

Introduction



Modern society does not know what to do with God. For many, God belongs in a small box labelled ‘religion’, and is not expected to appear outside it. Maybe the box itself is a useless bequest from the past, fit only to be thrown out. Or maybe it is one of many optional lifestyle choices: like *Star Trek* or horse racing, people may engage with it without feeling any need to justify it.

Traditional religions have understood God very differently. Making sense of God has been an essential starting point for making sense of anything at all. This book will explain why.

I found myself challenged by the difference between these perspectives in the 1980s. I was helping to organize the annual Green Fair in Sheffield. Hundreds of people came, many feeling a need for a spiritual dimension to their lives and hoping to shop around for guidance. They were interested in a wide range of traditions, from crystal therapy to Indian meditation methods to Tai Chi to dancing naked round some standing stones in the Peak District under a full moon. I was struck by the wide variety of providers. Nevertheless the number of providers was less than the number of Christian churches in the city, and none of those people told me they had tried going to a Christian church. It was as though that was something they definitely did not want.

Being a Christian priest I wanted to know why. I learned to appreciate that people who deliberately engage on a spiritual search usually expect to remain in control of their own searching process, so the last thing they want is someone who claims to know all the answers, burdens them with a mountain of beliefs and makes them feel guilty for any doubts they may have. If this is what many expected from Christian churches, I felt I understood. I knew of churches which promoted evangelism as an unequal dialogue where

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the Christian knows the truth and does all the talking. Spiritual seekers, on enquiring about Christianity, might find that their own views were not taken seriously. I also knew of churches which taught that reason cannot convert, so becoming a Christian is primarily a matter of having a personal conversion experience. Non-Christians being evangelized might then feel they were being subjected to emotional manipulation rather than being credited with the ability to make their own judgements. It is hardly surprising when people with a spiritual awareness do not want to buy into packages of dogma which they do not find convincing. They often avoid speaking of having a ‘belief’ at all because of the dogmatic connotations of the word; they may prefer to speak more vaguely of having a ‘spirituality’.

I was left with three questions, all of which are even more relevant today than they were then. First, why are so many people prepared to spend time and effort trying to establish a spiritual dimension to their lives? What are they missing, that makes them feel they need it? Second, if a spiritual dimension is so important, why are so many people starting from scratch with an open mind? Why have they been brought up without such a dimension – or at least, without one they find acceptable? Third, why do so many people fail to find the spiritual guidance they seek in Christian churches?

This book will address these questions. They are closely related to each other, but the emphasis will be on the first. What seems to have become the default position in modern western culture is that there is no God. Recently this position has been defended by a number of ‘new atheist’ authors, the best known of whom are Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett.¹ Their main argument is that science can explain the way the universe works without any need for God. Either God’s existence has been completely disproved, or at least there is no evidence for it; so believing is either a pointless optional extra or, worse, a misleading superstition.

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Their main target is the God of fundamentalist and dogmatic religion in the forms which have been flourishing over the last generation or two, especially in the USA. Such versions of Christianity and Islam

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often do reject scientific findings; opposition to evolution, for example, is common. These authors then proceed to describe other versions of Christianity and Islam as merely watered-down versions of those dogmatic fundamentalisms. In this way they make their task easier, as it gives them an excuse to ignore better informed accounts of religious belief.

On the one hand their books have been so popular that they clearly touch a raw nerve: many people have indeed had strong negative experiences of religious teaching of this type, and are anxious to have nothing to do with it. On the other hand, many people are dissatisfied with the conviction that there is no God. They feel a need to relate to *something*: something which they can integrate into the rest of their life and help them make sense of it, without buying into dogmas which defy ordinary modern knowledge of the world. Faced with a choice between rejecting all spiritual awareness and rejecting modern scientific knowledge, it is understandable if many prefer to keep their options open. The result is a range of vaguely 'spiritual' practices and ideas which can be picked up and dropped with minimal commitment, in a culture reluctant to subject any of them to rigorous examination. This book, as the title indicates, offers a different alternative: to reject neither reason nor God, because believing in God makes sense.

Nineteenth-century atheism and dogmatism

Thus modern western society is slowly moving into a new phase. For nearly two centuries, from the end of the eighteenth century until the 1960s, many educated people believed science was about to disprove, or had already disproved, the existence of God. It seemed that religious belief was a relic from a superstitious past, destined to die out as we all became better educated. Christians often reacted by appealing to spiritual truths beyond the reach of science, thereby creating more fundamentalist and dogmatic versions of Christianity.

The result was a debate between two positions that had a great deal in common with each other. Atheists denounced all religion as irrational, and so denied the existence of God in the name of reason. Religious

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dogmatists agreed that reason and God were incompatible, but rejected secular reason in the name of God. From then on, militant atheism and religious dogmatism have fed on each other, denouncing each other while dismissing more liberal religious traditions as watered-down, inauthentic versions.

Since the 1970s the tide has turned. Increasing numbers have been convinced that there is more to reality than science can show us. They may prefer to speak of having a spirituality rather than a religion, but they feel a desire to engage with a deeper reality, whatever-it-is that underpins the everyday things of our ordinary lives.

This perhaps explains why the ‘new atheist’ authors express such intense bitterness against religious belief. Their arguments, far from riding the crest of a wave, are better seen as reactionary defences of an outdated tradition, by people lamenting the failure of an older hope that religious belief would die out.

At the same time, what people experience in the Christian churches often seems equally reactionary and outdated. Instead of encouraging spiritual searchers and offering Christian resources for people to use as they see fit, churches often continue using the anti-rational methods they learned against atheism, proudly advertising those elements of their tradition which are hardest to justify rationally. This clash of ideologies, with both sides determined to deny that believing in God makes sense, increasingly feels like a voice from the past.

When it comes to believing in God, therefore, the two most loudly trumpeted options are incompatible with each other: either God, or modern science and reason. This either/or dichotomy results from a most unusual history, not at all the way most societies, or most people in the past, have thought about the matter.

Chapter 1 will describe how we got into our present situation. One of the advantages of a good awareness of history is that it helps us appreciate how ideas change. What seems obviously true today did not always seem obviously true, and sometimes may have seemed obviously false. This is certainly the case with believing in God: given that where we are now is a most unusual place to be, how on earth did we get here? The story cannot be told without acknowledging the close interaction between anti-religious theories and anti-rational religious dogmatism.

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The rest of the book is more positively concerned with exploring the reasons why people do believe in God, and how well they can be justified. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 focus on the most common reasons for belief: design, values, morality and experience. These chapters generate some theoretical questions, which will be the topic of the following three chapters. By the end it should be clear that a pattern is emerging: to reject God consistently we would need to redescribe reality in the bleakest, simplest terms, and this would mean denying most of our ordinary experience. The coherent alternative is that reality as we experience it makes better sense if there is more to it than we experience.

This book does not defend one account of God against others. It draws on Christian resources because these are the ones I am familiar with, but it is not about Christianity as such. Nor does it defend the idea of a *good* God against the common argument that such a being would not have allowed all the suffering and evil in the world. Important though this question is, the focus here is on making sense of the reasons why people *do* believe in God. We shall therefore be concerned with how to *justify* belief. Psychological and sociological motivations are another matter; they may produce strong desires to believe, regardless of whether God exists.

Before proceeding with this more positive agenda, however, I need to justify some of the claims I have already made about the oddness of the present situation. If we can understand why Europeans broke with earlier tradition to produce God-free accounts of reality, it may help us appreciate which bits of our inheritance are worth keeping and which are no longer of value.