

## Alister McGrath Why We Believe

Alister McGrath writes extensively on science and religion, having an academic background in both. While this book does explore some aspects of Christian faith, its main argument is that we need belief systems to give our lives texture and meaning.

His target throughout the book seems to be the unchallenged confidence of the loud and self-asserting 'New Atheists'. Against them he declares:

- There is no such thing as a universal rationalism that remains neutral and constant over time.
- It is circular to assert that reason can judge that reason is the primary arbiter of truth.
- Truth does not only exist if it can be demonstrably proven: torturing babies is wrong, despite the lack of scientific evidence.
- The God that the atheists reject is seldom the God anyone believes in.

But he has more sympathy with new scientists who tend to offer not proofs but temporary 'best explanations' and models – thereby presenting a less antagonistic stance to ideas from other disciplines. Indeed, the mathematician Penrose – not a religious man – asserted that mathematics wasn't invented it was 'out there' waiting to be discovered.

The point of a faith, on the other hand, is to offer meaning, an encompassing narrative, values by which to live and a sense of the transcendent. It is a particular way of looking at and interpreting the world.

McGrath addresses the problem of suffering. How can you believe in a God of love who creates a world of pain? He thinks the problem is in the question. Since the Enlightenment we have assumed that we can find the causes and reasons for everything. An older generation sought to find ways to endure or overcome pain rather than explain it. One Christian view is that all is NOT well, and yet God is with us.

He suggests the world today is drowning in knowledge and starving in wisdom. As it abandons God, rather than find reason – as many had been hoping - it has sanctified secular alternatives: political beliefs or cultural norms. Among these are some very toxic beliefs. But the solution is not to ban belief, rather to find better ways of believing. He acknowledges that doubt is uncomfortable but prefers it to certainty which he considers ridiculous and dishonest. Human flourishing depends on truth, purpose and meaning. Reason alone is inadequate to the task. Belief offers us a more comprehensive map.

The book is a helpful reminder that there is no such thing as a neutral position. Even what is judged 'reasonable' changes over time and across cultures – and secular reason itself is a position that is chosen rather than something 'self-evident'. The simple provable facts are not sufficient to lead to a satisfying existence, nor is it enough to be fed and housed. Our hearts and minds need more than this and our beliefs are necessary to develop our humanity. It is a book of compassion and wisdom, offering a strand to grasp in a disconcerting world.

