

What sort of god don't you believe in?

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At least the classical gods reflected the realities of life in hard times! Bob Bury thinks on the varieties of non-religious experience.

If someone insists on believing that God exists, there's not a lot you can do about it. We can't prove that they are wrong, any more than they can prove that they are right, and they are unlikely to listen to rational argument based on the balance of probabilities. However, there's one argument I think we can win, and that's all about the sort of god that people believe in.

If a theist answers the question 'do you believe in a loving and omnipotent god?' in the affirmative – you've got them. I mean, just look around at what's happening in the world; God is either omnipotent, or he is loving – he can't be both. The Greeks and Romans had it about right – if there is/are a god or gods, then they are clearly a pretty unpleasant bunch, who like nothing better than a bit of mild smiting followed by the hurling of thunderbolts and the calling down of plagues. Classical theology may sound fanciful to us, but at least it reflected the realities of life in those fairly hard times.

The concept of god as a loving father with unlimited power just doesn't cut it, and if you want proof of that, you only have to look at the mental gymnastics that believers indulge in when they try to explain why bad things happen to good people. This is where that nonsense about god 'moving in mysterious ways' comes in – it's only mysterious if you insist that he loves you; it actually makes some sort of sense if, like the ancients, you accept that he can be a bit of a bastard.

Of course, it makes even more sense if you just accept that there probably is no god, and that bad stuff happens at random. The only supreme being scenarios

that fit the facts are either that he loves us, but isn't very good at showing it, or that he doesn't give a stuff for our welfare and just enjoys lording it over his subjects. In my experience, the fundamentalists are more honest about this than the flower-arranging arm of the C of E. I have been told by fundies – and it was meant quite literally – that I will burn in hell because I won't accept that the earth is only 6000 years old and that Jesus wants me for a sunbeam. They seem to be more at ease with the concept of a malicious god than the Nice Christians are, but then I suppose we all tend to cast god in our own image.

If I had to believe in a god, I'd prefer the slightly ineffectual but loving one. I wouldn't want to fall down and worship a supreme being who insisted on personal abasement as a pre-requisite for showing me any sort of consideration. In fact, I wouldn't even want to sit through a dinner party with him – he'd expect to get served first, and would demand all the breast meat. No, there are more than enough egotists around in real life, without choosing to worship one.

When I see Haiti earthquake survivors on the TV holding up their arms to the heavens asking for help, or read heart-rending stories of parents whose children have died and who insist on trying to square their loss with a continued belief in a benevolent deity, I don't admire the strength of their faith – I despair at the depth of the brain-washing that made such behaviour possible. Faith means believing something that is intrinsically improbable and for which there is no supporting evidence. Believing in a loving and omnipotent god takes it one step further – it requires a wilful disregard of clear evidence that those qualities in a deity are mutually exclusive.

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