

Episode 157 The Surprising Rebirth of Belief

Justin Brierley

Hi, I'm Justin Brierley, a broadcaster, author and speaker. And for over a decade, I've been hosting conversations between Christians and atheists. And my latest project is a book called *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*.

David Capes

Justin Brierley, so good to see you. Welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Justin Brierley

Thank you so much for having me on, Dave. It's great to be with you.

David Capes

It's good to see you. You came into our orbit, through Mark Lanier. You had him on your podcast a number of years ago.

Justin Brierley

Yes, for many years, I hosted the *Unbelievable* Show, which brought Christians and non-Christians together for dialogue and debate. And yes, it was probably several years ago now that Mark came to our London studio to record a discussion. It was wonderful to have him on as a guest. And I'm really looking forward to joining you as well in person at the Lanier Theological Library later in September.

David Capes

Now, this will be September the 22nd, 2023. And your book is coming out, entitled *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God: Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers are Considering Christianity Again*. It's a fabulous book. I've had a chance to read it the last few days, and there are a lot of great stories in it. First of all, congratulations.

Justin Brierley

Thank you very much. It's always wonderful when you finally get to hold the book in your hands, because you know, you spend a long time working on it, and then going through the revisions. And I just got my own supply of books just a week ago from when we're recording. So, it's great to have it.

David Capes

Well, we're going to have copies available when you're here. So that's always a good thing. But it's a very interesting project. I first heard the phrase New Atheism back around 2000. I was on sabbatical at the University of Edinburgh, and one of the faculty members, David Ferguson was giving a lecture. And it was fascinating that I hadn't heard that phrase New Atheism before. When did that get started exactly?

Justin Brierley

Well, a lot of people date the New Atheism to the mid 2000s, particularly as a response to 9/11. This was when a number of secular writers, thinkers, intellectuals, people like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, started to publish these quite strong broadsides against religion in general and Christianity in particular. Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, came out in 2006. And then you had other people like Harris and Dennis, and Hitchens, all publishing similar types of books around the time. And these became bestsellers. They were very strong anti-religious, anti-theistic tomes, decrying superstition, and arguing for science and reason, and so on. And I think it was, as I say, partly in response to 9/11, the rise of what they saw as dangerous forms of religious extremism.

But I think it was also fueled by the rise of internet chat rooms, and early forms of social media. They allowed lots of skeptics, and sometimes people with an axe to grind against religion to get together to mobilize. I saw a number of in-person events come out of atheist conferences and rallies. We even had here in the UK in 2008, or 2009, the nearest thing to an advertising campaign for the New Atheism, which was a bus campaign. There were red London buses, circulating the capital, bearing the words, "there's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life". So, it did feel like the closest thing to a really orchestrated atheist movement at the time.

David Capes

Is this something that was created by culture at the time do you think, Justin? Was culture just moving in this way? I remember many of the churches back when I first went to Britain in the 1990s being very empty on a Sunday. It seemed more and more people were saying they had no religious affiliation at all.

Justin Brierley

Yes, in a sense. It's strange to think that the atheists felt they needed a bus campaign in the UK because, as you say, it wasn't exactly as though lots of people were talking about God in the first place. There had been increasing secularization for generations in the UK and, and the kind of church statistics were only going in one direction. I think the New Atheism was almost just the cherry on top of what was an overall religious decline in the West.

I think the UK in some ways was just ahead of that curve of the US. But even now, I think you're seeing similar trends in the US with numbers of young people saying that they don't have a religion. They don't have any religious affiliation. So it was in that sense, a slightly strange thing that in the UK at least, it was felt that there needed to be this strong movement against the Christian faith. When in fact, the Christian faith had been on the decline in general for a long time anyway. I think there were a number of factors that came together, not only those, but the birth of a movement that allowed people to feel that they could come side by side with each other in this particular way.

David Capes

You know, one of the things that you write here that got my attention early in the book is that people need a story to live by. That's a profound statement. And I think it's absolutely true. I've been looking at these issues for a number of years, from an academic perspective, and looking at narrative theology

and narrative criticism, in the biblical text. But it seems to me that what happened with the New Atheism is that they took the story away, a story that had been forming and shaping Western culture for so long. They took that away and didn't replace it with anything much.

Justin Brierley

I think you're right and what I would say is they decided to tear God down and tell people that religion was a bad thing, but they didn't really replace it with anything positive. And the reality is people do need a positive ethic to get on with their lives. And so simply telling them there is science and there is reason isn't enough, because science alone won't buy you value and purpose and identity. And I think in a funny way, the New Atheism paved the way for lots of other stories to potentially flood in because in the absence of the Christian story, it's not that people just don't believe anything, don't believe in anything. They potentially could believe in all kinds of other options.

Because I didn't see that many converts from the New Atheism to this very hardline, materialist Atheism. What you tended to see was simply people moving off in other directions, and other stories coming to dominate their lives. And I think that set the scene for the rise of multiple gender ideologies and different types of identity and people investing themselves in other causes, justice causes. I think, partially because they felt like, well, I need something to give me a sense of identity and a narrative to live by. The Christian story for a long time had been that in our culture. But when people failed to have that, it wasn't just that they didn't believe in anything. They needed something to fill that God-shaped hole in a sense, even if it wasn't ultimately the thing that would make sense of their lives.

David Capes

One of the things I appreciate about your book, you've been very much in the center of modern culture. You have a Twitter account, and you understand Tick Tock and those types of things. But the internet that played such an important role in the forming of this New Atheism, also seems to become an enemy of at least some of these guys. Richard Dawkins, in particular seemed to fall foul of the "me-too" movements and charges of racism and sexism.

Justin Brierley

Yes, and I think there's a twofold reason for why the New Atheism as a movement largely sputtered out after five or ten years of it riding quite high. One was because it didn't provide that positive ethic. I don't think it ultimately gave people a reason to live for. But I think it also had all these inherent contradictions and reasons why it unraveled. One of which was, as you say, the fact that some of the New Atheists found themselves getting canceled or coming under scrutiny themselves.

It had a kind of a "me too" moment early on in about 2011. There was this moment that came to be dubbed "elevator gate". At one particular atheist conference in Dublin, a female atheist blogger called Rebecca Watson, who had been speaking on some of the problems inherent in the atheist culture of misogyny and sexism and so on, was propositioned in an elevator late at night by one of the guests of this conference. And she went on to explain on her blog, how this was just symptomatic of some of the problems in atheism. Well, that might have been the end of it, except that Richard Dawkins, one of the architects of the atheist movement then commented on this in a blog post. It was a highly sarcastic, sardonic response to Rebecca Watson complaining about this.

He put on the voice of someone who was being oppressed in a Muslim country and said, but, you know, forget about all the trials I have to endure. Think of our poor American sisters being asked for coffee in an elevator. And so, this simply poured gasoline on the whole debate. And that really was a pivotal moment where the movement split in two directions. Those who wanted it had to be so-called Atheism Plus. So not only do we believe in atheism, but we also believe in lots of other things, including social justice movements, feminism, LGBT rights, and so on. And then there were others who wanted, just pure, free thinking and science and reason and felt everything else was just politically correct ideologies and even a form of religion in itself. So, this was, I think, the starting point of the movement really starting to unravel to the point where some of these atheist speakers were no longer willing to share a stage with each other, they had fallen out with each other, so dramatically. It was interesting to watch as it were, from the sidelines, some of that cultural stuff going on, where the New Atheism itself started to be unraveled by the direction the culture was going.

David Capes

You've had a number of these atheist on your radio show to dialogue with Christians. And some of the people I know who responded to them included people like Alister McGrath and William Lane Craig and N. T. Wright who've all been here at the Lanier Theological Library. You're a Christian and you've heard all of these arguments, and you've weighed it all out, and you're still a believing Christian having heard all that.

Justin Brierley

Yes, this was really the subject of my first book which came out about five or six years ago. And that was titled *Unbelievable: Why After Ten Years of Talking with Atheists I'm Still a Christian*. And it was interesting having had some of these heavyweights on both sides of the discussion, come on my show to debate things. There were plenty of things that I still found difficult to answer or mysterious, but what it really gave me was a new appreciation for just how intellectually robust the Christian faith is. Because, really, it still feels to me and always has as the most compelling explanation of reality. Partly because I was able to put it next to other interpretations of reality, like atheism or naturalism.

And I just found there were so many things that worldview does not answer, and just doesn't speak to in the way that the Christian view of reality speaks. So, it's not that I have some overwhelming proof for Christianity that could demolish any atheists. But when I look at various views—atheism, naturalism and Christianity—I just find that Christianity provides a very compelling vision of reality and answers far more questions than the atheist perspective does. So that's been the way I've approached things myself as an apologist. Not to try and claim that Christianity answers every single question, but to say that actually, it provides the best overall vision of reality that I've ever come across. And I continue to find it very compelling.

David Capes

I'm reading for the second time right now a book by Tom Holland called *Dominion*. And you mentioned Tom Holland, and Jordan Peterson in particular, in your book about individuals who are secular thinkers, and yet are making a case that the Christian story, the Christian explanation of reality, has had such an important shaping function for us. They themselves, I don't guess are believers, but they still

find value in what the Christian faith has brought to the West. And you really can't envision the West without it.

Justin Brierley

Absolutely. And what I was noticing, as I went on hosting shows was that as we started the *Unbelievable* Show with a lot of these bombastic debates between the New Atheists and the Christian thinkers. Increasingly, in the last several years, I found that those were being replaced by these much more nuanced conversations between people, as you mentioned, like Jordan Peterson, and Tom Holland, and Douglas Murray. People who are themselves not necessarily Christian believers, but who are not nearly as dismissive of Christianity, as the New atheists were. They actually see the value of the Christian worldview and find themselves sometimes quite drawn to it but they haven't necessarily taken that full step into it.

And so, I was just fascinated to see the way in which the conversations were changing in the culture. And I saw that a lot of the audience that had been drawn to the New Atheists, were now turning up for the lectures of Jordan Peterson and watching their YouTube videos. And they were asking very different questions and offering very different answers to the New Atheists. And particularly Tom Holland, who you mentioned, whose book *Dominion* is just an extraordinary look at the way our moral instincts in the West really were generated by the Christian revolution. He came on my show several times for fascinating conversations both with atheists like A.C. Grayling and Christians like N. T Wright.

And it was just remarkable to see the way in which he absolutely recognized that even though he wasn't a believer himself, everything he valued as a thinking, cultural person, (human rights, equality, dignity, freedom) he said, I can't deny that as a historian these come from the Christian worldview rather than from science or reason or the enlightenment. So, it's been a real sea change, I think in the openness that there is in the intellectual community to taking Christianity seriously. And for me that was significant enough to write a book on it.

David Capes

One of the images, I guess the metaphors for your book, is about the tide going out and the tide coming back in. You're fairly optimistic that the tide is coming back in?

Justin Brierley

I am. I start the introduction, actually with a quote from a well-known poem by the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold. And it's been used many times by others as a metaphor, but I'll just quote the particular stanza here. The sea of faith, was once too at the full and round earth shore, lay like the folds of a bright girdle filled, but now I only hear Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar. And that image from *Dover Beach* has represented the way in which the tide of faith has gone out in the 150 years since he wrote those words, because of technology, science, enlightenment, thinking, and so on.

But it was actually a conversation I was hosting between the secular thinker Douglas Murray, and N.T Wright where I suddenly thought, well, this might not be the end of the story. Because Douglas Murray quoted the same line. And he said, the thing about the sea of faith, Justin, is it could come back in again, that is the point of tonight. And I thought, you know, I'd never thought of that. Yes, it could. And,

interestingly, he was saying this in the context of seeing some of his friends and peers converting to Christianity, quite unlikely converts. And I thought, well you know what, I've seen some rather unusual, interesting converts to Christianity, people you wouldn't expect necessarily to have made that journey.

And I was seeing people like Douglas Murray, another of these secular intellectuals, but who seemed to have completely jettison the New Atheist approach. He was very much a friend and colleague of Hitchens and others at one time, but even he was saying in that discussion, look, the New Atheists completely failed to give us a workable ethic. And he himself was saying, I've come to recognize that the reason I believe that things is because of Christianity, even though I can't subscribe to its doctrines. And I just thought, you know, there's something going on here. And so that was really where the book began for me.

David Capes

Well, it's a brilliant book, and you're going to be with us September 22nd, 2023, to do a lecture here. We will have copies of your book there, and it comes out in September as well, that same month.

Justin Brierley

That's right. So, if you're looking for it online, it's *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*. I'm a fan of long subtitles because they capture the thesis of it.

David Capes

It is the thesis statement of the book.

Justin Brierley

Yes. *Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers are Considering Christianity Again*. So that's what I'll be talking on when I come to the library. There's a lot of people these days, understandably, somewhat cynical or jaded almost about the church and Christianity and asking, really, where are we going. But I'm an optimist at heart. And I just think sometimes some things have to die off before they're reborn.

And I wonder whether we're seeing something rather interesting happening with the turning of that tide as it were, in our culture. And yes, things may get worse before they get better. But at the same time, people need a story to live by and if the stories they're currently telling themselves aren't working out, if they're running out of steam, and I think in particular, the 80s material story really is running out of steam. And I detail that in several ways during the book. I think there is room for that Christian story, which I think is still flowing. It's still under the surface, is still basically inherent in many of the assumptions we have as Western people. I think it's still there, and it could come back again, even within our generation. So that's my optimistic thesis in the room.

David Capes

Well, with you, I am optimistic and I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk about your book and, will be even more grateful for the chance for a lot of people to get it and begin to absorb it and think it through. Justin, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast

Justin Brierley

It's been an absolute pleasure to be with you. Thank you.

A Nugget of Wisdom from Justin Brierley

I love this quote from Blaise Pascal, who was a Christian thinker and mathematician. He said, "Make religion attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show them that it is". I think that's our job as apologists and evangelists today. Not simply to show them that Christianity is true, but to make them wish it were true, just as C.S. Lewis once did with his Narnia stories. He made people wish for a world that could be true. And then he said, what if it is true? I think that's our job today as well.