

“Faith in Doubt: how my dog made me an atheist and atheism made me a priest: An experiment in Faith”

This book proposes that the church must learn the language of secularism and find God and Christ already there if we are to have any impact on the wider society. It suggests the secular society is our new mission field and we should approach it as such as did many early missionaries—by taking the indigenous culture seriously. What if we were to do that with the culture of secularism?

The book illustrates that proposal with anecdotes from my own life and ministry. Two characters, a believer and an atheist scientist, are falling in love and have to talk about God and faith. It’s supposed to be fun as well as a serious proposal about a way forward for faith in our secular age.

Discussion starters and further reading

Chapter 1 Growing up with disbelief



This chapter describes my experience as a young child discovering that belief in God wasn’t as common as I’d thought.

Questions to consider:

1. Have you ever been startled that someone didn't know something obvious about Jesus or God? If, so, describe what they said or did and what you felt.
2. Did you find yourself facing challenges about your belief? If so, what age were you when you first noticed that? How did you feel about those challenges? Did you find anyone who supported you? Did you seek anyone to help you or explain?
3. Have you ever wondered if there might be some contradiction between God and scientific knowledge? If so, when did you first wonder this?
4. Have you ever felt uncomfortable about other people knowing you believe in God? If so, in what circumstances? What do you think that other people think about you believing in God?
5. Do you believe there is no real issue between science and believing in God? Why or why not?
6. Is your understanding of God different from that of your parents' understanding? If so, in what ways? If so, what is different in you or the world that caused this change?
7. Is there anyone you know who you respect for not believing in God? Have you had any conversation with them about their disbelief? What did they say? If you haven't talked to them about this, your homework is to find such a person and ask them about why they don't believe, or why they don't go to church.

Further reading:

1. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*. Presents the different ways in which children, teens, and adults experience faith as they grow in understanding and in personal maturing.
2. Harvey Cox, *The secular city*. A ground-breaking proposal that God is present both in religion and in secular society. Recently updated to account for the upsurge of fundamentalism in “Religion in the Secular City.”
3. C.P. Snow, *The two cultures*. An early seminal short book about the dialogue between science and faith.



Chapter 2. Deluged by disbelief

Dis-belief has become normative in our society. Despite the western world being grounded for two thousand years in the details of the Christian religion, there is now a pervasive absence of even the most basic knowledge of Christianity. Churches tend to blame inadequate leadership or programming for the resultant declines in membership. But none of the church’s responses has slowed that decline.

Questions to consider:

1. Are there people in your own family who don't believe in God? If so, do you know why they don't? Think back to your grandparents' life-style. Has the number of believers in your family changed in the last couple of generations? If so, why?
2. If there are people in your family younger than you – children or relatives – what is their attitude to faith? Is it the same as your parents' or yours, or different? If different, what is the difference?
3. How many people that you work with, or socialize with, go to church? What percentage is that?
4. Have you ever been part of a organized event to invite people to church? If so, how did you enjoy it? What sort of response did you get, personally, and as a congregation?
5. Did your congregation recommend such an event, and you didn’t take part? Why? What were your feelings? Were you reluctant because you felt sure the invitees wouldn’t take you seriously?



Chapter 3. The Language of Disbelief

New languages are difficult to learn. John decides to take the initiative and have a conversation with his atheist neighbour. He encounters her community and is disturbed by how calmly they accept the absence of God. This language makes no sense to him, it seems like gibberish.

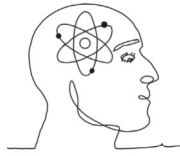
Questions to consider:

1. Did you take any math or science courses in high school? If so, how did you enjoy them? Was it fun, were you bored, or were you uncomfortable? Describe how you felt about those studies.
2. What do you think of the analogy that encountering science is like learning a new language – does that idea feel disturbing, or like relief? Why?
3. Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't understand what people were saying in another language? If, so, describe what they said or did and what you felt.
4. Have you learned another language, even a little bit, as an adult? If so, describe what that experience felt like.
5. Do you know any words in a language that has no relation to any European language? Do you know any words in Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Asian, African, or First Nations languages? If you do, say a word and ask people to guess what it means.
6. Do you have any friends that you would like to speak to about God and faith, but you are hesitant to raise the issue? If so, describe your hesitancy. Describe your reasons for wanting to talk to that person. Do you have a feeling they will think you are speaking gibberish to them? How does that feel?
7. Do you know any atheists or unbelievers who are fun people to be around? Have you ever been surprised that you enjoy their company even if they don't believe in God, or don't want to be part of a church?
8. Does it bother you that science has explained how so much of how our bodies work? Our faith used to say that it was our soul that kept our body alive and breathing, but science says it is a series of chemical processes in our cells. What do you think?
9. If the biological explanations of how living bodies work doesn't disturb your faith, why not? If it does disturb your faith, explain why.
10. Does it bother you that the very first life may have arisen by purely natural processes without God taking any direct action? Why or why not?
11. What do you think of Charles' idea that there are two fundamental principles that have nothing to do with each other – one gives rise to art and ethical living and human qualities and the other gives rise to the physical processes that science studies. This seems to be a good way of dealing with the issue of science and faith. Do you think this is a good explanation? Why or why not?
12. If Charles is right, and the universe doesn't require anything, such as God, to get it started, does this matter? Why or why not?

Further reading:

1. Stephen Hawking, *A brief history of time*. A very readable introduction to how science understands the origin of the universe.
2. Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages* – a careful proposal of why we should think of faith and science as two separate worlds each with their own integrity.
3. Ian Barbour, *Religion in an age of science* – several ways of understanding the conflict between science and faith.
4. John Gribbon, *The birth of time*. A very readable account of how time may have arisen.
5. Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters*. A very readable account of quantum processes.

Chapter 4 *Disoriented by Disbelief*



John uses his most effective faith language to explain why belief in God is central, but none of this makes sense to his new friends who gently dismantle his best arguments for faith.

Questions to consider:

1. Have you found yourself feeling uncomfortably quiet when around people who clearly don't believe in God? What was that like? Why do you think you kept quiet?
2. Do you think that humanness – our consciousness, our ability to choose between right and wrong, our individuality as persons – arises purely naturally without any creator? Would it matter if our consciousness arose without God? Why or why not?
3. What if it turns out there is no relationship between prayer and people recovering from illness? If it is true, does that mean that prayer is useless? Would that affect your faith in God? Why or why not?
4. Do you find this discussion supportive or disturbing?
5. If you have a friend you know well who doesn't believe in God, how do you think that lack of belief affects their life? What does your friend think about their lack of belief?



Chapter 5 *Stuff just organizes itself*

Traditional faith believes that God made the physical world and put everything together, especially in the creation of life. John discovers a disturbing attraction in the alternate explanation, that natural processes, not requiring the intervention of God or any plan, produce amazingly ingenious creatures which perfectly fit the places they live.

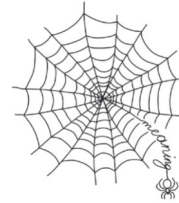
Questions to consider:

1. The book mentions ripples in sand, waves in water, and convoys of cars on a freeway as examples of regular patterns that just emerge without anyone causing them. Can you think of other examples? Do you think those patterns really arise without any input from an outside force?
2. Creation Science and conservative Christian traditions strongly oppose Rosalind's view that the intricate designs of living things happened without any input by God. They claim some form of God, the "Intelligent Design(er)" is the only explanation. What do you think of those ideas?
3. Do you think it makes any difference whether, as Rosalind suggests, patterns arise, including life itself, all by themselves, all over the universe, without any consciousness such as God causing it? What difference does it make if God did or did not cause those patterns to happen?

4. Do you think the science-language idea of patterns arising everywhere in the universe is the same as the religious idea of God creating the universe? Why or why not? If you've had a child ask "Why?" share what the child was asking about and what happened.

Further reading:

1. Jonathan Weiner, *The beak of the finch*. A fascinating description of how evolution was observed actually happening in finches under pressure from changes in their food.
2. Richard Dawkins, *The selfish gene*. One of the best introductions to how science understands the process of life. Although Dawkins has been a strong opponent of faith, his biological books are full of awe and wonder which will feel familiar to people of faith.
3. Richard Dawkins, *The blind watchmaker*. A very readable account of how design can arise automatically in nature.
4. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The phenomenon of Man*. One of the best writers to think about the implications of evolution for faith.
5. Ilya Prigogine, *Order out of chaos*. How patterns emerge from chaos.
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Chapter 6 Why we ask 'Why?' The demand for meaning

Humans want to find meaning everywhere. That's why kids keep asking, "Why?". But what drives this search for meanings? People who seek meanings understand better how things work than people who don't seek meanings and so they are more successful in finding food and forming relationships in which to raise children. In time, the people who weren't good at finding how things work do less well, and have fewer children. The more intense the desire to find meanings in life, the more such people do well, and so humans who inherit the desire to find meanings become the norm.

Questions to consider:

1. Do you know someone who felt they had lost their meaning? If so, without telling who they were, describe what happened and what that was like for them. And for you.
2. Did you ever feel that you couldn't find a meaning? If so, what was that like?
3. Did anyone ever tell you the meaning of something very sad that happened to you, and you felt completely misunderstood? If so, share what the other person said, and why it didn't help.
4. Do you agree that meaning is essential for humans? What has your experience been?
5. Have you ever destroyed someone's meaning? What was that like?

Further reading:

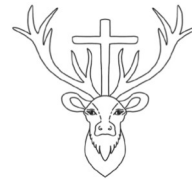
Viktor Frankl, *Man's search for meaning*. A psychiatrist's memoirs of a Nazi death camp lead him to understand why humans' need for meaning is so intense.



One of the meanings everyone searches for is why sometimes other people make us feel uncomfortable. The first meaning we find is that it's the other person's fault. But over time we sometimes discover that it's us ourselves who are unpleasant. Accepting that uncomfortable fact about ourself results in us moving into more mature adulthood. Sometimes called "projection" this process of accepting our own limitations results in deeper strength and solidity in our own self. It makes us more human and not simply reactive to tensions.

Questions to consider:

1. Does it make sense to you that people sometimes think someone else has a problem or characteristic when it is really their own?
2. Have you ever seen that happen? Have you ever noticed it happening in you? If so, how did that feel?
3. Does the idea of "projecting" help you name that process? Would you prefer to call it by another name? If so, what?
4. Do you think that projecting a feeling onto someone else is a way of finding a meaning in something that didn't make sense? Why or why not?
5. The chapter suggests that in the Second World War, the Allied countries portrayed their enemies as cruel, but the Allies were really describing their own cruelty. Do you think that actually happened? If it did, do you think people were aware of doing that? Were the movie-makers aware? Why or why not?
6. Do you think entire cultures project feelings on other cultures, that it is not just individuals doing that? Can you think of any examples?



Chapter 8 Graduating in Disbelief: Why we Invented God

Just as entire cultures project disparaging things on other cultures in order to avoid the disturbing sense that there is no meaning in our conflicts, so entire cultures learn about their own strengths by projecting them onto an imaginary consciousness. This results in a deep sense of meaning: that human self-awareness, often called "consciousness," isn't just a meaningless quirk, but arises from something understandable. This origin of our consciousness is experienced as a force beyond us. That process is central to humans becoming human and being self-aware. But what if it were just a natural force that just arises naturally, as waves do? What if no God is required?

Questions to consider:

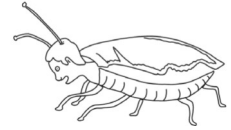
1. *Pre-animism*: the sense that consciousness is all around us.
 1. What would it feel like to live in a world where every single object was alive and aware? Would it feel delightful, disturbing, fulfilling, scary? Normal? Why?

2. Have you ever had the feeling, perhaps alone on a lake, or on a mountain top, that everything around you was suffused with joy and delight and was deeply connected to you? What was that like?
 3. If that happened to you, do you think that the scenery was really full of joy or was it just your feelings? How would you know the difference?
 4. Do you use a horoscope? If so, do you have a sense that there are underlying forces which can influence your life? Does that give you a sense of meaning, of being grounded in something reliable other than your self?
2. *Animism*: the sense that there are many distinct centres of consciousness around us with which we can have relationships.
1. If you have experienced your pet deeply understanding you, what feelings come to you when someone points out that your pet has very little actual understanding of your life? How does that feel? Does it feel as if someone were trying to take away something very valuable? If so, what is it that is so valuable?
 2. If your pet doesn't actually understand very much about your life, where does your sense that your pet understands you come from?
3. *Olympic gods*: the sense that there are global centres of consciousness which can be persuaded to assist us and take our side.
1. In times of crisis, personal or international, have you found yourself wanting to cry out for help? What did you want to say? What did you hope would happen?
 2. If your cry had been answered immediately, what would your reaction have been? Why would you have felt that way?
 3. When your cry for help isn't answered, how do you respond? Is your faith threatened?
 4. Does it sometimes seem to you that forces of evil seem to have taken over your world, or that forces of good are just about to break through? How would you describe those forces? What is your attitude to that struggle between good and evil forces? Which do you hope will win? Which do you expect will win?
 5. What do you think of the suggestion that older forms of religion were projections?
 6. Does it make sense to you that those older religious experiences each died and that another one emerged?
4. *The monotheistic God*
1. Do you think that explanation of former projections dying and re-emerging in a new projection also applies to our experience of a monotheistic God? Why or why not?
 2. If the projection theory is true for our experience of the one monotheistic God, what would that mean for your faith?
 3. Does the pattern that all the former projections (universal consciousness, spirits, and gods) each died, but also led to deeper humanity, give you hope that something even deeper than our former image of the one God may be available to us? Why or why not?

Further reading:

1. Edward Harrison, *Masks of the Universe*. How various cultures have experienced God.
2. Karen Armstrong, *A history of God*. How God has been experienced in many cultures.
3. Carl Sagan, *The demon-haunted world*. A critique of religious projection and lazy thinking about faith.

4. Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the clouds*. A discussion of how projection leads us to have religious experiences.
5. John Polkinghorne, *Faith, Science, and Understanding*. A way of thinking about the issues of science and faith written by an Anglican priest who was a professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge.



Chapter 9: Part 1 Concludes: What we've learned about the language of Secular.

Because the one monotheistic God has been the source of meaning and explanation in western society, it can be a very disturbing experience to discover that God is a projection of our own consciousness. Yet that's what the secular culture experiences and doesn't find it disturbing, but, rather, completely normal. This is a crisis for faith. Taking the secular understanding seriously means giving up the centre of human meaning, yet that language makes no sense to secular people. However, if we rely on past experiences of universal consciousness, spirits, and gods dying and giving rise to something even more meaningful, we might trust that the dying of the monotheistic God in our culture may be the prelude to an even deeper experience. To do so will take sacrifice of some certainties in the sure and certain hope that deeper life will be the result. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the death of God is the central Christian proclamation.

Questions to consider:

1. So far we have been exploring the language of Secular. Have you found this exploration disturbing or energizing? Why?
2. What makes sense about this proposal?
3. What doesn't make sense?
4. What aspects of Secular make sense to you? What aspects are attractive?
5. What aspects of Secular are threatening? What aspects just don't make sense?
6. Where do you find yourself on the journey of leaning a new language? Is it just gibberish? Is it making some sense and that in itself makes you uncomfortable? It is a relief or a burden to be exposed to this new language?



CHAPTER 10: Your God Died in Seminary and Surgery. Congratulations!

John and Rosalind struggle to find a new way of understanding how a divine being called God could make sense in a secular age. The usual image of God as an invisible spiritual being watching us is experienced in secular culture as so tiny as to be silly. Secular culture understands that image to be just a projection of ourselves and can't be taken seriously as the source of all reality. For secular people there's no awe in that image. John and Rosalind develop the concept of a deep force, or character, that gives rise to existence, not just to the things that exist. This image could be a way of connecting with the secular experience of awe and wonder known through the awareness of the vast cosmic awareness which is common in our society. That would mean letting go of the idea of God as the supreme spiritual being. The author recounts how that idea collapsed during his seminary studies and how in a personal crisis he refused to return to that projection. In both cases that loss of the idea of God as a spiritual being was replaced by something more powerful.

Questions to consider:

1. If God only exists inside existence, God would be too small to be God. Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?
2. Rosalind had projected her own anger onto John until he spoke to her. Have you ever had the experience of imagining God in one way and then having a very different experience of God? If so, what was the transition like? How was your new experience different from your previous experience of God?
3. Do you think God must die, or is it our usual understandings of God that have to die? Can God die? What do you think? Why or why not?
4. John wants to use a different word than “God” for what he thinks is really God. Why do you think he wants that?
5. Because the word “God” seems too small for what faith is talking about, John and Rosalind come up with the term “ultimate reality.” Can you suggest a better phrase?
6. Do you think that the reason so many people aren't interested in faith is because the traditional idea of God doesn't seem impressive any more? Why or why not?
7. Why does the book offer congratulations to people who have lost that idea of God?

Further reading:

1. Paul Tillich, *The New Being*. Also, *Ultimate Concern*. The major thinker who made the idea of God beyond existence accessible to non-specialists.
2. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God*. A very thoughtful way of thinking about how God may be experienced in our time through the universe as God's body.
3. John Barrow, *The Mind of God*. Issues about God and meaning from a scientific perspective.



Chapter 11: Ultimate Reality: Source and Care

Rosalind points out that “ultimate reality” is theoretical and distant, but she knows that members of faiths need a sense of relationship with whatever is our ultimate source. John suggests that “Ultimate Reality” can be experienced as intimate because all the patterns out of which we are constructed are more intimate than our very self. We didn’t construct ourselves, we are the product of processes still far beyond our understanding, so that is a way of experiencing awe and intimacy with ultimate reality.

Questions to consider:

1. It's sometimes easy to imagine that God is close to us. When do you find that is easy to imagine?
2. Sometimes it's hard to imagine God being close, or God being real. Do you find the idea that we are immersed in a deep process from which we are constantly emerging, helpful or not in experiencing it as intimate with us?
3. That deep process, what John and Rosalind call “ultimate reality,” can feel distant and theoretical and not really related to us. John suggests that it can be imagined as intimate

with us because it is the source of all the patterns that keep emerging and become us. Do you find that a helpful image? Why or why not?

4. Do you think that's a useful way to speak of our having a deep relationship with ultimate reality because we are the result of surrounding creativity at every moment? Would that make sense to people who have no traditional belief in God? Why or why not?



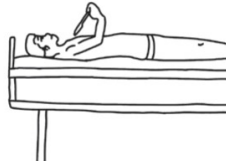
Chapter 12 Ultimate Reality: Intimate, caring, and funny

Rosalind points out that ultimate reality won't mean much or be of any significance to people unless we have a sense of it caring for us. Otherwise it might well be true, as arithmetic is true, but of no personal significance. John suggests that our being fragile on so many levels causes us to seek for surrounding patterns that could reassure us that we are safe. As the constant source of patterns, ultimate reality would then be experienced as caring since its patterns emerge everywhere around us. He points out that the caring quality of how we experience ultimate reality is something science needs to state more clearly; otherwise science will lose its purpose and become an enabler of consuming the planet until there is nothing left.

Questions to consider:

1. Have you ever felt ambivalent about asking God for help? If so, what did that feel like? What felt odd about asking?
2. Did you ever have the experience of feeling calm when you accepted that something terrible might actually happen? If so, can you describe that sense of calm?
3. Were you ever startled at your ability to love more than you thought you could? Have you ever worried that you aren't able to love as much as you think you should? How did that happen?
4. The priest lost all hope when he refused to pray to God. When Jesus was being crucified, he cried out that God had abandoned him – had he lost all hope? What do you think was going on?
5. Have you ever lost hope about something important? If so, what happened then?
6. Does it sometimes seem as if there is no hope for the future of our world – that increasing violence and chaos look like the only options for the future? What does it feel like to lose that hope?
7. What if confidence in being upheld by ultimate reality were really true? What would that feel like?

CHAPTER 13 Ultimate Reality: Dying to Love



If ultimate reality is to be taken seriously as a way of knowing what's ultimately true about reality, ultimate reality must be experienced as loving. Otherwise it would remain just a theoretical concept. John suggests how it might be possible for ultimate reality to love so deeply as to be prepared to die. Because its very nature is to produce patterns, which ultimately become self-aware consciousness within us, ultimate reality must continue to produce those patterns, which we experience as being loved. But from the side of ultimate reality, it would cease to be ultimate if it abandoned us, so its ultimate character must be commitment to us—even at the cost of its own death. That would be the deepest possible form of love.

1. This chapter suggests that ultimate reality values reality so deeply that ultimate reality would die in order to retain its character of absolute care. Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?
2. Did this suggestion strike you as possible?
3. If it were true, what would that mean for you?
4. Rosalind felt frightened at the possibility of John caring so much for her. Have you ever had such a feeling? About someone? About God?

CHAPTERS 14-16: Your Romance Died. Congratulations!



If the character of ultimate reality is to give up itself if necessary to remain loyal to us, then the same must be true of us: our deepest character is to give up our own self to remain loyal to ourself, to our commitments, and to the world. These three chapters explore how that dynamic of love operates in romance, marriage, and commitment to our planet and its creatures.

Romance must die if the relationship is to become deeper. Yet within that deeper relationship, romance may return regularly in an even deeper form. Such death becomes the path to fulfillment and maturity.

Questions to consider:

1. This chapter suggests that pre-animism (the experience of being surrounded by consciousness everywhere) happens in the early stages of romantic love, and in some religious experiences and in a sense of that the planet exists to serve us. Have you had any such experiences?
2. If you had such experiences, what did you experience when they ended? Did you find yourself moving into a deeper relationship with the person you had fallen in love with, or if it was religious, what was your next experience of God? If the planet seems further away and less reliable, what was that like?

3. Did this experience of romantic love return later with the same person? Did the experience of deep unity in a religious experience return later? If it was different in some way, what was different?
4. The experience of animism (of spirits existing around us) happens when we are in a team such as a deep friendship, or in religious experience or in sports, or with our country. Have you had any such experiences? If they ended what was that like? How were you changed? Did those experiences return later? If so, was it different?
5. The projection of gods (the experience of deep forces) allows us to be aware of deep relationships when we make a long-term commitment, or in the faith when we experience an underlying support of God, or in our patriotism to our country. Have you had such experiences? Did they come to an end and were you changed by that? Did those experiences recur later and were they different?
6. The experience of a single God also happens when one decides to make a total commitment to someone, such as in marriage, since one's whole future life is tied up with a single person, or in life-long commitments of some kind, or in relation to the future of the planet. Has that been your experience? Did it come to an end and was succeeded by an even deeper experience, either in relationships or in religious experience?



Chapter 15 Your Marriage Died. Congratulations!

Not only must romance die so something deeper and even more satisfying can emerge. Marriage itself must die, in the form of the assumption that getting married will solve all your relationship issues. Getting married doesn't solve issues. But when you know that, you are able to draw upon depths of love which were inaccessible when we thought the fact of being married would deepen our relationship. Just as romance has to die to move us to something deeper, so the idea that being married automatically makes us more loving also has to die. But the result is a depth of commitment which emerges, almost automatically from beyond us and gives us even deeper life. And sometimes what has to die is the illusion that just trying harder can fix a relationship that has become inappropriate.

1. Has death and movement into something deeper you never anticipated happened to you in an important relationship? If so, were you startled by it? What do you make of it when you look back?
2. Have you had an experience of having to die to illusions about yourself and then found yourself more deeply calm than before? As if your marriage to your self was replaced by something far deeper?

CHAPTER 16 *Your World Died. Congratulations!*



The process of death and resurrection in a personal relationship with someone else also exists in our relationship with the rest of creation, this planet and all its creatures. Rosalind has become aware that her passion, scientific discovery, has been manipulated into encouraging the death of love for the planet which gives us life.

Questions to consider:

1. Some people are aware of constant pressure to consume more—after all, we are often referred to as consumers. Have you experienced that pressure? When? How did that feel?
2. Science makes that consumerism possible. Does that seem like a contradiction that science provides us with life and yet has been re-directed into priorities that lead to death?
3. What is it like to live in a world in which we cannot escape from that pressure to always consume more?
4. Rosalind finds herself being pressed to contemplate enormous changes in her leadership role in order to be loyal and loving toward the world that nurtures us and make us possible. Have you experienced anything like that, wondering if you are called? Have you felt unable to respond?
5. Would it make any difference if it were true that ultimate reality remains infinitely committed to upholding us regardless of whether we respond? What difference would that make?



CHAPTER 17 *Your Religion Died. Congratulations!*

If romance, marriage, and our relationship with the planet all have to die if we are to live fully, the same is true of our religion. If our faith had been about getting more people to join, or about demonstrating our own goodness, or about having the best religion, then our religion must die for us to experience infinite life.

Questions to consider:

1. What do you think is the point of religion?
2. Have you ever found yourself wondering if religion has any importance beyond being a form of religious entertainment? How does that feel if you are an active member of a religion?
3. If God isn't adequate as an image of what is ultimately real, and needs to be withdrawn if it's a projection of us, is there anything left? What would it feel like if you took that proposal seriously?

CHAPTER 18 Re-imagining God: Managing Multiple Projections



Religion might find new meaning and purpose even if the image of God as an existing being dies. Indeed, religion may regain its strength and significance because it points to something credible within the language of secularism. But the key is not simply to kill religion, but to set it free to enable people to use whatever level of projection meets their needs: pre-animist consciousness, spirits, gods, God, or ultimate reality. That would make sense since no single type of projection by humans could ever fully express that from which we emerge. In that case, the role of religion in secular culture will be to enable people to draw upon multiple images and projections to name what is ultimately real.

Questions to consider:

1. John proposes that all the projections of religion—all-surrounding consciousness, spirits, gods, and even God—are all equally important ways of experiencing what is ultimately real. Does that make sense to you? Why or why not?
2. What do you think of the idea that to be loyal to what's ultimately real, we need to move nimbly between whatever projection best serves to care for a person with whom we are in conversation?
3. What experiences have you had of moving from one image to another? Is that freeing or constricting or disloyal?
4. The chapter suggests that there are a variety of equally true images of God. Have you found yourself experiencing different kinds of relationships with God on different occasions? Do you adjust how you speak about God depending on the way another person experiences God? What is it like to use different ways of sharing your experience of God in order to care for someone else effectively?
5. Do you find some ways of experiencing God more comfortable than others? Which are most comfortable for you? What experiences of God do you hear about from other people that are less comfortable for you?
6. The chapter suggests that one of religion's jobs is to present God differently according to people's needs. Have you noticed this happening in church services? In sermons? Or in other places?



CHAPTER 19 Re-imagining Jesus

Christianity most frequently explains Jesus' death as being the way in which he takes on the punishment that humans deserve so we don't have to. However this makes little sense in our secular context, and can even appear as violent retribution by God. Since John (the gospel-writer) locates Jesus as having a fundamental role at the creation of the universe it may be possible to interpret Jesus' death as the image by which the process of death and resurrection is central to all reality, including to our own human acquisition

of self-aware consciousness and of maturing. If that's the case, that we live within a processes which is ultimately life-giving and joyful, then all circumstances of life become filled with joy, turning the world's loyalty to violence upside down.

Questions to consider:

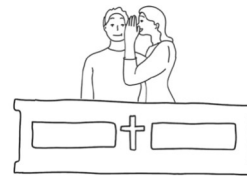
1. Have you ever wondered how Jesus' death is important? Has that always seemed obvious to you? If so, what was its purpose? If not, why not?
2. Do you think it makes sense that Jesus' death and resurrection is going on in cultures as they move from one spirituality to another? Why or why not?
3. Do you think it makes sense to imagine that Jesus' death and resurrection is a fundamental part of how the universe came to exist? Why or why not?
4. Do you think it makes sense to imagine that Jesus' death and resurrection is the process by which evolution happens? Why or why not?
5. Have you had experiences of deep pain or disappointment in relation to someone important, which later turned out to be the source of new life for you? If so, does it make sense to say that you were participating in Jesus' death and resurrection without knowing it?

Further reading:

1. H. A. Williams, True resurrection. How we can experience resurrection in personal life.
2. Marcus Borg and Tom Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*. Discussion between a conservative and a liberal thinker about the significance of Jesus.
3. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus, a revolutionary biography*. A study of the circumstances around Jesus' execution and what its significance may be for us today.

Chapter 20 *The Secret Life of Priests: Faith in Disbelief*

Re-imagining the purpose and experience of a church service.



Questions to consider:

1. Did you see anything you thought was new or unexpected in Rosalind's reactions to the service? If so, what? How might you use what you noticed in her reactions to assist newcomers in your church?
2. Did you see anything new or unexpected in the experience of the priest? If so, what? Do the priest's reactions assist or hinder you when you attend a service? Do you think other priests would have similar thoughts? Why or why not?
3. John had a great deal of trouble praying before the service began. Have you had that experience? How has your experience of praying in church been different from other places you pray?

Further reading:

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*. A personal account by an Anglican priest of her search for authentic faith in her calling.