



**Why  
religion without belief  
can still make  
perfect sense<sup>i</sup>**

Philip Goff<sup>ii</sup>

# **It is common to assume that religion is all about belief**

Religious people are ‘believers’.

Muslims believe that God revealed the Quran to Muhammad; Christians

believe Jesus rose from the dead;

Buddhists believe in cyclical rebirth and the non-existence of the self.

But there is more to a religion than a cold set of doctrines. Religions involve spiritual practices, traditions that bind a community together across space and time, and rituals that mark the seasons and the big moments of life: birth, coming of age, marriage, death. This is not to deny that there are specific metaphysical views associated with

each religion, nor that there is a place for assessing how plausible those views are. But it is myopic to obsess about the ‘belief-y’ aspects of religion at the expense of all the other aspects of the lived religious life.

Some people become religious because they become convinced on intellectual grounds that the specific doctrines of a particular faith are highly likely to be true. That’s all well and good. But I want to suggest that there are fruitful ways of engaging with religion that don’t involve belief. Perhaps the best way to do this is to sketch some possibilities.

Faiza is what's called a practising agnostic. She was raised a British Muslim and believes, on the basis of personal experience, that there is a spiritual dimension to existence, a 'higher power' as she calls it. But she's not sure whether that higher power is a personal God. Faiza studied philosophy at university, and was somewhat impressed by arguments for the existence of God, although she didn't find any of them conclusive. As a young child, Faiza was taught to read the Quran in Arabic: she has some feel for the great beauty of its verses, and finds it plausible that this wondrous text had a divine origin. On the other hand, when

she reflects on the plurality of religions around the world, each with their insights and great books, she feels she cannot be too confident that her own religion is the correct one. If she had to give odds, Faiza would say there's a 50/50 chance of Islam being true. In other words, Faiza is a perfect agnostic regarding the truth of Islam.

Does Faiza believe in Islam? The answer of course depends on what we mean by 'belief'. According to one standard definition, to believe something is to feel confident that it's true. Belief, in this sense, doesn't imply 100 per cent certainty, but it does imply confidence significantly greater than 50

per cent. To take a trivial example, I believe my sister is in London right now, as I know she spends 90 per cent of her life there. I'm not 100 per cent certain – maybe she's gone to Bath for a work trip – but I'm pretty confident. On this definition of belief, Faiza does not believe in Islam. She's not confident that it's false, but nor is she confident that it's true.

Does her lack of belief mean that it would be irrational for Faiza to practise Islam? It's hard to see why. Faith is not just an abstract, intellectual affair, but a matter of commitment and engagement. It would be absurd to engage with something as a possibility if you think it

has almost zero chance of being true. But from Faiza's perspective, Islam is a live possibility: it could be true. Faiza can choose to follow the Five Pillars of Islam as an expression not of certainty but of *hopeful commitment*. Indeed, there is something noble about living in hope that there is a deeper purpose to existence, in spite of your doubts.

## **Pascal's wager**

My suggestion here is somewhat reminiscent of 'Pascal's wager', the name given to the argument of the 17th-century mathematician Blaise Pascal that it's rational to bet on God's existence. Pascal reasoned as follows: if

we choose belief in God and it turns out that God exists, then we will gain infinite rewards in the afterlife; whereas if it turns out that God does not exist, then we've lost little, apart from maybe not being able to sleep in on a Sunday morning. According to Pascal, it's worth a punt on God.

There are a couple of familiar problems with Pascal's wager. For one, it relies on the idea that God will reward/punish each person depending on whether they accept the One True Religion, whereas many contemporary interpretations of religion don't have this implication.

And even if we accept this rather possessive conception of God, how do



we decide which religion is the right one? Pascal-style reasoning, at least, can't help us here.

However, Faiza's wager, as I am imagining it, is not primarily focused on the life to come but on the benefits of religion in this life. Through the regular and structured practice of her faith, Faiza can deepen her spiritual life over time. Through engagement with community and tradition, she can cultivate virtue and good community. Even if it turns out there is no God, Faiza has lost nothing and gained much. Let's turn now to Pete, who is what is called a religious fictionalist. He was raised a Christian in the US. Like Faiza,

he has spiritual convictions.

Experiences with psychedelics in his early 20s led Pete to believe that there is a reality greater than what we can perceive with our senses. He finds it hard to pin down exactly what this ‘greater reality’ is but likes to refer to it with [William James](#)’s term ‘the “more”’.

However, in contrast to Faiza, Pete is a resolute atheist, at least about the ‘Omni-God’ of traditional Western religion: all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good. In his personal investigations of the philosophical arguments for/against God’s existence, Pete struggled to find any merit in the

arguments for, but was overwhelmingly persuaded by the arguments against. Whereas Faiza is 50/50 on the truth of Islam, Pete finds it deeply implausible that an all-powerful and loving God would create a universe with so much suffering, and concludes on this basis that there is, at best, a 5 per cent chance of Christianity being true. We standardly use the phrase 'don't believe' to cover both the situation of Faiza and the situation of Pete, but they are not the same. While Faiza merely *lacks belief* in the religion of her birth, Pete positively *dis-believes* in his.

Would it make sense for Pete to continue to be a Christian, in spite of his

atheism? Surprisingly, there are ways of interpreting Christianity consistent with Pete's beliefs. Marcus Borg was a New Testament scholar and liberal theologian who formulated a conception of Christianity involving few of the beliefs standardly associated with Christianity, such as a literal resurrection and a personal God. In his [book](#) *The God We Never Knew* (1997), Borg affirmed the existence of God, but a God whose nature could not be expressed in human language, and hence who is not literally 'all-knowing' or 'all-powerful'.

This may strike readers as contrary to the 'Christian' idea of God. However, from the very early days of Christianity,

there has been a tradition of ‘apophatic’ or ‘negative’ theology, according to which God’s nature is beyond language. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (late 5th/early 6th centuries) talked of how God is ‘beyond every assertion’ and ‘beyond every denial’. And the late-14th-century text *The Cloud of Unknowing* was hugely influential in showing Christians how to move beyond the superficial descriptions of God found in ordinary worship to a deeper experience of a God beyond human characterisation. Even some of the Early Church Fathers, such as Origen (c184-253) and Gregory of Nyssa (c335-395) adopted the apophatic

approach. While Pete is an atheist about the Omni-God, it's not so clear that 'the "more"' of his psychedelic experiences differs from the God of apophatic Christianity.

## **What about the story of Jesus?**

What about the story of Jesus, including its many miraculous occurrences?

While there is much history we can get out of the gospels, Borg [argued](#) that, from a religious perspective, we should think of the Christian story not as conveying historical fact, but as expressing what he called the 'character and passion' of God. Through meditating on this story, in which God

is identified not with the king in his castle but with the naked, executed peasant – the guy who was born in a barn and hung out with the outcasts of society – we are afforded a deep insight into what God truly is. For Borg, the resurrection was not about a corpse coming back to life, but [about](#) the transcendent reality he knew through the character of Jesus still being alive and active in the world.

In other words, the Christian story is understood not as literal fact but as profound fiction, one that, as part of the Christian spiritual practice, facilitates a deeper connection with ultimate reality. That's 'religious fictionalism', an

approach of engaging with religion as important fiction. The philosopher John Hick [defended](#) a similar conception of religion to Borg but broadened to all religion. For Hick, all religions are connecting with the same ultimate reality, but doing so with culturally specific mythological language.

Different things work for different people. It's possible that Pete will find what he needs in Buddhism or personal spiritual practice. But it's also possible that the religious symbols from his culture and upbringing will retain a deep resonance for Pete, meaning that Christian practice 'works' for him in a way that, say, Buddhism does not. And



if he can attach a Borgian interpretation to the words he's hearing and saying in church services, then Pete could have the option of engaging with Christianity in a way that's consistent with his philosophical views.

Faiza and Pete are not 'believers' in the traditional sense, but they do have spiritual beliefs in a greater reality underlying the world we perceive with our senses. I personally find it harder to see the motivation for engagement with religion in the absence of any kind of belief in a transcendent reality (although there are some such [religious fictionalists](#)). However, even in the highly secular United Kingdom, belief

in a transcendent reality is not a fringe position. In a recent [survey](#), 46 per cent of UK adults agreed that ‘all religions have some element of truth in them’, and 49 per cent that ‘humans are at heart spiritual beings’. Some of these, of course, will be traditional religious believers. Other will identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’. The purpose of this article is simply to point out that there is a third option that many are not aware of, and that some may find attractive: religion without belief.

- i Source: <https://psyche.co/ideas/why-religion-without-belief-can-still-make-perfect-sense>
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