Giving up God: Losses and gains

An existential audit

Geoff Heath FRSA

Formerly Principal Lecturer in Counselling and Human Relations, University of Derby, UK
Geoffheath@aol.com

But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us there is only the trying.
The rest is not our business.

T S Eliot
'Four Quartets'

Introduction

In 2004 I was contacted by a BBC researcher with a view to being included in a discussion about why I ceased to be a Christian and became a humanist. I was phoned 'out of the blue' and had a fascinating conversation with the research assistant. Her contact with me was in response to the publication of my book: *'Believing in Nothing and Something: A Humanist Approach to Values and Beliefs'* (2003). She started by asking me what I missed about Christianity. In our conversation I outlined some of the points which I have since reflected on and which I indicate below. The mains issues which I mentioned to her were therefore the *losses,* but I was also keen to point out the *gains.* Later I was invited to give two short talks (2 minutes each !!) which summarised my humanist position in the BBC Radio Derby series on the 'A – Z of Beliefs'. These are now available on the British Humanist Association website under: *Humanist thought for the day.*

What follows is a more considered position than the one which I gave 'off the top' to the BBC researcher. I decided to explore losses and gains in some detail because I sense that many people are anxious about the consequences of 'losing' God - the fear of loneliness. Some seem to hold on to a belief that their fate is in the stars. Others hope that there is a vague 'force which is greater than ourselves' with assumed vaguely benevolent intentions. Others believe intensely and dogmatically – as if their life depended on their beliefs, which in an existential sense it does. Yet others may go along with the pretence of believing because they appreciate the social and communal life of their faith community. The idea of God seems to allow people to feel that they are somehow part of a bigger meaningful purpose. 'Intelligent Design' – creationism by another name - is a recent attempt to avoid the worrying thought of the randomness of existence. God is a sort of flow with which to go. To accept that we are on own and that we have to make every effort to make the best of it is, it seems, quite a daunting thought. It's certainly challenging. From my own point of view the challenge when I gave up God was to revise and review what I thought that my life had meant hitherto and to create a very different sense of identity, meaning and purpose. It's a very worthwhile task, but it is not

easy. Michael Shermer's research (quoted in Wolpert 2006 p 130) on the basis of belief in God among members of the Sceptic Society in the USA found: *that* (belief in God*) brings comfort and alleviates the fear of death.* It does not surprise me that many seem to opt for vague versions of gods as existential comfort blankets. I do not wish to sound too disparaging. We all need comfort and it comes in various forms. However, the comfort derived from believing in a universal and eternal God not only becomes a deep habit along with religious rituals and activities but also elevates this version of comfort into a cosmic principle. It tends to exclude those who eschew this form of comfort and to denigrate those who believe differently. It endows what is only a particular perspective with spiritual and universal significance. Beliefs in various gods tend to create sharp 'us' and 'them' distinctions – almost tribal. Changing habits of belief and behaviour which are deep-seated, familiar, unconscious, socially reinforced, identity-forming and comforting is very difficult, whether they are religious or not. Hence, *criticism of our beliefs can feel like criticism of ourselves*. (Wolpert 2006 p 5). I have sympathy with Hanif Kureishi's statement: *I think that most people's beliefs actually get in the way of their lives*. (BBC Radio 3, series on 'Belief' with Joan Bakewell, 3 January 2007). They can get in the way of other people's lives too.

What follows is not so much a discussion about the existence or otherwise of God, but an exploration of some of the lived consequences which I experienced when I gave up believing in God. In summary: Losing God but gaining confidence. It is an existential audit.

Losses.

These are the losses of which I became aware while I was considering giving up God. I only became aware of some of them later.

1 Loss of sense of belonging to a religious community with birth to death connotations. I no longer have a community to which I belong. I live in a geographical area, but that is not a community. I have neighbours, but we are infrequent communicators – we are not a community. The Labour Party – from which I resigned over the illegal, immoral and deeply unwise war on Iraq – was not a community. Loss of community is a fairly widespread problem for many more people than myself. I am fortunate in having a family and a small number of highly valued friends.

2 Loss of a sense of being part of a divine purpose for the whole of life. This involved the loss of a sense of having special status in the overall meaning of things. I have lost any sense of belief that I am part of a metaphysical cosmic plan or purpose. I have therefore lost any sense of being supported by divine forces or purposes.

3 Loss of sense of myself as a child of God – loss of a sense of dependency. In a sense, and paradoxically, there is also a loss of a sense of status which goes along with this loss of dependency. We gain status by that with which we identify

ourselves. Our status is affirmed by other people's perception of this identification. If we cease to adhere to those identifications we consequently lose status. This loss of status erodes confidence and undermines aspects of identity. People change their perceptions of us. As Bishop Berkeley's (1685 – 1753 CE) dictum has it: *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived. He meant that we have existence because we are perceived by God. But I suggest that it is also the case that if people change their perceptions of us then in some respects we ourselves change. We are, to some extent, what others perceive us to be. I explored some of these issues in my paper: *Beliefs and Identity* which I gave at the Multifaith Centre at the University of Derby and at the University of Nottingham Humanist Society in 2005. *

Identity is interactive and identity is related to ways in which we perceive and are perceived. Identity also depends on a well functioning, undamaged brain. Damaged brains can change identity. (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1999, Rose 2005).

4 Loss of any ultimate, externally derived purpose or reason for life and living. Loss of sense of ultimate significance within the divine scheme of things.

Some other aspects of loss of significance occur when one retires from work. Such losses arise from lack of relatedness, belonging and community. Another common experience of loss of meaning, purpose and identity is that which occurs after bereavement. Divorce is another form of bereavement. There are many ordinary losses. Managing losses is one of life's unavoidable tasks.

Losing God is a special sort of bereavement. Loss of relationships involves, among other things, a loss of people with whom to engage in activities. In important respects we are what we do. Identity is closely related to agency and most of our agency is in relation to people. Giving up God involves a loss of identity in terms of no longer being 'related' to God. I no longer engage in God-related activities such as going to church, seeking God's guidance and support and praying. In terms of the famous hymn by Robert Bridges based on words by Joachim Neander (1650 –1680 CE): I lost the assumption that 'all my hope on God is founded'.

5 Loss of a divine being to whom I could say 'Thank you' for the good things of life – beauty, other people, food, happiness and being itself.

6 Loss of sense of the Christian year and calendar. The great Christian festivals now mean nothing to me. Only secular holidays and the seasons (which I thoroughly enjoy and appreciate) are important ways of shaping the year.

* It is available on the British Humanist Association website. (Enter: *bha on Beliefs and Identity* into search engine). Also available on: www.bowlandpress.com click on 'Seminar papers'.

7 Loss of sense of an after life when I would meet again with relations and loved ones. This was never a central aspect of my Christian belief, so that is not much of a loss.

8 Loss of a sense of my personal history in the Church. I lost a central personal narrative. In a sense I felt distanced from my past. The past felt strange if not exactly another country.

9 Loss of the friends who were disturbed when I left Christianity. Other people sometimes find it difficult to accept changes which challenge their own insecurities and uncertainties.

10 I lost pre-packaged beliefs and moral standards, but I was free to decide on my own beliefs and to make my own moral choices.

11 Loss of any hope of divine reparation and forgiveness for sufferings caused and sufferings experienced. For me there is no longer a realm of God and goodness where all will be forgiven and all will be well. Suffering is just that – suffering and there it stays. It's up to individuals with as much support as they can muster to make the most of their suffering. But suffering, particularly suffering deliberately caused by others which inflicts humiliation, gratuitous death, pain and torture, this suffering is an extreme expression of human cruelty. Man's inhumanity to man. Life is not vaguely 'all for the best'. It is often for the worst. We are a strange species of animal.

When I was religious, suffering – whilst very problematic – was nevertheless understood as being part of God's overall plan for salvation. Indeed, in the Christian mythology God was believed to have turned the suffering of his own son into the redemption of the world. Suffering was not pointless it was redemptive. Suffering was not just suffering. Death was not just death, there was physical or metaphorical resurrection for those who believed the right things.

As I ponder these significant losses I conclude that it's these kinds of needs and beliefs, and the associated anxiety which contemplating such losses evokes, which I sense keep people believing in some form of God and which make them retain their sometimes tenuous relationship with a 'god community'. I think that it's not so much God and 'his' numerous, complex, contested and frequently conflicting attributes in whom they believe so much as their need for, and belief in, their faith community. Faith groups meet this deep human need to belong. Believing, I suggest, is a corollary of belonging. We need to believe. (Dennett 2006, Wolpert 2006 explore issues around the propensity to believe).

I also sense that the reason why some people, particularly those who have been ordained, continue to belong and to believe is that if they formally resigned, rather than hang on with serious criticisms and frequent anguish, they would be accepting that major parts of their lives and work have been 'wasted' and were a 'mistake'. There are also issues

around accommodation (tied cottage), pension, what other job to do and what family, friends and others might think.

Dawkins (2006 p 325) quotes from Don Barker's *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist:*

> (this) *is the story of his gradual conversion from devout fundamentalist minister and zealous travelling preacher to the strong and confident atheist he is today. Significantly, Barker continued to go through the motions of preaching Christianity for a while after he had become an atheist, because it was the only career he knew and he felt locked into a web of social obligations. He now knows many other American clergy-men who are in the same position as he was but have confided only in him, having read his book.*

I needed to work through all these issues myself. However, I have actually concluded that my Christian belief period and my ordination as a Methodist Minister were anything but wasted. My time as a Christian and my brief period in the Methodist Ministry have given me important insights into why and how people believe in their various gods and become and remain members of their various religious groups. This loss also resulted in my pursuit of a new career in psychology, counselling and human relations. I still took people seriously even without God to support that seriousness. Being a member of the human species is, for me, still a serious business intellectually, ethically and existentially. Dawkins' (2006) book is not only a detailed and persuasive critique of the bizarre and sometimes dangerous contents of religious beliefs but it is also a very stimulating read. It ought to be read by all who assume or assert that their belief in God is valid, should be shared by others – or worse, foisted on them. (See the interesting review of *'The God Delusion'* by H Allen Orr in 'The New York Review of Books' 11 January 2007).

It may seem strange to say, but I now conclude that my time as a Christian played an important part in my later development as a humanist. In the briefest way I would put it as follows:

My time as a Christian believer and student of theology, especially philosophical theology, ensured that I took the process of deciding what to believe seriously. I gave careful consideration to the kinds of evidence which might support my beliefs. I still do.

A dictum which has guided my humanist search for beliefs has been that of William of Ockham (circa 1288 – 1348 CE): *Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity*. I therefore try to believe as little as possible, not as much as possible. I also try to develop a sense of coherence in my various beliefs.

But there is no doubt that to lose all these religious beliefs, hopes and comforts leaves a great sense of void, of existential emptiness. Giving up belief in God is not an easy option – at least it was not so for me. It is a unique loss. My work in the Methodist Ministry, my house, my future pension, some of my relationships, my identity, my status – all were at stake. The good news is that losses also produced freedoms. Freedoms which created considerable challenges. Eric Fromm's book: *Fear of Freedom* was well titled. For

example, meanings for my life had to be invented when I gave up believing in God. I had the freedom and therefore the challenge of creating meanings. Meaning was no longer there to be discovered in scriptures, rituals, customs and traditions. In a crucial, sometimes lonely but deeply satisfying sense I had the responsibility for deciding what to believe. I say 'lonely' but I have excellent friends and I read superb books. I do have a sense of a community of family and friends and I also have a sense of being engaged in a very worthwhile process – that of being human. It's the only process I have !

Gains.

Some of the gains are the obverse of the losses – but not in a trivial 'other side of the coin' sense. I shall emphasise the word 'feeling' because *feelings* are intrinsic to our being in the world, even more basic than our *ideas* about the world. In terms of our evolution feelings preceded ideas and are still the underpinnings of all our thinking and behaving. Feelings are therefore unavoidable components of the beliefs which we hold, of our relationships, of our sense of belongings and indeed of our sense of being. (Damasio 1999).

1 I felt a sense of freedom to be myself and not having to bother whether I am pleasing God or not. Strangely, loss of God was basically a liberating experience. The fact of losing what I termed above as a sense of dependency and false status allowed me to leave behind an infantile immaturity. Losing God turned out to be a very positive, self-affirming and developmental act.

2 I now experience the benefit of deciding what to feel guilty about – although old guilts still remain. Christianity had largely pre-determined what I should feel guilty about. Now I could come to my own views on guilt. This means, in complex ways, that I began to take a greater sense of responsibility for myself. Inappropriate guilt is the debilitating residue of many childhoods – not only religious. Feeling less guilty about myself as a person and about my actions does not mean that I do not feel guilty from time to time, but I feel more in charge of what I feel guilty about. I am much more able to ask: *Why do I feel guilty about that ?* I try to relate to others in a guilt free and positive way. Relationships based on inappropriate guilt are constrained, inhibited, collusive, unproductive and defensive.

3 Feeling less threatened by the various forms of developing scientific knowledge – indeed coming to feel stimulated and challenged by such radically changing information. Being able to tackle ideas in their own right without having to consider whether they 'fit' into Christian teaching. I no longer have to wonder whether the latest scientific discovery will undermine my theology. My knowledge base, whilst severely limited, is constantly expanding. That's a stimulating and enhancing experience. My engagement with science and other sources of knowledge is actually exciting.

4 Feeling therefore less defensive about my own views and being able to listen seriously to the views of others. I found that I was beginning to take other people more seriously because I saw them and myself as all in the same human boat, whereas as a Christian believer I looked upon others as spiritually and existentially deficient. Then other people were needing to be saved by the God in whom I believed. Now I have a much stronger sense of my own common humanity – but I also believe that I am an animal – the product of random evolution. Something of a change from being a 'special child of God'!

5 Feeling much more open about the world and other people.

6 Feeling much more tolerant about other people and their different ideas and beliefs. Having said that there's a big caveat. I find it very difficult to tolerate dogmatic fundamentalisms of whatever misogynistic, homophobic, patriarchal, exclusionary, reductionist kind. Dogmatism in its various guises causes me concern, so I shall digress in order to explore it in a bit more detail. Dogmatism is based on seriously flawed and naïve understanding of epistemology.

I find it difficult to understand why so many people seem to accept ancient, pre-scientific ideas portrayed in scriptures and which are interpreted by largely autocratic, patriarchal and usually unaccountable authorities. Perhaps there is an imagined sense of authenticity about the past which is safely cocooned and which seems to betoken 'ancient wisdom' as if such wisdom were the prerogative of the past and is encapsulated immutably in divinely inspired scriptures. This sort of comforting, fantasy nostalgia obviously beguiles many people. It seduces people by not requiring critical thinking – indeed by eschewing doubt. You can belong if you believe or if you behave as if you believe.

I also find that form of dogmatism known as *scientism* difficult, namely the epistemologically dubious notion that scientific methodologies are the only ways in which to understand reality, human experiences and human meaning-making. The reduction of all human experience to a mere scientific mode of knowing is, of course, a rather dogmatic belief system. I would assert that multiple meanings, different values and conflictual ethical stances are not susceptible to scientific analysis without remainder. They are unlikely to be able to be understood by scientific methodologies but are no less important for that. Meanings, values and morals may all be *influenced* by scientific knowledge, but I cannot see how they can be ultimately subsumed by such knowledge. The very notion that I take my own and others' multifaceted human experience seriously is not a scientifically valid or validatable statement.

The extremely complex moral problems which are thrown up by scientific discoveries and potentials – stem cell research, cloning, animal experiments for human benefit, face transplants, nuclear power, pre-emptive attacks on sovereign states, euthanasia, abortion to name just a few – are not in themselves scientific

problems and are not susceptible to scientific resolution. Indeed, their resolution is not definitive at all, but is the outcome of a careful ethical analysis which arrives at a partial decision based on choice and some kind of consensus among those making the decision. Such decisions can be and are revoked in the light of subsequent information and changes in ethical understanding.The validity of the decision depends on prior and new ethical positions and not on reproducible causal relationships and interactions. There are numerous other social, legal and political issues requiring decisions which are quite incapable of scientific analysis. For example: Should the tax system be more or less redistributive ? Should suspected terrorists be detained without trial ? Should this gay couple be allowed to adopt children ? Should religious organisations be required to conform to the laws on equality of opportunity ? And so on and on. Such issues and decisions change over time. The idea that science will ultimately solve all issues and that *when we have unified enough certain knowledge, we will understand who we are and why we are here* (Wilson 1998 p 5) is not a scientific statement at all even though Wilson is a famous scientist and founder of socio-biology. It is a *belief assertion* and a naïve one at that. It is not even a scientific hypothesis and is therefore essentially incapable of scientific testing, verification or falsification. There are many questions which Wilson's confidence raise. I will pose two: How could we know when we had *enough* certain knowledge ? And: How could we know that the knowledge which we had was *certain knowledge ?* His confidence is shared by Professor Peter Atkins who asserted in the Channel 4 programme 'The Trouble with Atheism' (18 December 2006): 'We will be able to explain everything through science'. It was not clear what Atkins meant by 'everything'. I am reminded of an Einstein aphorism: *Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.*

These are scientistic and utopian assumptions about the ability of science to remove all human delusion and to create a better and 'final' version of 'rational' humanity. The desire to change/control human nature(s) has a long and worrying history. Some 'utopias' have a habit of becoming both totalitarian and oppressive.

Let us suppose that at a future date (some) scientists assert along with Wilson (as fundamentalist exponents of some religions have done and still do assert): *Now we have enough certain knowledge to know who we are and why we are here*. What would happen to the billions of people who disagreed ? How might the sceptics and the 'believing otherwise' be convinced ? Would the sceptics be forcibly re-educated for denying 'the Truth' ? Would they be prevented from propagating views which opposed 'the Truth' of scientism ? Scientistic dogmatism can seem distressingly similar to religious fundamentalisms.

In spite of problems arising from human diversity (Sacks 2003) I suggest that multiple perspectives on human meanings are more valid than the imposition of a

single meaning perspective. I think that it is not only safer but also more realistic to assume along with Sen (2006) that we all inhabit 'multiple identities'. There is no single, simple 'me' – or 'you'. No singular 'human nature'. In summary: I doubt whether rationality can explain everything.

Dogmatic atheism, linked with extreme scientific reductionism, is based on a serious lack of understanding of epistemological problems on the one hand and existential issues and concerns on the other. Wilson's confidence takes its place alongside other creedal assertions which mistake belief for certainty and all of which are similarly flawed by their excessive epistemological confidence and existential simplicity. There are no obvious grounds for *certainty* in human knowledge. Dogmatism of all varieties is based on the inappropriate need for epistemological certainty. There is, I suspect, no single, simple solution to the insoluble complexity of the human condition.

Wolpert's statement: *It is very difficult to get reliable evidence to show whether one is right or wrong* (2006 p xi) is more suitably humble and realistic.

I've taken the time to mention epistemological problems, albeit briefly, because of the crucial significance and consequences of the view that the human mind is incapable of standing outside itself in order to understand everything else - mind is *necessarily* brain function (Rose 2005). A crucial consequence of this is that it is not possible to know anything for certain. The brain is part of that which it is seeking to understand. This is basic to my own qualified approach to human knowledge. In brief jargon terms: The strong version of Cartesian mind/body dualism is not on. Epistemological certainty, derived from rational thought, is a trap for many unwary, whether religious or not.

Epistemological problems, constantly addressed by historical and contemporary philosophers, are also interestingly addressed by the biologist Steven Rose. He puts it well:

If, as I have argued, the brain cannot be understood except in a historical context, how much more so is it the case that our understanding of the brain cannot itself be understood except in its historical context. Our knowledges are contexted and constrained, so that the questions and the answers that seem self-evident to us today were not so in the past and will not be in the future. Nor would we see things as we do had the sciences themselves developed in a different socio-cultural framework. The search for 'truth' about the material world cannot be separated from the social context in which it is conducted. (Chapter titled: 'What we know, what we might know and what we can't know' in Rose 2005 pp 189-190).

Habermas (2003) in his book: *The Future of Human Nature* deals with some of the complex relationships between ways in which we know things, current scientific knowledge in genetics and the moral issues which are raised.

Issues around consciousness and first person/third person forms of knowing are contemporary examples of explorations of epistemological issues. (McGinn 2004 and Humphrey 2006).

Now, back to the 'Gains'.

7 Feeling able to change my ideas and beliefs if I think that this is appropriate. This freedom and flexibility follows from my position about the uncertainty of human knowing. From my point of view it is this very uncertainty which is the basis for creative and on-going dialogue. We can, potentially, have constructive existential engagement with each other only *because* our knowledge is uncertain. Indeed, the very possibility of interesting discussions rather than the exchange of tedious monologues exists *because we do not know the truth*. It's because they assume that they have the truth that I find dogmatists boring and inflexible. There's no dialogue with dogma. There's no conversation with those who are certain.

8 Feeling able to engage with other people on their terms and not merely on my own. I think that I am much more empathic.

9 Feeling free from the obligation to 'convert' people, although I am still interested in sharing my ideas with others. Sharing, exploring, extending, criticising and discussing, not converting. (See Sacks 2003 on the importance of conversation).

10 Feeling a larger person. This may seem a strange notion. I mean that I feel a great deal more confident, less defensive, more open-minded.

11 Feeling more in charge of myself, more responsible for myself.

12 Feeling accountable only to other people for my actions rather than to an invisible and all pervasive God who tends to be very critical as well as forgiving.

13 Freedom to consider ideas on what I think are their own merits rather than having to fit ideas into a pre-formed theological template. Even in the Methodist (Protestant !) Church there were strong pressures to believe the 'right' things. Particularly at theological college these pressures were considerable. Confident and open ability to question and debate were actively discouraged. I now feel free to question anything which seems to me to need a dose of scepticism – and this applies to my own beliefs and actions as well as those of others. I summed up my thinking on issues around freedom in another paper which I gave at the Multifaith Centre and Nottingham University Humanist Society in 2006: *Freedom of Speech in a Multicultural Society*. *

* It is available on the British Humanist Association website. (Enter: *bha on Freedom of Speech in a Multicultural Society* into search engine). Also available on: www.bowlandpress.com click on 'Seminar papers'.

14 Feeling more confused about the world and yet at the same time more open to create my own sense of meaning about myself and the world. I have come to value the benefits of being confused. Confusion and curiosity are growth points.

15 I am no longer attacked or threatened for what I decide to believe – with the exception of some fundamentalist religionists who assert that my parlous condition is leading me to various hells.

In theological college I was threatened with the statement that I might be in the wrong ministry because I posed questions about the nature of theology and about my own and their beliefs. I was viewed as somewhat heretical and was accused of arrogance because I proposed a different view of the Atonement – one in line with the ideas of the late John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich who had recently written his radical book: 'Honest to God' (1963).

I now feel confident in believing what I want to believe and in being critical of others' beliefs as well as of my own. Whatever I believe I am a critical believer.

That is a significant liberation. I try to base my central beliefs on some kind of evidence but in some instances the 'evidence' is my adoption of certain values for which I only have belief and commitment rather than evidence.

For example, I believe in democracy because I value people and respect their right to elect their government and to hold that government to account. I believe in trying to be kind, courteous and supportive.

16 I now have considerable freedom to decide what to read, what issues to discuss, with whom, what to change about my beliefs and what to retain. That is both a great opportunity but also a great challenge. I am more than happy to accept the opportunity and the challenge.

Amartya Sen's latest (2006) book: *Identity and Violence: The illusion of destiny* has significantly extended my understandings of cultures and identities different from my own. It has made me re-think, among many other things, what I mean by 'The West'. I strongly agree with him in his emphasis on 'multiple identities'.

Lewis Wolpert's (2006) *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief* takes the vast evidence for evolution seriously and relates this to our deep needs to believe in and find causal links between events. Our need to find causal links is so strong that we even make up mythical causes in which to believe in the absence of real (carefully evidenced) ones. As he says: *Human beings are a believing phenomenon who must believe in order to live at all.* (p 140).

Dan Dennett's (2006) book: *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* explores the almost universal phenomenon of religious beliefs from philosophical and scientific research points of view. It examines why we believe in things for which there is no objective evidence. There seems, he suggests, to be a need to 'believe in beliefs'.
Along with Wolpert, Dennett is interested in why we need to believe things and why this need expands into mythical ultimate causes determined by a range of gods deemed to be responsible for these ultimate causes.

17 I have a sense of aloneness, but this is mitigated by a sense of integrity. Giving up belief in God was the right thing to do – for me. I feel comfortable and positive about that decision.

Loss of God, like other losses in life, creates a sense of bereavement. Those beliefs which had underpinned my life through childhood and into adulthood were slowly disappearing and some were being actively rejected. The bereavement was not sudden, but the 'death of God' (Nietzsche) is still a death. It's much more than a philosophical statement for me. There is a sense of existential loss which has to be addressed. One major identity narrative was being lost to be slowly replaced by another identity narrative. But losses can have benefits. A crisis is, as they say, also an opportunity. As I said earlier: there are many ordinary losses. Managing losses is one of life's unavoidable tasks.

I am confident that the benefits/gains have enabled me to be a more positive, more realistically optimistic and a more relationally creative person. However, my optimism about the human condition is modest, tentative and fragile. We are a strange species, at the same time highly intelligent and distressingly stupid.

Giving up belief in God presented me with what I now realise was a huge challenge in my life. In terms of the title of Dennett's book, *Breaking the Spell* of religion takes effort and courage. When I told my parents that I was leaving the church and Christianity it was my Mum, a life-long Methodist, who posed the most difficult of questions: *What will you put in its place ?*

It took me about 30 years to work out a careful response to that profound, concerned and somewhat anguished question. To work out what I believed and why I believed it. Along with this went my attempts to clarify the values to which I am currently committed.

The publication of my recent book: *'Believing in Nothing and Something: An Approach to Humanist Beliefs and Values*' (2003) feels like a considerable existential achievement – at least from my point of view. I could have called it: 'In Place of God'

I conclude: It's safe to lose belief in God. Meaningful life does not end. But life as one knew it does end in some crucial aspects. There is 'Life Beyond the Death of God' - which could also have been the title of my book. There is a reason for living. That reason is me and you and other people. From my humanist perspective we all matter to each other.

As I said to a woman who told me that she was a practising Catholic after one of my sessions at the Multifaith Centre: *I'm a practising human being*. It may sound odd as a response to the practising Catholic, but it's sufficient justification for my humanism.

I agree with Einstein: *Strange is our situation here on Earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men – above all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends*. (Quoted by Dawkins 2006 p 209)

And to return to the beginning in which is our end:

But perhaps neither gain nor loss/For us there is only the trying/The rest is not our business - as Eliot usefully, if ruefully, pointed out.

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Geoffheath@aol.com

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Other papers which I have written are available on the British Humanist Association website.

- *Has the advance of science made religion unnecessary ?*
- *Beliefs and Identity*

∞ *Freedom of speech in a multicultural society.*

Enter: bha on *and then the title of the paper*.

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