
I'm not religious, but ...

The Times (London); Dec 8, 2007; Celia Dodd; p. 10

Full Text:

(Copyright (c) Times Newspapers Limited 2007)

Over the past decades Britain has become an increasingly secular society. According to the most recent MORI poll, more than a third of us describe our outlook as "humanist" and only 10 per cent go to church each week. However, nearly half of us say that we believe in some sort of deity. From a television newsreader and an explorer to a funeral director, CELIA DODD talks to seven people about how they fill the God-shaped hole

THE ARTIST

Grayson Perry, 47, who won the Turner Prize in 2003, is also famous for his alter ego, Claire. He lives in North London with his wife and daughter.

"I've never been religious. I had a secular upbringing, although I went to a Church of England school. Religion always seemed a bit meaningless to me, yet most of the art that I love is religious in some way, and I've made a lot of work around religious themes. I think that God is a natural invention that human beings needed psychologically at some point in our development.

"We don't go to church at Christmas but we have our own traditional ritual on New Year's Eve when we share our worst and best moments of the year with close friends and family. It's always quite potent.

"Organising a culture around religious rituals and behaviours is good, even if they are meaningless. Religion encourages people to do good things, not just for each other but also artistically and communally. But I get p****d off when the goodness of religion is attributed to some mystic power rather than just basic human nature. I believe that we are all born good and that people have an innate ability to empathise with each other. My philosophy is 'live life now and act with love'. People get confused between being irreligious and amoral.

"I'm kind of envious of artists in history for their religious beliefs, because they had a ready-made set of myths and subjects to make art about. So for my last show in Japan in the summer I made up a religion with my teddy bear, Alan Measles, as a kind of deity. He's the nearest I've ever got to religion; he was a god in my childhood universe, so I've made effigies of him, a shrine, and I've designed a high priestess outfit for Claire.

"I also made a big work to do with Heaven. My heaven is a huge fantasy about what would be really nice. But it's absolutely personal; it might be horrible for other people. The word spiritual is one of my bugbears; it

has been so devalued. When I have feelings that other people would describe as a spiritual experience -when I'm filled with awe or love or a feeling of being part of something bigger it's no less of an experience because I attribute it to human nature and not to God.

Such experiences make me curious about what was in place in me at the time that produced them."

THE EXPLORER

Rosie Stancer, 47, braved horrendous conditions last May in her bid to become the first woman to trek solo to the North Pole. But she had to give up 89 miles from her goal. She lives in Essex with her husband and son.

"The first Christmas I spent on the ice was with a team of four other girls. I secretly fashioned a makeshift stocking out of a surgical glove and put chocolates in each finger, one finger for each team member. Two years later Christmas was spent solo on the Antarctic ice cap. God couldn't have felt closer. I was content to celebrate being alive and incredibly privileged to find myself in such a rarefied place. And I did unearth a present among my Christmas Day marching rations, a gold cross from my husband William and my son Jock. It has been to the top and the bottom of the world with me. Had they been there, it would probably have been the happiest Christmas I've ever had.

"For me, part of the point of every expedition is the spiritual and psychological side. These days we can't explore any farther on land; so it's all about exploring what lies deep inside ourselves, when survival is the only focus. I'm fascinated by the force that drives us and protects us. One reason I go solo is to intensify the experience, to see if I can get closer to this force, which I would call God.

"At times on the march I get into an almost monastic state of meditation. Alone on the ice I feel the layers of affectation and materialism peeling away. Your senses tune in and become more intuitive, more aware of other forces. You feel small but not insignificant. I've also often had a sense that there's somebody with me, which isn't so unusual in polar exploration, feeling another presence. It fits with my belief that most of us have a guardian angel. From a young age I've felt my maternal grandmother around me. I feel she's helping me out when things get a bit testing.

"My parents were both church-goers and at school we had chapel twice a day, but I got disillusioned with the repetitiveness and rigidity of church. The core values of Christianity are my ultimate umpire. They go with an overriding belief that you should live life to the full, hopefully setting a good -and perhaps even an inspirational -example to others.

"It's perhaps hypocritical but in extreme danger I pray. I also have a prayer, in my brother's handwriting, which I always take on expeditions. It's a protection against various forces, a spiritual suit of armour. I don't see why a form of afterlife shouldn't be possible."

"Like many people I've often had the experience of someone who has recently died coming back to say goodbye, often in a dream. It has happened so often, I'd be a fool to dismiss it."

THE LIFEBOATMAN

Gary Stanbury, 44, regularly faces life and death situations as helmsman on the RNLI lifeboat at Appledore, Devon. Last year he was awarded an RNLI bronze medal for gallantry. He lives in Devon with his wife; they have no children.

"You often get back after a rescue and feel like saying 'thank you; that was close'. I believe your life is mapped out when you are born, and that whatever happens, happens, and it's not my time to have an accident. I think there's a higher power, something that connects everything together, rather than a man with a beard. I feel most closely connected with it at sea.

"As a youngster I was never pushed into religion. I can understand why people get comfort from it, but I've got a fairly big family and I probably get more comfort from that. The only time I go to church is at Christmas and on Sea Sunday (usually second Sunday in July). My wife and I thought long and hard before deciding that it would be a bit hypocritical to marry in church.

"I have picked up bodies out of the sea. Things like that make you live life to the full. There aren't many clubs where someone is willing to give up his life for another member. I don't think wanting to help people has anything to do with religion. It's about respect for people, and it's a community thing; it's nice to put something back."

THE BROADCASTER

Anna Ford, 63, the former BBC newsreader, is now chair of the Index on Censorship and Chancellor of Manchester University. Her husband, the cartoonist Mark Boxer, died in 1988.

She has two daughters.

"I love singing hymns and carols. I still sing them on my own in the car sometimes and I love carol services. My father was a vicar, and if you go to church every Sunday as a child you can't help the rhythm of all the old prayers and psalms going into your head.

"I fell out of love with religion when I left home and read anthropology at university. My father and I never talked about it but I don't think that he would have been upset because his own religion became so individual and he retired early from the Church. What I dislike intensely about religion are these great hierarchies of power and wealth that represent male homophobia and misogyny. And the way that religion imbues people's lives with guilt and sin. I find the notion of worship really difficult because I think human beings have infinite possibilities to be mature

and in control of their own lives, and if we hand over our lives to someone else we remain in a childlike state.

"Although I never go to church, my moral code is founded on a basic Christian way of life, very good rules to live by.

"I'm sure there is a time to die and that if you are not terribly ill or in pain it must be satisfying to go towards the end of your life and tie up the threads.

My husband Mark died very well. He made a lot of jokes and had his friends in. He continues in the memories of the people who loved him; that is a sort of afterlife. The promise of any other sort of afterlife is a complete confidence trick. I'm not frightened of death. I believe that matter is indestructible and, therefore, the atoms I'm made of will become something else when I'm buried.

There's a nice continuity about the feeling that you came from something else and you go back into something else."

THE SCIENTIST

James Lovelock, 88, was one of the first scientists to alert the world to environmental dangers 40 years ago. This year he published *The Revenge of Gaia* (Penguin, Pounds 8.99). He lives in Cornwall with his second wife. They have four children.

"From the age of about 6 I was sent to the Quaker Sunday school in Brixton, South London, where we had discussions about cosmology and warnings not to look at the Old Testament. It's a strange sort of religion but it causes no conflict with science. For Quakers, God is the still small voice, not some old gentleman up in the sky. I left the Quakers partly because it led to many quarrels with my first wife, and partly because the attitude of our local meeting was all wrong. I regret it a bit.

"My parents weren't churchgoers and my mother eventually became a Quaker. But like most of my generation, I was marinated in Christianity as a child, with prayers at school every day. I first went to an Anglican church service when I was about 6, on my own; I heard the church bells and wandered in, and everyone was so welcoming that it left a kind of nice feeling.

"I don't go to church at Christmas and I didn't marry in church; I think it would be hypocritical since I don't support it otherwise. When I have attended church services I've never felt any need to pray or to bring God into my thinking, but I am moved by the ambience.

I am in every sense an agnostic. You can't be certain about anything if you're a scientist. I am delighted by the mystery in everything; it's what is so wonderful about life. I often think the greatest human problem is that we get too philosophical and try to explain everything. Nobody knows how the Universe started or who or what planned it. It is not impossible that there is a God, but there is virtually no evidence for it.

"You get absolutely wonderful moments of revelation if you are a scientist. The first discovery of Gaia was one, in 1965, when I was working at Nasa in California. I have no views whatsoever on burial rather than cremation. I think it is so improbable that there is any survival after death that it has never bothered me. I am very content with the idea that when I die all the parts of me will become part of Gaia (the Earth), which is a living system."

THE UNDERTAKER

John Weir, 54, has been a funeral director since leaving school at 17. He runs the family business in Rainham, Kent, where he lives with his wife and son.

"My work is a constant reminder of my own mortality. Recently I arranged the funeral of a 46-year-old who had been told just weeks earlier that he had only a short time to live. I wonder how I would have behaved in his situation and whether it would make me more inclined to believe in God. And it makes me think hard about what happens after death and what we're here for.

"I know that logically there's no evidence for God or Heaven. Yet sometimes when I'm out walking I look into the sky and wonder what's beyond. I cannot believe that we are the only beings in this Universe. And that makes me think, is there a higher intelligence? While I would love to believe that we have a soul, it's clear to me from my work that what is left when someone dies is just a shell. If there is a soul, where does it go? It's beyond my reasoning to conceive what would happen to it.

"Certainly all the stuff about spirits and mediums you see on television these days is a load of nonsense. In 37 years of dealing with dead people I have never experienced anything remotely ghostly, or anything to suggest that the spirit lives on.

"These days I'm open-minded about religion. I was nominally brought up Church of England. My parents didn't go to church but at school we had Christian assembly every morning. I won't go to church on Christmas Day, but tomorrow I am reading at the carol service in the village church near where I was born. I often find services interesting, but not uplifting.

"I must have sat in on thousands of funerals over the past 38 years. When I was an apprentice, funerals were nearly always religious and I seriously considered which religion was for me. What still appeals is the support that people clearly get from religion, although I've seen people get just as much comfort from secular services.

"Over the years I have found it increasingly hard to accept the notion of a higher power, particularly when I'm dealing with the parents of a child or a young person killed in a road accident. Sadly, deaths of that nature are common and because of my work I'm aware of it in a way that most people aren't.

"Some cases are still vivid in my mind years later. Bereaved relatives often ask whether I believe in God. I have to be as open as I can but careful not to influence them at such a vulnerable time."

THE NEWSREADER

Alastair Stewart, 54, co-presents the ITV lunchtime news and London Tonight. He lives in London with his wife and four children.

"One of the reasons I gave up on organised religion at my Catholic boarding school was the number of highly intelligent Benedictine monks who would say: "Ah, but it's an act of faith, you just have to trust God." I didn't think that was good enough, I still don't. I've covered many terrible tragedies since then, including Beslan and Lockerbie. While I still try to live in the faith that there is a greater purpose to life, the notion of an intelligent purpose behind the deaths of so many innocents is very difficult to grasp.

"By my mid-teens I was fed up of being bullied into Mass and I had begun to realise that you need philosophy, not vestments and rosary beads, for fundamental pointers to how to lead your life. I was particularly influenced by one monk, a very free thinker who later stepped out of the priesthood and ultimately Catholicism. He introduced me to Hemingway, Orwell and Teilhard de Chardin (the French Jesuit), who was duly dumped by the Catholic Church.

"My father wasn't upset when I lapsed; in fact, I think he was rather relieved. He was a very old school Scottish Catholic, who liked Latin and incense. When the Catholic Church got a bit liberal and modern I think he'd had enough. I still adhere to the fundamentals that I was raised to believe in: faith, hope and charity. I believe it's more than just a biological quirk that we're here.

"And I have great hope in humanity, that I can improve myself and work with others to improve themselves. Charity is absolutely fundamental to the way I try to lead my life and encourage my family to lead theirs, both in terms of working for organisations such as Care UK, and in the more general sense of helping other people.

"If I'm having a wrestling match with myself or with an issue, I go for a walk in the country on my own. That's when I feel I'm communing with some greater being.

And I put my hand up to asking for help from a higher power in moments of danger; when I was in Lebanon recently, for example."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.