

Books

Life&Arts

Heinrich Heine, one of Europe's greatest poets, was born into an observant German-Jewish family in the early 19th century, when this was still suspect. There was a tension between his religion and his environment. In a famous poem, he envisions himself as a lonely palm tree in a land of firs – a Semite incongruously transplanted to Christendom. In the end, this could only be resolved through conversion. Baptism, he wrote, was his "ticket of admission into European society".

That always resonated with me. As a teenager from a religious minority, two centuries after Heine, I was in a similar fix. Only it was *de rigueur* now not to renounce one faith for another, but to reject religion outright. Being a young Christian would have been embarrassing enough, but practising Islam felt virtually taboo in the years after 9/11, when New Atheism was militating against it. I wanted to be a fir tree, not a maladapted palm. So I paid for my entry ticket, vanishing for years into the secular orthodoxy, one little drop in the torrent of religious desertion that hit the west in the early 21st century.

Slowly, slightly, faith is trickling back, at least into Britain. There's something in the water. Religion is civilised table talk. Even non-believers mourned the death of Pope Francis, with secularism yet to devise a credible alternative as the world's moral conscience. The pews are filling up, notably with young people. Gen Z's attendance at church has quadrupled in recent years – from a small base, but the significance lies more in the direction of travel.

This is shaping up to be the first new generation, in a very long time, to be making the country more, not less, religious – TikToking digital natives for whom the old world is unfathomable, yet who retrieve now from its analogue wreckage, of all things, Bibles and hymn sheets.

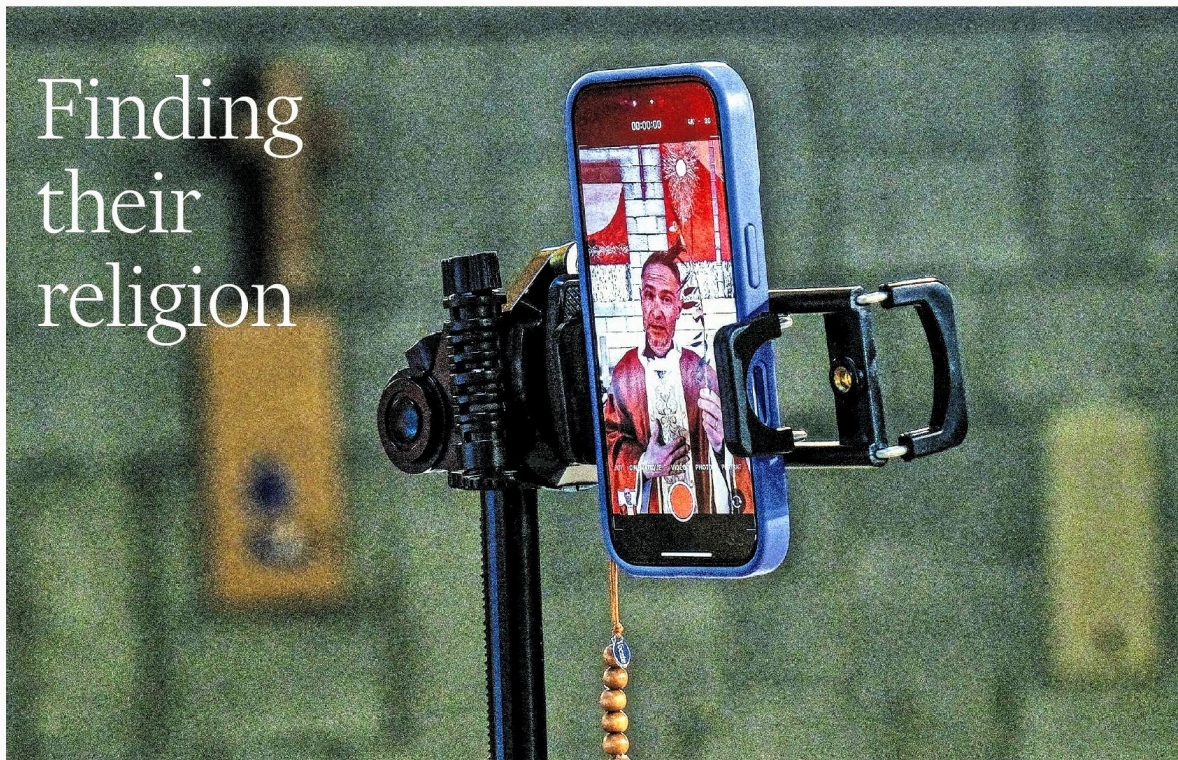
Today's culture is certainly more sympathetic to faith than the noughties, when millennials like me grew up ensnared by the "Four Horsemen" of New Atheism and their era-defining bestsellers: Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*; Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*; Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*; and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*. Dismissing religion as child abuse, mental illness or terrorist propaganda, they seem now as dated as the Dead Sea Scrolls. (Would any get past today's sensitivity readers?) And in their place, the litany of new books revisiting faith steadily grows.

In *Don't Forget We're Here Forever* by award-winning writer Lamorna Ash, *Why We Believe* by polymath professor Alistair McGrath, and *The Möbius Book* by cult novelist Catherine Lacey, we find differing approaches to faith – reportage, scholarship, narrative – which nevertheless share a humane curiosity that sets them apart from the screeds we were reading 20 years ago.

While McGrath is a paid-up believer of a familiar type – albeit with an unusual hinterland in biophysics and Marxism – the others really aren't. Their profiles reflect the vibe-shift that has occurred, both of them cool writers hailed by the contemporary literary world, youngish bisexual women – Ash is also polyamorous – known for writing as frankly about queerness as about faith. This is worlds away from the contempt for religion so recently in vogue among writers, all those grizzled male boomers trumpeting godlessness. (Our culture's "it" novelist, Sally Rooney, is instead tellingly God-obsessed.)

When Ash began, aged 26, her immersive inquiry into "a new generation's search for religion", she too toed the more sceptical line. In her view, "religious experiences were not real." Faith held no interest. She just needed something to write about. A comedy duo she knew had become Christians, and she was intrigued. The mere oddity of it set

Finding their religion



Essay | Has Christianity regained the underground appeal of its earliest days? *Tanjil Rashid* on the signs that Britain's Gen Z are turning to faith

Above: a smartphone showing a video of Father Benoit Pouzin, a French Catholic priest with more than 46,000 followers on Instagram — Getty Images

Ash off on what would turn out to be her candidly documented journey through British Christendom.

In ancient abbeys and modern meeting houses, in silent retreats and garrulous reading groups, Ash meets born-again evangelicals and utopian Quakers and all sorts in between. But what everyone shares – beyond being in their twenties and thirties – is their edginess. "In every believer I came across," writes Ash, "I discovered so much moveable strangeness."

No one in this book is boring or, frankly, normal. A subculture deprecated for long enough becomes counter-cultural, and so Christianity has regained the underground appeal of its earliest days. Non-conformism is a fine Christian tradition, after all. Christianity, to Heine, was an entry ticket into the mainstream; now it's an exit visa on the way out.

That dissenting spirit can be observed in conservative evangelist Rico Tice's weekly Bible classes in central London, attended by Ash and replete with denunciations of progressive individualism and the idea that "we can all be exactly who we want to be".

While the radical free-thinking Protestants whom Ash meets proudly endorse that idea, there's an irony here for intransigent trads. Tice's mission – to convert people to his hardline creed – would be nowhere without individuals choosing for themselves who they wish to be. A culture of individualism is what permits people to convert to a life on the margins and what affirms their courage to be different.

Don't Forget We're Here Forever is really a story about conversion, including – and this isn't really a plot spoiler, given how deftly it's foreshadowed – Ash's

own eventual embrace of Christianity. More than anything else, more than Christian theology, the idea of being born again is what bewitches Ash.

"Can I become a Christian in a year?" she asks at the outset, tantalised by the prospect of her own personal reformation before even ascertaining what beliefs that might entail. Metaphysics barely matter; doctrines are all "mutative", anyway. What is stressed is the self's passionate reawakening – her tears, her prayers, her "burning heart".

Without personally sharing this Romantic disposition, I found the book offered scintillating insight into how faith works in an age of intense self-fashioning. Ash describes how "conversion arrives like a volta [poetic shift] in a

The era-defining bestsellers of noughties New Atheism seem now as dated as the Dead Sea Scrolls

person's life." The metaphor is apt, imagining one's spiritual life as a poem, an authored thing, and not preserved on vellum either, but open to revision. In a sense, that's what this book has been for Ash these past few years, the mesmerised authorship of her own conversion.

Conversions are stunning things. The most famous, that of St Paul, came as a flash of light on the road to Damascus. Ash's was ignited by her own charged writing process.

And what of Alistair McGrath's conversion? It might have been interesting to read about, if *Why We Believe* properly explored it. A gifted, irreligious boy from Belfast becomes an

accomplished scientist, a career unexpectedly abandoned for academic philosophy and the priesthood. But why? This cogent book, citing well-worn reasons why humankind believes, shies away from what must have been McGrath's roiling inner life.

For McGrath, humans are "believing and meaning-seeking animals". Beliefs can't be proven (that God exists, that torture is wrong, that humans have rights, etc.). Yet not even atheists can live without some of these. Try building a life around observable facts alone, like the atomic weight of chlorine.

Everyone understands the world via what McGrath calls a "big picture" – some belief-ridden worldview, religious or secular – even avowedly atheist Christopher Hitchens, who claimed that his beliefs were "not beliefs." However, since none of these worldviews can be verified empirically, why adopt religion over secularism? McGrath fails to vindicate his big picture.

That's why the academic, discursive approach to faith's quandary flops. The author himself implies this: "Step inside this world of meaning and experience it," he urges. McGrath has presumably done this – he's taken Holy Orders – but at no point does he tell us this from the inside, or at all. His priesthood goes unacknowledged. The book's scholarly eschewal of the subjective limits its insight into why we believe.

The contemporary genre of confessional literature, which makes public the private self, exemplifies how writing can step inside faith. The name alone harks back to a sacrament (confession) that once shaped daily life, as with so many forgotten rituals that spook our language – the invocation of God in our goodbyes, of the holy in our holidays. Catherine Lacey, whose religious fundamentalist upbringing in Mississippi was hinted at in her novel *Pew* (2020), now reflects on it in her post-break-up memoir of faith and love.

Their equivalence, writ large in western tradition since the Bible ("God is love"), is at the heart of *The Möbius Book*.

"A relationship is an act of faith," writes Lacey, "a kind of magic." And faith, it hardly needs adding, is an act of love, an intimacy with the unseen. The metaphor works both ways, like a Möbius strip, a twisted loop that can be infinitely reversed.

After being dumped, Lacey recollects her passion for God, which also traumatically left her. Having become anorexic then, she now again loses her appetite – which is insightfully likened to asceticism, "a denying of the flesh perhaps in order not to lose Him". To get over the funk, she turns to healers and psychics, whose ministrations remind us that rituals of spirituality are as bodily as acts of love.

Partly because the emotional notes of love and faith – hope, happiness, ecstasy – are identical, all such talk reverts to the same vocabulary. A slim fictional appendix, whose most vivid character is Edie, also emerging from a break-up in a whirl of spirituality, really evokes this. Edie's Catholicism has lapsed but not her words. Relationships "redeem" her. After a sexually promiscuous spell, she's "reborn". Personal fulfilment and meaning seem impossible to conceive of outside age-old religious paradigms.

God, then, isn't as dead as we thought. Nietzsche's claim is ubiquitous; less known is his intent. "How can I exist if God does?" he asked. For Nietzsche, Christianity's repressive rubble was crushing the individual; it had to be cleared for our self-created, self-fulfilling identity.

But out of that rubble have emerged greater threats to the self's sovereignty, from algorithms to surveillance. A more efficient, optimised future looms at the expense of our gnarly individuality, to be cast aside – some feel – like misshapen supermarket bananas. Responding to these perceived encroachments by intensifying the inner life and butressing the individual conscience, today's spirituality, as all of these books hint, is an act of self-determination: how can I exist if God doesn't?

Don't Forget We're Here Forever:
A New Generation's Search for Religion
by Lamorna Ash
Bloomsbury £22, 352 pages

The Möbius Book
by Catherine Lacey
Farrar, Straus & Giroux \$27
Granta £16.99, 240 pages

Why We Believe: Finding Meaning in Uncertain Times
by Alistair McGrath
Oneworld £18.99
272 pages