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Graham Ward
UNBELIEVABLE: WHY WE BELIEVE AND WHY WE DON'T
228pp. I.B. Tauris, £20.00
978-1-780-76735-2

Sam Harris
WAKING UP: A GUIDE TO SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION
245pp. Bantam Press, £20.95
978-0-593-707401-5

Hans Joas
FAITH AS AN OPTION: POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR CHRISTIANITY
184pp. Stanford University Press, £50.00
978-0-804-79277-6

The contemporary debate over the validity of religious belief tends to play out in a curiously abstract and rationalistic way. We think of ourselves as detached, autonomous agents, scrutinizing the “God hypothesis” (as Richard Dawkins calls it), examining the supposed evidence, and evaluating the arguments for and against. Particularly amongst philosophers, belief is implicitly assumed to be a transparent process of intellectual assessment, the province, as it were, of the seminar room. But the starting point of Graham Ward’s ambitious and wide-ranging *Unbelievable* is that what makes us believe or disbelieve something is a far more complex matter. It involves much “deeper layers of embodied engagement and reaction”, where we are touched “imaginatively, affectively and existentially.”

Philosophers have argued endlessly about the epistemic status of belief, or what entitles some beliefs to the accolade “knowledge”, but comparatively few have paid attention to “what lies beneath” – to the “archaeology of belief”, as Graham Ward calls it. Drawing on a formidable array of empirical research into the behavioural and neurological underpinnings of belief, and its evolutionary and prehistoric roots, Ward digs deep into the domain of what the Berkeley psychologist John Kihlstrom has termed the “cognitive unconscious”. A rich array of non-conscious mental activity, including learned responses that have become automatic, subliminal perceptions that impact on our conscious judgements, and implicit but not consciously recalled memories – all these profoundly affect how we perceive and interpret the world.

Though there is a partial debt here to the seminal insights of Freud, the scope of the resulting conception of human belief and understanding is far wider. Not just in neurotic desires and perceptions, but whenever we believe anything at all, there is a “mode of liminal processing, related to embodiment and affectivity, which ‘thinks’ more quickly and reacts more instinctively than our conscious rational deliberation.”

This partly calls to mind Iain McGilchrist’s groundbreaking work *The Master and His Emissary*, which speaks of two ways of relating to the world (broadly, though qualifiedly, correlated with the activities of the left and right hemispheres of the brain respectively), the former detached, fragmented, abstract, analytical, the latter more direct, holistic, intuitive and empathetic. Acknowledging McGilchrist’s influence, Ward urges us to question the “left-brain

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hegemony” that has increasingly dominated our culture since the Enlightenment, and to reconfigure our understanding of belief. Doing justice to the full range of our embodied human engagement with the world could allow for a “rebalancing” of “left-brain” and “right-brain” modes of awareness. This might enable us to overcome the sterile opposition between scientific and religious modes of thinking, and to understand what lies “at the very core of poetic and religious faith”.

For Ward, postmodernity has exploded the notion of the inevitable triumph of a science-based, demythologized and secularized world. Myth is an inescapable part of human culture. And it does not just include archetypal stories of our origins (such as the Genesis narrative), but a whole range of human activity, the “symbolic realms we hominids have been cultivating for 2.2 million years”, including art, poetry, rite and dance, or, in the present day, even some of the fantasy fiction produced by the filmmakers. Much of the latter may be merely anaesthetizing and escapist, but the best of it, Ward argues, is an outlet for our need to “believe and belong”. In ways we cannot fully explain, these interlocking modes of human culture tap the powers of what (for a want of a better term) we call the imagination, which operates at many more levels than are accessed by our conscious reflective awareness. Such works “intimate that our experience ... of being in the world is freighted with a significance that only an appeal to the mythic can index.”

But if the price for making space for the possibility of religious belief is a complete postmodernist-style elision of the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, between inventive dreaming and well-founded rationality, many religious believers might feel the price is too high. Ward’s reply to this kind of objection will be, if I understand him correctly, to urge that *all* belief involves imagination. Imagination is simply “belief in action”, projecting and anticipating, receiving and responding. Or, following Sartre, imagination is not a partial or accidental feature of consciousness but its very essence.

Yet even if we grant some of this, anything like a traditional religious worldview would seem to require its defenders to articulate tighter constraints on imaginative creativity than Ward appears to provide. Perhaps this will be a task for the future. What Ward has splendidly succeeded in doing, on any showing, is to bring together into one tightly woven argument a wonderful range of scientific, anthropological, philosophical, literary and contemporary cultural resources, in such a way as to challenge religious and non-religious thinkers alike to think more carefully about the structure of human belief.

In sharp contrast with Graham Ward, with his stress on the imaginative and mythopoeic aspects of our human cognitive relationship to the world, the so-called ‘new atheists’ are for the most part noted for their hard-nosed empiricism and for extolling natural science as the ultimate template for all truth. It is therefore a significant development to find one of the new atheism’s most prominent writers, Sam Harris, in his latest offering, *Waking Up*, acknowledging the vital importance of a spiritual dimension in human life. Spirituality, he declares with refreshing candour, is the “great hole in secularism, humanism, rationalism, atheism, and all the other defensive postures men and women strike in the presence of unreasonable faith.”

This is not to say that Harris has diluted any of his implacable hostility to faith, which he still regards as intrinsically “unreasonable”. Nor has he abandoned the tendency, common among the new atheists, to provide highly one-sided summaries of the religious outlook, as when he informs us that “the central message of [Judaism, Christianity and Islam] is that each of us is in relationship to, a divine authority who will punish anyone who harbors the slightest doubt about His supremacy.” Admittedly the “severity” of God, as Paul Moser has called it, is one element in traditional theism; but a more balanced reading of the relevant texts seems clearly to indicate that such severity is more centrally related to the demands of justice and righteousness than to an obsession with suppressing the doubters.

At all events, Harris aims, as he puts it, to salvage certain “important psychological truths” from what he calls the intellectual “rubble” of the world’s religions. These truths relate to the undoubted reality of spiritual experiences, which “often constitute the most important and transformative moments in a person’s life.” The transformations Harris has in mind are familiar from the claims of many types of Eastern religion, and include a sense of “selfless wellbeing”, “self-transcendence”, “paying attention to the present moment”, a feeling of “boundless love” (albeit of a fundamentally impersonal kind), a sense of being “at one with the cosmos”, and “bringing stress to an end”. They stem from a long tradition in which the paramount objective is achieving bliss by detaching oneself from the stressful world of struggle, commitment and dependency. Whether such detachment has the paramount value that Harris appears to assume is of course a vexed question, but what seems more strikingly questionable in the context of Harris’s general philosophical position is his claim that the relevant spiritual experiences can be understood purely in “universal and secular terms.”

Harris makes it central to his argument that “nothing in this book needs to be accepted on faith,” since all his assertions “can be tested in the laboratory of your own life.” But the spurious image of the laboratory masks a vision of ultimate reality that is actually metaphysical, not scientific. Harris’s vision is of a reality where there are no true substances and there is ultimately nothing but an impersonal flux of conditions that arise and pass away. Yet once the results of spiritual experience are allowed as empirical confirmation of this kind of vision, then Harris has left himself no justification for dismissing those countless theists, whose own spiritual experience has, by contrast, seemed to them to disclose the nature of reality as deeply and ultimately personal.

Empirical evidence is also supposed by Harris to show that our sense of ourselves as unitary subjects of experience is an illusion. But while the evidence Harris cites, for example about split brain patients, reveals much about the modular functioning of the brain, divided into relatively autonomous subsystems, none of it shows that it is a philosophical or scientific mistake for you or me to think of ourselves as genuine subjects of experience enduring through time. Indeed, the personal narrative Harris himself provides in the course of the book about his own early life, and how his distinctive philosophical and spiritual outlook matured though the years, seems at every point implicitly to run counter to the official ‘no-self’ view he proclaims. For all that, this is an engagingly written book, which will probably resonate with many modern secular readers searching for an outlet for the spiritual aspirations that are deeply rooted in the human psyche.

While Harris struggles to reconcile his commitment to spirituality with his unwavering allegiance to the framework of secular scientific rationalism, for Graham Ward (as we have seen) the very coherence of such a supposedly neutral secular framework is called into question, since on his account of belief, “all seeing is seeing *as*” and “knowledge is always and only metaphor.” In the third book under discussion here, *Faith as an Option*, Hans Joas directly tackles the “secularization thesis” – the idea that modernity and the triumph of science will inevitably lead to a decreasing role for religion and its retreat from the public sphere.

Joas conducts his inquiry from a historical and contemporary sociological perspective, but one that is appropriately suspicious of sweeping claims and predictions about the course of social history. As he shows through a wealth of carefully researched sources and citations, the notion of secularization is by no means a straightforward one, and it was understood in many different ways throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but despite the diversity of approaches there was a general and confident agreement that modernization could be expected to weaken religion. The reality, Joas argues, has turned out otherwise, though he warns that the present situation is so heterogeneous as to preclude neat summaries. A significant portion of contemporary Europe, to take a somewhat special case, is indeed “profoundly secular”, but with enormous regional and national differences that cannot

be explained in terms of varying degrees of modernization. Immigration and globalization have introduced further complicating influences.

In his introduction, Joas remarks that “dogmatic secularizers” may claim that his book is a religious apologia. It is hard to see how it could be interpreted that way, since the tone throughout is that of the detached and cautious expositor of ideas and trends. But the subtitle, *Faith as an Option*, alludes to Joas’s view that “the shattering of the idea that modernization inevitably leads to secularization opens up new possibilities for faith” – though he adds that it remains uncertain how far those possibilities may be actualized. In the Western academic world, at least, one suspects that the prevailing intellectual ethos is unlikely to shed its naturalistic and secular stamp any time soon. However that may be, all three of these books, albeit in very different ways, raise fascinating questions about the place of religious outlooks and attitudes in our contemporary culture.

John Cottingham’s latest book, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*, was published last year. His *How to Believe* comes out later this year.