

Atheism is not so smart

By Roy Lawrence

Many years ago I discovered John Bunyan's famous book *Pilgrim's Progress*. Recently I have read it again and have been surprised to discover in it some characters I have never noticed before.

There is 'Atheist' who meets 'Christian' and 'Hopeful' on their way to the Celestial City. He asks where they are going and when they tell him of their hopes of heaven, 'then Atheist fell into very great laughter' explaining 'I laugh to see what ignorant people you are.' He insists: 'there is no such place as you dream of.'

There is another similar character called 'Shame', not because he feels any shame himself, but because of his habit of calling out 'Shame' whenever he meets a Christian. His view, like that of Atheist is that it is 'a pitiful, low, sneaking business for a man to mind religion.'

These two characters are not uncommon today. Secularism has become fashionable. Atheism is thought to be quite smart, whereas the media often portray believers as bigots and boobies. The same view can be found in some educational circles. I know of a school where a new head teacher has banned the Christmas crib because she says it is not 'politically correct' for a modern school to have one.

I am sure she feels smart and fashionable in having these views, and fashionable she may well be, but smart she is not.

To believe or not to believe

When I was training for the ministry, I had the good fortune to spend four years at Oxford, obtaining a degree in classics and theology, and then two years of post-graduate study in Cambridge. The purpose was to teach me to think.

If Bunyan's Atheist was right and having a Christian faith is a sign of laughable ignorance, training the clergy in this way would make no sense. It would just expose the folly of belief. However, all I can tell you is that the effect on me was precisely the opposite. The impact of those six years was to convince me that Christian belief is well able to stand up to the most searching of thought processes.

Also, I could not help noting that many others had come to the same conclusion. Think for instance of CS Lewis, author of the famous Narnia stories, who taught at both Oxford and Cambridge, and whom I was privileged to meet. He was an atheist in his earlier years but found he could not continue to be so. Or think of Professor CEM Joad, once a frequent broadcaster on the BBC Brains Trust, whose atheistic views were well known.

I remember reading his book *God and Evil*, which revealed that he was slowly and painfully working his way back to believing in God, a process which was completed when he wrote his final book, *Recovery of Belief*. The writer and





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know that, when she does so, she is quoting Parmenides, who lived five centuries before Jesus?

It is hard to look at the universe and not wonder where it has come from. And what a universe it is! Think of the glory of a sunset, the loveliness of a rose, the symmetry of a snowflake. Even if creation could happen inexplicably by accident, what are we to make of all the evidence of order and design? Of beauty? Of moral laws or the visionary experience? Or of art and literature and great music? Can we contemplate any or all of these things without a sense of mystery? A sense of that which is greater than we are—greater than anything which we can conceive or understand? In Bunyan, *Atheist and Shame* try to dispel these questions by mockery. However, mockery is a two-edged weapon.

Laughter in heaven

C. S. Lewis suggested that in heaven atheism would be mentioned only as a sort of joke. Perhaps for a moment we can share the humour.

Imagine you want to buy a car. You go to a local car dealer, point to a model you fancy, and ask about its production. What if the salesman said there was no production line, no design team, and that the car happened by accident? There was an explosion in the corner of the factory and when the dust settled there it was! Wouldn't you go to another salesman?

The universe is much more complex than a car. I am not competent to know whether those who speak about a 'big bang' are right or not, but common sense tells us that

broadcaster, Malcolm Muggeridge, made a similar journey not long afterwards. It was meeting Mother Teresa which brought him to the point at which he realised he could no longer be an unbeliever. His book *Jesus Rediscovered* told the story of his conversion.

I have a list of some fifty former atheists who became Christians. They include politicians of the left and the right, scientists, journalists, poets, and pop singers.

What has happened to individuals has happened to nations too. Russia has abandoned atheistic communism and returned to the beliefs of the Orthodox Church, and at this very moment something extraordinary is happening in Communist China, where every

day sees perhaps 15,000 new Christians.

The logic of faith

None of this is surprising. From the dawn of human thought, men and women have felt that this remarkable universe of ours cannot be a mere accident. If you have enjoyed *The Sound of Music*, you may remember Maria singing 'nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could', but did you





this cannot be the whole story. And what about those who prefer to talk about creation in terms of a 'steady state'?

A story was told to me of two university lecturers, one a Christian, the other an atheist. When the atheist visited the Christian he was impressed to see a working model of the solar system in the other one's house. There was a representation of the sun and around it all the planets were rotating. 'My goodness, who made that?' he asked. The Christian could not resist answering: 'I thought you believed it just happened!'

Struggle for the soul of the nation

Perhaps, however, though atheism may cause laughter in heaven, the fact that it is becoming fashionable these days is not such a joke. Most of the best things in our national life come from the Christian faith. Our best laws have a Christian basis. Our education system has a Christian origin. Medical care was pioneered by Christians. That is why a number of our best hospitals and hospices are named after

saints. Our traditional standards of decency and honour are based on the Christian ethic.

If we were to remove the Christian influence, the result would be sheer disaster. Yet that is what is happening. The place of Christianity in the UK (from where I write) is being steadily eroded. Christian couples find it difficult to adopt or foster children. Christian teachers

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and medics can be disciplined and even dismissed if they show their faith. Christian hoteliers are penalised for their principles. By contrast it has become easier, more politically correct, to be an atheist. We ask ourselves what is going wrong, but we do not wait for an answer.

During World War II there was a slogan: 'Don't you know there's a

war on?' You might hear it if you broke the blackout regulations or put more than five inches (12.5 cm) of water in the bath or tried to obtain more than your ration of food. It is a slogan we could well revive, because there is certainly a war going on now, a war of values and belief. There is a struggle for the soul of our nation and we all have to work out where we stand.

For myself, my conviction, formed over the course of many years, is that I cannot do better than to stand with and for Jesus. The main reason why I believe in God the Father is that I take him on trust from Jesus. Atheists have to believe they know

better than Jesus. I can't do that. Can you?

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