

The Invasion of the Book Believers
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Do you know how sometimes very small, apparently insignificant incidents stay in your memory? One such for me was a few years ago, when I was coming out of a tube station in South London. A young man was blocking my path. He fixed me with steely eyes, and as I approached, I could see that he had business with me. Or at least he thought he did.

“Are you saved, brother?” he wanted to know. He was clutching a Bible with what appeared to be white knuckles.

I admit that I was at a temporary loss for words. And those who know me can imagine how rare that is. I began to mumble something, I can't remember what now. What I remember is those piercing eyes of his, and the way he was clutching the clearly well-used Bible like a drowning man clutches a lifeline.

A couple of years ago, I saw some similar eyes while watching a television report of the 7/7 London bombings. They were the eyes of Mohammed Sadique Khan, a teaching assistant from Beeston, Leeds, in a posthumous video justifying his part in the slaughter of innocents. Bright, insolent in their certainty, the eyes said it all: here was a man who had moved from the bleakness of ordinary human confusion into the promised land of divine assurance. I never saw the eyes of the 9/11 suicide pilots, and I have never seen the face of a man who has pressed the detonator of a bomb in an American abortion clinic, but I'm sure they all shone with that same gleam of holy certainty.

I have come to think that the white knuckles of the man clutching the Bible looked that way because he was holding what was, to him, a lifeline. It was lifeline because he thought of himself as drowning. But drowning in what?

For an answer to that question, we have to go back a century and a half, to a time when a bright but reportedly difficult young man from a Unitarian background stepped back onto English shores from the decks of a small ship called the Beagle. He was carrying a lot of burdens: years of samples of exotic flora and fauna from a long voyage that took him to the remote places of the known world. Notebooks too heavy to carry, boxes of papers that would stagger an archivist. But he had one burden that was invisible to the eye, and that one was even heavier. He carried his newly-found evidence that the Bible stories were fictional, and that creation was

the result of explainable natural phenomena instead of a six-day mega-miracle by the God of the Old Testament.

It took Charles Darwin nearly two decades to publish his results. He knew that his book, *The Origin of Species*, would not just set the scientific establishment alight with speculation; he was aware that theology was also about to change forever. If it had not been for a possible competitor for scientific glory, it is possible that Darwin would have chosen to publish his work posthumously. He didn't have to worry about money, after all; his uncle was Josiah Wedgwood, and his family were secure enough to offer him the life of a gentleman as long as he wished. But I also believe that his theory was sort of radioactive, and that it simply had to be revealed.

It would be lovely to report that the world had recovered from these revelations and gone on finding a way to trust the universe without keeping the bath water along with the baby. But you know, as I do, that the issue still divides communities and families, especially in America. And that those who are willing to shut down their logic to save God are growing like mushrooms. And so that was what the young man outside the tube station wanted to rescue me from: a world with no God, no ultimate meaning, and—worst of all, no Bible. What he was inviting me to do was put my mind to sleep, ignore the evidence of my senses and my insight, and just *believe* the unbelievable.

I couldn't do that. And, even though I don't know all of you, I'd be willing to bet that you can't either. But for some reason, it appears that we are managing to avoid the literal sinking feeling that motivates the True Believer.

Alongside these unhappy fundamentalists, we have recently been treated to a wave of what I have to call "mere atheism". You know who I mean. Richard Dawkins with his undoubtedly brilliant scientific mind asking and then dismissing all the wrong questions. Christopher Hitchens, never willing to miss an opportunity to shock and offend, taking the mickey—as the British say-- out of the loony religionists and misrepresenting even the staid theological porridge of worthy Anglicans. *The God Delusion* and *God is not Good* were destined to be best-sellers before either man wrote a single line. Atheism hasn't had such entertaining advocates for a long time. It has produced a whole new group of book believers.

The problem with their position for me is two-fold. First, it strikes me as a bit—forgive me—adolescent. One of the great things about being an adolescent is that suddenly you know all about

everything. You know more about things than your parents, your teachers, and certainly than those old greybeards of the holy books.

The first "out" atheist I ever met was in the ninth grade. His name was David Piehl and he reportedly had the highest IQ in the school. He also was a victim of what looked like terminal acne, although I don't necessarily relate the two things. One day in the school cafeteria, David stood on the table we were sharing, the result of a dare, and shouted, "There is no God! If there's a God, let him strike me dead!" Instantly, without thinking, the rest of us fled from the table. Just in case. No one actually said so, but we were all thinking about lightning bolts, and I wasn't wearing rubber-soled shoes. As it turned out, David Piehl got nothing more for his blasphemy than three days detention.

The other reason why the seductive logic of atheism doesn't work for me is one of simple observation. Atheism is unlike agnosticism, in that it reaches a conclusion, a final statement of fact. In that, it is the first cousin of the brainless fundamentalism I mentioned earlier. Certainty is its lure and its *modus operandi*. But throughout my own experience, my understanding of things has changed over time, sometimes radically. What I knew when I was younger has given way to what I know now, either by modification or outright replacement. What that has done has made me wary of any final theory or claim to knowledge. It has made me believe that belief itself is an illusion, also subject to the shifting sands of relativity, not a rock graven with absolutes.

That's why, as victims of my weekly sermons know all too well, I am so fond of those words by the Indian spiritual master, Meher Baba: "Trying to understand God is like trying to see with your ears". It's a perfectly human, all too understandable mistake, but I have come to believe that the mind is excellent for such things as making traffic laws and working crosswords, but, when it comes to finding meaning... Well, sorry, but it's just the wrong organ. That sort of search, as the mystics have long reminded us, is best undertaken by the heart.

I'm assuming that among us here today there are no hard-bitten, confirmed atheists of the Dawkins variety, just the more palatable Unitarian version we all are from time to time. I'm also ready to assume that there are no born-again book believers in the house. If I've got you wrong, I'm sorry; you can take a shot at me later, during the coffee. I suspect that most of us are somewhere in the middle, sometimes perhaps wandering toward one end of the spectrum, sometimes toward the other.

But that makes it sound a little... I don't know—*bland*, maybe. I have never liked the so-called "middle way", especially when a recent British prime minister appropriated a fine Buddhist term for his own ends. One of my favourite lines from the Revelation in the New Testament is something God reputedly said, "Because thou art neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth." Excellent! Blandness is no good, either. Pallid liberalism, the condition that gives rise to all those jokes we Unitarians tell on ourselves, is no answer to either side. Like this one, "In Sunday school, Unitarian children are taught about Moses bringing down the tablets inscribed with the Ten Suggestions."

Maybe the right way isn't about being bland and non-offensive. Maybe we are doing ourselves a disservice by even referring to those two erroneous schools of thought. Maybe we should ignore all the shouting and posturing and just get on with being spiritual beings in a confusing world. And maybe we should just get rid, once and for all, of this matter of belief.

Belief is what condemns the extremists of both camps to irrelevance. It is also the first thing people ask when they want to know about Unitarianism or Universalism. Have you ever noticed that? And how hard it is to give an answer? The writers of our pamphlets have wrestled with this problem for years. And if we do manage to scratch together a few half-satisfactory phrases about our hugely diverse opinions, the response is often something like, "Oh, well, I believe all that too, of course. But then, what's the point of going to church?"

What I would have to say at this point is that it's not at all about belief. If that were not so, why wouldn't we just give in and have a creed like everybody else? But if it's not about belief, what is it?

In the end, it's about *experience*. If the mind and its fixation on ideas inevitably leads us in erroneous directions, what we have left is an experience. And that experience—I'm aware that some of you may not like this term—has been called the "practice of the presence of God". In a service that works, or in a small circle dedicated to engaging with deep reality, there sometimes is something else at work. Something like the day of Pentecost, perhaps. Something like what Richard S. Gilbert refers to when he says that God is not a noun but a verb, and so we are practising "goddling" together.

When that kind of thing happens, we are not re-enacting a ritual that springs from dead forms. We are not "getting away with

it", as we ministers are sometimes inclined to hope when we utter bland homilies about the seasons or redact the lines of a hymn or do a potted biography of some deceased Unitarian worthy. Instead, we are shining the silver plate, dusting the pews, cleaning the curtains for a visit by something we cannot understand, control or second-guess. We are opening the doors of our buildings and doing our very, very best to open our hearts to an appearance of that spirit, by whatever name you want to call it.

This hour every few weeks is crucial. And we are not doing it just for ourselves. We are doing it for the world, whether we know it or not. That world where people are drowning in relativity, lost in materialism, fearful of violence, bewildered by sexuality, vulnerable to poisonous nonsense from extremists and smart-alecks. Now I'm no Christian, liberal or otherwise. I don't like the concept of sin any more than anyone here, but I would say this: if there is a sin, it would be the waste of our precious opportunity to make a space for what is real and true.

And all those book believers? Well, we religious liberals have always found a way to denounce nonsense, and I don't think the time to stop is now. Not when the world, shrinking from an overdose of change, is polarising fast. But the trick will be to denounce the empty, fear-ridden pronouncements that spring from a too-literal belief without condemning the poor souls stuck in that all-too appealing trap.

Sometimes I think I'm not such a fast learner. It's taken me years to realise what the right response to the fanatic's question would have been. When he said, "Are you saved?", I should have responded, "Yes, Brother. I was always saved-- from the minute I turned up here."

AMEN