

STRUGGLING TO BELIEVE?

*The journey of one
contemporary believer*

TONY DOHERTY



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PREFACE

National census figures tell a story of fewer people willing to call themselves believers. Churches report that there are fewer people in the pews, and those who are there are growing older. The culture as we knew it is shifting.

Evening television shows present scientific information about our universe and take the viewer along a journey into space which human imagination finds almost impossible to comprehend. Nature programs, produced in spectacular colour, tell the evolving story of life with the rocklike authority of a David Attenborough. Children come home

from school and explain to bemused parents information about this planet, our common home, and its long and unfolding history.

In our search for meaning, a search that is as old as humankind, the language of traditional belief works on a different level, insisting that we go below the alluring surface of much that dazzles us. We can choose not to be engaged in this search. In which case we should ask: does rejection or neglect of God – of what Tony speaks of as the ‘Gracious Mystery’ – enrich our lives, or does it leave too many of life’s experiences unexplored?

Today, when the conversation turns to talking about God, what we say is often facile and naive. If we think that speaking of God should be easy and religion should be readily accessible to anybody, we are seriously mistaken. Conversation about God is about the ultimate mystery that calls us to gather all our life's experiences and penetrate well below the surface. What we discover is best expressed in story, in poetry and song.

Those of us who have been graced to be enriched by Tony's priestly life and ministry welcome the gift of this book in which he reflects

on the experiences over those sixty years that speak to him of God. It is refreshing to share Tony's experiences as an educator, a hospital chaplain, in parish ministry, and through his family history.

Just how do we speak about God today in a manner that makes sense and brings genuine nourishment in this restless, stormy, but exquisitely beautiful world? The author of the reflections that make up this book believes that taking our own life-stories seriously holds an important clue.

Michael Fallon MSC

*Dedicated to
a lifetime friend and
fellow pilgrim*

Barrie Lum

*and his own passion
for the story.*

PREAMBLE

sample

Things change. People change. The world changes. Yet we all sometimes ache for a bit of a pause to catch our breath – don't we? Sometimes believers cling to an unchanging faith and fight to keep it secure like holding down a flapping umbrella in a fierce gale. Yet even belief, or at least the language it is expressed in, changes.

In my opinion our beliefs are not static. They either grow deeper and make more sense as we come up against new life experiences or, sadly, they can sometimes diminish into empty rituals that fail to nourish us. The following reflections are those

of a priest looking back over a long ministry, and his quest to make sense of the gospels and the creeds while speaking to an increasingly secularist and fundamentalist Australia.

Over six decades immersed in the highs and lows of many lives – sitting with the dying, feeling excited with young couples facing marriage, grieving with parents whose children die before them, baptising infants of shining-eyed parents – it has been a surprisingly but deeply satisfying adventure. That journey has also included long conversations with disaffected Catholics who have left the Church behind, friends who see

the notion of God as a pious illusion. I have spoken with deeply scarred victims of the cancer of sexual abuse, and with many angry about the inadequate manner in which the Church authorities have responded to it. And then, of course, there have been confused believers still in the pews, but finding the words just don't cut it when they face the inevitable crises that life throws up at them.

My ministry has been one long nagging search for words that make sense to people battling to survive the gale: words that touch the imagination and emotional life of those contemporaries. It

has been my role to assure them that the gospels are literally and genuinely 'good news', and that the insights they contain are precious and uniquely able to help us to understand a little more clearly the mystery of what it means to be a genuine human being.

Within this gale – even this storm – we inhabit a world of revolutionary science, globalisation and the internet, where our choices are affected by algorithms, the marketplace controlling political choice, and space vehicles searching the universe with telescopes of extraordinary power. Is it any



wonder that our language of faith has had to grow and expand?

As a believing Christian and a minister of the gospel, three issues concern me:

- ✦ The common usage of the word 'God' is tired, static, and confusing and often robbed of all its mystery.
- ✦ As we have become used to understanding a little more about the immensity of the universe, we need now a matching language for the immensity of God.
- ✦ That our search for an adult belief happens within the evolving nature of the universe, the world and the Church.

Millions of believers, of course, wish to know how to pray and remain connected to their church. They want to draw on the life-giving stories of the gospels and their rich tradition, but they find in the oppressive desert of a relentless secular culture that the catechism formulas learnt as infants are quite

inadequate to make sense in the turbulent culture in which we live.

The fascinating presence of a divinity lying within the burning heart of creation and the beauty of human life cannot be shrink-wrapped in a simple formula for eight-year-olds. The language that some have grown accustomed to employing in describing that 'gracious mystery' whom we call God has become too trivial, too trite, and always in danger of being reduced to superstition.

In a word, the God that many place their faith in is far too small.

My purpose in these reflections is not to attempt any sort of proper history or theological analysis of this tempest that batters us. It is just to provide a peep into the life of one wrestling believer, and to collect a few personal snapshots of that believer's journey of faith along the way.

May this serve as an invitation to fellow pilgrims to join me on the path.

A photograph of a paved path winding through a dense forest of tall evergreen trees. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a hazy, golden atmosphere. The path leads towards a bright opening in the distance. The text 'WRESTLING WITH ANGELS' is centered in white, bold, sans-serif font. A large, semi-transparent watermark 'mpt' is visible across the center of the image.

WRESTLING WITH ANGELS

On a typical Sydney July morning sixty years ago, the sandstone walls of St Marys Cathedral offered little protection from a stiff westerly. Lying face down on the unforgiving marble sanctuary floor within the Cathedral, together with twenty-five colleagues, I was being ordained a priest, committing my future to this ministry as the Cardinal Archbishop sat resplendent in the robes and symbols of his office. The scene was as dramatic as anything from a film by Martin Scorsese.

What was I doing? What was I thinking? Would you do it again today, people ask? The decision was no flash-in-the-pan choice. This act of commitment had been prepared for, considered from a dozen angles, prayed over, and meditated on, and explored by spiritual directors, for eight long years. Would I do it again today? Surely I would have by now one simple answer. But no. I must honestly admit, when I search into the fathomless depths of human choice, what emerges are entirely different answers at different times in those sixty years. Sometimes the reply is a bit glib: 'I couldn't imagine spending my life in the

boring world of commercial life'. While true, this is only a surface reason. Being a bit of a hero-worshipper, I was attracted to the passion and personalities of other friends who were priests. Contrary to popular myth, let me assure you, the decision had nothing to do with the pious dreams of loving parents. No one who really knew my mother would fall for that one. Years ago a French worker priest said, 'I became a priest to stop the rumour of God disappearing from the face of the earth'. I like that. It's getting close to the money.

In the late Sixties, there was a song that became popular as it put a question to music: 'Is That All There Is?'. This world-weary cry might be behind the familiar hunger for a spirituality that many feel makes sense. The trouble is the language to support that search is often rather thin on the ground. This is possibly why this slightly maudlin tune touched something deep in me sixty years ago and I began to search more than ever before. My search began with the tradition I knew best and found more reliable – the gospels and Christian tradition.

Language is important.

The heart of the matter was to find a language to explain to friends I respected and loved, why I was lying full length on that chilly Cathedral floor.

As a twenty-two-year-old, gainfully employed and leading a vigorous social life, one thing which drove me was the persistent conviction – at times it felt rather like an aching tooth – that there is more to life than what appears on the surface. What makes us wise or shallow, sacred or profane, sane or emotionally unbalanced, is precisely whether we live on the surface of things or not. This is a frequently quoted insight of Franciscan Richard Rohr.

Dressed in an immaculate white alb and stretched out flat on the floor, I couldn't have been closer to the surface. Sixty years later I am still digging into the depth of that decision to be a priest and commit myself to the search for that elusive God, to keep the rumour alive, to find fresh language to describe our spiritual quest. The search goes on. Who is this God that some of us pursue relentlessly? As Emily Dickinson would say, what are these below-the-surface questions that 'nibble at the soul'?



A STORY

As a young man, Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis interviewed an old Monk who lived on Mt Athos:

'Do you still struggle with the devil?'

'No. I used to, but I have grown old and tired and the devil has grown old and tired with me.'

'So your life is easy now – no more struggles.'

With a wry smile, the Monk replied.

'Ah no. Now it's worse.

Now I struggle with God.'

My struggle is not the same as the monk on the mountain. I wrestle with words. Where can we find language in this attention-deficit, sugar-rush culture dominated by screens and games, to even imagine a sense of the divine mystery that accompanies every moment of our day? The abstract language often heard from pulpits whistles over our nodding heads. The trivialised use of the word 'God' that is heard in common conversation suffers from fatigue, thoughtlessness, and overuse. How can it be revived?

Visiting an overseas university, I encountered a theologian and fine teacher named Nicholas Lash, and discovered he shared the questions which still nag away at me. For example he said:

Speaking appropriately – while not impossible – is the most difficult, the most demanding, the most dangerous thing that human speech can do ... It is the tragedy of modern Western culture to have fallen victim to the illusion that it is perfectly easy to talk about God. (Lash, Lecture at St Edmunds College, Cambridge, 1977).

Lash uses strong words – ‘most dangerous’, ‘tragedy of modern Western culture’ – but perhaps they are not exaggerations. I share his concerns. Talking about ‘God’ opens us up to a hall of mirrors – the dangerous world of illusion. Every one of us, whether we are believers or not, are over our heads thrashing around in the deep water of ultimate mystery. And yet, I hear you say, surely everyone knows what God is, who God is? After all, we use the word in one context or another most days of our lives.

That is exactly the problem. The three-letter word ‘God’ has lost its edge. The currency has been debased. We throw it around with little thought or purpose. We have tended to tame and domesticate the word. We regularly ask God to bless our parliament, to save the king, to give us a fine day for the wedding, to send the rain, to stop the rain, and to bless us when we sneeze. We assure those facing a tragedy of their thoughts and prayers. Politicians quote God to justify their policies. Terrorists commit atrocities in God’s name. We beg God to support ‘our’ side in an election but in war

both sides may be invoking God’s protection. That innocuous three-letter word can become a mindless thought bubble as we throw our minds into neutral and reach out in the dark. Is there any wonder that increasing numbers of people feel more comfortable identifying themselves as ‘non-believers’?

The truth is that the word ‘God’ is too huge to allow any other word to breathe beside it. Any description of God expressed in human language is simply a limp analogy, an inadequate attempt at capturing a mystery,

Jewish wisdom and practice offer an interesting solution. They refrain entirely from naming God, because of the special sacredness and mystery that the word carries. Such a sense of reserve and reverence has always made great sense to me. On the other hand, the Qur’an has ninety-nine names for God.

Jesus talked of his Father but used the term ‘Abba’ (which roughly translates as ‘daddy’). During many centuries of contemplation and prayer, the great mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila,

Catherine of Siena and John of the Cross employed a wide range of metaphors to capture this elusive mystery when wrestling with their idea of God – sometimes God was the vastness of the ocean, sometimes a mountain or a mighty storm. And one which I find sometimes very appealing, a gentle breeze.

The ‘rumour’ of God is expressed in a million ways. For me after sixty years of conversations with believers and unbelievers, with the seriously ill and the dying, with ten-year-old children and their penetrating questions, with Imams and Buddhist monks, with feminists and those

who believe religion is the most destructive presence on the planet, the search for a language that makes sense of my belief is as urgent as it ever was.

Theological giants caution us not to rely on strict definitions of the nature of God. ‘If we have understood then what we have understood is not God,’ wrote Augustine in the fifth century. ‘We can know *that* God is but not *what* God is,’ Thomas Aquinas said some centuries later. He was saying that God, who is mystery, cannot be imprisoned by limited human vocabulary ... ‘God is beyond

anything we can observe, study and come to know' is the way scripture scholar Michael Fallon expresses it.

Looking for a word to describe God that has more traction, my preference is for the term 'gracious mystery'. As has been said, God is the ultimate mystery (easy to claim) but this mystery is neither fickle nor remote. This divine mystery is 'on our side' or as we say, 'gracious'. The term 'gracious mystery' is thus an attempt to escape on the one hand some elderly father looking down from a far-off height, and on the other hand to give us the flexibility to imagine a sufficient dimension for

God to match this immense universe of which we have become recently aware.

Now there's a sizeable pastoral dilemma. Like a banker deciding not to use the word 'dollar' or a baker deciding to stop talking about bread, I found myself on the floor of St Mary's Cathedral finding it difficult to use the traditional word 'God', conscious of the ambiguity of that slippery word which is understood in vastly different ways according to whom you are speaking.

Looks like being an interesting future ministry.

Personal Challenge

**An example of Persian wisdom from Haziz:
*Beware of the tiny gods frightened men create
To bring an anaesthetic relief to their sad days.***

