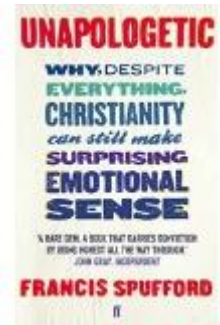


Francis Spufford

Unapologetic – Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense

Faber 2012 Notes AJM July 2015



Spufford teaches writing at Goldsmiths College, London, and has won various prizes. It's an emotional apologetic – his proposal is that Christianity does not have to be embraced or rejected on intellectual, analytical grounds alone, because most belief is in fact held emotionally, and Christianity is both coherent and convincing on an emotional level. It's a response to the new atheists which deals with them not by outproving them but by dismissing the whole premise on which their beliefs are founded. There are lots of things he doesn't touch on, in particular the role of the Holy Spirit in faith and in our experience of what it means to love and be loved; but it's an original and compelling response to the over intellectualisation of faith and unfaith.

1. Unapologetic

The atheist bus tells us to stop worrying and enjoy our life, for there probably is no God. Problem – they have absolutely no evidence for that. Second problem – anyone who isn't enjoying themselves is entirely on their own. Question – what is Mozart doing in his Clarinet Concerto, for it sounds as if it comes from a world where sorrow is perfectly ordinary, but there is more to be said.

'If I say that, from inside, it makes much more sense to talk about belief as a characteristic set of feelings, or even as a habit, you will conclude that I am trying to wriggle out... I am a fairly orthodox Christian. Every Sunday I say and do my best to mean the whole of the Creed, which is a series of propositions... But it is still a mistake to suppose that it is assent to the propositions that makes you a believer. It is the feelings that are primary. I assent to the ideas because I have the feelings; I don't have the feelings because I've assented to the ideas.' 19. Listening to Mozart is not a metaphor; my belief is made up from emotions like that. Mozart created a beautiful and accurate report of an aspect of reality.

'The book is called *unapologetic* because it isn't giving an 'apologia', the technical term for a defence of the ideas. And because I'm not sorry.

2. The crack in everything

The obstacle to communicating what belief feels like is that we are not working with a blank slate. The word sin, for example, which now means the pleasurable consumption of something – enjoyable naughtiness. So he offers a new term: HPtFtU – the human propensity to fuck things up. Our desires cause us internal conflict, and if trying to keep busy and distract ourselves doesn't work (solution number 1) then we have a strong feeling that it ought to be able to fix the situation by a change in the rules – that we can behave as we please. The HPtFtU isn't just bad news about other people, it's bad news about us too. Christianity is the only religion which takes account of the HPtFtU. It doesn't just gather up the good people and reject the bad ones; it insists we are all bad.

3. Big Daddy

So we talk to God, and he doesn't respond. Samuel Beckett: 'He doesn't exist, the bastard!'. The life of faith has lots of those moments. But gradually a different perception grows. I sit in silence. I breathe in; I breathe out. I register something that precedes the manifold immensity that is not-me and yet is real. I feel what I feel when there is someone beside me. I feel comfort – although it's not comfortable. Some New Atheists say:

'I don't believe in any gods, I think they're saying, because I do believe in the felt completeness, the experienced adequacy, of a world of supermarket trolleys, hangovers, suburban Sundays, toothache, drum 'n' bass, romantic love, diminishing marginal utility and the smell of fresh paint. This world is solid, stolid even. It makes no sudden moves. It

incorporates an absolutely firm distinction between a prosaic, law-governed external reality and a private, internal domain of imagination which exerts no traction over prosaic reality except by prosaic means - by the publication of fantasy novels, for instance. This world believes that it has science on its side. Indeed, by an act of oblivious metaphorical digestion, it tends to believe that it is science; it thinks that what it sees around it is the bare, disenchanting, unmediated, uncoloured truth delivered by the scientific method. Look, no gods! Also, no fairies, no unicorns, no griffins, no leprechauns. A quick census of the local fauna confirms it: case solved. But this perceptual world isn't science. It is a cultural artefact created by one version of the cultural influence of science, specific to the last two centuries in Europe and North America. It is not a direct, unmediated picture of reality; far from it. It is a drastically human-centred, human-scaled selection from the physical universe, comfortably restricted to the order of reality which is cooked rather than raw, which happens within the envelope of society.' 70

For you, though, what comes next? You have this experience again, you try to work out what you should do about it. You don't possess it as logic, but as emotion. Its' a presence, and you can't tie it down. You begin to believe. Then you notice what goes on in the world, and you are horrified and disgusted.

4. Hello, cruel world

Without faith, there'd be nothing but indifferent material forces at work. It's only when you introduce the idea of an author that the world becomes cruel. Let's discard God. But then there's that shining, that glimmer, that song of loving intent threading through the substrate of things, and that you find you can't discard. But you were looking for help of the things you'd fucked up, in accordance with the HPTtU – but you find you are seeking help from the party who is Himself responsible for the crappiness in question. It starts to feel as if the whole thing is a stick of seaside rock with the words HA-HA-HA written through it. And what about the biosphere, which has suffering written all the way through it? We tend to take this personally, and find special outrage in the fact of our own mortality. It can all be extinguished by a dodgy heart valve, or a single transcriptional error in a cell nucleus. Every one of our voyages ends in disaster; every ship is the Titanic. Atheists often believe this should not be a problem for believers (magic kingdom in the sky). It is – but 'we also have to fit it together somehow with the intermittently felt, constantly transmitted assurance that we are loved' (94). (NB talking intelligibly about evolutionary biology requires as many metaphors as it does to talk intelligible theology). So what do we do? Self deception (everything's lovely)? Argue? (suffering must mean something else, eg it refines us; or it's necessary in some way; or it's part of a package deal which gives us free will; or it doesn't matter because it's only a momentary prelude to heaven ; or because the world is not as God intended it to be. (NB the acceptance of evolution owed a lot to the CofE – if you're glad that Darwin is on the £10 note, hug an Anglican).

So how do we deal with suffering? We don't. We take it as given; the only comfort is to feel yourself loved. Given the cruel world, it's the love song we need, to help us bear what we must, and, if we can, to go on loving. If there are no short answers to suffering, there is a long one – a specifically Christian perception of what God is, which helps us move on. 'We don't have an argument that solves the problem of the cruel world, but we have a story.' 107. When I pray, it's not to a philosophically complicated absentee creator, it's to a face, the face of a man under arrest and on his way to our common catastrophe.

5. Yeshua

C1st century context; in comes Yeshua, and he says don't be careful. He ups the ante – it's not about keeping the rules, it's about the fact you fail. He offers frightening challenges – it's worth chopping bits of yourself off if that prevents you being separated from God. He condemns self-righteousness. It doesn't make him popular. But he's tender, he's never disgusted. He talks about love. He offers unlimited love in a world of limits – often by healing people. He can't mend the world's sorrows this way, for the consequences of the HPTtU ramify out in time from moments we cannot retrieve. The existing religion of the time says the only way to be free of the past is by sacrifice. That's what he does.

6. Et Cetera

'I have cheated, of course' – simplifying and heightening the story, to make the emotional outline clear. But you can't strip things away and say Jesus was just human, a wise person, it doesn't work, for his teaching is not, conventionally, wise. It won't work as myth (the dying god) either, for it takes place inconveniently in the

middle of history. Nor will it work as tragedy, because of its ending, its defeat of death. Why do I believe? Not because I want an unlimited future twiddling a harp. 'I believe because I know I've got a past and a present in which the HPtFtU did and does its usual work, and I want a way of living which opens out more widely and honestly and lovingly than I can manage for myself, which widens rather than narrowing with each destructive decision.' 166. The answer to the HPtFtU is grace – forgiveness we can't earn.

7. The International League of the Guilty, Part Two

One version of Christian history assembles itself very readily these days – it starts with famous Christian-committed iniquities of the present, like clerical child abuse, and works backward in time finding counterpart outrages all the way to the point, 2000 years ago, when the memory of Jesus was first organised into the thing called 'the church.' No one is going to sign up to that. But if on one level it's not surprising that Christian history is shot through with miseries, it's just what the HPtFtU is. It takes 4 forms. First, we can treat the story of the crucifixion as an excuse for more pain, more violence; one shiny person, lots of villains, and we hate villains (especially Jews). The reality is we are all villains. Secondly, we downgrade grace – it's not a Get Out of Jail Free card which allows people to get away with awful things for which they should be punished (note that hell is still popular). Thirdly, we mess up power – Christians have never handled it well. We can imagine that because we are Christians, our projects will somehow share in God's freedom from the HPtFtU. They don't. Fourthly, we tend to give religious sanction to whatever is conservative in our society, at the expense of everyone who falls outside the conservative definition of what's good and natural. We are supposed to be a harbour for the guilty, not the high ground of virtue. Sexual guilt is distributed across the entire human race, but Jesus scarcely seemed to think it worth talking about.

We don't believe the church is precious because it is good or does good or may do good in the future; we care about its behaviour but we don't believe its muddled and sometimes awful record is the only truth about it. We believe that the church is precious because it embodies something that the HPtFtU in general and our sins of complicity in particular cannot destroy. It's not just an institution, it's a body of people who aspire to be the body of Jesus. The church is what Christ is doing in the world, nowadays. We are the only hands he's got, even when we fail.

8. Consequences

What does it feel like to feel yourself forgiven? Surprising. Like toothache stopping. Like something that hurt not being there any more. Faith requires you to take risks; it's like falling in love. It means trying to love other people. There is no one set of opinions that follow on from your belief.

It would be nice if people were to understand that science is a special exercise in perceiving the world without metaphor, and that, powerful though it is, it doesn't function as a guide to those very large aspects of experience that can't be perceived *except* through metaphor. It would be nice if people saw that the world cannot be disenchanted, and that the choice before us is really a choice of enchantments' (222). Nice, but not necessary; for the church is still doing its stuff.

Alison Morgan, July 2015

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk

www.resource-arm.net