

Book Review

Jonathan M.S. Pearce and Tristan Vick (eds.), *Beyond an Absence of Faith: Stories About the Loss of Faith and the Discovery of Self*. Onus Books 2014, 263pp, \$17.99, ISBN 978-0-9926000-0-6

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Beyond an Absence of Faith is an edited anthology that consists of the autobiographical accounts of the journey of ex-believers from a life of faith to a life of atheism or agnosticism. It brings together the so-called ‘deconversion’ stories of 16 people of different gender, race, age, and religion. If, like me, you have never heard of the term “deconversion” before, it is the atheist equivalent to the religious finding of faith – it is a conversion from belief to agnosticism or atheism.

Each of these 16 accounts winds its way around a different individual’s struggle with faith and the often serious obstacles in overcoming it and describes the life of the writers before and after their deconversion. The common experience of deconversion and this general form of the stories is just about the only thing these stories share. Otherwise, the collection as a whole offers a variety of different perspectives. Many of the writers started out in deeply religious and authoritarian households in sect-like communities and were deeply and genuinely involved in religion – some were even extremists. Others grew up with minimal or no religious background but found themselves in religious or spiritual contexts through their own personal quest for God. Others still, never really had faith and their story is one of “coming out” as an atheist. Though for all their final deconversion came through a gradual disillusionment, their reasons for deconverting are very different. Vyckie Garrison, a member of the Quiverfull movement, describes what she underwent in terms of surviving “spiritual abuse”, Mindi Rosser entertained doubts since childhood but had to overcome the social isolation of a fundamentalist society and what she calls “Religion Trauma Disorder”, Saleha M. was initially

led to her deconversion because she could not fit the mold of a Muslim woman, Mike Doolittle and Beth Ann Erickson wanted explanations and answers that they could not get from religion, while an anonymous contributor was exposed to different ideologies as a result of going to college which lead him to reevaluate absolute ideas and strict rules he grew up with. Finally others, including Tristan Vick, one of the editors of the volume who has also contributed his deconversion story and who also found his way out by falling in love and coming into contact with another culture, felt oppressed by the inflexible rules imposed by their churches and the quilt accompanying them.

The aim of this volume, as stated by the editors Jonathan M.S. Pearce and Tristan Vick (who were both raised in faith and are now vocal atheists), is not to offer arguments against religious faith. Rather, this book is meant to give atheists a voice and be a source of comfort for people who are going through the process of questioning their faith but have no source of support, as well as to serve as a common ground from which believers and non-believers can start overcoming the gap that separates them.

What is new and different about this book compared to other atheist books is that it focuses on people and their stories rather than on abstract arguments and this gives the reader, through moving and often shocking first-hand accounts, a sense of how oppressive and authoritarian religion can be and how strong a hold it can have on people’s lives. It also allows the reader to understand why sometimes non-believers are very aggressively against religion. Having lived in societies

where dissent is difficult or impossible, or having invested so much in a Church only to be disillusioned in the end, one can understand where they are coming from. This anthology gives a clear and disturbing insight into fundamentalist American religious right and the practices that it involves, from Bible camp and Young Earth Creationist science classes to Bible college and proselytisation tactics. However, it goes beyond American Christianity and the book is to be commended for including other faiths, including the story of an ex-Muslim, Arsala, who makes the point that a faith based on respect of tradition need not be oppressive or xenophobic and that not all Muslims are fundamentalists. What all this makes clear is why, in theocracies and in certain parts of America that are very much like them, the existence of a community of atheists is important to lend support to people that are ostracised because of their beliefs, or who cannot voice their belief and have to live double lives under the threat of isolation, criminalization or even death. After reading this book, I think the editors are right that this book can help in this respect.

But religion is not always, nor does it have to be, oppressive and fundamentalist. What is mostly described in the book are experiences of people who come from, in one way or another, an all-encompassing religious faith which is not just a set of beliefs for them but also their source of income and their entire social network. Though one might be tempted to blame religion for their plight, one can also very naturally conclude from these accounts that it is the oppressive and authoritarian nature of their particular faith, rather than religious faith itself, that made their experience so adverse. There are social contexts in which religion exists in a much milder personal form in which being an atheist is not seen, or experienced, as a problem. Though there are stories in which the writers do acknowledge this, the book as a whole paints a very bleak view of religious faith. Yet, religion can be a very fulfilling part of someone's life. Indeed, for many people, as can be seen from some of the stories in this anthology, the main role of religion is not as an explanatory tool to understand the world around them but, rather, a body of beliefs that play a much more profound role in their lives; it gives meaning to their life and comfort in the face of a deep existential need that "there is more to it all than just *this*". And this kind of religion can and does exist without the extremes described in the book, as Rebecca Bradley's story tries to show.

Of course, powerful deconversion stories accompanied by the sense of liberation and joy that many authors describe do not come from such mild religious commitments, so it is understandable that the selection of texts includes such extreme situations. For one typically rejoices not because one has lost the meaning religion gives to one's life or because one encounters the world for what it is, but because one has been liberated from an oppressive ideology. However, there is another element that, coupled with this largely one-sided depiction of religion, makes this anthology not so different from other atheist books and somewhat problematic in my view. This other element is an implicit attitude that permeates this anthology. Though in the introduction and afterword the editors are careful to avoid condescension towards believers and point out that the book is not an attack on religion, there is an underlying tone, very reminiscent of the New Atheist movement, to the effect that it is somewhat ignorant, or less than rational, or not that intelligent to believe in God.

This comes through in many different details in the book: in the epigraph at the beginning, a quote from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value* (an unfortunate choice of philosopher given Wittgenstein's views on religion) that reads "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself", in Jeremy Beahan's foreword on the "false consolation of religion" and on religious faith being "maintained through ignorance", in Pearce's introduction where he claims that believers handle evidence in a "truly psychological and emotive way", in the dedication of the book to "eternally curious people" and in the afterword where Vick affixes the term "freethinkers" to atheists, agnostics and humanists. One does not find quite as many such remarks in the chapters by the contributors to the book who are generally milder in their tone, but there are some interspersed throughout the book. For instance, Sergio Paulo Sider does claim that "Where it not for childhood indoctrination, no one in their right mind would believe the nonsense of Christianity and religion in general."

All this creates a sharp contrast between atheists on the one side and believers on the other who are deceiving themselves, are ignorant, less than fully rational, not curious and not free. Though some of this may be true in the extreme scenarios described in this book in which dissenters are socially isolated and

often feel trapped, it is not true of all believers, and, certainly, these characteristics are not necessarily true of anyone who has faith. So this attitude underlying the book is doubly problematic: first because it is an attitude that is not justified and, second, because it undermines what this book aims to achieve.

First of all, it is somewhat arrogant and condescending to tell people that you know the reason why they believe what they do. Like with any belief, the reasons people believe are varied and differ from person to person. Secondly, we cannot evaluate someone's rationality or level of ignorance based solely on a belief she holds. To hold a belief rationally one must have evaluated the evidence for her belief, must have been careful enough to avoid contradictions in her reasoning and must have made sure that the belief that she has arrived at follows from her reasons for believing. This is important because it makes clear that neither falsehood of one's beliefs is equated with irrationality, nor is impeccable reasoning required for rationality. As any undergraduate student of logic knows, false premises or false conclusions are not enough for invalid arguments and the content alone of one's belief does not make it irrational or unreasonable. So it is not enough that one be a theist or have some kind of faith for one to be irrational.

More than this though, people do not hold isolated beliefs but, instead, a whole web of beliefs that is held together by complex justificatory relations that involve both explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious beliefs that go into assessing evidence one is presented with. So to assess the irrationality of a belief one should assess it given the other beliefs held by that person, the relevance of that evidence to the set of the person's beliefs and also the context in which those beliefs are held. This can also explain why two people with opposing views can both be rational in holding their views. I do not believe in a necessary omnipotent being so telling me that God is the first cause will raise more questions than it answers. But to a person who has accepted His necessity and omnipotence, it would settle the question satisfactorily and it would fit in tightly with the rest of his beliefs and values. I still think he would be wrong, but that doesn't make him irrational, unreasonable or not intelligent in any interesting sense.

This is probably the reason why there are very intelligent and educated people that believe in God. If it

were irrational or unreasonable to believe you wouldn't expect there to be such people, or at least, not as many as there are. None of this is to say that all the contributors to the anthology share this attitude with the editors. In a way, the book itself serves against this very idea because we see writers that are clearly intelligent and capable people who were, themselves, believers. But also, in some of the stories people believe without giving up critical thinking or being anti-science - for instance Sergio Paul Cider's wife, a scientist, questioned a lot about religion and shared a lot of his views but still believed in God, as did the wife of the anonymous Counter Apologist who, though not a Christian for many of the same reasons that led to his deconversion, remains a nominal deist. Rebecca Bradley in her contribution to this volume gives her insightful view about what the difference between believers and non-believers really amounts to and argues for this point exactly; that intelligent, rational, competent and educated people, like her siblings, can believe in God and be perfectly nice people without being fanatical, brainwashed or anti-science.

Though atheists often present religious belief as a position that people accept unreflectively in an epistemically irresponsible manner without reasons or evidence, this is not necessarily true. Some believers have pragmatic reasons; people need to believe in God to find meaning in life, or to be on the right side of Pascal's wager, so that *if* God exists they will be saved. William James had such an attitude to religion opposing Clifford's evidentialism, and to allow pragmatic considerations of a cost/benefit analysis to outweigh epistemic ones does seem a rational way to approach such a tremendously significant decision.

Apart from such pragmatic considerations, and though some believers sometimes offer admittedly easily rebuttable arguments for their faith, others do have reasons for believing that can be good. Members of the professional clergy and theist philosophers like Plantinga, Swinburne and Alston have very intricate arguments and offer evidence for their belief. This is not to say that I find such arguments convincing. I consider the assumptions of the theist flawed and hence I am an atheist, but it is to say that faith is not necessarily belief without evidence.

Atheists, myself included, often evaluate God as an explanation based on what we take to be a good explanation in science: we expect it to help us make reliable

predictions, to cohere with the rest of our knowledge, to be testable, to be parsimonious and so on. Given these values, and even given a lack of an alternative explanation (for, despite what some atheists say, there is no generally accepted theory about the origins of everything), atheists judge that the overall evidence available to us tells against the existence of a deity. But as Putnam points out, this judgement is made through the lenses of the values of science and someone who does not share those values, or who does not hold them as the standard for every human epistemic activity, will not be swayed by such considerations.

There are certainty limits to scientific explanation, and believers, including those who accept the findings of science, often argue from that there is more to the world than what science can ever hope to capture, in effect substituting the various brute facts of science with the one brute fact of the existence of a deity. Though I do not find such arguments satisfactory, they are not irrational or unreasonable. Nor do they necessarily give a blank check to believe things in general without evidence, as some atheists believe that religious belief gives. James too, who rejected an evidentialist standard when it came to “live, forced and momentous” choices – as he took to be the choice between belief and its rejection – accepted them in other fields of inquiry. To say all this is not to say that science and religion occupy non-overlapping magisteria, as Gould argued, or that because there is no “view from nowhere” from which to evaluate epistemic values, any set of epistemic values is as good as another. Sometimes religion and science do overlap just as religion and history overlap and, in such cases, religious claims do not fare well. But, for many people, religion is something very different from an explanatory tool for understanding the world around them. This is something that atheists should keep in mind if they hope to enter in a constructive dialogue with believers.

And this is the other problem with this anthology: that the attitude underlying the book detracts from the editors’ stated aim of bridging the divide separating believers from non-believers.

Undoubtedly, by depicting the reality of a world within a world that we like to believe is liberal and advanced, this anthology can allow an atheist to better understand the difficulties faced by some people of religious faith, and thus make him more sympathetic

to the difficulties of leaving their faith behind. However, one gets the feeling when reading this book that it preaches to the converted and I don’t see how it can serve in bridging the gap on the side of believers. The worst way to open a dialogue with believers is by depicting religion in a negative light that does not do it justice. Through its underlying tone and the implication that religious people are somehow less sophisticated and lead less happy and fulfilling lives than atheists who have seen the light and have been liberated from the shackles of brainwashing and ignorance, this book may not resonate with more mild believers who, despite the otherwise interest of this book, may view it as yet another unjust atheist attack on their faith.

All in all, though I confess this is not a book I would chose to pick up in a bookstore, I am glad to have read it. This is a book that contains a lot of wisdom from people who have overcome incredible challenges to be where they are today and it helps explain a lot both about vocal religious believers and their atheist counterpart. It is also a pleasant change from the usually outright aggressive, arrogant and often mediocre atheist books that one finds today. Regardless of its shortcoming, this book can definitely serve to help people who are in the process of questioning their faith and it is of considerable anthropological and sociological interest to anyone interested in matters of faith.

References

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