

Beyond disbelief: Free to change

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

I grew up in an apartment on the 12th floor of a World War II era red-brick apartment building in lower Manhattan, with my parents and a goldfinch. In an identical red-brick building, across from the playground where I got my head stuck between iron bars and had to be rescued by the fire department, lived Berenice, an elderly lady who had been my grandmother's best friend during their days at Cornell. Berenice was a pulp fiction writer who had carried on a dalliance with a celebrated author, but never married. She wrote and lectured on the "great experiment" of Soviet communism, and kept a daily journal which by her death at age 97 had grown to 85 volumes.

Her conversation was a pastiche of recitations from the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and other works a photographic memory had engraved upon her mind. I can still hear the plaintive "hwy, hwence and hwither" with which she breathed out the melancholy lines of Edward Fitzgerald's translation from the Persian: "Into this Universe, and *Why* not knowing, / Nor *Whence*, like Water willy-nilly flowing; / And out of it, as Wind along the Waste, / I know not *Whither*, willy-nilly blowing."

Since Berenice had no surviving kin, it fell to my mother to look after her, and I was a frequent visitor. From the time I first evinced interest in religion, visits to Berenice meant a barrage of questions served up with cookies and juice. Berenice was haunted by a childhood memory of having cursed God on a whim, and she never quite forgave him for it. "I'm a determinist," Berenice would proclaim, with a determination that belied her doctrine. Yet she was obsessed with finding evidence for God, freedom and immortality. In her 90s she went deaf, but kept asking the same questions long past the day when she could hear my response: "What's that you say? Ontological argument? First cause? Design? Mysticism? Morality? Parapsychology? Common consent? I'm sorry, but you'll have to do better. I need proof!"

Last month Berenice came to mind when I read the newspaper accounts of British philosopher Antony Flew's defection from the atheist fold. His politics couldn't be

more different from Berenice's (her FBI file is a family heirloom), but he has devoted his distinguished philosophical career to holding God accountable to Berenice-like standards of evidence. In *The Presumption of Atheism*, Flew maintained that the burden of proof rests with religious believers. In his famous essay on "Theology and Falsification," Flew argued that if the assertion that God exists cannot be falsified by any state of affairs here below, religious belief dies "the death by a thousand qualifications." Coincidentally, on the day the Flew story broke my philosophy of religion class was discussing the closing lines of "Theology and Falsification":

Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made—God's love is "not a merely human love" or it is "an inscrutable love" . . . We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth . . .? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say "God does not love us" or even "God does not exist"?

Now Flew believes in God, not as the loving Father of Christian faith but the "appropriately qualified" intelligent designer who accounts for the complexity of DNA. He continues to reject claims of a future life, and in this respect is the mirror twin of the late Sir Alfred Jules Ayer, the passionately atheistic philosopher whose near-death experience led him to think that consciousness survives death. Put Ayer and Flew together and you have something approaching old-fashioned deism: belief in a creator God whose main function is to explain the cosmos and underwrite the promise of life after death.

Believers should not gloat over having bagged a famous atheist; neither should they underrate his conversion. Flew has admitted God on the frugal terms of deism, yet further concessions may be in store. For what is to prevent a deist God from taking an interest in the cosmic process he began? What being, capable of writing life-forms in genetic code, could be incapable of inscribing thought-forms in the human heart? What rule of divine decorum could restrain the creator from sending down prophet, lawgiver and redeemer to restore his creation? For former believers, deism is a halfway house on the way to atheism; for former atheists it is a traveler's inn on the road to full-bodied faith. Flew has opened the door just a crack; yet the opening

may prove wide enough for a whole convoy of angels and archangels to enter in.

If I could revisit Berenice in her solitary salon I would say, Antony Flew notwithstanding, that there is no new evidence for the existence of God. For those well disposed to see it, life has always been unfathomably complex. If anything, Flew's *volte-face* is a testimony to the mystery of human freedom. One need not remain captive to old certainties; one is free to change. The day may come when at last the mind assents to the heart's reasons even as the heart submits to the mind's correction. In every age, such a disciplined philosophical conversion is cause for rejoicing.