



# WHY I TRY TO BELIEVE

An Experiment in Faith,  
Life and Stubborn Hope

NATHAN BROWN

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# Contents

[Foreword](#)

[Questions of Belief](#)

[Trying to Believe](#)

[Hoping to Believe](#)

[Believing the Stories](#)

[Clinging to Belief](#)

[Believing Jesus](#)

[Wanting to Believe](#)

[Believing After Death](#)

[Needing to Believe](#)

[Choosing to Believe](#)

[For reflection and conversation . . .](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

# Foreword

“Friendship has no religion”—this is the tag line of the film *Arranged*, a story of two young school teachers in New York City—one an orthodox Jew, the other Muslim. Both are at the age when their families are arranging their marriages. They share much in common and become close friends, though their religions are supposed to keep them apart, if not cast them as enemies.

It’s an important point. Belief in a God is a force that unites and divides people, at the same time. Religions form around God-beliefs and create strong in-group bonds, which have historically been powerful cohesive force holding a group together against outside hostile forces. But the stronger the in-group cohesion, the stronger the fear and hostility toward the out-group. This makes religion dangerous. Like fire, it can be warming and put to good uses, but it can also destroy.

Nathan and I have been having conversations like these since we met at a conference in New York City in 2002. Since that time there have been many twists and turns in our lives but we always manage to connect about once a year as Nathan visits the United States or I come to Australia for work.

For 12 years, we have shared ideas back and forth, spoken in each other’s venues, visited each other’s homes. We’ve discussed theology, social justice and leadership, listened to each other’s sermons, and grappled with the challenges of life and ministry. We’ve discussed our difficulties with theology and our various ways of making sense of it all. We’ve commiserated over challenges and celebrated each other’s victories. Though we live a large ocean apart, we enjoy a closer friendship than many people who live in the same city. For this I am deeply grateful.

Because of our friendship, the direction my life has taken this past year has been challenging for both of us. Though he might not say it this way, I suspect Nathan felt at least a twinge of betrayal. I hadn’t taken the time to discuss my “Year Without God” plans with many people before it became

public and then unexpectedly prominent.

The book you're holding in your hands is likely among the most honest efforts to grapple with faith in the midst of doubt that you will find. I've never read anything like it. It is rare to find a Christian who will courageously admit the challenges that Christian faith entails and then explain, without hubris, why they still find the effort to believe worth it.

The themes in this book are familiar to me. Some I have discussed with Nathan in person at one time or another. Some we worked out in community with others on this same path. In these pages, Nathan expresses his process and reasons for belief. But his process might not be yours. His reasons might not work for you. You might not struggle to believe nearly as much as Nathan does—or you might struggle more. My hope is that by reading this honest confession from someone who is committed to the pursuit of faith, you will be challenged to continue your own journey, wherever that leads you. There is enough mystery in the universe to make room for some form of belief if you choose to.

But know that wherever you find yourself along the continuum from doubt to faith, the greatest virtue is still love (see 1 Corinthians 13:13)—and friendship is an important part of that.

**Ryan Bell**

# 1

## Questions of Belief

I remember the feeling—and the rush of questions that followed. It was mid-morning—a clear, cool, middling kind of morning out the window—and the phone on my desk had rung in its usual mundane manner but delivering a singular message. I don't remember distinctly who was on the other end of the call but the news he relayed left me reeling.

A friend in another city had committed suicide the previous night. Because of the circumstances and the need for an investigation, no date could yet be set for his funeral.

I don't know what I mumbled in reply but, having put the phone down, I stumbled into the hallway outside my office. We were due to begin an editorial team meeting and I paused at one office door to ask them to go ahead without me.

Alone with the news that had been thrust on me and not wanting to say it out loud for fear of being overwhelmed by it, I returned to my office, not knowing where else to go. I stood at the window—the sun still shining but now less benignly—trying to collect my feelings, too stunned for tears, too confused for thought.

Such deaths are always shocking and terribly tragic, but this one hit me harder than most and continues to challenge me, even years later. He was a friend with whom I had worked at times, including a period in which he was pastor of my local church.

Over the following days, as I put together some thoughts on what to say at his funeral, I reflected on our shared enthusiasm for music and books, good-natured sporting rivalries, family experiences and common faith. These were the things that made up our friendship—but it seemed they

were not enough to help him through the despair in which he felt he was lost. Although many factors contribute to such a tragic death, it seems at times his death was a sobering critique of much of what gives me meaning and purpose in life. I have asked myself many times whether my life could end just as sadly if only a few circumstances were rearranged, and these thoughts have led me to bigger questions of why I believe the way I do and how I came by those beliefs.

It was not the first occasion—nor would it be the last—through which the circumstances of life and friendship would ask deep questions about my beliefs and the nature of belief itself.

## **Another questioning**

Although not so dramatic circumstances—thankfully—many of these questions of belief came back to me at the beginning of 2014, when my friend Ryan Bell attracted international media attention as a Christian pastor announcing a year-long experiment with atheism. Until 2013, Ryan had been pastor of the Hollywood Seventh-day Adventist Church, a creative church community based in a curiously purple edifice perched on the edge of the Hollywood Freeway, not far from downtown Los Angeles. I had visited Ryan at this church a number of times. Through following their sermon podcasts and connections with Ryan and other church members, I considered it one of my home churches, albeit from quite some distance.

During our time working for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in our respective parts of the world, Ryan and I have worked together on writing projects, invited each other to preach in our respective churches and events, shared recommendations for favourite and challenging books, contributed ideas to each other's sermons, and hung out together whenever our international travels allowed. While we had talked generally about aspects of these ideas, Ryan's blog announcement of his plan to live as an atheist for a year, posted on January 1, caught me by surprise, especially when I was suddenly being asked about his plan and my reactions to it.

There is much I sympathise and identify with in Ryan's experiment. His critique of religion and even the possibilities of faith itself is something that resonates with many others, as evidenced by the unexpected media

and blogging attention his announcement attracted in the following weeks. When a former Los Angeles pastor appears on CNN, BBC or even on Saturday morning TV in Australia to talk about his experiment with atheism, we should recognise the validity of the questions raised about the sustainability and value of faith.

Of course, there always seems to be cynical interest in the spectacle of another fallen leader among the communities of faith—but there is more to this story than that alone.

## **Questioning together**

One of the things I have noticed among my reactions to and reflecting on both my earlier friend's death and Ryan's experiment is how much we believe together. Ryan and I have talked in the past about the encouragement that comes with shared faith and the spiritual discipline of friendship. When a friend, collaborator and colleague takes a different direction in matters of faith, it can feel like a strong critique of what and how we believe.

While we always have doubts around our faith, there are also significant and worthwhile questions about what might cause us to try changes in our belief. As such, one outcome of Ryan's experiment that I appreciate has been the prompt toward renewed thinking about my own faith and why I try to believe—not that I haven't thought about some of these questions before.

A few years ago, I presented some of the ideas that have grown into this book as a series of talks—I'm not quite bold enough to call them sermons—under the title of “Why I Try to Believe,” which I shared on three occasions. There was a youth summer camp, an advertised series of five sessions with university students over a long weekend at a city church in Brisbane, and a five-week series at my local church in outer Melbourne. Each of these occasions sparked conversations and responses that were helpful in further developing the thoughts.

Curiously, I have had the 6-metre (20-foot) canvas banner announcing one of these series rolled up in the corner of my office for the past few years, continually reminding me of my ideas about developing these presentations into something more. But it was the personal challenge of



Ryan’s experiment to my faith that got me thinking in this direction again—and to do more work on a response to some of these questions of faith.

However, I will be disappointed if this is read as an attack on Ryan or his year-long experiment. I am not setting out to critique or criticise my friend. Indeed, as I have developed this book, he has read a draft of the manuscript and in a couple of conversations has contributed to it being a better book than it would otherwise have been. I hope this will be counted among the positive results of his public investigation of the nature of belief and non-belief.

## **My experiment of faith**

As such, I would describe this as a “personal apologetic.”

While many of the big arguments of Christian “apologetics”—philosophy, metaphysics, history and religion—are present or at least in the background of some of my reading, thinking, conversations and experiences, this book is trying to do something different. There are many other books and resources that have already contributed significantly to these debates and if that’s what you are looking for, you should pick up those books. But, as interesting as those arguments can be, there are steps before we get to these arguments, before we consider them sufficiently important to invest time, energy and thought in them.

So this book is about why belief might be worth trying, why it might be important.

For example, when I reference a Bible verse, I do not spend the time and space mounting an argument for the veracity, authenticity or divine inspiration of the Bible. Rather I am using the Bible, as a text with a long history of sacredness, for what it offers to any thoughtful reader. To some degree, I assume it has significance—even if only by long use and respect—and then respond to the insights and worldview it offers. I choose the Bible because it is the “holy book” I am most familiar with but am still trying to figure out. It’s also the most authoritative story of Jesus, which I believe is important, as we will talk about in Chapter 6.

However, rather than ignoring the questions around the Bible as a sacred text, this use of the Bible might even be the spark to spend some time reading about the history, background and credibility of the Bible, as a step

after reflecting on its possible significance. I encourage you to do that if such questions become important to you. When we discover the text as important, insightful, even transformative, then we might be prompted to discover more about its authenticity and “truth,” an idea we will explore further in Chapter 4.

So *Why I Try to Believe* is about sharing some of my personal responses that help me make sense of why belief is worth trying and why I persist with it, despite challenges and disappointments. In a similar vein to Ryan’s experiment with atheism, this is an experiment with faith. Perhaps more correctly, it is some notes from my experiments with faith as I have tried to live my life, and make choices—large and small—about what is important and good, as well as choosing how to respond to the experiences life presents to each of us, such as love and grief, pain and wanting to make a difference, growing up and growing older.

I grew up with faith. My dad was a church pastor and Christian faith, church attendance and participation were assumed in our family. This does not make for dramatic conversion stories or testimonies. While almost all my education took place in secular contexts, I am employed by a denominational church organisation and spend most of my working life in faith-based situations.

But that doesn’t mean my faith is unexamined—or unchosen. Nor does it mean that faith is automatically easier. There are experiences, knowledge, discouragements and disappointments that come with close involvement with religious organisations that are not always helpful to faith. As a faith “insider,” I am well aware of some of the self-inflicted arguments against faith.

Yet I still try to believe—and here are some of the reasons why.

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