions, and there is simply no basis for supposing that questions susceptible to rational treatment are the only sort of worthwhile questions that there are.

Religion has too often tended to fight its battles on the wrong ground. Luther’s emphasis on justification by faith alone focused attention on belief in a series of propositions to which we must either intellectually assent or else risk eternal perdition. The Enlightenment encouraged a universal recourse to reason by which, despite various baleful outcomes, we are guided still. The tendency of fundamentalist religious sects to defend their corner as if they were advancing empirically provable scientific propositions adds grist to the materialist mill. But we need only think about how we approach important parts of our lives such as the appreciation of nature and art, or our relations with our loved ones, to realise that it is indeed often rational to forego pure reason. This suggestion has been put forward with lucidity in a book which is not about religion, Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master and his Emissary*, a work of exceptional importance which—from the starting-point of examining the different ways in which the two brain hemispheres make sense of the world—argues a persuasive case that we rely too much on the essentially verbal, lifeless, static, Platonic perceptions of the left hemisphere and should restore the equal validity of the right, which experiences the world in interactive, living, dynamic, pre-Socratic terms (for as Heraclitus said, “Everything is in flux”). On this view, we should not conceive the world in terms of verifiable certainties within our own minds, but recognise that man, far from being the intellectual centre of existence, is a “privileged listener and respondent” to it.

There are those who seek to approach and justify their own faith in a spirit of rationalist inquiry. Science and maths themselves have inspired people to see God through the purity of numbers and the architecture of the universe. For others—and no less productively—the religious life has to start with an inclination. There are those, such as Crane, who speak in terms of a religious “impulse”, deriving from the mere sense that (as he puts it) “there must be more to life than this”, but the notion of an inclination better conveys the sense of responding to a gradient, as it were of falling into a relationship with God. To the atheist who offers the knock-down response that he feels no such inclination, the answer is simple. Someone who decides that he has no appreciation, say, of music should pursue the things that he does enjoy; meanwhile, his deafness to the appeal of music is simply irrelevant to those who take pleasure in listening to it. Neither position invalidates the other; each is a choice about how to live in the world and what to characterise as important. It is pointless to try and persuade towards belief



Terry Eagleton: “The more [professional atheists] detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be”

a person who lacks the religious tendency. There is nothing reprehensible about not having such a tendency; but there is nothing reprehensible about having it either. The poets have traditionally understood the nature of the inclination towards belief better than the scientific materialists (as is indicated by the fact that many scientists would dispute the very existence of poetic truth). In his great spiritual meditation *Little Gidding*, Eliot quotes from the 14th-century text *The Cloud of Unknowing* to convey the sense of God’s gravitational pull: “With the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling.” Many respond to the beauty of this idea without knowing other than intuitively what it means—but they respond with a sense of recognition.

The origins of this instinct may well be in part natural. Anthropologists or psychologists, who for example characterise the story of the expulsion from Eden as a human attempt to mythologise the trauma of birth, cannot be proved wrong, but their insight, if such it be, does not carry the matter much further. Truth in this area does not depend upon a choice of alternatives: things co-exist simultaneously on different levels, and higher states—most obviously love itself—emerge from lower ones, as the image on a canvas emerges from brushstrokes of paint. Nor is the inclination towards God to be dismissed as a calculation based on wishful thinking or fear of death, since religious faith does not have to carry with it a belief in life after death—either at all, or certainly of any identifiable kind. (Judaism is particularly ambiguous on this subject.) Though Pascal thought otherwise, the point of worship is not to get back something in return, as if it would be pointless to bother with it unless obedience to God conferred the benefits of blissful immortality. The inclination is more akin to the unconditional and

involuntary joy in, say, a landscape. It is something that certain people feel, and they expect nothing in return for feeling it; no element of calculation is involved. It is experienced through the mind, to be sure, but not through the intellect. As used to be said, it is felt through the heart or the soul.

No one need be ashamed of this form of religious inclination, although it is constantly the target of condescension and attack. The fact that it is not for everybody does not mean that it should be treated as if it should be for nobody. It is easy to cite instances of modern sages who command universal respect for their intellectual rigour, but who also embraced the religious dimension in their lives. This does not mean that they were right, but it does at least demonstrate that the religious inclination is not the sole preserve of the fathead or the bigot. For example, Wittgenstein, who may be presumed to have had as powerful an intellect as anyone in the 20th century, had a lifelong interest in religion and said that he saw every problem from a religious point of view. As a soldier, he carried in his pocket a copy of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*. Bertrand Russell once wrote of him: "The last time we met he was so much pained by the fact of my not being a Christian that he has avoided me ever since." His writings are full of statements about God, faith and the religious cast of mind, but in contemporary discussion there are a hundred citations of Russell's noisy and conceited atheism for every reference to Wittgenstein's own quiet religiosity. To take another case, Gödel, probably the century's most important mathematician, was a theistic Lutheran who read the Bible in bed every Sunday morning and thought that it was impossible to give a credible account of reality without God. He even (whether correctly or otherwise) developed an update of the ontological proof of the existence of God originally formulated (unconvincingly) by Anselm and developed by Leibniz. (It is characteristic of Dawkins to have attacked this purported proof in its weakest form.)

The writer of *The Cloud* tells the receptive reader how to nurture and develop the religious inclination: "Only see: all rational beings have in them two principal active faculties, one a faculty of knowledge, and the second a faculty of love; and God, their maker, is forever beyond the reach of the first of these, the intellectual faculty; but by means of the second, the loving faculty, he can be fully grasped by each individual being." Faith, in other words, is a matter of the correct epistemological terminology. When we talk of knowing or believing things, we need to understand that we use these verbs in different ways depending on the object of our knowledge or belief. Knowing a scientific truth is already a different form of knowledge from knowing a mathematical truth. Belief in the truth of a well-evidenced scientific theory is plainly quite different from belief in, say, the pre-eminent value of the works of a celebrated artist, or belief that one is loved by a near relation. Belief entails a subject and an object; the important thing to understand is that it is the nature of the object which defines the character of the belief. *The Cloud* teaches that the way in which to further a belief in God is not by an evaluation of the evidence for and against, but by loving Him; and it does not matter that our view of the loved object is obscured: "If you wish to stand and not fall, never relax your purpose, but beat continually upon this cloud of unknowing that is between you and your God with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not give up, whatever happens".

The *Cloud* author was a follower and translator of an early sixth-century divine, who probably lived in Syria and wrote under the name of—indeed claimed to be—the very Dionysius who had stood before the altar to the unknown God and been

"The point of worship is not to get back something in return, as if it would be pointless to bother with it unless obedience to God conferred the benefits of blissful immortality"

converted by Paul's sermon in Athens. This writer, known to modern scholarship as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, advanced what became known as the *via negativa*, an approach to God which emphasises His unknowability, by apophatically stripping away all the concepts traditionally applied to

Him, and worshipping what is found to remain. The residue is, in Roger Scruton's phrase, "the unclothed subject, from which all marks of identity have fallen away". Charles Stang's recent book on Pseudo-Dionysius explains that the whole of his theology narrates the self's efforts to unite with the "God beyond being" as a perpetual process of affirming [kataphasis] and negating [apophasis] the divine names, in the conviction that only by contemplating and then clearing away all of our concepts and categories can we clear a space for the divine to descend, free of idolatrous accretions. His description of this union with the divine as the descent of "unknowing" ultimately derives from Acts chapter 17. Thus the sixth-century writer takes on the name of an Athenian convert to suggest that his entire mystical enterprise, which aims to worship and eventually to unite with the unknown God, finds inspiration in Saint Paul.

A stark expression of the discipline is provided by the 9th-century theologian John Scotus Erigena: "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being." This method of contemplating God is to be found in Aquinas and St John of the Cross, Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. In the words of Richard Hooker, a 16th-century theologian and Master of the Temple:

Dangerous it were for the feeble brain of man to wade too far into the doings of the Most High; whom although to know be life, and joy to make mention of his name, yet our soundest knowledge is to know that we know him not as indeed he is, neither can we know him; and our safest eloquence concerning him is our silence, when we confess without confession that his glory is inexplicable, and his greatness above our capacity and reach. He is above, and we upon earth; therefore it behoves our words to be wary and few.

This approach invites followers to a devotional, mystical, non-literal form of worship. It has the attraction of being found in, and so creating a communion with many of the world's religions, expressed in Judaism and Islam by the writings of Maimonides and al-Ghazālī. It corresponds to the conception of the transcendent God posited by Kant, who famously wrote that he had denied knowledge in order to make room for faith. God, on this view, is the ground of being, the fundamental predicate. This is indeed what faith in its purest form means, for faith is not an intellectual conclusion to the sifting of evidence following a quasi-scientific inquiry. In the epistle-writer's paradox, it is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"; it is no more or less rigorous than atheism, in that both are assumptions that reflect the adherent's pre-existing inclination, and require the acceptance of what can only be supposed. In the case of the religiously inclined, the resulting state of mind is one of trust, one that is open to mystery (an anathematic term to materialists), and one that does not object to practising a faith of which unknowing is the heart. The person who follows this path may find that, compared with others who take a more historically conventional approach, he believes more and more in less and less, but also that this progression represents an enhancement, not a diminution of faith.

Such an approach to God also has the advantage of marginalising trivial questions of the "Can God make a weight so ►

heavy that He can't lift it?" variety as well as setting into a more theologically coherent context serious issues such as (in C.S. Lewis's phrase) the problem of pain. The first sort of question might ask, for example, why God bothered to make us in the first place: it starts by hypothesising a God with the conventional attributes of creativity, transcendence, omnipotence and sempiternality, and then asks—of that very posited God—a question that only makes sense if one supposes God to be the opposite: temporal, contingent, limited and somehow possessed of humanity's vocabulary of values. One may as well ask whether God bowls round the wicket. The second much more difficult type of question, however, also erroneously assumes the correctness of ascribing to God a set of characteristics which accord with our own sub-lunary values and moral preoccupations. Both presuppose that the way in which to engage with Him is as a puzzling but in theory decodable member of the Senior Common Room, when He can by definition be no such thing. Atheists often ascribe to the God in whom they disbelieve a set of characteristics which those who have faith in God themselves do not believe.

The devout sceptic who has an inclination to belief and who is in sympathy with the approach outlined above now confronts a choice—whether to make the large jump from faith to established religion. He remains convinced that religions are man-made, and it follows that whilst they might have a tendency towards truth, no religion can claim an exclusive access to revelation (not least because of their mutual contradictions), or assert that there is only one path up the mountain. He is also careful not to beg any questions by pre-supposing the necessary existence of but a single truth (an enduring but unproven assumption in Western thinking since the days of Plato.) He is less convinced by the often-cited argument, iterated with uncharacteristic tediousness in Christopher Hitchens's book *God is not Great*, that discredits religions by pointing to the many evil deeds done in their name. This is because (among other answers) the actions of corruptible people in the names of their religions can have no logical bearing on the existence or non-existence of the superhuman Being whom religions imperfectly seek to describe.

It is open to anyone to retain a personalised and entirely individual faith, but for the majority the natural course at this stage is to reach out to an established tradition, which is most likely to be that in which they were brought up. This is for several reasons. First, like the followers of any other predilection, religious people typically form groups. Second, those groups provide a collective enhancement of the experience shared, as anyone who has been part of a theatre audience will attest. Third, all religions concern themselves with relations between human beings, and prescribe rules of conduct towards one's fellows, so that it is natural for people of faith to reach out to others. Fourth, and perhaps most important, the profound human desire for sacred spaces and rituals is best served by religions whose lengthy past has brought such places and actions into being, polished and venerated by the observances of succeeding generations. The result of these and other impulses, as Durkheim observed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, is that "religious beliefs proper are always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practises the rites that go with them". Those brought up in the Christian tradition may appreciate that other religions possess their own especial virtues not readily found in Christianity—for example the ebullient celebration of nature and sexuality in Hinduism, or the austere monism of Islam—but the Christian religion remains a suitable repository of their faith, and Christianity's unique expression of a God of love offers a version of the ineffable which has both beauty and power.

It is however the special feature of Christianity to propose a formidable metaphysical agenda, especially when compared with other religions'

It is however the special feature of Christianity, as already noted, to propose a formidable metaphysical agenda, especially when compared with other religions: it calls for belief in original sin, the Incarnation (and hence the Virgin Birth), the Resurrection, atonement and redemption, the Trinity, judgment, Heaven and Hell. Among the many problems which the human mind experiences with this conception of God is the idea that He occasionally chooses to intervene in his creation, so as intermittently to suspend the laws of biology, but otherwise remains aloof. Another arises from the exclusionary consequences of the words said by or attributed to Jesus (it being impossible to distinguish between these two categories of utterance): "No man cometh unto the Father but by me." Yet another is the whole concept of God meting out eternal punishment and reward, dependent on the precise degree to which a human has fallen short in his lifetime from a standard which he is inevitably (owing to his God-given nature) not going to meet, the extent of the allowable falling-short being entirely obscure, and the punishment almost by definition being disproportionate to the crime. Those who can literally believe in these doctrines are perhaps to be congratulated on the strength of their faith, but the rationalist cannot accept the literal truth in these "six impossible things before breakfast".

However, the fact that something may not be literally true does not mean that it is altogether false. The fallacy in the latter supposition is to confine oneself to a single version or level of truth, which is an impoverishing and unnecessary choice (and which limits truth once more to the scientific-reductionist world-view). It is wrong to suppose that Christians have to believe literally in their religion as if it posited a rival account of nature or science. Some may indeed believe that if a camera had filmed the conception of Christ, it would have recorded something which looked like Danaë being visited by the shower of gold in the Titian painting. Alternatively, however, one may have recourse to other sorts of truth of which humans are aware—poetic or allegorical truths are examples. Slightly more radically, one can trust in the (not very remote) possibility that there are truths beyond the reach of our imaginings. It is easy to hypothesise an animal which does not grasp a truth which is available to humans. Insects on a football pitch will never deduce the rules of the game, no matter how meticulously they record with their arthropod equipment the location and intensity of the seismic vibrations all around them. Human beings are likely to be in the same position; this is what it means to see "through a glass darkly".

It is therefore presumptuous to assume the non-existence of higher truths than humans can reach. On this view, the Incarnation and Resurrection are a story—no one knows whether true and, if so, in what sense and degree—which presents a vision of God's love for the world. Since we cannot see or fathom this, we need (adult) stories through which to imagine it. They are fundamentally mysterious, and we will never unlock their mysteries on this earth. But we can have faith. Many who are not believing Christians concede that the life and teaching of Jesus represent something altogether exceptional in the history of the world. They also have the sense that something remarkable and important happened over the first Easter weekend in Jerusalem, which changed things forever, but which nonetheless remains beyond our comprehension. It is not necessary to be convinced by rigorous forensic means of the empty tomb in order to acknowledge its potential significance in an open-minded spirit. It is admittedly the case that for most of the last 2,000 years these stories have been understood to be true in the literal sense, but that fact cannot bind us. As the furniture of our minds is restocked over the centuries, through



“The Expulsion from Eden”, by Rubens, 1620: Even if this story is an attempt to mythologise the trauma of birth, such an insight does not carry the matter much further

developments in philosophy, epistemology, psychology and the rest, we must move forward in the light of them. We can also learn much from the experience of the attitude to truth in Eastern religions. Even in its most sophisticated forms, Hinduism embraces its own myths without self-conscious defensiveness, and these myths are not only central to the outward signs and practices of religion, but constitute paths to the more abstract examination of the nature of God and His relationship with the human soul. The question whether Krishna, the godly teacher of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, really is an avatar of Vishnu and if so in what sense does not give rise to the same literalist agonising as the endlessly repeated inquiries in the West into the real nature of the Virgin Birth. That which is mysterious is not for that reason untrue. People can choose to close their minds to the presence of mystery in their lives and live an entirely reductionist, left-hemisphere existence, but it is not necessary for the devout sceptic to do so.

The habit of religion will always be derided by the atheist as an exercise in ever-increasing self-deception. Of course, precisely the same can be said about the habit of seeing the world in purely materialist terms. All mental habits lead—as is obvious—to habituation. One aspect of religion which the Reformation (perhaps unfortunately) did much to undermine is the value of religious actions in themselves: not merely good works, which have independent moral value, but also rituals. Religion is as much what one does as what one thinks, a truth that the Eastern religions have more successfully retained; and perhaps it is also true that the performance of religious actions affects the nature of religious thought. Thus, as Crane (following Durkheim) points out, being a believer essentially involves doing certain things, which are as fundamental an aspect of religion as a theory of the cosmos and a moral code. The benefits which are conferred by a life of active Christian observance include not only the repetition of sanctified rituals, but also enjoyment from within of the beauty of religious symbolism, the wisdom and poetry of Cranmer and the Authorised Version (if these are to your taste) and the inheritance of a tradition which still speaks to the

mind and the heart. None of these benefits proves the truths which underlie them, but an attentive reading of the New Testament confirms that faith is not, and never was a matter of proof.

It follows that doubt is necessarily at the heart of this sort of faith. For the Victorians, labouring under the burden of an inherited religious tradition which the forces of Darwinism prised out of their hands, doubt was a form of agony which one sees reflected, for example, in the poetry of Arnold and Tennyson. In Britain’s present, pervasively godless age, it is more productive to see doubt not as a staging-post on the retreat from faith, but conversely as a step towards engaging with it. Such a faith entails accepting that one does not know what one believes, to what extent and in what way, and that all of these three things may oscillate from day to day. It seeks to bridge the gap between agnosticism and Christian conviction using trust, mysticism, a sense of the transcendent, the beauty of holiness, and whatever other tools come to hand.

This faith does not know and often doubts the unbelievable truths of the New Testament, but takes up its place within the Christian tradition, trusting and hoping in a spirit of acceptance that it will deepen and progress. (As Saint Augustine said, “Seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand.”) This faith is therefore available to many who might call themselves agnostics, because it is wrong to suppose that belief in God has to be like belief in tomorrow’s sunrise. On the contrary: this faith is reconciled to the cloud of unknowing between the believer and his unprovable God. It does not require acceptance of the literal truth of six impossible things before breakfast, but believes that the metaphysical events recounted in the New Testament yield a true insight into the nature of the Divinity, in a sense which is not the same as the belief in the operation of a scientific law. This faith acknowledges the inherent worth of ritual, liturgy and works, all performed with hearts inclined to worship; it consists in practice, intuition and emotional response. Above all, it echoes the cry of the suffering father in Saint Mark’s Gospel: “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” [S](#)