

Confessing my religion

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Bob Bury

He used to be a Christian, then one day he read about morality without God, and something just clicked. Bob Bury 'fesses up for HumanistLife.

My name is Bob, and I used to be a church-going Christian. There – I've said it, and in front of all you people too.

I've been saying it quite often since I came out as a humanist, because renouncing religion is a bit like giving up smoking – people who still do it (smoke, go to church) assume that you have no idea what their habit involves, or how much gratification it gives them.

Well, I do. I was an only child growing up on a council estate in the Midlands in the fifties and sixties. Dad worshipped at the local Working Men's Club, but mum was a regular attender at the Methodist church, and I went with her. I became a Sunday School teacher, and when I went to medical school in 1967, I continued to go to church. I was never a heavy user – I managed to escape the clutches of the local chapter of the Christian Medical Fellowship, although it was a close call (they did a good free sandwich lunch) – and by the time I qualified I had stopped going to church altogether, although I would still have called myself a believer. Work, marriage to Lin and then the arrival of our four children followed. By this time, I was a medical officer in the RAF, and we attended the station church, eventually getting confirmed by the C of E padre in our early thirties. I left the RAF in 1988 at the age of 39, and took up my current consultant post in Leeds. We joined the local Anglican congregation, and I enjoyed a dizzying rise to prominence, eventually becoming chairman of the church committee and member of the Parochial Church Council – not to mention being on the rota for cutting the churchyard grass.

I suppose my beliefs were always somewhat less than hardcore, in that I took all of the Old Testament and much of the New – especially the miracles – with a pinch of salt, and belonged to the ‘Jesus was a jolly good chap and we should all try and be more like him’ arm of the Church Militant (or perhaps that should be the Church Diffident). Despite my own beliefs, I appreciated that organised religion had the capacity to do great harm as well as great good, taking a particularly dim view of Catholicism and what I considered, and still consider, to be the largely malign influence of the Pope. So – a lot of religious people will think that mine was a fairly threadbare set of beliefs in the first place, and that I had nothing much to give up. But I suspect that I was as devout as the majority of the souls passing through the doors of Anglican churches each Sunday.

Then, in my forties, I found myself reading an article in one of the Sunday supplements about Iris Murdoch. They interviewed her in the chaotic Oxford home she shared with John Bayley, her husband, and she talked about her recently released book, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, so this must have been around 1992-3. It described her feelings about religion and morality, making the argument for the existence of objective moral standards unrelated to religious belief. And something clicked. I just thought ‘Yes, that’s exactly how I feel’ and an enormous weight was lifted from my shoulders. In fact, it has often occurred to me that when I talk about my reverse Damascus road experience, I do so in exactly the same terms that born-again Christians use to describe their more conventional conversions.

It was intensely liberating to shed the baggage of religious dogma. Although I had not been particularly conscious of the internal conflict generated by the requirement to square my religious belief with the rational analysis I applied to every other aspect of life, I was certainly aware of the relief when I ditched all those mental gymnastics. Like most late converts, I became a fairly militant agnostic (as a scientist by training and occupation, I’m uneasy at calling myself an atheist, given the logical impossibility of proving that God does not exist). That militancy was at least partly based on anger: anger with myself for taking over thirty years to shake off the brainwashing I had undergone as a child, and for beginning, in a half-hearted way, to start the same process with my own

children. I've calmed down a bit now, although I'm still much more evangelistic for humanism than I ever was for Christianity, largely, I suppose, because my rejection of religion has brought me so much more joy than its adoption ever did.

And I use the word 'joy' advisedly. It's nearly twenty years now since my humanistic epiphany, but never a day goes by when I don't at some point feel pleasure at the fact that I'm no longer constrained by the inconsistencies of religious belief. It is a joy to accept that I and I alone am responsible for the good and evil that I do, and I rejoice that all over the world, humanists (whether they have heard of the word or not) do good for their fellow men because they believe it is the right thing to do, and not because they have been told to do it by an Imaginary Friend, or in order to jump the queue for the afterlife. Equally, it's sobering but liberating to accept the responsibility for any bad stuff you do and make reparation for it (or not), without any nonsense about the devil's influence or the need for redemption from above.

When I hear theists talking about the emptiness of the rationalist's life and our supposed inability to experience wonder and awe at the world around us, I feel almost sorry for them. They really do believe that they have the monopoly not only on morality, but also on transcendental experience. If nothing else, this reveals how little understanding they have of science – theoretical physics, for example, is far more mind-boggling in its concepts and their implications than any conjuring tricks in the Bible. In fact, it's the believers who lack imagination, with their willingness to postulate that 'God did it' whenever they are faced with phenomena that they can't immediately explain. That may have been acceptable for the authors of the Bible, given the state of knowledge at the time, but there's no excuse for it now. And for what it's worth, I know that I get every bit as much pleasure from a spectacular sunset now as I did in the days when I felt obliged to thank God for it. There is also no lack of 'meaning' (whatever that means) in my life. Unlike theists, though, I find that meaning in the life I make for myself, in the lives of my family and friends and the influence (hopefully for the good) that I have on those lives, and in my interaction with the rest of the world through my work and leisure. What I don't want or need is the imposition of a one-size-fits-all meaning based on two thousand years of collective wishful thinking and delusion.

I've carefully avoided any mention of the relatively hard time that organised religion is being given currently on account of its links with jihadism, or its unashamed displays of homophobia and misogyny. I get as angry about that as anyone else, but it can too easily be written off by believers as human baggage that has attached itself to religion. The point of my personal story is that, even if belief was all benign goodness, flower-rotas and jumble sales it would still have been an enormously liberating experience for me to drop all the dogmatic nonsense that underpins it, and be true to myself. More people should try it. And, of course, they are, in increasing numbers. For which fact, in all conscience, I can no longer thank God.

Bob Bury is a consultant radiologist working in Leeds. He is looking forward to his impending retirement, with its opportunities for more hill-walking, fishing and writing.