

Right-brained apologetics: Writer Francis Spufford

by [David Heim](#) in the [December 10, 2014](#) issue



Photo by Bart Koetsier

Francis Spufford has won several literary awards in Great Britain for his nonfiction works, which include I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination and a memoir of childhood, The Child That Books Built. In 2012 he published what he calls “a short polemic about religion”: Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense. One British reviewer described his case for faith as “rude, intelligent, and convincing.” The American paperback edition of Unapologetic was published this month by HarperOne.

Your book is not “apologetic” in the classic sense of presenting a rational defense of Christian belief designed to persuade skeptics. You explicitly focus on the emotional sense of Christianity. Do you think there is a place for the former kind of apologetics?

I’m not always intellectually convinced by particular moves that particular apologists make as they go about the traditional business of defending the integrity and plausibility of Christian ideas, but I absolutely accept the value of the task. It needs to exist in the Christian intellectual ecosystem and to be reinvented for changing

contexts of ideas every generation, maybe every decade. I just don't think it is the only persuasive tool we need, or that it is always the right one to reach people with.

Often, even when writers think they are beginning from scratch, conventional apologetics assumes a kind of basic assent from the reader to the idea that this religion stuff matters at all—that God is important enough that you'd want to devote your time to propositions about him. And for increasingly large numbers of people, that just isn't true any more.

Especially in my own European context, but I think in swaths of secularized America too, there'd need to be a reason before the reasons began for why you'd engage with an argument about God at all. This, I think, is where it makes sense to speak in the language of experience, of emotion, which is humanly recognizable as being urgent without the need for prior assent.

My book isn't intended to compete with more conventional apologetics, and it certainly isn't supposed to be saying: emotions good, ideas bad. We need both. But emotions create the setting in which the ideas begin to matter as something more than dry abstractions.

There's a particular danger, just at the moment, of falling in with the atheist polemicists' endless, tedious, monopolistic concentration on whether God exists. OK, God's existence is logically prior to the possibility of our faith in him, but it isn't biographically prior, it doesn't come first in terms of the life of faith. God's love gets us there, God's mercy. His mere existence is probably God's most boring quality.

It is sometimes said that the sequence of faith and churchgoing in our time is not “believe, then belong” but “belong, then believe.” Does that sound right?

It doesn't sound quite right to me. In some ways, being a member of a church community for whatever reason clearly enrolls you in a kind of very valuable school for the heart, where the practice, the doing part of the shared Christian life, can build up over time into a powerful, wordless understanding. But if we say that in the contemporary world people primarily believe because they belong, and that our evangelical attention should therefore go on making them belong, or helping them belong, then we seem to me to be piling far too many of our eggs in the one basket of church's social legitimacy.

In the United States, church is still one of the standard forms of bottom-up civil association. It's one of the basic voluntary building blocks of society. You arrive in a new city or a new neighborhood, and you naturally look for a sympathetic congregation, as a way of attaching yourself, of becoming at home in a new place.

As someone who lives in a place—England—where this has not been true for at least two generations, I look at the American pattern with some envy, yet I also think that it would be a mistake to count on the desire to belong as a permanent force working in church's favor. It can't be sufficient for faith to just accrete as a consequence of a fundamentally secular need.

There are open doors to God everywhere, and none of them should be scorned, but belonging to God's family is different from other kinds of belonging. I would want to say that church is the community formed by belief, rather than that Christianity is the belief formed by community.

Is there a kind of evangelical clarity or advantage in the British situation in that the faith question is sharply posed without cultural baggage? If so, the problem of entrée remains: How does the church as an institution begin to draw people into matters of faith?

Well, maybe. It's certainly easier in the British setting, I think, to distinguish between the appeal of Christianity as such and the appeal of belonging to a community's consensus about what virtue is.

In Britain, the commonsensical understanding of what it means to be a decent person has parted company with Christianity to the extent that you're doing something counterintuitive and perhaps potentially even isolating if you go looking for goodness in church. (Thankfully, some stubborn souls do it anyway.)

We don't have a problem with moralistic and therapeutic deism in Christian disguise, because with us there's no need for moralism or therapy to put on religious clothes. The true oddity of Christian belief stands revealed.

But that leaves us with exactly the problem of entrée, and pointing to any kind of supposed purity in the British position would be like suggesting that starvation has weight-loss advantages. Better, much better, to have all the inevitable compromises of being woven into social belonging, because that offers so many more entrées to faith—so many doors through which people may discover the Christ who offers more

than belonging.

You lived part of your life apart from church. Can you say anything about what made you return or what in your own early experience of church made the most impact? Looking back, what was most formative—positively and negatively—in your early experience of church?

I came back because I made a mess of my life in one of the characteristic ways that men in their thirties do, and I found myself in need of forgiveness. And to my astonishment, forgiveness seemed to be there, when I asked for it.

Then bit by bit, I discovered that this thing, church, which I had last really paid attention to when I was about 13, seemed to be far subtler and tougher and richer and larger than my child-sized understanding of it.

I should say that I sat for a long time in empty churches trying to quiet my mind and to listen to whatever might be there to be heard before I dared to go along to an actual service, with other human beings. (This probably affects my judgment on the believing/belonging question.)

Since then, with 15 years of membership behind me and a kind of minister's-side view of what works and doesn't for children, because I'm married to an Anglican parish priest, I suppose I look at my younger self and I notice that my childhood congregation did successfully load me up with the first understanding from which an adult understanding could grow. It gave me a map, even if I couldn't read it yet—even if I then forgot I had it for 20 years. I knew where to go when I needed help. And that seems to be a lot, in an uncertain world, and I'm grateful for it. I try to pass along the favor.

One of your other books is about the impact of books and stories on you as a child. What part does this nurturing of the imagination play in religious life?

Huge. We live by stories. They constitute the world for us, in everyday ways, all the time, just as an ordinary cognitive consequence of being human. We walk on narrative ground, under a sky of pelting anecdotes.

And for Christians, the particular story of the gospel is central, giving us reality's underlying shape far more profoundly, I think, than any theological argument. We

have to tell it and keep telling it, but this doesn't mean we have to be nervous about all the other stories, or to treat our own as if it were terribly vulnerable and had to be kept pure. We should trust its power and be enthusiastic about imagination as such, as the faculty that feels its way ahead of us, reaching for what we cannot yet know face to face—that looks as hard as it can into many glasses, darkly. The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen? Sounds like a job for imagination.

Anyone writing a popular book on Christianity may be shadowed by the figure of C. S. Lewis. Has he been important to you?

The Narnia books were my favorite reading as a child, and now, as a rather eccentric or peculiar kind of apologist, I have to reckon with Lewis as the biggest and most influential of my predecessors, someone whom I must define myself in relation to.

It isn't always the most straightforward and comfortable of relationships for me, because I'm out of sympathy with him theologically in a number of ways, and I'm also very conscious that in my own British setting his apologetics have lost their reach. For reasons to do with his voice on the page, and with the two generations of distance from which most Brits now view faith, he no longer speaks successfully to the uncommitted.

So I don't want to do some of what he does, and a lot of what we agree on I think now has to be done differently to stand a chance of being heard. But I admire him deeply. If I could achieve anything like his power to articulate transcendence, or his sardonic realism about human character, I would be very, very happy.

What do you find unsympathetic in Lewis? And what do you think makes contemporary readers less likely to be receptive?

It's the way he makes Christianity so primarily a deal about immortality. I'm not a Platonist, and I don't yearn to get outside the world of matter. Redemption, for me, needs to start making sense right here, incarnationally, before I start entertaining hopes of eternity.

As a child, I was troubled by the relish with which Lewis seemed to destroy Narnia in *The Last Battle*; as an adult, trying to do apologetics in his shadow, I think suggesting that faith entails a head-on collision with biology as its first order of business is a bad idea.

But there's also now a problem of voice for his apologetics which is specific to Britain. In the United States he just sounds, well, British on the page—safely outside American social judgments. But at home, quite unfairly, he has started to sound posh and a bit authoritarian. History is to blame, not him.

Early 21st-century British readers, on the other side of an enormous casualization of manners, aren't very good at picking up on how carefully he is doing the off-the-cuff, down-at-the-pub, off-duty version of his erudite Oxford don's voice. The static of time is interfering with our reception of him.

The context of your book is very much British culture. Have you thought about how it might have been shaped differently in an American context?

I know my limitations here. It seems to me that there is quite a large world of, as it were, Europe-in-America in the United States today—secularized regions of the culture where my sense that you have to explain everything may come in handy. And I hope, too, that a lot of what I am trying to convey in *Unapologetic* is universal because it is basic, because it is what belongs in common to all of Christianity's varieties.

But if you're going to try to speak directly out of experience, you have to speak out of a real and therefore particular experience, in a particular voice. And my voice is hopelessly British. I hope it travels; I want it to, as much as possible. But I fear that from the American point of view I'm probably stuck with producing the *Masterpiece Theater* of the soul.