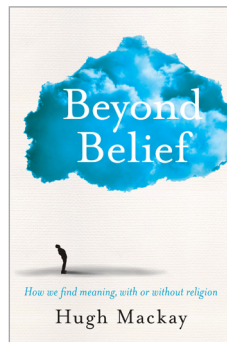


Beyond Belief: How We Find Meaning, With or Without Religion

By Hugh Mackay
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Reviewed by Peter Kurti

Cast an eye over the bibliography is a good way of getting some idea of what a book might actually be about. ‘This is not a book for committed Christians’, Hugh Mackay warns the reader at the very start of his new book *Beyond Belief: How We Find Meaning, With or Without Religion*. The list of references is enough to tell you that it’s not even a book for anyone who has ever thought critically about any kind of religion. Rather, *Beyond Belief*—the fourth in Mackay’s series of books about how we might live the good life—appears to be a guidebook to making your own meaning. If you think having belief is somehow a good thing but you’re not sure just what to believe in, this could be the book for you.

Beyond Belief is prompted by an interesting feature of contemporary Australian society: apparently, we are letting go of traditional ideas about God while our desire for a life of meaning remains as strong as ever. Careful consideration of the implications for what this might mean for Australia would have been valuable had Mackay attempted it; but he has something else in mind as he embarks on his treatment of religion.

Yearning is Mackay’s starting point. He tells us that ‘we’—by which he seems to mean all those who think the way he does—are yearning for something to fill the gap left by religion. Running through the book is a somewhat arbitrary distinction between ‘belief’ and ‘faith’. Mackay considers the former to be restrictive, dogged by superstition, and bound to dogmatic propositional content. The latter, by contrast, is suffused with mystery, ineffability and wonder. Belief chokes the mind like a weed whereas faith fertilises the mind and helps it bear fruit. We only believe for as long as we are ignorant, Mackay seems to think; but with the golden glow of enlightenment comes the freedom to have faith. Once enlightened—presumably

by having read Mackay’s book—we can move *beyond belief* to live with faith in . . . well, whatever you like really: justice, friends, music, climate science—it doesn’t really matter, so long as it fills you with hope. ‘Faith is fluid, imaginative, sustaining and constantly evolving’, says Mackay, ‘as we mature and learn from our experience’ (p. 216).

Mackay argues that belief is a function of ignorance. When we don’t know any better or when we are gullible, we’ll fall down the rabbit hole of belief in our quest for explanations and be forever deluded by falsity and superstition. But this idea that religion—and Christianity, specifically—is in the explanation business almost amounts to a parody of religion. As the literary theorist Terry Eagleton—who happens to be both Marxist and atheist—remarked in his 2009 book *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, ‘Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place. It is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov’ (p.7). In his pursuit of the practical, the rational and the certain, however, Mackay simply dismisses significant features of religious belief and experience such as the metaphorical use of language or the philosophical complexity of the relationship between miracles and theism. Metaphor is simply obfuscation, and miracles are for the ignorant.

Far from being a simplistic, immature response to ignorance, however, religion is a complex and ancient feature of human community which helps forge an emotional bonding captured in the probable derivation of the word from the Latin *religare*, meaning to bind. Religion is capable of evoking both the most noble and the most cruel of human behaviours. It can be abused, as the popularising scholar of religion Karen Armstrong noted in her 1994 book *A Short History of God*, but it seems to be something humans have always done. ‘It was not tacked on to a primordially secular nature by manipulative kings and priests,’ she says, ‘but [is] natural to humanity’ (p. xix). But Mackay has moved on from religion and beckons the reader to join him on the sunlit uplands of ‘faith’ and ‘spirituality’ where ‘reasonableness’ is the sole criterion for judging whether or not to place one’s faith in anything at all. Whereas he thinks religion entails the absence of doubt, faith is ‘a creative act; a leap; a

tentative, hopeful encounter with the numinous; a reaching-out for certainties that keep eluding us. We don't place our faith in visible, tangible certainties, but in ideas, prospects, promises, probabilities' (p. 130), says Mackay. But which religious person ever claimed God was a visible, tangible, certainty?

Anyway, we're off on the road to meaning and Mackay tells us we can leave belief behind. What matters is not the propositional but the attitudinal. He even cites Jesus of Nazareth in support of this claim. Apparently Jesus didn't mind what you believed in as long as you were nice to your neighbour. 'None of the explicit teachings of Jesus, in the parables or in [the Sermon on the Mount], called on his disciples to *believe* anything. He was not prescribing doctrine or dogma for some hypothetical institutional church that might in the future have been established in his name' (p. 230). More parody? No serious New Testament scholar has suggested that Jesus was setting out a dogmatic manifesto; but if Mackay had read the work of such a scholar he would know that action and belief are not so easily separable. Jesus wanted people to respond in a particular way because of a particular thing he claimed God was doing. After all, in St Matthew's account of Jesus' early ministry in

Galilee, preceding the sermon with which Mackay is so taken, Jesus proclaims, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

Mackay is right: *Beyond Belief* is not a book for committed Christians. But he fails to show why it should be for anyone who wishes to engage in any seriousness with religion and its place in the society and imagination of humankind. Had Mackay confined himself to social psychology, his acknowledged area of expertise, this book might have been a valuable account of the place of religion in contemporary Australian society—where many people do take their beliefs seriously, and where some are prepared to kill and injure in the name of those beliefs. But of this, and much else, Mackay has little of value to say.

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