

Incredible story? More than a relic: More than a relic

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [December 30, 2008](#) issue

"I don't believe in God, but I miss him." The first words of English novelist Julian Barnes's hauntingly beautiful memoir, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, suggest that this is not going to be your typical atheist's manifesto. There will be no shots across the bow à la Richard Dawkins, no overblown criticisms of religion's deleterious influence à la Christopher Hitchens. Indeed, Barnes's account is less a critique of religious belief than a lament, its tone less defiant than melancholic.

Barnes notes a personal transition: in his 20s he described himself as an atheist, he says, but in his 50s and 60s he has called himself an agnostic. The reason? He is more aware of his own ignorance, and more mindful of death and his own dying. As he observes, "God might be dead, but Death is well alive." He introduces us to his grandparents and parents, and to their manner of living as well as of dying. He observes that "however much you escape your parents in life, they are likely to reclaim you in death," which rings true in my generation as we begin to say farewell to parents.

Barnes makes three points. First, and ironically for a novelist, Barnes does not believe that human life has a narrative form. We may decide to process things in a way that makes them seem coherent, especially as we look back at our lives, but for Barnes this is an illusion. "I do not object to this atavistic need for narrative—not least since it is how I make my living—but I am suspicious of it." We are, he believes, simply a mass of cells that will disintegrate into nothingness.

Second, he laments the loss of a religious culture that once seemed animated by a larger story of God's creation, redemption and promised consummation of the world. He finds himself drawn to and moved by religious art and writes, "Missing God is focused for me by missing the underlying sense of purpose and belief when confronted with religious art." Hearing the Mozart *Requiem* or gazing at a Donatello sculpture and seeing the face of the suffering Christ, Barnes wonders, "Does it

matter if we take the religion out of religious art, if we aestheticize it into mere colours, structures, sounds, their essential meaning as distant as a childhood of memory? Or is that a pointless question, as we don't have the choice?"

Third, Barnes is looking for intellectual coherence in narratives that seem to be disconnected from the practices and habits that shape ways of life—especially religious dispositions toward life. Barnes notes that he has never been to a normal church service in his life. He walks into churches occasionally to get a sense of “what Englishness once was,” but for him the practice of Christianity is a relic of the past.

For me, as a practicing Christian committed to equipping others to practice Christian faith and life, Barnes's memoir feels like a word of judgment. How have we Christians so eviscerated the story of the Triune God in practice and intellectual articulation that Barnes can deem it a relic? This is not simply a matter of mounting intellectual apologetics to counter the “new” atheists. There are underlying challenges we Christians need to confront.

More than a decade ago Robert Jenson wrote an essay titled “How the World Lost Its Story,” in which he described modernity as a process of living off the heritage of the Christian narrative without having the resources needed to renew that narrative.

Jenson proposes that the church must reclaim a “narratable world” that articulates God's story in all of its “dramatic density, sensual actuality, and brutal realism.” This involves not a return to Constantinianism, but rather a robust “Christian culture” that shapes the ways we live and locates our lives in the larger narrative of God's creation, redemption and consummation of the world.

A Christian culture centered in robust worship and other central Christian practices prepares us to live toward dying through regular rehearsals. Such rehearsals are focused in Christ's dying and rising in Holy Week and Easter, but every weekly (and even daily) worship is a little Easter.

What would it be like if we Christians in the West became passionately, intellectually and practically committed again to Christian communities that were fully rooted in the story of the triune God, and to cultivating vibrant institutions that supported these communities? There would no doubt still be atheists and agnostics, but I suspect they wouldn't “miss” God as some relic of the past. There would be communities and practices and a story for them to believe in—and there would be nothing to be frightened of because there would be something—some One—to

believe in and to love.