

It was only a few months ago that I read an article in the Age making the claim that faith was the new black. Last week Catherine Deveny informed me that atheism had taken its place. Fashion is indeed fickle. I am so last year.

Atheism is the new big thing. Richard Dawkins' book and documentary "The God Delusion", have headlined its charge. For many, Dawkins' books are the much needed tonic from a lifetime of fundamentalist indoctrination. For others, his arguments are based on gross generalisations emanating from shoddy research that would never be permitted in his scientific classroom.

I'll probably be slammed by people of faith for admitting that there's much I agree with in Dawkins' books. Like him, I think that fundamentalism of any form is to be decried. I'm similarly appalled by acts of violence and war that are done in the name of Christianity – at just what point did Jesus change from being the Prince of Peace to being the Prince of the Pre-emptive strike? My beliefs have nothing in common with theirs, apart from an historically inherited name. If Christianity – and religion in its multifaceted forms – can't be redeemed from its reputation as violent, arrogant, manipulative and dangerous then I think Dawkins is probably right. I should have nothing to do with it.

But the failure to recognise the not-so-subtle nuances that distinguish between versions of faith and religious expression seems a little lazy or disingenuous. While Dawkins might find it hard to believe, my reasons to still

lay claim to believing in the existence of God have nothing to do with world domination, indoctrination, a claim to knowing the truth behind the beginning of life, an answer to the mystery of life, or even an assurance of what happens when we die. I'm a person of faith because i'm convinced by the concept of life within this life.

Religion and science, of course, are not in search of the same thing. It's when they try to answer each others' questions that they show their greatest limitations. Science looks for the process by which the world began – and I, like Dawkins, wish that religion would get out of its way in the search for that. For many people, though, the question that calls us into faith isn't where life came from, it's what we do with it now we have it. The answers to that question have no way of being measured empirically or rationally.

At its essence, Christianity is not about doctrine: it's about a lifestyle, and a commitment at ones very core to the notion that all people should have life, rich and full beyond our measure.

Sallie McFague says that at its very heart, what the Christian gospels teach us about God can be distilled into one line: there is a power at work in the universe on the side of life and all its fulfilment. Christianity is simply about aligning ones own life with that power – choosing to live in a way that brings life. Instead of focussing on what or who God is, faith is primarily about reorientating ourselves so that we look at the world through the eyes of God,

and respond to it with the heart of God. We continue to do so even when it doesn't seem rational, sensible, or as though it will make the slightest bit of difference. As a friend of mine says, who knows if God exists as an entity out there, but something draws me to bear witness to the existence of God through the unreasonable choices I make in my life.

Dawkins is right, of course, there's nothing rational about a life of faith. One of the most breathtaking parts of the New Testament Gospels is the Sermon on the Mount. Parts of it have become everyday speech: turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile. We've turned it into a moral code, but it's origin was way more subversive than that. It was a radical political manifesto about non-violent resistance to an oppressive master – the one that inspired both Martin Luther King and Gandhi to head up to of the last centuries most remarkable social transformations.

Where evolution favours those who are most adaptable, those who have the intelligence, strength and persistence to survive, Christianity challenges us to recognise that even the littlest and the poorest have value and worth. It gives us the responsibility to live in such a way that even the weakest will have life in its fullness.

Almost all of the Sermon on the Mount goes against our natural inclinations. "Blessed are the poor", says Jesus. Everything in us rails against that. Of course, the consequences of living as though money will save us are

unfolding before us right now: we – the world's rich – are sucking the world of its very life. The earth and its population simply cannot sustain us. The world's poor are living proof of that. Changing our focus from personal financial security looks irrational. It's certainly counter-cultural and incredibly difficult to achieve. It might also be the only thing that saves us.

It sounds like just another program for social transformation, but at its heart the message of Christianity is also deeply personal. It's as much about making broken lives whole as it is about putting a broken world back together again. Christianity tells a story of how that can happen. This is transformation that is not of human making. It's almost unbelievable, beyond comprehension: it's found the moment where we learn to love again after our lives have fallen apart, or when someone chooses not to take a path of revenge in situations where that seems the only human response. It's an encounter with forgiveness that makes the future seem possible to face. It's recognising that our lives - fragile, complicated, broken - are wrapped up in some much larger grace which is urging us back to wholeness.

I'm as sceptical and cynical as the next person. I have a very uneasy relationship with traditional Christian doctrines. I'm not convinced in the slightest that there will be life after death, the creeds don't speak of the truths at the heart of my faith. I've seen lives being made whole again, though, and that convinces me that religion is worth redeeming. These are

not things that can be measured empirically, but every time we see them happen we have an encounter with God.

Yes, the case for God is pretty flimsy. It's based on beliefs and experiences that can't be measured or proven or validated; hearsay and innuendo. But it also offers a promise of a story beyond the one the world would have us know: that there's a force at work in the world, bringing life – right here, right now – richer and more extraordinary than we can imagine. It might be delusional to believe that we can change the world by aligning ourselves with it, but it's a delusion i'm willingly going to risk.

Cheryl Lawrie

www.alternative.victas.uca.org.au

First published in the Sunday Age, May 27th 2007