

Religion of hatred: Why we should no longer be cowed by the chattering classes ruling Britain who sneer at Christianity

By A N Wilson 11th April 2009

A week ago, there were Palm Sunday processions all over the world. Near my house in North London is a parish with two churches. About 70 or 80 of us gathered at one of these buildings to collect our palms. We were told by the priest: 'Where we are standing in Kentish Town does not look much like a Judaeon hillside, and the other church to which we are walking does not look much like Jerusalem. But as we go, holding our palms, let us try to imagine the first Palm Sunday.'

[Jesus Christ: With sneering doubters becoming ever more vocal in their dismissive attitudes towards Christianity AN Wilson says we should no longer be cowed](#)

And so we set off, singing All Glory, Laud And Honour! and holding up our palm crosses, to the faint bemusement of passersby, who looked out of their windows at us, tooted their horns as we blocked the traffic or smiled from sunny pavements.

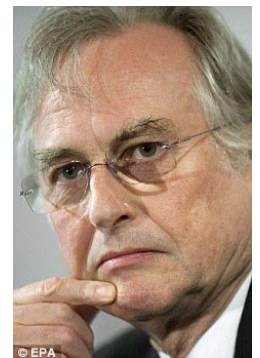
We were walking, as it were, in the footsteps of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on a donkey while crowds threw palms before him. Except our journey was along the pavements strewn with the usual North London discarded syringes, chewing gum and Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes. When we had reached our destination, a small choir and two priests sang the whole of St Mark's account of the last week of Jesus's life - that part of the Gospel that is called The Passion. It is said the chant used for this recitation dates back to the music used in the Jewish Temple in Jesus's day. We heard of his triumphal, palm-strewn procession into Jerusalem, his clash with the Temple authorities, his agonised prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, his arrest by the Roman guards, his torture, his trial before Pontius Pilate, his Crucifixion and his death. So there we were, all believers, and a disparate group of people, of various ages, races and classes, re-enacting once more this extraordinary story. A story of a Jewish prophet falling foul of the authorities in an eastern province of the Roman Empire, and being punished, as were thousands of Jews during the governorship of Pontius Pilate, by the gruesome torture of crucifixion.

This Easter weekend we revisit the extraordinary ending of that story - the discovery by some women friends of Jesus that his tomb was empty. And we read of the reactions of the disciples - fearful, incredulous, but eventually believing that, as millions of Christians will proclaim tomorrow morning: 'The Lord is risen indeed!'



[Atheist: Richard Dawkins](#)

But how many in Britain today actually believe the story? Most recent polls have shown that considerably less than half of us do - yet that won't, of course, stop us tucking into Easter eggs (symbolising new life) and simnel cake (decorated with 11 marzipan balls representing the 11 true disciples, with Judas missing). For much of my life, I, too, have been one of those who did not believe. It was in my young manhood that I began to wonder how much of the Easter story I accepted, and in my 30s I lost any religious belief whatsoever. Like many people who lost faith, I felt anger with myself for having been 'conned' by such a story. I began to rail against Christianity, and wrote a book, entitled Jesus, which endeavoured to establish that he had been no more than a messianic prophet who had well and truly failed, and died. Why did I, along with so many others, become so dismissive of Christianity?



Like most educated people in Britain and Northern Europe (I was born in 1950), I have grown up in a culture that is overwhelmingly secular and anti-religious. The universities, broadcasters and media generally are not merely non-religious, they are positively anti. To my shame, I believe it was this that made me lose faith and heart in my youth. It felt so uncool to be religious. With the mentality of a child in the playground, I felt at some visceral level that being religious was unsexy, like having spots or wearing specs.

This playground attitude accounts for much of the attitude towards Christianity that you pick up, say, from the alternative comedians, and the casual light blasphemy of jokes on TV or radio. It also lends weight to the fervour of the anti-God fanatics, such as the writer Christopher Hitchens and the geneticist Richard Dawkins, who think all the evil in the world is actually caused by religion. The vast majority of media pundits and intelligentsia in Britain are unbelievers, many of them quite fervent in their hatred of religion itself. The Guardian's fanatical feminist-in-chief, Polly Toynbee, is one of the most dismissive of religion and Christianity in particular. She is president of the British Humanist Association, an associate of the National Secular Society and openly scornful of the millions of Britons who will quietly proclaim their faith in Church tomorrow.

Self-satisfied tv personalities like Jo Brand are openly non-believers

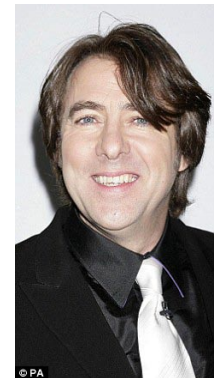
'Of all the elements of Christianity, the most repugnant is the notion of the Christ who took our sins upon himself and sacrificed his body in agony to save our souls. Did we ask him to?' she asked in a puerile article decrying the wickedness of C.S. Lewis's Narnia stories, which have bewitched children for more than 50 years. Or, to take another of her utterances:

'When absolute God-given righteousness beckons, blood flows and women are in chains.' The sneering Ms Toynbee, like Richard Dawkins, believes in rational explanations for our existence and behaviour. She is deeply committed to the Rationalist Association, but her approach to religion is too fanatical to be described as rational. Perhaps it goes back to her relationship with her nice old dad, Philip Toynbee, a Thirties public school Marxist who, before he died, made the hesitant journey from unbelief to a questing Christianity. The Polly Toynbees of this world ignore all the benign aspects of religion and see it purely as a sinister agent of control, especially over women.

One suspects this is how it is viewed in most liberal circles, in university common rooms, at the BBC and, perhaps above all, sadly, by the bishops of the Church of England, who despite their episcopal regalia, nourish few discernible beliefs that could be distinguished from the liberalism of the age.

Smug: Jonathan Ross

For ten or 15 of my middle years, I, too, was one of the mockers. But, as time passed, I found myself going back to church, although at first only as a fellow traveller with the believers, not as one who shared the faith that Jesus had truly risen from the grave. Some time over the past five or six years - I could not tell you exactly when - I found that I had changed. When I took part in the procession last Sunday and heard the Gospel being chanted, I assented to it with complete simplicity. My own return to faith has surprised no one more than myself. Why did I return to it? Partially, perhaps it is no more than the confidence I have gained with age. Rather than being cowed by them, I relish the notion that, by asserting a belief in the risen Christ, I am defying all the liberal clever-clogs on the block: cutting-edge novelists such as Martin Amis; foul-mouthed, self-satisfied TV presenters such as Jonathan Ross and Jo Brand; and the smug, tieless architects of so much television output.



But there is more to it than that. My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I have known - not the famous, not saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in the light of the Resurrection story, or in the quiet acceptance that they have a future after they die. The Easter story answers their questions about the spiritual aspects of humanity. It changes people's lives because it helps us understand that we, like Jesus, are born as spiritual beings. Every inner prompting of conscience, every glimmering sense of beauty, every response we make to music, every experience we have of love - whether of physical love, sexual love, family love or the love of friends - and every experience of bereavement, reminds us of this fact about ourselves.

Ah, say the rationalists. But no one can possibly rise again after death, for that is beyond the realm of scientific possibility. And it is true to say that no one can ever prove - nor, indeed, disprove - the existence of an after-life or God, or answer the conundrums of honest doubters (how does a loving God allow an earthquake in Italy?) Easter does not answer such questions by clever-clever logic. Nor is it irrational. On the contrary, it meets our reason and our hearts together, for it addresses the whole person.

In the past, I have questioned its veracity and suggested that it should not be taken literally. But the more I read the Easter story, the better it seems to fit and apply to the human condition. That, too, is why I now believe in it. Easter confronts us with a historical event set in time. We are faced with a story of an empty tomb, of a small group of men and women who were at one stage hiding for their lives and at the next were brave enough to face the full judicial persecution of the Roman Empire and proclaim their belief in a risen Christ. Historians of Roman and Jewish law have argued at length about the details of Jesus's trial - and just how historical the Gospel accounts are. Anyone who believes in the truth must heed the fine points that such scholars unearth. But at this distance of time, there is never going to be historical evidence one way or the other that could dissolve or sustain faith.

Of course, only hard evidence will satisfy the secularists, but over time and after repeated readings of the story, I've been convinced without it. And in contrast to those ephemeral pundits of today, I have as my companions in belief such Christians as Dostoevsky, T. S. Eliot, Samuel Johnson and all the saints, known and unknown, throughout the ages. When that great saint Thomas More, Chancellor of England, was on trial for his life for daring to defy Henry VIII, one of his prosecutors asked him if it did not worry him that he was standing out against all the bishops of England. He replied: 'My lord, for one bishop of your opinion, I have a hundred saints of mine.'

Now, I think of that exchange and of his bravery in proclaiming his faith. Our bishops and theologians, frightened as they have been by the pounding of secularist guns, need that kind of bravery more than ever. Sadly, they have all but accepted that only stupid people actually believe in Christianity, and that the few intelligent people left in the churches are there only for the music or believe it all in some symbolic or contorted way which, when examined, turns out not to be belief after all. As a matter of fact, I am sure the opposite is the case and that materialist atheism is not merely an arid creed, but totally irrational. Materialist atheism says we are just a collection of chemicals. It has no answer whatsoever to the question of how we should be capable of love or heroism or poetry if we are simply animated pieces of meat.

The Resurrection, which proclaims that matter and spirit are mysteriously conjoined, is the ultimate key to who we are. It confronts us with an extraordinarily haunting story. J. S. Bach believed the story, and set it to music. Most of the greatest writers and thinkers of the past 1,500 years have believed it. But an even stronger argument is the way that Christian faith transforms individual lives - the lives of the men and women with whom you mingle on a daily basis, the man, woman or child next to you in church tomorrow morning.

A N Wilson was writing in the Daily Mail. To see the original article click [here](#).

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