

15th July 2020

Atheist?

**"An atheist-laugh's a poor exchange
For Deity offended."**

Robert Burns, Epistle to a Young Friend

I don't offer you an "atheist-laugh" today, but I wonder if I've offended my Deity by buying *The Atheist's Bible*? It's described by the editor, Joan Konner, as "an illustrious collection of irreverent thoughts" – "illustrious", because it draws on a wide panoply of reflections on belief and non-belief; "collection", for the quotations are numerous and varied. But, while such a book may offend the Deity, I take no personal offence from it. A critique of faith, a sideways look at sacred and long-held creeds, cherished views and well-rehearsed statements of belief, is always helpful.

Konner includes a section called *Apocalyptus*, an invented term from the biblical word "apocalypse. *Apocalyptus*, she suggests, is "a weed of bias and prejudice that sprouts in the garden of free speech". If we cherish freedom of speech, we should also value the freedom to offer criticism of aspects of faith. And if *we* are critical of any weed of bias and prejudice, why would we respond negatively to those who challenge our beliefs?

Some of the most profound end-of-life conversations I had in the hospice were those which began with people saying, "I don't believe in God, but ..." Yet these were deeply spiritual encounters, in a place of mutual exploration, which often led to a restoration of peace or a glimpse of meaning and purpose for the first time. Did such people embrace a prescribed belief-system before they died? Rarely. Did the encounters allow them to find some sense of worth for their life before time ran out? More often than I would ever have expected.

Sent to me recently by a friend from the USA, I also have *To Bless the Space Between Us*, by the wonderfully spiritual Irish writer, John O'Donohue. In that "space between us", that place of open sharing and mutual learning, free from bias or prejudice, there *is* always blessing and healing, for both believer and atheist alike.

A prayer for today

*Lord, I believe – at least I say I do. Help me be honest about my un-belief.
Lord, I don't believe – at least I say I don't. Yet, I know I'm blessed. Amazing! Amen.*

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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