

Reimagining Evangelism

The surprising rebirth of belief in God

We continue our Reimagining Evangelism series, hearing from Justin Brierly, a freelance writer, speaker, and broadcaster who has become known for fostering dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. Here, Justin shares the growing shift he is seeing in openness to Christianity, particularly among influential cultural intellectuals, and the shift away from the era of New Atheism.



'I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.'
(John 4:35)

I recently received an email from a podcast listener saying that they've begun to call themselves a 'lapsed atheist' and even a 'reluctant Christian'. They're not the only one. Since launching *The Surprising*

Rebirth of Belief In God book and podcast series, I've received a stream of similar comments. Something has changed in our culture. There's a new receptivity to faith.

Some 20 years ago, I began to host weekly radio conversations between Christians and non-Christians at a time when New Atheism was a dominant cultural force. Anti-God books were topping the bestseller lists. The 'Atheist Bus Campaign' emblazoned red London buses with the slogan, 'There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life'. For several years, it became fashionable to dismiss religion in favour of science and reason.

But as the years wore on, more and more of the non-believers I met distanced themselves from this aggressive form of non-belief. In fact, New Atheism grew old pretty quickly. Once they had agreed that God doesn't exist and religion is bad for you, it turned out there was very little else they could agree on. Tearing down belief in God was easy. Finding something to replace God with was much harder.

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In recent years, I've been charting the rise and fall of New Atheism and the growth of a new conversation among secular intellectuals who are reconsidering the value of Christianity. People like the historian Tom Holland, co-host of *The Rest Is History* podcast, whose book *Dominion* tells the story of how the Christian revolution shaped the West's moral imagination.

Holland's own journey is an interesting example of the way in which the conversation on faith is changing. He told me how his childhood faith had 'sputtered out' by the time he had established a successful career writing popular historical books about the ancient world. However, the longer Holland spent time 'in the sandals' of the Greeks and Romans, the more he came to realise how alien their values were to his own as a modern 21st-century Westerner.

The Greco-Roman world cared little for the lives of women and children. The mass slaughter and enslavement of enemies was celebrated. Slavery was an unquestioned part of the economy. A senior Roman male had sexual claim to anyone – man, woman or child – who was his social inferior.

So, where had Holland obtained his own modern outlook on human rights, equality, consent, compassion and freedom?

The historian came to realise that those beliefs hadn't come from science, reason or atheism. In fact, they came from Jesus – someone who treated men, women and children with unfailing dignity, told his followers to love their enemies, and eventually died the kind of death reserved for rebels and slaves on a Roman cross.

Holland told me that – while he still struggles to believe in the supernatural claims of Christianity – he had come to recognise that, when it comes to his values, 'in almost every way I am a Christian'.

I believe more and more people, like Holland, are sensing that, in order to make sense of ourselves, we need a 'better story' than the one given to us by atheist secular culture.

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Perhaps you've noticed some high-profile intellectuals like former New Atheist Ayaan Hirsi Ali and her husband, the historian Niall Ferguson, coming to faith? Likewise, recent statistics in the UK, Europe and beyond are charting a renewal of interest in faith, especially among Gen Z.

Significantly, the stats show that people (especially Gen Z) are surprisingly open to saying 'yes' to invitations to church.¹ Arguably, there's never been a more fruitful time for evangelism in our culture.

Here are three ways in which I believe Christians and churches can embrace the new meaning-seekers in our culture.

1. Make them want it to be true

We need to learn as a church how to capture people's imagination again.

One of the best Christian communicators of the 20th century was C.S. Lewis, someone who was supremely gifted at making the intellectual case for faith in books such as *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem of Pain*. But his most successful evangelistic books were the fantasy novels, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Those stories made people wish that there really was a world full of magic, heroism and sacrifice with a supremely loving ruler at the centre of it. (Who has not, at some point in their life, checked the back of a wardrobe, just in case?)

The genius of Lewis's Narnia stories was that they revealed there is such a world, and that we must go and discover it in our own reality.

There will always be a place for helping people to make sense of the nuts and bolts of Christianity. Is there evidence for God? Do science and faith mix? Can I trust the Bible? And so on. This is the work of 'apologetics' – making a rational defence of faith.

But the reality is that, in our meaning-starved culture, most people aren't waking up in the morning asking for a philosophical argument for the existence of God. They are more likely to be asking for a reason to get out of bed because they feel anxious and disillusioned with the world.

So let's start with the questions they are actually asking: Why am I here? How can I find meaning in this life? Let's begin with their deepest fears, longings and hopes.

Blaise Pascal said, 'Make religion attractive, make good people wish it were true, and then show that it is.'

As we do that, let's remember to engage people's imagination through art, music, literature and film. That means using all our God-given creativity to show seekers why they would want this to be true. Then, perhaps, the door will be opened to showing that it *really* is true.



2. Keep Christianity weird

As I've spoken with many secular thinkers who find themselves attracted to Christianity, I often hear the same refrain: 'Keep Christianity weird'.

If they were to come back to church, they don't want something that looks the same as the culture, just another mouthpiece of popular opinion. They want something different, otherworldly, something that holds out another way of life.

When Tom Holland attends church, he goes to St Bartholomew the Great in London, the city's oldest church, dating back over 900 years. Why? Because he says the ancient stones, the beauty of the choral singing, and the mystery of the Anglo-Catholic ritual and liturgy 'transports' him into a different world.

But 'weird' can take many forms – from energetic hands-in-the-air charismatic worship where the Spirit moves dynamically, to deeply contemplative times of silence that are a challenge to our distracted culture.

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The point is this: we must lean into whatever the 'weird' is that defines our church practice. We've often assumed that these kinds of activities might seem off-putting to those exploring faith. In fact, it's often what they are looking for – something that offers an alternative to the materialistic and shallow nature of our present culture.

3. Create a church community that counters cancel culture

If we are going to welcome people into church, then we need to be ready for the questions, doubts and complex lives they bring with them.

The world is an unforgiving place, with ever more polarised political tensions. It's easy to be demonised and 'cancelled' on every side. But the church has to model something different. We must be a place of grace and community that can accommodate diversity and doubt, because what unites us, Jesus, is greater than anything that divides us.

We don't cancel people we disagree with – we practice forgiveness, humility, reconciliation, love, patience, and self-control. People exhausted by the culture wars are looking for such a space of grace.

Likewise, people are burned out by the 24-hour social media news cycle. They're feeling increasingly lonely in a world dominated by screens and devices. AI is taking the commodification of human existence to the next level. Technology offers many advantages but it is also creating a world where we can live completely independently of each other.

Today, a church is one of the few places where people can still find genuine human community. We need a place where we can look each other in the eye, learn to grow together despite our flaws and failings, and find a family we can call 'home'.

I believe that we have reached the sharp end of a 'meaning crisis' in our world. People are searching for a better story to make sense of their lives. People are ready to hear the story of God once again. Let's tell it.



Find out more

Justin's book and podcast, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*, are available from www.justinbrierley.com.

Justin speaks to Melanie on the Roots podcast about his experience in interviewing influential figures who have recently turned to faith, and shares stories of inspiration.

www.rootsforchurches.podbean.com