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Shout your doubt out loud, my fellow unbelievers

Matthew Parris

Christianity was part of my upbringing and education. Because I am fascinated by moral philosophy, enjoy reading the Bible and, as Private Parris in the Boys' Brigade, detested military drill, nautical knots, whiting-up my sash and polishing my brass belt-buckle, I have acquired a reasonable grounding in the other skill you could shine at in the BB: religious knowledge. I think religion, like politics, is tremendously important.

The trouble is, I'm sure religion is wrong. This drives me as a columnist into a curious dilemma. My subject is of interest mostly to those of my readers who are liable to be offended by me. One is left writing for a minority audience predisposed to take umbrage at what one says. Those who don't care for religion don't care to read about it.

The dilemma was brought home by readers' responses to a column I wrote on Maundy Thursday, inveighing against claims that a French nun has recently been cured of Parkinson's

disease through invoking the name of the late John Paul II, and that this alleged miracle could lead to the possible canonisation of the late Pope. I have been deluged with letters, almost all from Christians, and overwhelmingly critical of the column.

Three strands of opinion in particular emerge from this fascinating pile of letters. The first insists that miracles do occur, that saints may be invoked and that the successful invocation of putative saints may be grounds for canonisation. Such assertions have been made by a number of Anglican correspondents. I should remind them that their own Church had something to say on this more than 400 years ago. Article 22 of the Thirty-Nine Articles states: "The Romish doctrine concerning . . . invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded on no warranty of Scripture." I rest my case.

The second strand is more tentative. "Why rule out the possibility?" sums up the thought, variously expressed to me. Things do occur for which there is

no available explanation in Nature; in such cases is it not perfectly rational to accept that the divine explanation is at least a contender for the truth?

For the answer to this, I need only go back two-and-a-half centuries, to the greatest philosopher our islands ever produced: the Scot David Hume. Hume took a cool view of "the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvellous".

A miracle, began Hume (*On Miracles*, pt I), "may be accurately defined, [as] a transgression of a law of Nature by a particular volition of the Deity".

But "there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves." Forced to choose between doubting the evidence, and believing in a divine suspension of the laws of Nature, only someone already convinced that divine intervention occurs could opt for the miraculous as an explanation. Miracles

cannot therefore be evidence of a divinity: belief in a divinity must be the evidence for miracles.

In consequence, Hume concludes (hinting at atheism with such sly elegance that no Edinburgh pharisee could pin it on him): "The Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one."

But stop. Why should Hume, or Richard Dawkins, or lesser polemicists such as me, bang on about this? For heaven's sake, wail many of my correspondents (and this is the third strand in my pile of letters), what are you getting so het up about? You don't believe. Fine. Well why not shut up, then? Tell us about things you do believe in. Surely it is those who believe who should be proclaiming. How can one be a passionate non-believer, they ask, hinting that, like Saul, I may be battling against my own inner faith.

Proselytisers for atheism such as

Richard Dawkins will be as familiar as am I with the lament. I heard it most memorably from a Conservative Chief Whip (urging me to pipe down about homosexuality) who remarked to me that he had never believed in God, but felt absolutely no imperative to jump to his feet in church and broadcast this fact to his astonished constituents.

How do we reply? An *ad hominem* response would be to remark that when the Church had the upper hand it was happy to persecute, imprison or behead non-believers and fight crusades against other religions. Now it has lost its boss status it simply asks us to keep our opinions to ourselves (but still wants laws to criminalise us for mocking its pretensions).

On the back foot at last, it discovers (first) a brotherhood between all its sects. Then as the situation deteriorates Christianity discovers within itself a respect first for Judaism (suddenly we are all “Judaean-Christians”), then women with a Christian vocation, then for divorcees, and finally finds a common purpose with religions such as Islam, too (the “faith” community). Needs must.

And as the Devil (or falling church attendance) drives, these “members of the faith community” cease enforcing their moral imperatives upon a secular world and retreat into whimpering about their “freedom of conscience” to carry on persecuting the minority groups upon whose sinfulness they can still find a consensus. Freedom of conscience, my eye! If only there were an afterlife: Martin Luther would have loved Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor’s protests. They don’t like it up ’em.

As mainstream Christian church attendances fall farther still I predict that the Church of England, and finally the Roman Catholics, will be driven to conclude that they cannot even afford to make enemies of homosexuals, unmarried couples and family planners, and start welcoming them in too. I expect they’ll call it the “love community”. In truth it’s the “can’t afford to be choosy” community.

But there I go again. Getting passionate, fighting dirty. But we have a better argument than “you’d do the same to us if you could” — though they would, and until about half a

century ago they did.

It is that they will again, unless we non-believers are watchful, and energetic and — yes — passionate. I hate ending up in scraps with nice Anglicans and thoughtful Catholics because the Church of England and intelligent Catholicism are not the problem. They are the best kind of Christians, but the best lack all conviction. It is the worst who are full of passionate intensity. Look at the evangelical movement in America, and to some extent, now, here. Look at the Religious Right in Israel. Look at fundamentalist Islam. What they share, what drives them, the tiger in their tanks, is an absolute, unshakeable belief in an ever-present divinity, with plans for nations that He communicates to the leaders, or would-be leaders, of nations. They are the very devil, these people, they could wreck our world, and their central belief in God’s plan has to be confronted. Confronted with passion. Confronted because, and on the ground that, *it is not true*.

Disbelief can be passionate. Sometimes it should be. Agnosticism

can be passionate. A sense that we lack certitude, lack evidence, lack the external command of any luminous guiding truth, may not always lead to lassitude, complaisance or a modest silence. Sometimes it should provoke a great shout: “Stop. You don’t know that. You have no right.”

I hit you, earlier on, with a burst of the admirable David Hume. But he was not always right. “Opposing one species of superstition to another,” he wrote, “set them a-quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy.” No, David. Listen instead to Nietzsche. “This eternal indictment of Christianity,” he said, “I will write on walls, wherever there are walls.”

We who do not believe must be ready with our paintbrushes, our chisels and our cans of aerosol spray. Disbelief can be more than an absence of belief. It can be a redeeming, saving force.