

READING

In what consists the so much boasted utility of a Religion, which nobody can comprehend, which continually torments those who are weak enough to meddle with it, which is incapable of rendering men better, and which often makes them consider it meritorious to be unjust and wicked? Is there a folly more deplorable, and more justly to be combated, than that, which far from doing any service to the human race, only makes them blind, delirious, and miserable, by depriving them of Truth, the sole cure for their wretchedness.

“Religion has ever filled the mind of man with darkness and kept him in ignorance of the real duties of true interests. It is only by dispelling these clouds and phantoms of religion, that we shall discover Truth, Reason and Morality. Religion diverts us from the causes of evil, and from the remedies which nature prescribes; far from curing, it only aggravates, multiplies and perpetuates them.”

Baron d'Holbach, *Good Sense Without God*, 1772

John Dickson (Studio)

That's an excerpt from Franco-German Philosopher Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach [**doll-BACH**] (or just d'Holbach for short), published just before the French Revolution kicked off in 1789.

d'Holbach gained fame as one of the leading figures of the French Enlightenment, part of a broader intellectual and philosophical movement that swept across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Intellectuals challenged traditional ideas, and promoted the supremacy of reason and the separation of church and state.

d'Holbach is considered a pioneer of intellectual French Atheism.

His work helped fuel a quickly growing fire in late -18th century France, which turned against French traditions ... of monarch and religion.

The French Revolution dealt severely with both!

In their place, the French established a Republic and a new religion of reason.

In fact, the French invented an actual atheist church - you could say - the so called “Cult of Reason”: basically, a state-sponsored formal devotion to rationality as opposed to spirituality.

In 1793, revolutionaries even took over the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. Statues of saints were removed or replaced with busts of revolutionary heroes. The Virgin Mary statue was replaced with a statue of Liberty. They held speeches and ceremonies in praise of the secular ideals of the revolution.

Although the ‘cult of reason’ was short-lived, the ideas of people like d’Holbach and the famous Voltaire were cemented in the French consciousness.

France became the epicentre of world atheism!

But, of course, it wasn’t always like this.

For most of the millennium before the late 1700s, the champions of western Christianity were the Franks (the French).

When we speak of 'Christendom', we basically mean the Christian empires established, first, by the Merovingian dynasty in the 6th century and, then, by Charles the Great, Charlemagne. His so called Carolingian Renaissance from the 8th century on, established France as the spiritual and academic centre of the western world. France became the envy of the academic world, renowned for its commitment to the arts, sciences, and philosophy.

In a weird way, though, French Christianity's promotion of a culture of questioning and reasoning is what ultimately led to the elevation of reason over Christianity, especially in France.

I've often felt the French do atheism with more panache than anyone!

This impression comes partly from the history, and partly from my encounter some years ago with an extraordinary French sceptic.

One of dearest and most surprising friendships of my time as pastor was with an elderly French woman named Marie Rose.

She was a French atheist, and long-time academic at Sydney University. Some Sydney listeners may know of her.

Marie had been student in Paris 1950s. During that time she devoured all the great European philosophers—in the three languages she knew: Hume, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre. In those days, she once told me, she lived in pursuit of knowledge and what she called “experience”!! I didn’t ask questions.

She met a member of my church at a language class.

They got talking about the faith. She scoffed, of course. But he lent her a Christian book, which Marie devoured.

She found it slightly stimulating, so she took herself out to the large Sydney Christian bookstore, Koorong Books, and bought more books, by that author and others. The shop attendant could have had no idea of this woman's fierce intellect, voracious reading life, and scepticism toward the Church.

But eventually she was invited to my church. I happened to be in the pulpit that day. She demanded an audience with me.

And so began countless conversations, dinners with my family, and emails—where she questioned everything, read everything, and pondered deeply.

Marie had intellectual questions—her French devotion to reason was keen.

She also had moral/political questions—the French are renowned for suspicion toward elite power, and Marie had personally experienced the abuse of power.

She was one of the most straight-talking people I have ever known. When she first met Buff and learned that her original name was Elizabeth, she blurted out, “How can someone with a beautiful name be called

something as hideous as “Buff” (she pointed out that Bœuf is French for ‘beef’!).

We loved it! And Marie became one of our family’s dearest friends. I think we were all changed by knowing her. And she was changed over the course of the next few years, before she died.

Marie embodies our theme today: how peculiarly French ways of thinking can and often do lead to a staunch secularism — but also how those same ways of thinking can lead people back to Christianity again.

Marie is gone now (I’ll say more about her later). But my guest today has a similar story.

It’s the story of French atheism ... told by a former French atheist.

Je m'appelle Jean Dickson et voici Undeceptions.

JD: So set the scene. Uh, take us to your upbringing outside of Paris. Um, it was a happy, comfortable existence. Yes?

Guillaume: it was amazing. It was great. This is the best way to grow up. Frankly, this was I was in a upper middle class, wonderfully comfortable french family. I had an older brother, a younger sister. Um, and we were

John Dickson (Studio)

That's my guest, Dr. Guillaume Bignon, author of a fabulous little book *Confessions of a French Atheist*.

While he now has his PhD in philosophical theology, he started out his thinking life as an avowed atheist and critic of the Church.

I first connected with him a few years ago when he was writing his book. He wanted help tracking down some obscure historical sources – about ancient Jewish burial customs, if I remember correctly.

He was going into battle (in print) with the famous French philosopher and atheist Michel Onfray, whose book *The Atheist Manifesto* offered some swashbuckling criticisms of the history behind the Gospels.

Guillaume was the perfect person to offer a French rebuttal.

Anyway, since those emails, we've been threatening to catch up many times. And I've been trying to get him on the show for ages. After a couple of years of almost meeting each other, we finally did so in the not-so-salubrious rent-an-office at Washington airport, where I literally flew in, had a delightful two hour conversation, and flew back out.

Guillaume: freed from most of life's troubles, uh, and really to enjoy some of the good things.

And what better place than France to enjoy some of the good things when that includes, uh, Food and, and culture and, and fun. And so, um, yeah, it was a wonderful, wonderful childhood, uh, in an environment that I authority, uh, look back on with affection.

JD: your family was, you know, uh, religiously speaking, nominally Catholic? more devotion in that tradition along the way?

Guillaume: I think a setup that I've found to be quite common, uh, that my parents are the generation of the baby boomers, uh, after a while. Um, who grew up

Catholic and practicing and most oftentimes sincerely. Um, doing so I'm not a feeling that there's some sort of a contradiction in what they're doing or some hypocrisy.

Um, there's genuinely going through the rituals and attending mass, but, um, not necessarily out of a very deep life conviction.

So that, um, in the end. I ended up following them to mass, but as soon as we were old enough, um, me and my brother and my, basically my, uh, generation, uh, able to tell our parents from the boomer generation that, Hey, we actually don't believe any of this stuff.

Then we stopped going to church and it doesn't seem like a shape shifting life altering decision. It's more of a, Oh, well, I guess that's what we were doing, but you don't have to do this and this is fine. So this is a little bit. It felt like, uh, so it was part of what we did, but not very much part of who we were,

JD: if you will. But at some point you knew yourself to be an atheist quite young. Is that right?

Guillaume: Yes, that's right. I knew we were going through the motion. Fairly early on, it seemed to me like, yeah, there is no, there's no really good reason or

credible reason around me to think that there's a creator of the universe, uh, was listening to our prayers or does anything that I can tell in the world.

And so by default, I thought, well, I'm not really believing this, these things. Um, and then, yes, I guess, uh, to affirm that there is no God came a little bit later on with an added layer in my context, which was a bit more resentment. So, it wasn't just a feeling that, Oh, well, I guess my mind is made now.

I've, I've concluded that there is no God. There was also a resentment from, uh, feeling like religion had been forced upon us.

And then we absorb kind of what's prevalent in the culture, or at least in my environment in France, which is that religion is silly and people are superstitious.

And so there's kind of this scornful attitude towards religion that came packaged in my non belief as soon as I was able to say, well, not only I don't believe it, but it's nonsense and people shouldn't.

John Dickson (Studio)

A survey of French citizens in 2020 found that 47 per cent of respondents “felt bound” to Catholicism.

(*Statista*)

On the other hand, only 6 per cent of believers said they attended church once a week. So they obviously don’t feel too “bound”!!

And only 44% of French people say they believe in God at all (significantly below Australians, who hover around the mid-50s in surveys).

Soon enough, Guillaume was living a fairly typical upper-middle-class French life, with church firmly in the past.

By the time he was a young adult, he was an elite volleyballer—playing all around the country—and he was also playing keys in a rock band – nice!

He excelled in maths and science at school, and moved into a well-paid career as a software engineer.

At the heart of it all, he told me, was a desire to just “have a really good time”. He reminded me of my dear French atheist friend Marie: Smart, but always in pursuit of “*expériences*”!!

JD: Were there any moments in those happy French experiential days where you began to think deeply? Or was it really just you were a happy pagan?

Guillaume: Well, I was, uh, happy. I mean, all the pursuits that I've just described, uh, I mean, aside from perhaps what Christians would call, uh, unhealthy amount of pride. I was there's nothing inherently wrong about any of the pursuits that I've described, but one of them certainly was also my view of women and relationships at the time.

I was seeking happiness in all those forms and for, I mean, the view of relationships and women and sex in France, uh, for an atheist, my edge would have involved a very aggressive pressure to have many. Uh, experiences and to have relationships sometimes very short, sometimes long. Um, but in my case that involved, uh, really somewhat extreme, um, like unfaithfulness and just finding identity and fulfillment in those.

Um, and so those pieces all were seemingly avenues that I was seeking success in. Um, and. Precisely when I started to have enough success in all of those areas. Uh, is when I started to think a bit more deeply about,

well, what am I running after here? that, uh, I, I was the dog who caught the, uh, car that he was running after and not too sure what to do with it. Um, and so in that moment of Sobriety and wondering, Well, what's the point of all of that? Or what am I doing in all this?

Um, I started to reflect a bit and wonder, Well, you know, I'm I mean, I'm pretty happy with those things. And this is pleasant. But is that all there is? And you know what? What do I need here? the one time that I can recollect having actually some existential questions like that. Uh, and so what I did at that time is that I just wrote to my grandfather, uh, who I thought was one of the most, uh, fulfilled individuals that I've ever met in terms of accomplishments. And so I, I do, uh, talk a little bit about him.

He's a remarkable individual.

Um, was brilliant in many areas of life, was, uh, had an exceptional mind, uh, spoke fluently eight, nine languages. I was, uh, graduated from the most prestigious engineering school in France and worked in sciences all life. He was the lead engineer who made France a nuclear power.

he, during, he, he lived to be 107 and, uh, he lived through both World War during which he was put in charge of territories in, um, in Africa. That was the size of France. So. Uh, an absolutely unbelievable list of accomplishments and a wonderful guy.

if, if I feel like my goals have been satisfied, this guy is way ahead of me in this life, maybe he's got some answers. And so I kind of wrote my letter, like, what is happiness and what are we looking after? Um, and he's, uh, reply came to me, uh, very touching. He shared some of his experiences of his high of the successful accomplishments.

Um, and in there, um, he didn't really fully answer my struggles. I didn't really help me too much. The basis of his. Commentary on happiness is that, um, the joy that you feel is kind of just a milestone marker. So it helps you on the way, but you don't sit on the milestone and you don't just dwell in the experience.

Keep on going some sort of a metaphor like this which thought yeah, that's that's touching It's not exactly answering my question of what to do now, and where am I going but that was fine The one part that was annoying is that his letter also contains some talks

about Jesus Where he was sharing so he was a practicing Catholic himself But he was saying that some of his big experiences included once Uh, reading through the sermon on the mount, uh, in, uh, Israel on the mountain that well could have been where Jesus was.

And he said, there was something transcendent and exciting and a couple of other religious references in his letter. And at the time I was like, yuck, spare me, uh, not that again. I thought I was done with religion. So I thoroughly dismissed all of this, uh, and I accepted this was a cute answer. But I basically stopped thinking about those matters.

I figured that if this is going to be bringing back some religious themes, and of course, the connection is quite natural. I mean, what's the purpose of life? It's quite connected to whether there's a creator of life who has a purpose for what we do here, with an intention, and maybe, God forbid, some commandments about what we should be doing here.

John Dickson (Studio)

Guillaume went on living this carefree (and somewhat scandalous) way – but his grandfather’s words rattled around in the back of his mind.

Then, a fateful holiday in the Caribbean changed everything.

Guillaume: So this is, uh, very much, I mean, if you look at the grant, uh, the grand story of my life, the chances of me ever coming back to a religious, uh, lifestyle or to have to be even presented with anything that I would call the gospel of Jesus was actually extremely small.

And it took a very unlikely set of events that started with a trip to the Caribbean. We're visiting my uncle who had accepted a job there a few years back. And, uh, I was just discovering that kind of paradise on earth type of experience.

And, um, this is where things started to turn against me, uh, with a very fortuitous, uh, hitchhiking incident.

Where for the very first time in my life, um, we decided to come back from a beach that was a bit more distant when we didn't have a car and decided that we would be hitchhiking our way back home.

Um, and after a few minutes of hitchhiking, uh, the first scout for a car stopped, uh, in it, um, two American tourists who were just arriving on the island. And they were not even stopping to pick us up as hitchhikers. They were stopping to ask for directions because they were lost on their way from the airport to the hotel.

And so we stopped talking and realized the hotel they are going to. is literally next door to the house that we are actually going. So we say, well, we'll tell you where it is if you pick us up and drop us off next door. And so that's what we did. And they were both fairly attractive. One was from New York.

And immediately the, you know, romantic pursuit goal of my life kicked in.

Long story short, I ended up romantically involved with her, um, but very quickly learned, uh, a couple of bad news. Uh, one is that she was claiming to be a Christian, a believer in God, which at the time I still thought this is an intellectual suicide, like what kind of nonsense is this? Um, and the other is that attached to her belief was, uh, a belief in abstinence before marriage, which was extremely problematic for me as well. This is not at all what I wanted.

John Dickson (Studio)

The Bible is pretty clear that sex is wonderful and has God's full blessing, but only in the context of marriage.

That was bad news for Guillaume – but not bad enough to derail his flourishing romance.

Guillaume: Um, so I decided I would try to pursue this as a long distance relationship and that we would need to make it work. But obviously, her religious beliefs would be an extremely big problem and so that's one that needed to be resolved.

And that's what led me on the quest to try to Like look into her Christian faith so that I could explain to her why this is nonsense, why we shouldn't be bothered with it, and why we could be happy together.

JD: how did that go?

Guillaume: Yeah. So I don't think I would be here if it went the way that I had

Um, the way it went is that I started to actually consider that, um, there's a number of truth claims at the heart of Christian teaching that I was mostly ignorant of. I mean,

I knew clearly it is the belief that there is a God, uh, and that Jesus is somewhat of a big deal. But I wasn't too sure what the Christian faith even teaches.

And so, um, it was an important step for me to sit back and to realize, look, if I'm going to be discussing those things, it's actually it's, it's going to have to be based on what is true, not what I enjoy or what feels right, or my upbringing, uh, and distaste of religion.

Um, and that question, like, is it true?

Uh, are there any good reasons to think that there's a God, that Jesus was who he claimed to be, that he was risen from the dead? Uh, I've never really spent any time until then really thinking about those matters in terms of what kind of reasons do we have for believing those things. So it was, it was helpful to realize that my culture in France had just impressed on me this sense that, well, it's obvious there is no God and religion is silly, but I hadn't really backed this up in any sort of substantial way.

So, um, I started to feel like I needed to at least understand what is claimed. And so I picked up a Bible, um, and, uh, I dusted off a very old Bible from my, uh,

catechism, uh, years, uh, distant in the past, and I, um, I opened it and started to read the Gospels.

John Dickson (Studio)

Guillaume “started to read the Gospels”. That’s a dangerous business for an atheist.

I told you at the outset about Marie, an academic at Sydney University and a long term French atheist. She started attending my church, at first just for the intellectual stimulation, she said.

Buff and I had her over for dinner and conversation. She told me she’d been reading the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—our first-century biographies of Jesus.

I’ll never forget an email she sent me after one of our evenings.

READING

From: <Marie Graber>

Date: Fri Jun 10 19:08:51

To: <John Dickson>

Subject: reflections

*Dear Buff and John, I find it incredible that, walking on the dusty roads of Palestine, under the hot sun with a bunch of uneducated people, [JD **INTERJECTION: Marie was such an intellectual snob!!!**] should give me such pleasure and make me look at life so differently. In my life I have read avidly all sorts of books, and I never thought that the Gospels could stimulate thus my brain, and give me at the same time the feeling that I had arrived to the most important discovery, to the only worthwhile discovery, of my life. My love to you all, Marie.*

John Dickson (Studio)

There would be many more emails and conversations with Marie after that, but it was reading the life of Jesus that set her on her way to “the most important discovery.”

More about Marie, and from Guillaume, after the break.

****BREAK 1****

READING

*³⁶Then Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.” ³⁸And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. ³⁹Then Gideon said to God, “Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.” ⁴⁰And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew. - **Judges 6: 36 - 40***

John Dickson (Studio)

That’s a reading from the Old Testament book of Judges. It’s all about Gideon - a military ruler and tribal leader in ancient Israel. (Shout out to Producer Kaley’s little boy who’s named after this guy - Hi, Gideon).

Anyway, Gideon asks for a sign from God.

It's not the recommended standard of prayer, but a lot of people down the ages (including Guillaume) have asked for a sign.

Pop culture sometimes takes the mickey out of the idea - here's Jim Carey in the classic *Bruce Almighty*.

[*Bruce Almighty Clip1](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

Gideon's (and Bruce's) approach isn't a million miles from how our guest Guillaume approached prayer – when he was still an atheist. He decided to put Christianity to the test.

And similar to Gideon and Bruce, Guillaume got more than he bargained for.

Guillaume: I thought, well, you know, I'm an engineer by now. I'm a scientist, I'm a rational, I'm a reasonable person. Um, let's see what kind of experiments there could be around this way.-So there's one experiment I can run as a scientist I could pray and see what happens, you know, if there's a God, it might be interested, might be listening. So I started to pray as an

unbeliever, as a hostile unbeliever. Um, I said, well, you know, let me disprove this and say, well, okay, God, if you are there, I don't think there is anybody.

But if there's a God out there, um, why don't you go ahead and reveal yourself to me? And reading the New Testament, starting with some of the gospels, uh, reading about this person, Jesus, uh, tasted very differently.

I saw a person that I started to think is captivating, uh, the way that he navigated in conversations, uh, the kinds of things that he affirmed, uh, and people trying to trick him and he would always find the right snappy comeback and the right moves. And like he, he saw into people's, uh, lives and spoke to their conditions.

I would say that it started to hit me that people were also telling accounts of having seen him alive after his crucifixion.

So, um, I didn't take any of this at face value immediately, but it did come to hit me that this is, this is a historical claim that is made here by people who say we were in a position to check it out and we've seen him and we had food with him and we had conversations with him after his death.

John Dickson (Studio)

Just discovering a “new” version of Jesus wasn’t enough for Guillaume though; to really understand the Christian *faith*, he (like my friend Marie) decided to go to church.

Guillaume: I wouldn't have been able to end up in church even if I wanted to because every weekend I was traveling around the country for playing volleyball games.

And so, um, Sunday morning was for volleyball, not for church. Um, and, uh, that barrier didn't last long because just a little while after I kind of prayed that unbelieving prayer, um, I, had an unexplained injury. There was not any accidents or anything like that. But my shoulder from the right arm, the dominant arm where that I used to spike just started to fail me.

Uh, the physical therapist, uh, tried to help, but they wouldn't do anything. And I was told with a shrug, well, we don't know. Uh, basically, you just need to rest your shoulder and you need to be off of volleyball courts for a

So against my will, now I was freed on Sunday morning, and since I had started to look into the claims of

Christianity, I thought, Well, I guess I can go and see what's going on on a Sunday morning. And so I went to a church in Paris that was connected to my now long distance girlfriend.

John Dickson (Studio)

The service was a world away from what Guillaume had known growing up.

There was contemporary music, communal prayer, and a sermon delivered by ... a normal guy.

He could hardly believe he was there!

Guillaume: It was an extremely disturbing experience because I felt extremely awkward, um, simply from the fact that being present in a church felt like an intellectual crime.

I thought if any of my family or friends could see me there in a church, I would die of shame. Um, so this is just to kind of place the kind of cultural pressure that there is against this.

This is genuinely how I felt, embarrassing that I was even in the building to see what's going on.

I sat through the, the service and there was a full sermon that was preached by the pastor. Uh, and I don't remember a word that he said, I don't know if I was just too absorbed in my thoughts and feeling that I was embarrassed that I didn't pay attention enough, but, oh, if it's just, just like that, I don't remember what he said, but at the end I thought, well, I've seen enough.

John Dickson (Studio)

Despite the discomfort with church, Guillaume ended up connecting with that pastor - the two hit it off.

They met regularly, and like Marie at the Dickson home, Guillaume bombarded his new friend with questions about theology, the Christian life, and ethics.

Nothing was off limits.

JD: do you remember what were the biggest hurdles?

Because it At one level I'm listening to you and I'm thinking, perhaps the biggest hurdle is the social construct of Christianity in your head from your

childhood on, that was sort of impossible to get around, it was so negative.

Guillaume: That's right. It was a huge pressure, both because of the perceived intellectual sloppiness religion, um, and also because of the, what felt like a very repressive teaching on, uh, relationships and sex.

Um, and so, theoretically, neither of those is even remotely relevant to the question of whether it's true.

Right? I mean, I don't like their view of relationships, and My country and culture thinks that you need to be dumb to believe in Christianity. Well, even if those things are very present in my life, it's, it's not telling me whether it's true.

Then I realized that there's actually quite a respectable tradition of people, especially in France, uh, who believes that God exists and who clearly are part of the very respected tradition. Uh, even in French philosophy, I mean, folks like Descartes and even John Calvin's on the Protestant side. So folks who clearly are. and respected and yet clearly they believe that God exists and the sensible atheist philosophers today to argue for

atheism. But they're not making a case that you need to be silly to be a Christian. It's not, it doesn't require outright irrationality to believe those things. But in France, this is all I knew. Like, the atheist claims was not just religion is false, it's also silly and you need to be outright irrational if you're going to believe

So discovering that this wasn't the case, that you could actually discuss those things intelligently, was an important piece in terms of intellectual respectability.

John Dickson (Studio)

Realising that you could, in fact, consider the Bible without sacrificing intellectual integrity was just the start for Guillaume.

Next was dealing with the age-old debate of religion vs. science.

Once again, it was the history of his own country that challenged him.

Guillaume: I-mean, I had studied various sciences, math, physics, engineering. Um, and I had lived with the

assumption that somehow science was the death knell of religion.

Um, and then I just took a quick inventory. Like, what do I know in terms of scientific knowledge that sounds like it's actually incompatible with God's

And I realized there's hardly any of it that's even relevant.

Uh, it's, uh, uh, there's a world tradition of arguing for God's existence on the basis of some things that are scientific. various cosmological arguments based on the origin or the existence of the universe, um, or the fine tuning of the universe. I realized there is this big tradition and there are some scientific knowledge that can lead to that.

Um, but then, uh, the, the most problematic that I could see was maybe evolution. Or, or the Big Bang, which, once again, the Big Bang might actually be on the other side of the coin for, in favor of a creator. But, uh, evolution was really all I could think of was potentially in conflict

So I looked into this. Okay. Evolution. Well, very briefly, I mean for evolution to be a problem, it would have to be

that, uh, evolution is incompatible with God's existence and evolution is true-

I mean, it seems like God could have used something like evolution to bring about life.

John Dickson (Studio)

We've covered evolution a lot on *Undeceptions*. But if you want to hear how a full-blown evolutionist, a professor at Oxford no less, came to believe that God was the Author of all things, check out episode 100 - *Saving Nature* - with scientist and conservationist Prof Andrew Gossler - a real-life Radagast the Brown.

Sorry. Back to Guillaume.

Guillaume: So, so just this inventory realize made me realize, okay, science is not against God. But maybe science should be in favor of God like should there be strong scientific evidence and I can that kind of led me to Reflect on Assumptions that I had about what counts as knowledge and what can really be Affirmed or known about God and I realized as part of those conversations and reflection that I had a couple of very bad

assumptions One might have well been that all our knowledge has to be scientific.

I had developed that kind of scientific arrogance being a scientist myself and say, ah, this is true knowledge. This is where we actually know stuff.

It's self refuting itself because the claim that you can only believe science is not itself science. Um, so I had to let that go. Um, and I think an important one that kind of brings us back to, uh, affirmations about Jesus and his resurrection, which turned to be central in my becoming a Christian is I think my standard for what can be reasonably affirmed, uh, was much too high in terms of proof and certainty.

Um, and so it's not to say that somehow I lowered my bar of evidence and now Christianity finally could make it above the bar because I had lowered it so much. That's not at all the claim. My, but the bar of knowledge and proof that I was operating under was that you need to be able to prove something in order to be reasonable believing it, or you need to have absolute certainty about those things.

And once again, I realized that this was a completely unrealistic standard and that there's tons of things in life

that I know. Not just that I believe, that I know, uh, and yet I don't have absolute proof or certainty at all. Um, so lots of examples came to my mind. But one very important category of examples was things that I knew on the basis of testimony. basis of reliable testimony. I know my date of birth. I know who my parents are. I know where I was born. I even know some things about my older brother's birth. Clearly I wasn't there, I wasn't born yet but I have blind faith in them. I know them and I'm quite reasonable in believing them. And I realized, well, this is just respectable way of having knowledge. And, um, this is a parallel that I quickly came to draw with what I had been reading in the New Testament. Realizing what I'm reading here is accounts from people who claim to either be eyewitnesses or to take their accounts from people who have been Involved with Jesus and we're in a position to know those claims and they're telling you this is how it happened We've seen him.

JD: Can you wind me forward, Guillaume, to, um, you know, where you made that transition to actually think, oh my goodness, I'm a Christian.

So I thought this is, this could be reasonable, but if I'm going to be jumping through that hoop, uh, I want to be more certain than this.

I needed some kind of powerful, um, existential, like maybe emotional experience of, yes, God has reached out and he's there. Um, and so I, I did continue praying as a tentative unbeliever to say, okay, God, it's starting to make sense intellectually. Um, but if I'm going to become a Christian, I'm going to need something that's more radical than this.

John Dickson (Studio)

What Guillaume wanted was a miracle - for God to help him get over the line to Christianity.

But as it turned out, it was by confronting his own lifestyle that he realised he truly understood - and believed - the Gospels.

Funnily enough, this idea of the power within to bring about change is also riffed on in *Bruce Almighty* - with Morgan Freeman putting in a stellar performance as the Lord God Himself.

[BRUCE ALMIGHTY CLIP 2](#)

Guillaume: Um, and I was expecting some sort of an open heaven with a voice coming down and a welcome sun. Um, and the way I explain it is that, uh, God did something that was much less theatrical, uh, but much more brutal in the end. And it is that he reactivated my conscience. And at the same time I had been investigating, uh, Christianity and had been, uh, reflecting upon those experiences, um, I had also come to commit some really, uh, immoral actions, uh, that basically involved, uh, cheating on that girlfriend, uh, with various aggravating circumstances that

it was so, so ugly that I had completely suppressed it and I kind of turned around and lived as if it never happened and shoved it in. Um, and what happened is that God took this and he showed it in my face and my conscience was reactivated. I was just confronted with the fact that I had done those things.

And this is all I could think about it. I was crippled with guilt, like literally crippling guilt. Um, and I was in pain and deep pain of having done this.

And, um, it's in that place of deep pain. That's what I had been reading about from reading the Gospels actually made sense and answered the one question

that I had seemingly failed to answer in all of the booklets, uh, in all of my conversation.

There's one question that came back over and over again. I still have those notes written in French at home. And every other page, it says, Why did Jesus have to die? And it's in that place that it finally made sense in that pain of the guilt because of what I had done, right? So it's guilt because I was guilty. Um, I, I understood and I realized, well, that's why he died me. And the gospel made sense.

The explanation that Jesus paid the penalty on the cross for my sins, like that very thing I had just committed. That thing that made me feel so guilty because I was guilty, Jesus had paid for it so that I could be forgiven. That was my way out. And so I realized, okay, this is now completely explaining my experience.

It is giving me the best news that I need, right? I am guilty and I have here this way of forgiveness and reconciliation. And now this was totally explaining my experience. I had come to experience God through both the intellectual understanding of the Gospels and the respectability of affirming the resurrection and all of that,

but also through an existential encounter with the truth of the Gospel.

And so I, I gave up and I surrendered to God and say, all right, God, I'm all in. I'm okay. Uh, I have from this message, please, uh, change me and take my life and do what you want. And I experienced a genuinely a spiritual renewal where my conscience, my guilt evaporated. I was, I felt free, liberated that yes, I am at peace with my creator and I've encountered the living God. And so, um, this was fully liberating between God and me. Uh, shortly after that, I needed to walk it out in the light and say, well, now I'm going to be a big boy.

John Dickson (Studio)

We'll be back in a minute.

BREAK #2

JD: I want this episode to be partly about a French atheist who became a Christian, and partly about French atheis - uh, I mean, I find this remarkable that

what used to be the center of Christendom, Western Christendom, you know, Gaul, France, was Christianity's home base for a millennium. Has produced some of the best atheists.

I mean the names that people will know even if we can hardly remember what he said. You know, you think of Voltaire through to the 20th century Kamo and Sat, and Fko O Michelle, and Frey.

I can't really ask you to answer how did that happen, but I also want to ask you how did that happen?

] **Guillaume:**-Uh, my review of the various French atheists, um, has been more in the context of trying to engage their ideas. know that many of the atheist French voices, um, have very different, not every French atheist philosopher is the same.

And I think that there's a, there's a, I have a different attitude towards several of the names that you give. So tell me, so like I said, I come at this more like a, a, I can't tell you what happens, uh, I'm not a historian, but I can tell you what I see. So I'm more going to be examining the crime scene, uh, and tell you what I see now.

John Dickson (Studio)

Guillaume set off on a classic *Undeceptions* rapid-fire round about atheist French philosophers!

But the first thing he did was correct me about the 18th century intellectual giant François-Marie Arouet, whose pen name was Voltaire.

We normally think of Voltaire as the arch atheist and critic of Christianity. Well, he was certainly a critic of Christianity ...

READING

“(Christianity) is assuredly the most ridiculous, the most absurd and the most bloody religion which has ever infected this world. Your Majesty will do the human race an eternal service by extirpating this infamous superstition, I do not say among the rabble, who are not worthy of being enlightened and who are apt for every yoke.”

John Dickson (Studio)

... but, it turns out, Voltaire was no atheist!

Guillaume: After I became a Christian I wanted to engage various voices about the various arguments in favor of Christianity that I wanted to discuss in my writings.

And so one thing I did is that I went and looked for all the French atheist philosophers who would have something to contribute to one argument or another that I wanted to treat. Um, just because I also wanted to write for the French people as well.

So I wanted to have a very French flavor to my writings about atheism. And so I went and read and looked for the various arguments attacking Christianity from the various, uh, authors. And I realized there's not a lot of that, actually. Like in terms of arguments, like trying to make a case. There's a lot of complaint about religion, so you get quite a bit of that in Voltaire, um, that he's gonna have problem with various doctrines of Christianity.

You find him engaging against, like, original sin, or the, the truthfulness of the gospel, that there's somehow a judgment after death, or something like that. Um,

has some really fiery things to say against atheism. Of all the things I didn't expect, I thought, well, atheism, France, Voltaire is the French atheist.

Well, no, he's not. I don't know if we can really categorize him as a deist or anything like that. But he had some very strong things to say against the irrationality of atheism itself. Um, making claims like, I think he said, there's nothing that's ever been more certain to me that's out of nothing, nothing comes.

READING

"What is faith? Is it to believe what appears quite evident? No. It is evident to me that there is a being necessary, eternal, supreme, intelligent ... this is not a matter of faith but of reason.

"I deserve no credit for thinking that this eternal, infinite being which I perceive as virtue and goodness itself, wishes me to be good and virtuous.

"Faith consists of believing not what seems true, but what seems false to our understanding."

John Dickson (Studio)

Next up were the French existentialists.

My friend Marie had been enamoured with Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and the gang ... They didn't bother arguing there was no God. They just assumed it, and asked, What does it mean to exist and experience life in a godless universe?

Guillaume: You mentioned some of the existentialist philosophers, right? Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus.

What I see them do there is less of an argument in favor of their atheism, but they rather try to establish what follows practically from atheism being true. And so Um, the main claim, and again, there's, there's a lot of words in their literature, right? I mean, if you take, uh, Being and Nothingness from Jean Paul Sartre, it's a very thick book.

Um, About nothing, which is kind of ironic, um, but you can boil it down to much of the claim that well, if there is no God and there's no a priori way that the human beings have been created with a certain goal in mind from a creator. Um, then there is no really strong basis

for us to say that there's some things that we should be doing, right?

It's the existential malaise. Um, so you find that in, in Sartre, and to some respect it's helpful argumentation for the Christian apologist in showing that, well, if God does not exist, then there might be problems for anchoring things like morality or meaning for life, objective morality and objective meaning to our lives. Once again, uh, it's kind of an intuitive idea that, um, for us to have some goals, uh, that are actually the goal of life, like the intent of life requires for somebody to have conceived of it, right?

So you do find some of that in Sartre who says, well, I'm sorry, if there's no God, there's not really a way for us to know those things.

We can't really. Have a, there's, there's no objective morality, there's no meaning in life, and therefore we find ourselves in this despair, this kind of, uh, existential angst that yeah, there's, there's no meaning to life. Um,

John Dickson (Studio)

A big claim from Sartre, and he actually received pushback from his existentialist colleagues - like Albert Camus.

JD: Is Camus similar or are there differences there?

Guillaume:-there are some political differences that I could tell between Camus and Sartre, uh, and some of the maybe ways that they might be seen as less consistent.

Right. I think that there was some, uh. So I'm concerned that if you are politically active and you strongly believe in some of those political ideals, then you might be actually operating on the basis that some things are objectively right and objectively wrong. And I remember seeing that Camus and Sartre, uh, got into conflicts about that.

Like, they, they agreed on the existentialism and the atheism that underlie their worldview, but then disagreed on whether they should be engaged in some political activism, uh, that as a result.

JD: But these guys sort of gave the French a language and a mood that was very powerful in embedding atheism, even if there wasn't an argument. There was just the assumption of atheism. Yeah.

Guillaume: and then that that unboldens the culture to simply take it, say, like, this is the way that the world is, and let's try to leave it out and see how we are going to move forward and leave religion behind. And in some respect, I think that the French Revolution is very much to blame for much of the bad rep that religion has.

Because this was seen, I mean, this is still like, this is our 4th of July, right? I mean, for us, it's the 14th, the national feast in France, the national holiday. It's celebrating the taking of the Bastille, which was seen as, let's go to the state prison and free the people that had been wrongfully imprisoned there.

John Dickson (Studio)

The Bastille was a medieval fortress, armoury, and political prison in Paris.

Revolutionary insurgents laid siege to it on July 14, 1789, and after four hours of fighting, took control of the building.

While only seven inmates were held there at the time, the building was a symbol of the French monarchy - and clergy's - abuse of power.

Bastille Day remains the National holiday of France.

Guillaume: you had the three classes in France, the nobility, the clergy, and then the third state, the rest of the common people, and the revolution was an overthrowing of the privileges of, yes, nobility, but also the clergy. And so, the complete overthrowing of religion was certainly underway there, and throwing the baby out with the bathwater was somewhat inevitable, and in the bloodbath that was the French Revolution.

There was a strong sense that we need to leave religion behind. This is bad, and we move forward. And then the Enlightenment came in and confirmed and said, Well, yeah, if you're really enlightened, you know that you don't want to live in the dark ages of the religious beliefs of the Middle Ages. So, I think much of that mood is still present in France, to say religion bad, atheism yes.

But not even needing to argue in favor of atheism, because that's just obviously that's common sense. That's how we live.

John Dickson (Studio)

In modern France, few thinkers embody this disdain toward religion and the assumption of its repressive

stupidity than the philosopher Michel Onfray, the author of *The Atheist Manifesto*!

READING

The religion of the one God espouses these impulses. It seeks to promote self-hatred to the detriment of the body, to discredit the intelligence, to despise the flesh, and to prize everything that stands in the way of a gratified subjectivity. Launched against others, it foments contempt, wickedness, the forms of intolerance that produce racism, xenophobia, colonialism, wars, social injustice. A glance at history is enough to confirm the misery and the rivers of blood shed in the name of the one God.

Guillaume: I have, I have very mixed feelings about Michel Onfray. Uh, there's a part of me that obviously thinks that this is an abject caricature of Christian belief. And so this is, this is, would be the bad side, right? So it's, it's bad Michel, uh, right there. Um, but there's also a deep affection that I've developed in, uh, reading some of his material.

Um, and he's a, he's a wonderfully compelling guy in terms of enjoying life and, um, Enjoying philosophy, uh, as in the French tradition. And, uh, also just enjoying reading and ideas. And so, the way that he expresses himself is very compelling.

And also, he's not afraid to go contrary to some of the culture. I love him. I think he's deeply wrong about Christianity.

In his writings, you find him more in the tradition of somebody like-Voltaire, more criticizing religion. If you read his book, *Un Traité d'Athéologie*, which I think in English has been translated by an atheist manifesto. Uh, he's attacking not just Christianity, but also Judaism and Islam, and he's lumping them all in the same bag.

And sometimes, It's very, those religions being very different, uh, actually hits differently by his arguments, but he's mostly criticizing practice and doctrine, not so much giving us arguments for God's existence. The most I could find in this book, um, to argue that God doesn't exist is one sentence of statements that somehow evil in this world is difficult to reconcile with God. No fleshing out of the argument or engaging.

JD: this particular paragraph I read, um, seems very French in its critique. That basically monotheism and Christianity included is just opposed to intelligence and pleasure. Tell me, what is your response to that very French critique?

Guillaume: So some of it is just misguided and misinformed. Uh, right. I mean, I think this was helpful for me in my conversations with that pastor, discovering the Christian faith for him to paint a view of sexuality that's actually Christian so that I would be at least Uh, freed from the fear that somehow the Christian worldview would be deeply opposed to any sex or even finding fulfillment in there.

And there you go to the Bible or to simply just plain Christian teaching that no, sex is a great thing. It's a gift from God and it's something to be enjoyed. Yes, there are some conditions, right? There's bounds. And what I found is that even with folks like Michel Onfray, um, they should have some limitations in terms of what they think is right and wrong in terms of sexuality. And sometimes they go, their pen goes faster than their mind, and they, they are criticizing all of those restrictions from Christianity, not realizing that they are going to be

attacking some things that sensibly, surely, they believe as well.

I think that when he's criticizing the interdictions of Christianity when it comes to relationships and sex, Michel Honfray complains about monogamy, um, uh, the family, bearing children. Like he's saying, like, these are things that are encouraged and demanded by Christianity.

And he's saying, well, that's all themes, variations around the theme of castration. And I'm like, what? What's wrong with family? What's, what's, what's wrong with marriage? What's wrong with that? Uh, monogamy? I mean, so if I don't want to be called a castrator, I need to engage in polyamory. Uh, so I think that there's, it's just the, the eloquence is getting a hold of them and they're going too far.

And myself, when considering those claims of the Christian view. I realized that I wasn't prepared to let go of all sorts of moral considerations for relationships either.

Um, and so Somehow, through my disdain of the, um, abstinence before marriage, um, did shine a bit that there was something appealing about a bit more of a

conservative view on relationships and sex. And that pastor told me that he had not even kissed his wife before they got married, and heard the traditional words of the, of the minister, you may kiss the bride.

And while I thought this was absolutely insane and I was never going to do this, there was something intriguingly, um, like captivating about this, the scenario saying, there's the traditional words, you may kiss the bride, and then have their first kiss and on they go. There was something a bit romantic about that, even though I was still very anti, um, Christianity and the view of relationships. I did I know that years later, this is actually the path that I would end up choosing for myself. And so I got a chance to have kind of a redeemed, uh, experience. And with my lovely wife, Catherine, um, this is what we decided and was beautiful. And we had our first kiss at the altar after the pastor said, you may kiss the bride.

[01:02:36] **JD:** I think we're going to pause the episode at that point and ask listeners to soak that up.

They had their first kiss at the altar. Love it.

John Dickson (Studio)

It was quite the turnaround for Guillaume!

His investigation was multifaceted. It was intellectual. It was existential. And it was moral.

What he found was that Christianity amply answers all the questions of human existence.

He discovered that the French disdain toward Christianity was itself a child of Christianity, and that peculiarly French ways of thinking can produce not just scepticism but also genuine Faith. After all, those way of thinking were originally—in Medieval France—Christian: a love of reason (as an echo of the Mind behind the universe), a love of bodily experience (as the gift of the Creator), and a heightened sense of justice and fairness (which the Church had often betrayed but which was thoroughly Christian in its origins).

It is a paradox at the heart of this episode that peculiarly Christian ideals and thoughtforms led to the French turning against institutional Christianity.

The greatest example is perhaps the French Revolution. The Revolution was brutal in its treatment of the Church, but the Revolution's underlying principles of

Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité can only have come from Christianity.

Don't take my word for it. One of the other leading atheists in France today is Luc Ferry, the former French Education Secretary and a professor at the famous Sorbonne!

In his *Brief History of Thought* he puts it even more boldly than I could dare. He laments that when he went to university in France in the 1960s, “it was possible to pass our exams and even become a philosophy professor by knowing next to nothing about Judaism, Islam or Christianity.”

That now strikes him as “absurd,” he says.

Ferry is adamant that “Christianity was to introduce the notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that men were equal in dignity—an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance.”

“The French Revolution,” he goes on, “and to some extent, the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of

Man—owes to Christianity an essential part of its egalitarian message”.

I had to ask Guillaume about Luc Ferry.

JD: Um. Um, so one other atheist that, that in some ways is very different from the little I've read of him, very different from that disdainful atheist.

This is Luke Ferry, who I believe was the former education secretary for France, um, philosophy professor.

anyway, so he, he, but he's, he's a well known philosopher, but he, but he has said that, um, I might as well quote this. Christianity was to introduce the notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that men were equal in dignity, an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance.

So, comment about, uh, Luke Ferry, um, who seems, he's openly atheist, but he thinks Christianity gave the world a lot of good things.

Guillaume: Um. I think that Luc Ferry has interesting connections with the Christian worldview because he does write on morality and the foundation of morality and he, um, He finds himself trying to make sense of the moral experience that we have, which is that we are confronted with ethical choices every day, that we, it does seem to us that this is not purely inside of us, that this is not purely our own desires and subjective opinions.

And so he does lean towards affirming that there is such a thing as objective morality, the very thing that Sartre and Camus were denying.

He is kind of careful with his words cause he doesn't want to affirm that God exists, but he says we're confronted with this thing and it's, it's coming from the outside. It's transcendent. He uses this language. And he does, um, Admit that this is a bit awkward for the atheist, but it does lead him to say that, well, though there's no God and atheism is true, there's something that's, um, transcendent and that is beyond nature.

So he is, he's taking a claim that somehow there is an objective meaning to life, right?

So this is one of the big topics on which I found him to write is, is there a meaning to life? Like how should we live? And is there a goal, a purpose? And. He explores a lot of the discussions in the literature on that. And he lands ultimately on saying that there is a meaning to life and meaning is going to be found in love and relationship. And, uh, to which as a Christian, like, yeah, well, sure enough, love is at the center of the goal of this existence. Um, I think this is clearly part of God's design to express and glorify himself in love relationships. Certainly with a Christian view with Jesus dying on the cross for us as an expression of love.

Uh, and that in turn we love him because he first loved us. So this love thing is clearly at the center.

John Dickson (Studio)

“We love him because he first loved us” – Guillaume is quoting from 1 John 4 in the NT.

It's one of my favourite passages in the Bible. Here's the context: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved

us, we also ought to love one another ... We love because he first loved us.”

If I were to put my finger on one idea that draw my friend Marie to a deep Christian faith, it's this one. Yes, there are intellectual and moral and experiential reasons to contemplate Christianity, but, ultimately, it's the love of God - as the ground of all things - that captured Marie's heart.

Earlier we read from one of her emails to me and Buff: “I have read avidly all sorts of books, and I never thought that the Gospels could stimulate thus my brain, and give me at the same time the feeling that I had arrived to the most important discovery ...”

That was June 10. By October 10 ... the following year ... boy, she took her time ... she wrote to us about the strange sense of mercy she was sensing and how it was changing everything. Here's how she put it:

Dear John and Buff,

It is a miracle for me to learn that God had forgiven me all my past sins ... what joy I experienced in Christianity. But later, when I observed that I was indulging in the same sins again, I had moments of

Doubts ... would God continue to forgive me? Then by praying to tell God how sorry I was, the joy came back. It was as if God had forgiven me my past and present ... and perhaps future sins. This is probably not orthodox, but somehow I still believe it. Much love to you all, Marie.

John Dickson (Studio)

I remember getting that at about 930 at night, and I wrote straight back, saying, “Marie, that is ‘orthodox’!!! That’s what we’ve been trying to say. Because of God’s love in Christ, he can forgive us for past, present, and even future wrongs!! That’s Christian faith, Marie!”

Marie lived her last two years with a deep sense of this divine love. She wasn’t any less herself – intellectual, straight talking, French! – In fact, she would tell you she had wandered the intellectual and experiential landscape of the world only to find her true home, and her true self, in God’s love. Her favourite song, the one I sang to her at her bedside as she died, was “When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride ... Love so amazing, so divine, demands by soul, my life, my all.”

A few years after her death, I was telling Marie's story at a church in Sydney and I noticed this grown man crying! Tears were pouring down his face. I guessed perhaps his mother had died and I was dredging up the grief. But afterwards he came straight up to me, tears still in his eyes, and he said, "I was Marie's masters student at Sydney University—and a Christian. I spent hours with her in her office. I loved her. But she was not fond of Christianity. She was the last person I ever imagined would become a Christian!," he said.

He was thrilled to learn that Marie's very French intellectual rigour and pursuit of meaning - the things that had driven her away from religion - were, in the end, the very things that brought her back to Christ.

That brings us to the end of our *tenth* season of Undeceptions - I can't quite believe it!

Thank you all so much for helping make this one of our most successful seasons yet. You can let us know what you thought of it - or even suggest an episode idea - by sending us an audio message at undeceptions.com. We love hearing from you!

And give us a rating and review over at Apple Podcasts if you want to see us keep rising in the charts.

We'll be back with our new season in April, and its shaping up to be an absolute cracker.

We're finally giving Augustine an episode (can you believe we *haven't* done one on him yet?), we're interviewing a US senator, and we're going to be tackling one of the hardest topics in the Bible: hell.

There's loads of other Undeceptions-adjacent things happening in the off-season too.

As usual you'll get a few "singles" episodes in your feeds before we kick off the next season proper, but you'll also be hearing more about our recently announced documentary *First Hymn*, which is in full-scale production at the moment.

We've also got a YouTube channel up and running, which has episode highlights, keynotes from last years Undeceptions Conference, as well as some *awesome* animation videos on topics we've covered on the show.

And if you're *really* missing us in the off-season, head to our website: there you can find extended show notes, articles, reading recommendations, and heaps more.

There's loads happening for Undeceptions in 2024 and I haven't even said anything about live shows yet. All that to come.

Finally, if you enjoy what we're doing here at Undeceptions, why not subscribe to become an Undeceptions Plus member?

For just \$5 a month (that's Aussie \$5, so hardly anything, really) you'll get loads of bonus material, beyond this weekly podcast. Check out the details at undeceptions.com/plus.

And some of you may want to support us further with a gift. We could really do with it. So many people have been finding the podcast recently - we're actually coming up on 2.5 million downloads - but each episode costs a bomb.

That's because I pay a wonderful team to make this thing sound as good as it does.

We're so excited for what's to come, and would love any financial help you can spare - we've got at *least* another ten seasons left in us!

Head to Undeceptions.com and click the 'Donate' button. You can't miss it. Thanks so much.

See ya

CREDITS

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne, and directed by Mark **Voltaire** Hadley.

Sophie Hawkshaw is on socials and membership.

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Au Revoir!