

MEDIA - [All Aboard the Atheist Bus](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

That's a clip from The Guardian of a conversation between writer Polly Toynbee and the famous evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. They're standing in front of a London bus scrawled with the words: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

It was all part of a 2009 advertising campaign supported by organisations like Humanists UK.

it was a rejoinder to a Christian advertising campaign JesusSaid.org, which paid for Bible verses to be placed on buses around London.

The atheist reply was designed to give unbelief a more "peaceful and upbeat" vibe - and for a while, it seemed to work! The campaign was expanded from the UK to other parts of the world, with atheist buses popping up all over Europe, then the US, South America - and parts of Australia.

This bus campaign was part of a much larger movement that got dubbed "New Atheism," a strident form of anti-religious sentiment.

It found its mojo following Sept 11, 2001, and was pretty popular until maybe 5-6 years ago. There were plenty of public intellectuals, writers, and academics jumping on board.

They wrote chart-topping books, appeared on talk shows, and were extremely active in the blog and vlogosphere.

The movement even had its own self-declared "four horsemen" (a kind of parody of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelation 6); American philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris, philosopher and

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scientist Daniel Dennett, the late British author and journalist Christopher Hitchens, and of course, Richard Dawkins.

Their books became the authoritative texts of New Atheism.

Religion, they claimed, was bad for you. It was anti-intellectual, anti-science, and the cause of countless wars.

Fast forward to 2024 and people are declaring the *death* of New Atheism.

Not only did the movement fracture along political and cultural lines, a few prominent would-be New Atheists began publicly re-assessing the Christian faith and even accepting it.

And my guest today has watched this weird development closer than most. As a journalist and broadcaster, he's had front row seats to the great turnaround from new atheism to new theism.

I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

INTRO

Justin : So for the last 20 plus years, I've been working in Christian broadcasting Interviewing, creating magazines, radio shows, podcasts. And really a lot of that has been around creating conversations between Christians and non Christians.

John Dickson (Studio)

That's my mate Justin , and, as I say, he's been in a unique position to watch the rise and demise of the so-called New Atheism.

For nearly two decades he was the host of the *Unbelievable* Radio program, a hugely popular show that was broadcast on Premier Christian Radio in the UK, and released as a podcast worldwide.

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Most episodes would feature a Christian and a sceptic, and Justin would moderate the discussion on the week's topic.

Some names to appear on the show include political commentator Dave Rubin, mathematician cum theologian John Lennox, the Hitchens brothers (that's Peter and Chris), and historian Tom Holland. I was on a couple of times, but they were non-events by comparison!

Justin has recently stepped away from that relentless broadcasting gig to focus on writing and long-form documentary making. His new book makes the provocative claim that in the wake of New Atheism's collapse, we're seeing a rebirth of belief ... in God.

It's not just that New Atheism is dead, Justin reckons, we've entered an age of New *Theism*.

JD: You did it right on the, sort of, the wave of The new atheism. I mean, I can't even bring myself to say those words anymore, but apart from anything, it's not new. Um, but anyway, the so called new atheism, which was characterized by this strident, militant, angry sort of thing. But you just sort of hopped in there as this sweet, oh, tell me about your view, approach.

Were you deliberately countering the anger around religion in what you were doing? Or was it just, you know, because you are a sweet man.

Justin : I'd like to think it's because I'm a sweet man, John, but honestly, I think I, I was kind of fortunate in a sense, the Richard Dawkins hadn't actually published his best selling book at the moment I started that show, but it did land about nine months later and this, this, this new boom of anti God publishing suddenly was there, the new atheism and, and that turned into all kinds of other aspects and online kind of militant, quite dogmatic form of anti theism and being in the middle of that conversation, I think was the perfect foil in a way for the radio show. It

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enabled us to hit those questions head on. Uh, these were big dramatic, um, media personalities that we were able to engage at this time. So in a way it was a gift for, for having these kinds of conversations, having that very strong kind of anti Christian voice at the time.

John Dickson (Studio)

A watershed moment for New Atheism was the release of Richard Dawkins' seminal work *The God Delusion* in 2006.

Dawkins offered a case that there was almost certainly no God, and to believe in a *personal* one was ... just ... deluded!

It's been translated into over 35 languages, with sales topping 3 million worldwide.

Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (in 2004), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (in 2006), and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* (2007) also made huge waves; you could say these books became the "Unholy Gospels" of New Atheism.

Of course, the success of the books also opened the door for a public Christian response.

Hitchens and Dawkins took part (partook) in several high-profile debates against public Christian intellectuals like friends of the pod John Lennox and Alister McGrath.

Some friends and I even started Australia's Centre for Public Christianity in the wake of the New Atheism. I wouldn't say we were specifically answering atheists—it was more than mere apologetics—but we were a bunch of scholar-communicators who felt the mood of the mid-2000s, in Australia, really needed a public Christian voice that was informed, calm, and cheerful. Our public motto was "Promoting the public understanding of the Christian faith with the best of scholarship and the best of media."

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Our private motto - one we joked about all the time - was "To leave people thinking Christianity wasn't as dumb and mean as they thought!!" I was with the Centre for its first 10 years - some of my happiest and most productive years ever - and they're still going strong. Go check them out at publicchristianity.org (then of course head back to undeceptions.com)!!!!

Anyway, sorry ... back to Justin – who's pretty much a one-man Centre for Public Christianity!

Justin : What I was really concerned about was that Christians shouldn't be ducking these issues, that we shouldn't be running away, fearful, or simply fighting back in a kind of aggressive way.

But we should actually invite people around the table. And that was the whole point of the show.

JD: Because the fighting back often comes from insecurity, actually, doesn't it? The sort of lashing out. Whereas a more secure kind of Christianity does take your approach.

Justin : I agree. I would say confident Christianity is not being able to give all the right answers.

It's being able to listen to people and hear their point of view and not sort of have a knee-jerk response of fear or feeling like you have to shut them down. So for me, that was the wonderful thing that hosting all of these conversations over many years did. It just enabled me to. to hear people and to let them have their say.

And yes, there would be a time for giving answers and responses, but it was about just letting people be able to talk and not to run away or respond in some kind of fear driven way.

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JD: Do you really think there was a turning against God come, you know, the year 2000, 2001 through 2005, right? Um, or was it just this high level media populism Anti Christianity? Because I've, I've often felt like there's sort of two stories going on at the same time. There is a kind of the public square, which is very different from what normal humans think. But I'm interested to know what you reckon, particularly in Britain.

Justin : I, I think that, if you like, the new atheism was the, the capstone to a long period, obviously, of secularization. But I think the things that triggered that particular interesting movement, and I would say it had a shelf life of about 10 or 12 years, um, was] I think 9 11, that was the rise of what many people saw as religious fundamentalism and extremism.

MEDIA - [Sam Harris: Journey to atheism from 9/11](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

That's Sam Harris, reflecting on how the horrifying events of the September 11 attacks made him question whether religion had any capacity to be good at all.

If religion could inspire people to fly planes into buildings - and then provoke a full-scale military invasion which was dubbed a Crusade - then religion must be dangerous.

Ten years later, Harris has doubled down on this view.

READING

We should not terrify our children with thoughts of hell, or poison them with hatred for infidels. We should not teach our sons to

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consider women their future property, or convince our daughters that they are property even now. And we must decline to tell our children that human history began with magic and will end with bloody magic—perhaps soon, in a glorious war between the righteous and the rest. One must be religious to fail the young so abysmally—to derange them with fear, bigotry, and superstition even as their minds are forming—and one cannot be a serious Christian, Muslim, or Jew without doing so in some measure.

Justin : I think that a lot of these, um, atheist writers and popular speakers were able to tap into a certain kind of fear that drove among a lot of people and I think there were just some cultural things going on I think that the fact that the internet suddenly gave people who had previously been quite spread out, you know in America You know, you may not have that many atheist neighbours But if you find a community online suddenly it gives you a sense of urgency and momentum And so I think a number of different factors coalesced to create the right moment for this new atheist sort of movement to begin.

I don't think actually that the new atheism itself led to lots more people becoming materialist atheists. You know, I think if you actually look at the numbers of people who describe themselves as atheists in the surveys, it hasn't changed that much over the years. Obviously, Less and less people describe themselves as Christian, that's for sure.

But that doesn't mean they're converting to a Richard Dawkins style new atheism either. So I think it was more of a kind of, um, a headline-driven, media-driven movement that had its moment, but that kind of faded away.

John Dickson (Studio)

Despite its best efforts New Atheism didn't usher in a new *era* of atheism but it did make a few critiques of religion pretty popular.

JD: What do you reckon was the best argument that they ever had?

Justin Brierley: I mean, possibly the best argument they had was the one that was, in a sense, supported by 9 11, "Religion is bad for you", you know? Religion is the cause of wars. Religion is the cause of violence. And it wasn't hard for them to come up with lots of examples of how religion has been bad for people. Lots of the folk that were part of the movement were an ex Christian or an ex Muslim or whatever, who could talk about some of the things they had endured and so on. So I think there was a sense in which that it was easy to make that case at the time they

JD: were out. Because there's lots of empirical evidence lying around, isn't

Justin Brierley: Exactly, yeah, and you don't have to search too far. And it's easy, it's a very powerful narrative when you when you put it that way. So I think that was probably their strongest argument. I think when you actually dig into it, historically, culturally and so on, it's not as watertight as they might have thought. But nonetheless, it was a powerful argument.

John Dickson (Studio)

Another popular argument by New Atheists was the incompatibility of science and religion.

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I've said a few times in the media that I reckon the New Atheists brought fresh energy to the science vs. religion debate.

The general public might not be able to recall any particular argument about *why* the two are in conflict. But we're left with a vibe that that's true.

Christian think tank *Theos* published a report in 2022 that found 57 per cent of UK citizens believed science and religion were at odds.

That figure was 59 per cent in the US, according to a 2014 Pew Poll.

Things like the decline in religious belief, the awful clerical abuse scandals, and religious climate scepticism gave New Atheists easy ammunition.

But ... by the late 20-teens people were starting to write obituaries for New Atheism.

We'll explore why after the break.

****BREAK****

MEDIA - [Sunday Assembly](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

That's another clip from *The Guardian*, from the opening of a Sunday Assembly - AKA "Atheist Church".

The first one opened in 2013 in North London, and, shortly afterwards, assemblies were opening up all over the world.

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There were songs, coffee, Sunday school, and even sermons from atheist thinkers (about science, of course).

One journalist referred to it as “Pentecostalism for the Godless”. Nice!

John Dickson (Studio)

“Almost a church”.

It's a funny line but also kind of telling. Was this brand of atheism becoming a bit too dogmatic ... a bit too religious??

TAPE

JD: So um, we're, we're really now talking about the eulogy, uh, to the New Atheist Movement. Um, tell us what you think caused its demise.

Justin Brierley: So, I think New Atheism had issues that led to its downfall, if you like, both from outside and within the movement.

I mean, on the outside, I think it just became a little bit passé, almost a bit of a caricature of itself in some ways, because I think people started to see that it had its own kind of dogmatism and fundamentalism to it. Um, this sort of shrill tone that was often associated with it. And people started to tire of that because I think people felt like, well, it feels a bit religious itself.

It's very zealous, evangelistic, It has its high priests in these so called four horsemen of new atheism, sacred texts, even it's sort of orthodoxy, you know, scientific materialism, you could say. And if people diverge from that, they were seen as heretics. So, It took on this slightly quasi-religious nature, and I think some people even within the movement bridled at that.

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And I think, ultimately, it didn't actually answer the ultimate questions people had around meaning and purpose. Once they'd torn God down, if you like, they didn't have anything positive to replace God with. I don't think science and reason alone are enough to build that kind of positive worldview.

JD: This is the sort of Achilles heel of atheism, isn't it? I mean, humans are meaning-seeking creatures. And you can't change human nature.

Justin Brierley: Exactly, and to that degree, I think because atheism is almost by definition a negative statement, something that is about what it is not, it's very hard, I think, for atheists to then build a positive. Now obviously people have tried, there have been various forms of secular humanism and so on, but in the end, I believe a lot of those are still kind of, in a sense, Um, borrowing from essentially a Christian worldview in terms of the way they, they build those ethical systems.

John Dickson (Studio)

We'll have more to say about Tom Holland later on, but if you want to hear his take on why the modern West remains steeped in Christianity, check out Episode 45, *Christian Revolution*. As has you covered in the show notes.

Justin : There was also an internal issue with New Atheism and that was simply that it started to unravel from the inside. Um, I was a sort of bystander watching some of this happen at the time and sometimes reporting on it and speaking to some of the leaders involved. But there were various moments where the movement started to experience internal controversies.

Um, fallouts, so one particular moment that I catalogue in my book is 2011, there was this incident called Elevator Gate, involving a sceptical vlogger called Rebecca Watson, who goes online as scepchick, and she

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had been speaking at an atheist conference in Dublin alongside people like Richard Dawkins.

Having had late night drinks at the bar, going back to her room about 4am in the morning, and having just given an address that day. on the problems of misogyny and patriarchy and sexism in the atheist movement. She was then propositioned by one of the delegates on her way up to her room. Do you want to go back to my room for coffee?

Anyway, she vlogged about this, you know, a short while later, ...

MEDIA - [Elevatorgate](#)

That might have been the end of the story, except that Richard Dawkins then weighed in with a heavily sarcastic response to this, titled *Dear Muslimah*. And essentially he was parodying this idea that, you know, American atheist women have problems compared to, you know, the plight of religious people who live under religious regimes and so on, saying, you know, uh, you may be, you know, Having your hands cut off and so on, but consider the plight of your poor American sisters being asked for coffee.

READING

Dear Muslima

Stop whining, will you? Yes, yes, I know you had your genitals mutilated with a razor blade, and . . . yawn . . . don't tell me yet again, I know you aren't allowed to drive a car, and you can't leave the house without a male relative, and your husband is allowed to

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beat you, and you'll be stoned to death if you commit adultery. But stop whining, will you? Think of the suffering your poor American sisters have to put up with.

Only this week I heard of one, she calls herself "Skepchick", and do you know what happened to her? A man in a hotel elevator invited her back to his room for coffee. I am not exaggerating. He really did. He invited her back to his room for coffee. Of course, she said no, and of course, he didn't lay a finger on her, but even so . . .

Richard

Justin : This just ignited the whole debate, this heavily sarcastic response from Dawkins. Um, and I think this moment actually, kind of, people started to realize in this moment, well what do we stand for? Because there was one part of the New Atheist Movement who were very concerned about things like women's rights, feminism and so on.

John Dickson (Studio)

Dawkins found himself in a comment-thread 'war of words' with Watson's supporters.

But he doubled down.

READING

“She was probably offended to about the same extent as I am offended if a man gets into an elevator with me chewing gum. But he does me no physical damage and I simply grin and bear it until either I or he gets out of the elevator. It would be different if he physically attacked me.”

John Dickson (Studio)

Dawkins eventually apologised ... sort of ... three years later.

But the damage was done.

Elevatorgate was one in a series of unpleasant incidents that led to the fracturing of New Atheism, and spawning “Atheism+”.

Atheism+ went beyond non-belief and looked to address broader issues like misogyny, sexism, homophobia and racism.

According to a blog post by founder Jey McCreight, *Atheism+* was;

- Atheists *plus* we care about social justice,
- Atheists *plus* we support women’s rights,
- Atheists *plus* we protest racism,
- Atheists *plus* we fight homophobia and transphobia,
- Atheists *plus* we use critical thinking and skepticism.

But not everyone jumped on board.

Justin : You had another part of the movement that went in a very different direction, who felt that this was all just politically correct ideology, taking over their sort of free thought movement.

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And in the end, you could say that it was the culture wars, really, that ended up killing new atheism because this was just the first of many, many issues that suddenly started dividing those within the movement as they couldn't agree where they should be as sceptics. There wasn't enough to unite them, just their belief that God didn't exist and religion was bad for you.

It wasn't enough to actually give them a positive ethic for what we should do next with this movement.

John Dickson (Studio)

Ideological fractures weren't the only problem to hit New Atheism.

Sunday Assembly numbers tanked, with over half of *all* services folding by the turn of the decade.

This came as no surprise to some commentators. Pew Research Centre statistics suggest that only a third of people who select 'no religion' in surveys fall into the category of 'principled rejectors' of organised religion or 'principled embracers' of atheism. The majority are just ... indifferent to religion.

It's not exactly a basis for community!

Director of the Pew Research Centre, Alan Cooperman told *The Atlantic* a few years back:

"Being uninterested in something is about the least effective social glue, the dullest possible mobilizing cry, the weakest affinity principle, that one can imagine."

Ouch.

The biggest problem for New Atheism, it appeared, was that at its core was ... pretty much nothing.

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There's nothing in atheism that *tends towards* social justice - atheism is just as compatible with tyranny.

There's nothing in atheism that *tends towards* the arts - atheism is just as compatible with barbarism.

There's nothing in atheism that *tends towards* joy - atheism is just as compatible with nihilism.

There's nothing there - but negation.

And people were beginning to spot that!!

[00:11:50] **JD:** Okay, you've, uh, detected and now detailed a resurgence of openness to God. Can you, uh, demonstrate that for me? Because I'm pretty sure some listeners will be going, as if.

Justin Brierley: I know, and when I put the title of my book out on social media, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*, a lot of atheists naturally got back to me and said, What rebirth?

Look at statistics, you know, Christianity is dying in the West. And I don't dispute any of the statistics about churchgoing, Christendom in decline, and all the rest of it.

What I would say, though, is that there has been a shift in the tone of what's happening, perhaps at an academic level, um, even at a popular level as well.

I was noticing during the course of hosting my unbelievable shows that the bombastic debates between these new atheist types and Christian thinkers were being replaced by these Uh, different kinds of conversations between secular thinkers who were often more open to the Christian story than many of their new atheist peers, um, people like Tom Holland, the historian, um, people like Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychologist, people like, um, Dave Rubin or Douglas Murray,

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and other, other interesting sort of secular intellectuals, but who, understood the value of what Christianity gifted the West in terms of its moral values, in terms of much of its cultural heritage and so on.

And, they weren't as willing as some of their atheist peers to simply dismiss Christianity altogether. They didn't necessarily believe it, but they understood that there was something there that was possibly worth preserving. And I think what a lot of them saw was that actually the new atheism itself had kind of been the last thing to sweep the board clean of this kind of God story in the West.

But actually, what was going to replace it? Not necessarily some oasis of scientific rationalism, but actually all kinds of other possible ideologies that would come in its place. Lots of postmodern views about how one should live life, Um, lots of what some people started to term woke ideologies on the left Or, you know, on the right, sort of political mythologies that would ultimately, people would use as a sort of way of replacing the God story because, as you said, people still need something to live by.-They need a story. They need meaning. So in the absence of something like the Christian story, they're going to find something else to fill the sort of God-shaped hole in that sense.

And I think a lot of them started to be worried that actually, well, Maybe what's going to replace the Christian story might be worse than this, than that, than, you know, this story that did give us our culture and so on.

So I was hosting some of these conversations, very interesting, and just noticing that the audience that they were drawing, often lots of people, often quite young men, you know, you look at someone like Jordan Peterson who, whether you approve of his politics or not, he's had this outsized influence on a big generation of young people.

And He seemed to be drawing the same people that the New Atheists had been drawing only a few years before. People looking for meaning, purpose, looking for intellectual answers, but being given a very different way of engaging that.

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Here was someone who wasn't dismissing God or the Christian story, but actually inviting people to open the Bible and say, well look, maybe there's some meaning and purpose that could be found within these pages.

MEDIA [Peterson on Rogan](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

We're listening to Canadian psychologist and author Jordan Peterson, speaking on the Joe Rogan Experience - the biggest podcast in the world - about the impact of the Bible on the Western world.

It's Director Mark's favourite podcast, of course – he begged us to use it. The rest of us aren't so sure, but we wanted to be kind to Director Marky.

Many of Peterson's views are controversial - especially on climate change, and gender and sexuality - but he commands one of the biggest audiences of any public intellectual today.

In recent years, he's been riffing on both the cultural impact of Christianity and how its "story" has benefited the world.

Peterson isn't the only well-known intellectual to re-assess Christianity.

Douglas Murray, whom Justin also just mentioned, is an author and social commentator who also commands a huge online audience.

Like Peterson, Murray has spoken openly about the benefits of a Christian society, and has gone as far as to call himself a "Christian atheist".

That's a big claim from someone who was a former dining partner of Christopher Hitchens.

Justin Brierley: I had a fascinating conversation with Douglas Murray. Murray himself was describing the fact that he describes himself as a sort of unsatisfied agnostic. Um, he had been great friends with the new atheists. And, uh, in a sense, he, he sort of lost his own faith in that kind of milieu. Douglas Murray, he sort of had a faith of sorts up to his early twenties, but lost it.

But what he would say is that he recognizes that atheism doesn't give a sort of alternative meaning system. He describes himself in fact as a Christian atheist because he says I recognize that the values and virtues that I hold dear do stem from Christianity, not from atheism, not from science or the Enlightenment.

And he worries, as I say, at what is potentially going to replace those values and virtues in the absence of the Christian story. But he pointed out something interesting. He said, "The funny thing is, I've just, in the last few years, noticed some of my very intelligent secular friends converting to Christianity, Justin.

And he said, I wonder whether the, sort of, the atmosphere might be changing, whether this might be the moment for the Church to speak into a more receptive environment and he referenced a well worn line by Matthew Arnold, a Victorian poet. Uh, in *Dover Beach*, there's this line about the melancholy, long withdrawing roar of the sea of faith and he says that's often been used to denote, you know, faith going out with the enlightenment, science, technology, et cetera,

READING

*Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,*

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*Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

Justin : But he said “But the sea of faith could come back in again, after all that's the point of tides”.

And that was just fascinating to me because I think Douglas Murray recognized that actually, atheism and the secular direction that culture is going in isn't necessarily the end of the story. That sometimes people are hungry enough for something beyond that, that they might just start to open themselves up again to the story again.

And, and that's really the way I see it. I think he's on to something there. When you look at someone like him, who is, uh, obviously a hugely intelligent, you know, cultural commentator, um, journalist, but who recognises that it's very difficult to get meaning, purpose, identity, value out of something other than the Christian story that's informed the West.

I think you've got to ask yourself, well, maybe there is a changing of sort of the intellectual atmosphere, people who are opening up to this again.

I think a lot of these new secular thinkers, what Understanding that there was a meaning crisis in our culture that new atheism had failed to address, even to some extent precipitated, and that actually In order for people to live flourishing, meaningful lives, they needed more than just being told God doesn't exist and science is great.

Um, they needed to be given a bigger, fuller picture of reality. And a lot of them have been turning back to the ancient wisdom of scripture, of, um, religious tradition, um, and, I've been fascinated to see that even though some of these secular intellectuals don't necessarily themselves confess a faith, they've been opening the door to other people to walk through.

JD: So Jordan Peterson and Douglas Murray, um, would be characterized as right wing. Um, so, do you think there's a connection

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between being right wing and this resurgence of faith? Because a lot of my listeners aren't going to be happy with that.

Justin Brierley: I think there are ... there is a connection between, I think, obviously conservatism and right-wing and, and. I think

JD: Because it values the past still,

Justin Brierley: I think I think there's a natural sort of their natural bedfellows that those who kind of want to conserve the past and the sort of structures and some of the values that brings are inevitably going to probably be on the right, you know, on the right of social, cultural, political issues, to some extent,

JD: Even though justice and equality and those sorts of things are, like, fabulously Christian

Justin Brierley: Absolutely, I think, that's the kind of irony of the thing is that in a sense, you do in a sense get people who are kind of valuing the, those, those values, they, they would say yes, of course, it's just, there's going to be a difference in how they think they should be inculcated in in our culture.

Having said that, it's not that the, it's only sort of more right wing philosophers and thinkers who are making these sort of things. I mean if you go to someone for instance someone like Terry Eagleton who's a sort of more of a Marxist sort of philosopher.

He's written very similar things about the fact that he thinks actually in the absence of the Christian story we are running into, you know ...

JD: I remember, did you read his book, um, on evil? Where he basically says, Christianity's got the best account of evil humans have ever invented.

Justin Brierley: Absolutely.

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JD: The “dewy-eyed atheism of Richard Dawkins will do us no good”, he says.

Justin Brierley: Indeed. And so you've got people who are on, obviously on, on the left who are noticing the same thing, that, that essentially a kind of atheist materialist story of reality doesn't buy you value and meaning and purpose.

John Dickson (Studio)

Here's the passage from Terry Eagleton I was trying to remember ...

READING

Today, ironically, a mindless progressivism poses a greater threat to political change than an awareness of the nightmare of history. The true antirealists are those like the scientist Richard Dawkins, with his staggeringly complacent belief that we are all becoming kinder and more civilised. It is true that some things get better in some respects. But some things also get worse. And of these the dewy-eyed Dawkins has scarcely anything to say. Nobody would gather from his smug account of the evolving wisdom of humanity that we are also faced with planetary devastation, the threat of nuclear conflict, the spreading catastrophe of AIDS and other deadly viruses, neoimperial zealotry, mass migrations of the dispossessed, political fanaticism and a reversion to Victorian-type economic inequalities.

Terry Eagleton, On Evil

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Justin : Christianity tells you both how far we've fallen and and makes no illusions as to how Deep the sin of the human heart can go but also offers this extraordinary grace and love as a counter to it [00:22:00] And in I find in sort of secular philosophies you kind of either get one or the other it's Either it's some terrible story of how broken humanity is, but there's no real fix for it.

Or it's a story that, well, we're all really good and we're, but, in a way, that story doesn't account for the fact that we are broken creatures. And, for me, Christianity has always struck me as a very realistic, in that sense, story of reality. It takes seriously the human condition, uh, but it gives us the resources to believe that there's hope, that there's a possibility for transformation and change and so on.

And, and I, as I say, whether these thinkers sort of position themselves on the left or the right, culturally speaking, I think what's apparent is that they're all noticing that there is this so-called meaning crisis that people don't have a story to live by anymore.

They're filling the void with lots of other stories-but it's actually quite a burdensome thing Having to invent yourself from scratch is is incredibly draining in our modern culture, It's only been exacerbated by modern technology social media and everything else And I think one of the reasons why we are seeing a modern mental health crisis, anxiety, depression, suicide, and so on, is partly because people are struggling to find a story that makes sense of their lives any longer.

And you've got to ask how long can that go on for before people start to maybe go back to the thing that once did give them that solidity, that sort of shared understanding, that communal narrative about what life is like - the Christian story. And I, I find in all kinds of ways it continues to To be there, under the surface, even if people have forgotten the story, it's perhaps not going to be too hard to remind them of it, because ultimately, so much of what we do still essentially rides on the coattails of the Christian revolution 2000 years ago.

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John Dickson (Studio)

We'll pick back up with Justin in just a minute

****BREAK 2****

MEDIA: [Tom Holland on The Big Conversation:](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

That's historian, author, podcaster and friend of *Undeceptions* Tom Holland, speaking with atheist philosopher A.C. Grayling on *The Big Conversation*, an offshoot of Justin's *Unbelievable* program.

The two are debating whether or not Christianity gave the West its human values. Link in the show notes for the full thing - it's a great listen, and even better viewing!

Tom is best known now for hosting the wildly successful *The Rest Is History* podcast, but he made some serious waves with his book *Dominion* in 2019.

In it, he examined how the morals and values of the global West are fundamentally Christian.

Equality, love, human rights, sexual rights, justice - all of them stem from a Christian heritage.

Justin Brierley: I've been privileged to have a bit of a friendship with Tom Holland, who's a historian here in the UK, runs a hugely popular

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History podcast, The Rest is History. And around the time he was writing his book *Dominion*, um, which is really the story of how the Christian revolution has shaped the moral instincts of the West,

Uh, I got to know him a little bit, um, and he told me some of his own story, which is essentially that he grew up with a sort of childhood faith that fizzled out in his teenage years, but that as he started to investigate the world of Greco Roman history in order to write some of these popular works of history that he, he became a bestseller for, he started to realize as much as he really enjoyed that world.

It was very exciting and glamorous, He also found it very alien to his own way of thinking because the values and the practices were so different to Western culture. This was a world where obviously, um, slavery was just a, an absolutely assumed part of the economy, where people could be effectively sexual property, where the lives of women and children especially were cheap, where you know, it, it was a cause of triumph and celebration to have enslaved or killed a million people in your, in your wars.

And he realized that his values that he held dear as a sort of liberal westerner of equality, uh, freedom, dignity, those didn't come from the Greeks or the Romans. And I think he realized that he didn't come from science and the Enlightenment either. He realized where they came from was the Christian Revolution.

Specifically this idea that, uh, the Jewish Messiah, or someone who claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, had been crucified, his followers believed he was God, and that he'd risen from the dead. And this absurd idea, in that world, was the thing that catalyzed this movement called the Church, which completely turned on its head the way people thought about how to treat humans.

And we are the inheritors of that.

And what he has been reminding many of his secular peers is whether you believe this Christian story or not. You, you are still living it in so

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many ways that the fact that you believe the things you believe about equality, dignity, freedom, and so on, are a direct result of that story, it could have could have turned out differently.

This is a very unusual soil that the Western world has grown up in this Christian story. And like so many has a kind of, um, difficult to describe relationship with Christianity in terms of his own personal beliefs, but nonetheless fully recognizes that, as he said in articles and to me, when it comes to my sort of ethics and values, in almost every way I am a Christian.

And that was just a revelation for him and something that he's been pointing out to a lot of others.

John Dickson (Studio)

Re-assessing Christianity is one thing - but recently, one of the most high-profile New Atheists - friend and colleague of Richard Dawkins - announced she'd *converted* to Christianity.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Dutch-American writer and was dubbed the "horse-woman" of New Atheism.

Born in Somalia and raised in Kenya in a fundamentalist Islamic community, she was subject to awful abuse growing up.

After moving to the Netherlands as an adult, she denounced her belief in God altogether and eventually became the most prominent female atheist in the world.

That is, until the end of last year when she posted a bombshell essay on the website *UnHerd*.

It was titled 'Why I'm now a Christian'.

READING

I would not be truthful if I attributed my embrace of Christianity solely to the realisation that atheism is too weak and divisive a doctrine to fortify us against our menacing foes. I have ... turned to Christianity because I ultimately found life without any spiritual solace unendurable — indeed very nearly self-destructive. Atheism failed to answer a simple question: what is the meaning and purpose of life?

[Russell and] Other Activist atheists believed that with the rejection of God we would enter an age of reason and intelligent humanism. But the “God hole” — the void left by the retreat of the church — has merely been filled by a jumble of irrational quasi-religious dogma. The result is a world where modern cults prey on the dislocated masses, offering them spurious reasons for being and action — mostly by engaging in virtue-signalling theatre on behalf of a victimised minority or our supposedly doomed planet. The line often attributed to G.K. Chesterton has turned into a prophecy: “When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything”.

John Dickson (Studio)

Ayaan listed several other reasons for her change of heart, including a need to unify behind “Western values”.

It's not an effusive conversion story - Jesus Himself is hardly mentioned - but Ayaan says herself she has “a great deal to learn about Christianity (and) I discover a little more at church each Sunday”. So, she's in process. God bless her!

In any case, her announcement sent shockwaves across the internet. It'll probably get worse, because she's currently writing a book about the process.

Her friend Richard Dawkins posted this stern reply.

READING

Dear Ayaan,

As you know, you are one of my favourite people but . . . seriously, Ayaan? You, a Christian?

...
Christianity makes factual claims, truth claims that Christians believe, truth claims that define them as Christian. Christians are theists. They believe in a divine father figure who designed the universe, listens to our prayers, is privy to our every thought. You surely don't believe that? Do you believe Jesus rose from the grave three days after being placed there? Of course you don't. Do you believe Jesus was born to a virgin? Certainly not. Someone of your intelligence does not believe you have an immortal soul, which will survive the decay of your brain. Christians believe in a frightful place called Hell, where the souls of the wicked go after they are dead. Do you believe that? Hell no! Christians believe every baby is "born in sin" and is saved from Hell only by the redemptive (pre-emptive in the case of all those born anno domini) execution of Jesus. Do you believe anything close to that nasty scapegoat theory? Of course you don't.
Ayaan, you are no more a Christian than I am.

John Dickson (Studio)

Ayaan's story was a landmark moment for new *theism*; one of the most prominent New Atheists had officially "switched sides".

But what does this mean exactly? I had to ask Justin if he thinks this is a real spiritual phenomenon or perhaps just a social, even political, one.

JD: So to what extent do you think this is bringing, or going to result in people actually developing a faith versus simply giving Christianity a new nominal respectability?

Justin Brierley: I think there's a great danger it could go in that second way, just a sort of nominal respectability. Um, but what I have seen is that there are certainly examples of people who have come to faith partly through the fact that this breath of fresh air, if you like, has been brought into the room that it's, you know, I think under the sort of the new atheist kind of moment in our culture, while that was riding high in popular culture, it was actually hard for a lot of people to even take this seriously in the first place. It was so unfashionable, almost.

I think what's interesting is now that that phenomenon has kind of died off. And in fact, there's been this resurgence I think in lots of areas across lots of people talking on in events and podcasts and media about Christianity and the fact that it does have this background this cultural heritage that it gives people permission to just take it possibly seriously again and when that's happened I think people who are potentially open to it suddenly find that Actually, this is something I can believe in.

I've heard a lot of stories of people who have gone all the way to Christian faith because they started, you know, or they started with, you know, a Tom Holland podcast or whatever it is. And for me that's that's not a sign that there's going to be some great revival of Christianity but it is a sign that something's changing in the culture when there's a kind of a permission to start investigating Christianity again.

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Inevitably I think the problem will be is that a lot of people might just stop at that point of saying well I'm content to believe that, you know, Christianity wasn't all bad, and yes, I can understand that it's given us some of our moral values, but that's enough for me, you know, because not everyone will want it to take it to the next stage.

I think the question is for me whether we can continue to enjoy the benefits of Christianity if we do say that, you know, our culture has benefited from, you know, equality, dignity, value, purpose, and so on, that that story is brought into the lives of so many people. Can we continue to see that flourish in the absence of the story itself if you like?

If people don't believe that story is true in the first place, my question is can you have the fruits without the roots, as they say, if you cut that off? Um, and so I think in the end, ultimately, time will tell as to whether people actually take this seriously enough to believe it could really have happened.

My hope is they will, because I think I'm seeing alongside the kind of, the openness in intellectual circles to the value of Christianity, I'm also seeing a real resurgence of people pointing out that actually, not only would you want this to be true, there are good reasons to believe it is true. People like you, John, for instance, who have done your bit in kind of making the case for the historicity of the New Testament documents and things like that. And increasingly I'm seeing more and more of a kind of pushback against that simplistic atheism or sort of sceptical perspective that simply poo poots and dismisses the historical basis

JD: Well, the, I the irony of that new atheist movement was that their arguments, philosophical arguments, historical arguments And even scientific arguments were so poor, I like the way you put it at the very beginning, their strongest argument was the bad behaviour of Christians. But it was just so surprising how weak their arguments were, and how there are answers to these difficult questions.

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Justin Brierley: There are indeed, and for those who are willing to look into it, I think that we're living in a world now where it's not as hard as it used to be to find those answers. Now I think the church -

JD: There's a lot of crap out there as well -

Justin Brierley: Absolutely. That's the problem. You have to, you have to cipher all of the, the stuff that's out there and that's the problem. We're living in an information overload world and so it's how do you get to the real truth of the matter. But, I believe, you know, it, for those who are willing to look, there are some really great ways of understanding what the Christian faith is about and the historical arguments for it.

I think a lot of this will depend ultimately on how the church plays this because, in the end, the church has to be the carrier of this news, but if the church continues to look like either a relic of the past, or, um, looks far too much like a sort of just trying to ape the culture of the present, or indeed, continues to suffer the same kinds of politicization and scandals that we've seen sadly in so many parts of the church in recent years.

I think the church's own ability to receive these people who might be open to the message, who might be the refugees, if you like, from this meaning crisis, that's going to hamper our ability to actually speak truth and life to people. So my, my hope is that the church will get its] house in order and understand what it's here to do and how it's supposed to do it.

5 Minute Jesus

Let's press pause ... I've got a 5 min Jesus for you.

It was Jesus himself who insisted that his own students - "the church" - should get their house in order, before daring to talk about the true and good in public. It's something that's haunted me for years.

When I was with the Centre for Public Christianity, we put out a documentary subtitled "how the church is better and worse than you ever

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imagined.” It played in cinemas around Australia and a short version was aired on ABC TV. Atheists kind of liked it. They could see we were promoting the good Christianity had done through history – the undeniable good hospitals, charity, education for all, human rights, and much more – but they could also see it wasn’t a whitewash. We are dead honest about the terrible things the Church had done, *in the name of Christ!!*

But there were Christians – not many but a few – who were disappointed with the project. They didn’t like that we’d featured so many examples of the church’s failures: treatment of women, witches, Inquisitions, support of slavery and so on. Jesus had said his followers would be marked by “love,” and here we were suggesting the church was frequently characterised by hatred, bigotry, and violence.

The criticism continued when I wrote my *Bullies and Saints: an honest look at the good and evil of Christian history*. Some believers felt I was trying to appeal to the sceptical “woke” crowd by bad-mouthing God’s own people and throwing the church under the bus.

I understand the criticism. I’m happy just to take it on the chin.

It feels to me that just as much as Jesus called his students to the way of love, he also called them admit their own *failures*, their own moral bankruptcy.

The opening words of his famous Sermon on the Mount – basically, Jesus’ greatest hits in Matthew 5-7 – were these: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matt 5:1–4)

The expressions “poor in spirit” and “those who mourn” both refer to recognising the lamentable moral condition of humanity, including among Jesus’ own “disciples”. As well-known biblical scholar Don Carson says, “Poverty of spirit is the personal acknowledgement of spiritual bankruptcy. It is a conscious confession of unworth before God.”^[1]

It is remarkable that the richest ethical discourse in the western tradition (in my view, anyway) begins with a call to admit our spiritual and moral bankruptcy.

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Then there's the statement toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus is wrapping up his amazing teaching about love, sexual purity, honesty, humility, and so on. Having advocated the most stringent moral outlook imaginable, Jesus tells his followers, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. (Matt 7:1–5; see also Luke 6:37–42)

One thing you can't do when you have something in your eye, even a tiny particle, is see clearly. Jesus speaks here of getting an entire "log" in the eye. He was fond of rhetorical hyperbole—this one is almost humorous. The point about the log in the eye is that his students are meant to be more conscious of their own wrongdoing (the "log") than the wrongdoing of others (the "speck").

When critics expose the failings of the church, and a Christian concedes the problem, this isn't "letting the team down" or "airing the church's dirty laundry in public." It's just doing what Jesus said: worrying more about our wrongdoing than the wrongdoing of others.

The same Lord who called his followers to pursue love, peacemaking, purity, and all the rest of it, also insisted, in the same sermon, that Christians should be quick to admit personal fault and slow to condemn the faults of others.

There's a place for exploring the positive contributions of Christianity—the myriad ways Christians put love into practice—but I can't see how any of that material would make sense to a thoughtful sceptic if Christians aren't first willing to admit the systemic failures, the "log in the eye", of the Church.

You can press play now

MEDIA - [The most dangerous idea](#)

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John Dickson (Studio)

That's *Peter Hitchens* - brother of New Atheist horseman Christopher Hitchens - at the Sydney Opera House on ABC national TV giving a forthright account of why the Christian faith - *his* faith - matters. It was a call to action in one of the most secularised settings in my homeland!

As he sees it, Christianity cuts through culture wars and gives confronting answers to ethically tricky questions and to ultimate questions of eternal reality and destiny.

I asked Justin, as we finished our conversation, to offer his own 'call to action'. He's not as dramatic as Peter Hitchens, but he's wise ... and his suggestions are no less dangerous!

JD: You are someone who has interacted with the most hardcore atheism right through to seeing people actually embrace the Christian faith deeply. So can we end by you just talking to my listener, who's not sure what to make of it? What's some advice for just taking the little steps in the right direction that might end up with a genuine experience of Christ?

Justin Brierley: I think wherever you find yourself, whether you think of yourself as a skeptic, uh, interested, agnostic, someone maybe who is, feels like you're practically across the doorway or whatever. It's, it's just about following truth, ultimately. I think we can follow truth. Um, the problem is it's so hard sometimes I think to dissociate our ... the stories our culture is telling us, our own internal biases, the baggage we've picked up to get to sort of this, quote unquote, "objective truth".

I think ultimately though, um, I believe the words of Jesus when he says to anyone who asks, they will receive. Anyone who knocks the door will be open to them. If, if there's an honest pursuit of truth, I, I think God understands that and meets that.

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And so I would say keep pursuing truth primarily. Keep asking the right questions and keep looking for the answers as honestly as you can. Uh, and then get around people, you know, get around people who, for you, feel like they have the ring of truth about them. Whether that be Christians or non Christians, people who you feel, actually this person I can trust, this is someone who seems to be making sense. And, and have those conversations. So much of what I see is, is it's when people actually engage in conversations, not the kind of conversation that exists on social media, which isn't a conversation, it's just a kind of both sides lobbing hand grenades at each other. Um, get, you know, have proper face to face conversations with people.

That's what I tried to encourage through The Unbelievable Show for all those years. And I think there was a real value to that because you meet humans rather than just arguments and, you know, positions that are being defended.

And you may find in the process of that - you may find something like God is speaking to you and that there's there's a process and I've seen many people who have gone on that, that journey of looking for truth, having those conversations, seeking, and finding, ultimately, what they were looking for.

And I guess my advice to that would also be that that search for truth is not just about working out, you know, the historical and philosophical arguments. That might be an important part of anyone's journey as they try to make intellectual sense of the Christian story. But I think we need to be open to what it says to our imagination as well.

We are story driven creatures, um, meaning making creatures. Now, some of my atheist friends would say, well, that's just a sort of accident of evolution, you know. But I don't believe that. I think actually The reason we are that way is because it's imprinted deep within us in some way and that we're meant to be part of a story.

And very often that's why we find stories in cinema, literature, art, music, speak to us so deeply. It's because they're speaking to another part of us

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apart from just our logical left brain, if you like. And I think it's okay to open yourself, that imaginative part of yourself, to ask, Well, what if the world really was enchanted. What if there really was more than just molecules and matter in motion that explains who I am, my deepest desires and longings, my love of art, music, literature, my search for beauty, truth, and justice. What if there was something that met that? And I think if you open yourself to that possibility, you'll find that again, Jesus is on the other side of the door waiting for you.

So I can just only encourage you to both search with your mind and your heart And you'll find what you're looking for.