

Why I Try to Believe: Nathan Brown Confronting Atheism | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Nathan Brown (*right*) and Ryan Bell are good friends. Brown is book editor at Signs Publishing Company in Australia and Bell, the former pastor of the Hollywood Seventh-day Adventist Church, has come off a year-long experiment with atheism.



Nathan Brown

Bell (*below*) now says that he doesn't think God "exists." The world, he explains, "makes more sense to me as it is, without postulating a divine being who is somehow in charge of things." Brown has published a book that is, in substantial part, a response to his friend's experience. It's called *Why I Try to Believe: An Experiment in Faith, Life and Stubborn Hope*, and his friend is author of the foreword. Ryan Bell says Brown's book is "likely among the most honest efforts to grapple with faith in the midst of doubt that you will find."



Ryan Bell

His book is a memoir as well as a theological reflection, a record of why he persists in Christian conviction "despite challenges and disappointments" such as come, he suggests, to any thoughtful person of faith. The word "trying" in the book's title expresses "healthy honesty," what he also calls "humility." It's an acknowledgement, too, that many of his questions remain "unanswered."

Titles for the book's ten chapters aptly summarize the author's themes. After "Trying to Believe" comes "Hoping to Believe," where Brown quotes Jim Wallis's remark that two groups may be the best at viewing the world "realistically." They are "the cynics and the saints," and they differ in this crucial regard: the saints, but not the cynics, enjoy "the presence, power and possibility of hope."

Hoping that life is "more than molecules and mathematics" changes us for the good, he says, and "reconnects us to the present."

Brown has published a novel, and so it should be no surprise that one chapter is called "Believing the Stories." He describes a visit with his wife to the Holy Land, where the commercial uses of the scriptural record seem off-putting, but helped him realize that seeing "holy places" is not so much the point as is rediscovering "holy stories." The following chapter, "Clinging to Belief," recounts stories about C. S. Lewis and the biblical character of Job as a means of dealing with inexplicable sorrows and griefs. "Believing Jesus" suggests that theories about "how salvation works" may distract from the deeper point of the story. Quoting from one of Ryan Bell's sermons, he emphasizes that Jesus "knows something more about life than we do," and then shares his favorite "picture" of Jesus, one that is often "skipped over." Found in Matthew 12, it shows Jesus defining his mission in terms of Isaiah 42; he proclaims "justice to the nations," and refuses all the while to "crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle."

The book is thus not only a defense of faith but also a critique of faith gone wrong. True faith is not escape from responsibility but alignment with the divine initiative for justice on earth. To be, with Abraham as well as with Jesus, a "blessing to others" means taking up a kind of holy "activism." You "try to believe"—Chapter 7 is calling "Wanting to Believe"—in order to be "good for our world."

Not that Christ's victory over death is shunted aside. From the perspective of faith, the grave cannot, Brown thinks, be the end, but he does resist unbiblical borrowings from Platonic philosophy that devalue the physical life God has given us. "If belief makes us less engaged with the life and world we are given, we have something askew," he declares.

The theme of humility returns in Chapter 9, where he addresses his own struggle with hypocrisy. He goes on to suggest that critics of religion may be less offended by “inconsistency of living” than by “pretending” to have somehow risen above it. He offers a possible summary of Jesus’ message, “Let’s go for a walk together,” and then says, “No matter how hypocritical and faltering I might be, grace invites me still.”

The book is short—about 120 pages in all—and ends with another reference to Ryan Bell. Precisely in the context of his friend’s “experiment with atheism,” Brown says, “I have chosen again to try to believe.”

In the context of Adventist life today, the book is encouraging not just for its evocation of faith in the midst of secularity but also, and perhaps especially, for its candor and humility. This helps to make it a good read, at once deeply relevant and fully comprehensible. The Gospel of Matthew can speak of “doubt,” even among the disciples (Matthew 28:16–20), and then proceed immediately, without handwringing or raising of eyebrows, to its final call to participation in the mission. The book is thus an expression, despite potential huffing and puffing from naysayers, of, precisely, the Matthean vision.

Here now is further perspective from the author:

Question: *You’re a book man—a reader, writer and editor of books, a self-described “word nerd.” And you invest so much of yourself in Adventist publishing, in other people’s words. Why do you think all this makes a difference? Why, to the church, should words matter so much?*

Answer: Despite all the other forms of communication and media, books remain important cultural artifacts. They still matter to both readers and writers because they offer the most considered and developed setting for ideas, stories, conversations and arguments. A book is a serious undertaking for a writer, a publisher and a reader, so should demand the best from all three. Compared to a comment on a blog or social media post, we expect that a book is

more than mere reaction, has been through a significant process of mediation and refinement, and has a life expectancy beyond tomorrow afternoon. In the church, some argue that our message and our beliefs are so important that we should use any and every means available. By contrast, I would argue that our message and our beliefs are so important that we should use the best means available, in both format and creative development.

Question: *In Why I Try to Believe you acknowledge, even apologize for, the evils done in the name of religion. Still, you take faith and hope to be good for the world, and one reason you try to believe is so that you can be good for the world. Your reason seems to be related to the theme of “Do Justice,” but can you say more?*

Answer: We can’t talk about faith in the world today without this kind of acknowledgment. I read some years ago the suggestion that apologetics today needs a lot more plain apology. But where we go after that is an important question. It seems to me that the better response to bad religion is not no religion, but better religion. In much of my writing and editing work—of which both these books are good examples (I hope)—I try to share my hopes for what faith can be, even what it ought to be. And as I read the Bible, its description of faith includes a real, active and practical passion for justice—and that must be good for the world. Among other motivations, we believe and act for the benefit of those outside the narrower definitions of our faith.

Question: *Your book is a wrestling with doubt, and with questions life throws us “in the form of our sorrows and joys, grief and triumphs, disappointments and hopes.” But two other themes, honesty on the one hand and humility on the other, are also prominent. So if doubt is a problem, might it also be, in some sense, a virtue?*

Answer: In doubt are the seeds of both change and growth. Questions are often more useful than rote answers. But we need to find healthy ways to be honest about our doubts, at the

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same time as keeping these doubts in perspective and recognizing that living in tension does not mean we are unable to believe. Let's be honest about our doubts and humble with our questions, which means we are also prepared to doubt our doubts and question our questions.

Question: *Ellen White said famously that God has never removed the possibility of doubt. She said we have "evidence enough," but added that our beliefs about God "must ever remain clothed in mystery..."*

Answer: Faith is a complicated question, particularly when we recognize we are dealing in what we cannot prove. After all, the incomprehensibility of God is among the attributes that make God worthy of being called God. But mystery does not mean we can't know—although perhaps only "through a glass darkly"—or choose to trust.

Question: *You quote Jim Wallis to the effect that only "cynics and saints" see the world realistically. What do you mean by that?*

Answer: The quote talks about the choices we make when we look at our lives and the world around us. The first choice is whether we ignore the reality of our various situations, then we choose how we respond to those realities. Wallis' suggestion is that we choose either despair or cynicism—as a kind of coping mechanism—or hope. Ultimately, I believe we can choose to hope in ways that are both realistic and transformative.

Question: *On a trip to the Holy Land with your wife, you realized that the point was not so much to visit "holy places" as to rediscover "holy stories." Say more. Why do stories figure so importantly in your understanding of faith?*

Answer: Probably because that is my way of understanding life. With degrees in English, writing and literature, I am well trained in thinking about—and thinking in—story. Stories are significant in what it means to be human,

giving shape and meaning to our experiences and ideas. Unsurprisingly, this is also the way that the Bible presents faith to us. At its core is the story of Jesus—and the stories He told. But I also wonder if the books that are "opened" in the Bible's judgment scenes (see, for example, Revelation 20:12) might not be, as I seem to have assumed growing up, some kind of accountant's ledger tallying all the rights and wrongs, but instead might be the recorded stories of each of our lives, reminding us that our lives do matter, and allowing for much greater nuance than the bare statistics of our lives. Sorry, distracted there with an idea I have been thinking on recently—but, yes, stories matter.

Question: *Alluding to Moses' great sermon in Deuteronomy, you suggest at the end of the book that choosing to believe is the "key to your life." Your whole book is about why this is so, but I still wonder what single thing you might say in defense of the claim if your friend Ryan Bell were listening in just now?*

Answer: From the conversations I have had with Ryan around this book, we have found common ground in the idea of choice as a key part of the questions of belief, not blind choice but nonetheless a choice or choices we each make. When he and I make different choices in relation to faith, that questions each other's choice, which can strain friendship, but should not be the end of the conversation. So I would say to Ryan, "Thank you for listening to and contributing to my attempt to explain why I choose to believe. And, as mentioned in the book, I pray for you still—in what I hope is a friendly, non-combative, non-condescending way." ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum. This interview appeared on the *Spectrum* web site April 23, 2015.



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