

Reading

“What I mean when I say God” Bruce Marshall

God is what gives us life. That’s what I mean when I say God: the spirit or force that gives us life. I mean this not in the narrow scientific sense. God is not a chemical process that makes life possible. My grounding, rather, is in experience. It is in the experience of being given life - new life - that I find God.

I find God most reliably in relationship.

This may be relationship with other people. The connections of friendship give me life. As do occasions when something important is shared between me and another person. I am renewed, given spirit for living.

This may be relationship with my deepest self. In the emptiness of quiet or in the environment of safety provided by a person that I trust, I find the me that exists below the layers that have accumulated over the years. When I find that self that exists within, I am given life.

This may be relationship with the earth, with the world, with the swirl of life all around me. I am given life as I explore a mountain trail, as I work with others towards making ours a better community, as I enter the excitement of a good Sunday at church. There is life all around me, and when I am in relationship with that, I am renewed; I find God.

This may be relationship with the mystery that seems to me at the centre of existence. Sometimes I catch glimpses of that. An image that tells me something of what is eternal and unending in existence. An unexpected rush of emotion. The experience of being drawn towards something or someone even though I don’t understand why or where it will lead. In the context of mystery the voice of God speaks, and I am given new life.

God - the force that gives us life - does not necessarily follow the rules, the guidelines, the standards we humans so painstakingly create. The voice of God is surprising and insistent and takes us in directions we would not otherwise choose. We plead, with Moses, “Why now? Why me?” But the question is before us: will I choose what gives me life, given the uncertainties and dangers that exposes me to, or will I settle?

Whenever I find myself at that question - will I choose life? - then I know I have encountered God.

The Big Question

Over My Head

Let me tell you about a conversation I had with a woman while I was still in England. She was an active member of her local parish church, and she was quizzing me about Unitarianism. In the UK, it is only Unitarianism, Universalism never took root there. Anyway, she was asking me, Who are we, where did we come from, what are we all about. The usual stuff. You know, sometimes I think it would be so much easier just to go to the local parish church, or be a Methodist or Catholic or anything that people had already heard of and therefore would be instantly uninterested in. But no. You are a Unitarian? What's that? And so you have to try to explain to people, most of them kindly well-meaning folk, that what is important to us, what binds us together, is not what we believe in common, but what we love in common. So there I was, trying my best to explain all of this to this good and intelligent person, when she suddenly looked somewhat anxious as she asked the inevitable Big Question. But, she said, you do believe in God, don't you?

How is it that I have been a Unitarian all of my years, and a minister for the past thirty six of them, I have letters after my name showing that I have studied theology and am probably not entirely ignorant on the subject, and yet, still, I am never sure how to answer that question. Frankly, I am not even sure what the question means.

Do I believe in God? Do I believe in God? The question seems to be asked as if the only answer could be yes or no. And as if my answer put me into one camp or the other. As if, were my answer yes, I was a good person worthy of being in church, and were my answer no, I was somehow an imposter. But I don't know what the question means. I really don't.

Especially I don't know what it means when I am asked by the sort of person who has not darkened a church's door for ages but who, for reasons best known to themselves, somehow wants to justify themselves. Often, with a statement like "You know, I believe in God, obviously, but I don't need to go to church. I worship God in my own way." Oh really? And which way might that be, I privately wonder to myself. In bed with the Sunday papers? Watching the game with your mates? At the mall or some other cathedral of consumerism? "Oh really, how interesting," I reply if I am feeling mischievous. "You believe in God but don't go to church. Whereas I go to church but don't believe in God."

So, let's try to unpack it a little. Do I believe in God?

Does the question mean, do I believe that there is a being which exists in some separate time/space reality who is God? Like Zeus on Mount Olympus. And from that separate time/space reality this God observes the world, responds to it, makes things happen, and once decided that things had got so messy that he sent his son – where that son came from is a puzzle we shall leave to one side for now – sent this son to earth to sort things out in a heroic and sacrificial way?

Do I believe that there is such a being, that exists? No, I don't. I understand that is the God that some people do believe exists, but I don't. I also understand why and how such a belief came into being in a pre-scientific age. It made sense in a pre-scientific age, when God or gods were in charge of everything and made sense of everything otherwise beyond human comprehension. The God of modern thought does not live on Mount Olympus as did Zeus, but in the sky. Yet no amount of air travel, or exploration into space, has yet been able to locate exactly where.

Thirty some years ago, in my first ministry, I set myself a project for Lent. I set myself the task of reading the book, *Does God Exist*, by the Dutch theologian Hans Kung. This was a 600 page door stopper of a book, readable but pretty dense. In it Kung, himself a Catholic but barely clinging on by his fingernails to the Catholic church without being kicked out for his heretical views, examines the history of God, and all the arguments about God's existence – the ontological, the teleological, the cosmological and other such fancy sounding multi-syllabic words – and finally comes to the conclusion that it makes no sense to talk about God existing.

Why? Because the term "existence" can be used only with reference to something that is real. Something in time and space. Love does not "exist" says Kung. Neither does beauty, or truth, or goodness. They are abstract concepts which we experience in life, but they do not "exist". The reality is our experience, not that which is experienced. And neither does God exist, unless you warp the meaning of the term "existing" to such an extent that it ceases to be meaningful. You know, reading that book made me admire Kung greatly. Nothing makes me admire someone else's intelligence quite so much as that they should come to the same conclusions as me.

So, do I believe that there is a being called God, that God exists? No, I don't. I am not even agnostic about it. I don't even want to place an each way bet on it. I am willing to say, with absolute and categorical assurance, that there is no God. There. I've said it. And I don't care who knows it.

But I am not an atheist. I don't call myself an atheist. I don't even like the word,

atheist. I refuse to be called an atheist. Because, you see, when asked “Do you believe in God?” the short answer is no. See above. But the longer and much more interesting and so much more important answer is yes.

Because, believing in God is not a rational thing. It is not about believing that something is the case, an intellectual proposition which is verifiably true. Do I believe that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow morning? Yes, I do. And if you and I get up early tomorrow morning we can see whether that belief has been verified. There are other beliefs which are not verifiable in the same way, but are matters of personal judgment and prejudice. Do I believe that the cannabis should be decriminalised? Well, I have an opinion about that, and no doubt you do too. Perhaps your opinion is different from mine. Who is right? Who can say? There are arguments for both camps.

But God is not like that. God is not an either/or. We can never know for sure whether or not God exists and, in any case, who cares if such a God exists? I don't. But, do I believe in God? Yes. With all my being.

Let me conduct a quick straw poll here. Hands up, those of you who believe in Santa Claus. Come on, don't be shy. Well, here's the thing. I do.

Do I believe that there is a jolly fat man in a red suit and sporting a fluffy white beard who, every Christmas Eve, kisses Mrs Claus goodbye at their cosy home at the North Pole, boards his sleigh behind eight reindeer and whizzes around the world, going down every chimney, snacking on cookies and milk in every household and leaving not only presents under the tree for those children who have been well-behaved during the year, but also appreciative notes for the hospitality? Well, actually, no I don't. I do remember the Christmas when I learned the awful truth, but I was forty three years old.

But do I believe in Santa Claus? You bet your boots. Am I away with the fairies? Do I deserve the dripping contempt of the likes of Richard Dawkins and company for such infantile naivety?

Perhaps you know about this letter written by a mother to her questioning daughter. No, this is not Dear Virginia, but dear Lucy.

Dear Lucy,

Thank you for your letter. You asked a very good question: “Are you Santa?”

I know you've wanted the answer to this question for a long time, and I've had to give it careful thought to know just what to say.

The answer is no. I am not Santa. There is no one Santa.

I am the person who fills your stockings with presents, though. I also choose and wrap the presents under the tree, the same way my mom did for me, and the same way her mom did for her. (And yes, Daddy helps, too.)

I imagine you will someday do this for your children, and I know you will love seeing them run down the Christmas magic stairs on Christmas morning. You will love seeing them sit under the tree, their small faces lit with Christmas lights.

This won't make you Santa, though.

Santa is bigger than any person, and his work has gone on longer than any of us have lived. What he does is simple, but it is powerful. He teaches children how to have belief in something they can't see or touch.

It's a big job, and it's an important one. Throughout your life, you will need this capacity to believe: in yourself, in your friends, in your talents and in your family. You'll also need to believe in things you can't measure or even hold in your hand. Here, I am talking about love, that great power that will light your life from the inside out, even during its darkest, coldest moments.

Santa is a teacher, and I have been his student, and now you know the secret of how he gets down all those chimneys on Christmas Eve: he has help from all the people whose hearts he's filled with joy.

With full hearts, people like Daddy and me take our turns helping Santa do a job that would otherwise be impossible.

So, no. I am not Santa. Santa is love and magic and hope and happiness. I'm on his team, and now you are, too.

I am sixty five years old, and I believe in Santa. That Santa. I want to be on his team. Some people say, you should not encourage children to believe in Santa. It is a lie, these people say, and when they find out that you have been lying to them, they will never trust you again. Well, you know what, the best things I know and experience in this world are not facts, they are not hard truths. The best things I know and experience in this world can't be pinned down and analysed, or put under a microscope or given neat definitions. The best things in life are beyond being proven like a mathematical formula.

The best things I know and experience are about wonder, and awe, and reverence, and mystery. I want to be in a world infused with miracle and wonder. I want to be in a world in which story and legend are how we convey, one generation to the next, what is most important. Was I lying to my children when I helped them put the cookies and milk on the mantelpiece? Was I lying to them as I wrote them a note of thanks in a disguised hand, and scattered the half eaten carrots on the snow by the front door? Or was I teaching them that a sense of awe is a most precious gift, which we as adults lose to our peril?

I believe in God. I believe in all that that simple three letter word evokes and connotes. I believe in that which transcends the littleness of my own small and fleeting life. I believe in the connection I experience with all that is, that the word "God" is a poetic but ever inadequate shorthand way of expressing. I believe in God not as a separate being out there, but because I want the divine, the mysterious, the wonder-full to be an intrinsic part of what it means for me and you to be human.

I want to be on that God's team. Why? Because it makes my life worth the living. Because, though I am mortal, it makes me part of that which is eternal. Because though I am finite, it connects me to the infinite. Because though I see a world broken and bruised it reassures me with the constant vision of what might yet be. Because though I am tempted and seduced by all of life's distractions, because it is so easy for me to fall short of my own best aspirations, it aligns me in a true direction, as a magnet does for iron filings.

Do I believe that God exists? No, I don't. Do you? Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn. But do I believe in God, and all that God means in this marvellous, magical, mysterious world? Oh yes, I most certainly do. And I hope you do too.