

BOOK REVIEW

Brierley, Justin, 2023. *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God: Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers Are Considering Christianity Again*

Carol Stream, Illinois
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Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

The British freelance writer, speaker, and broadcaster Justin Brierley has been working in radio, podcasting, and video for twenty years. He also has become known for creating weekly dialogues between Christians and non-Christians in his *Unbelievable?* radio show and podcast. This allowed him “to chair hundreds of debates between the most influential voices on both sides of the conversation on faith.” (2) In his book, he gives a broad perspective on the topic at hand based on enquiry as much as on many personal talks and encounters with critics of religion as well as apologetics of faith. The central metaphor of the book is one of a tide. Brierley suggests that faith in God is moving like a tide and after many years of decline and retreat, he senses a gentle and small, but recognizable return of faith in the UK and in other parts of the so called West: “In this book I will make a bold proposition – that Matthew Arnold’s long, withdrawing Sea of Faith [from his poem *Dover Beach* in 1867], is beginning to reach its farthest limit and that we may yet see the tide of faith come rushing back in again within our lifetime.” (4)

Brierley begins his book with a brief overview of the rise and fall of new atheism in the two-thousands (chapter 1). He traces the – mostly British – discourse on atheism and (partly aggressive) criticism of religion in general and the Christian faith in particular undertaken by people like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel C. Dennett, etc. He shows the dynamics and influence as well as tensions and shortcomings of the movement, which led to the different phases he identifies (rise, falter, unravel, split, implode, fall).

He then turns to a new interest in and conversation about God and the Christian faith in the public sphere in recent years (chapter 2). This, he outlines with the aid of people like Jordan Peterson, who (re)discovered the relevance and intellectual

appeal of the biblical resp. Judeo-Christian tradition. He introduces many cases of people from the public sphere (like Peter Boghossian, Helen Pluckrose, Douglas Murray, and Bari Weiss) as well as 'everyday secular people' who found new interest in the biblical story and the Christian cultural heritage, as well as in Christian values (like self-sacrificial love) and Christian convictions (like human sinfulness and objective truth). This new interest in faith is accompanied by a growing awareness of the limits and even downsides of a secular (and increasingly digital) culture.

Subsequently, Brierley takes a closer look at European history and the massive influence of Christianity on it (chapter 3). For this quest, he relates among others to the work of the historian Tom Holland, who claims that the basic Christian teaching that "God himself died the death of a slave [...] laid the foundation for the abolition of slavery, the modern welfare state, and even the freedom for people to reject religion in the modern world." (66) He unfolds Holland's thesis on topics like human rights, slavery, and the care for the weakest.

After exploring the cultural influence of the Christian faith, Brierley turns toward the Bible as the fundamental text and source of Christianity (chapter 4) and takes different perspectives on the Scripture, like a statistical, historical, atheistic, and psychological. He also offers reasons for the reliability of the Bible, and he examines some central objections.

With the aid of a debate between Richard Dawkins and Francis Collins, Brierley offers an alternative story of science (chapter 5) and examines the relation between faith and science to make a case for the tied bonds between human reasoning, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the history of science. He introduces some scholars (Rosalind Picard, Francis Collins, Alister McGrath) who converted to the Christian faith "after encountering a world that could not be explained by scientific materialism alone." (157)

In the sixth chapter, Brierley shares some stories of converts, who are listeners of his podcast: "Many have a story of ›deconstructing‹ as adults from the straitjacket of an oppressive form of faith they once inhabited, but then failing to find satisfaction in an atheistic account of reality. Many of these are tentatively reexploring Christianity." (165) Their stories lead to questions about materialism, determinism and the meaning of life, because all portrayed converts "have something in common: a search for a meaningful account of life and purpose that New Atheism was unable to provide." (167) Thus, Brierley makes a case for the claim that determinism "is a self-defeating philosophy that radically undercuts itself" (181) and criticizes – with reference to the psychiatrist, philosopher and neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist – the reduction of human reasoning to the left hemisphere of the brain, which leads to many problems we are facing at the moment, like polarization and alienation as well as a meaning crisis.

The closing chapter sums up the central themes of the book, and Brierley suggests: "As the New Atheist story of scientific materialism begins to wear thin and as people

tire of the quasi-religious stories that are fomenting the present culture wars, I am convinced we are seeing our culture gradually become more willing to consider the value of the Christian story again.” (208) He then offers a threefold advice for the church to engage with a post-secular and post-materialist culture and to prepare itself for a possible awakening: a) Embrace Both Reason and Imagination, b) Keep Christianity Weird, and c) Create a Community That Counters Cancel Culture.

Justin Brierley’s book is a thoroughly crafted piece of work and draws from many serious and sound as well as authentic and inspiring sources. Even though some ideas and thoughts are not absolutely new (like in chapter 4), the collection, review, and reassembly of the material is helpful to make his case and illustrates the phenomenon of a rebirth of faith in God, often to the surprise of those who (re)discovered the Christian faith lately.

The book asks the Church in the West a serious question: If the different converts portrayed throughout the book are “the firstfruits of those who have come through the meaning crisis, [...] what will the church be ready to offer if people come knocking at its door?” (220) To reflect this possibility and a potential ecclesial interaction should be a prioritized task for theological thinkers and church practitioners alike. Such an endeavor falls in line with a variety of contemporary attempts in different Western Churches (e.g. in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands) to foster ecclesial innovation and adapt church structures to better suit the challenges it faces.¹ The perspective Brierley’s book emphasizes might challenge the churches to reflect on ecclesial innovation in a holistic way that combines structural questions with theological as well as apologetical and aesthetic aspects. That the effort for ecclesial innovation and church renewal should be guided by profound theological questions shows this statement Brierley makes: “But I’m not so convinced that we can forever enjoy the fruits of religion without the roots of religion, especially when it comes to Christianity.” (61)

About the Reviewer

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1 For an introduction in some German initiatives see Herbst, Michael: Regional and/or local: Can church be present in close proximity and in regional cooperation at the same time?, in: *Ecclesial Futures 2025* – Vol. 6 – Issue 1: 21-39, DOI: 10.54195/ef22223; Eiffler, Felix: Evaluation of Ecclesial Innovations as Empowerment, in: *Ibid.*: 40-52, DOI: 10.54195/ef22190; Schlegel, Thomas: How do new forms of Church emerge in mainline churches and what does it tell about patterns, dynamics and competition?, in: *Ibid.*: 53-61, DOI: 10.54195/ef22491.