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## *The starting point*

But my dear Sebastian, you can't seriously believe it all.  
(Evelyn Waugh<sup>1</sup>)

The challenge that the sceptical Charles Ryder puts to his friend Sebastian in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* sums up an attitude that has become steadily more dominant in our contemporary culture. Over the last few generations we seem to have seen a steady shift from a world in which religious belief of some kind was the 'default' position for the majority, to one where it is an option only for a diminishing minority.<sup>2</sup>

This applies, of course, to the developed Western world. There are many parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia where religion remains central to the lives of most people, and shows no signs of losing its hold. So the sceptical and detached attitude of Charles Ryder is by no means the norm in the world as a whole, though it has become fairly typical of our own Western culture.

Is the decline of religious faith in the West something to be regretted? It partly depends on which aspects of religion you're considering. A religion-dominated society can be an environment where intolerance and bigotry reign and fear and oppression flourish. Many Westerners

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pride themselves on their humane values, but one does not have to go back many generations to find a time when Christians in Europe were burning other Christians to death for their beliefs.

So there are aspects of religion that the modern Western world may be grateful to have left behind. But rather than go over that old territory, let us start our inquiry with a rather different and more directly personal question. Are we – are *you*, the reader – completely comfortable with living entirely without religious faith?

It's perhaps not easy to answer that question with complete honesty. But when the jaded Western tourist looks out from a hotel window in Amman or Marrakesh and hears the strange haunting wail of the call to prayer floating over the city in the clear morning light, he or she may feel a sneaking pang of admiration for a culture where each day still begins with the praise of God. The mess and the grime of another day will soon be unleashed, but here is a timeless moment of affirmation, a brief space set aside to acknowledge the utter dependency of humanity on a power it cannot fully understand but which it has felt a deep need, since time immemorial, to acknowledge.

A similar pang of nostalgia may grip the visitor to Jerusalem as the shops and offices fall silent on Friday evening and the sabbath lamps are lit. None of the difficulty or anguish of human life has disappeared, but here is a brief pause in which secular time gives way to sacred time, a time of renewal and reflection, following a custom passed on down the generations in faith and hope that human life has a deeper significance than the utilitarian imperatives of work and survival.

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And even in disillusioned and disbelieving north-western Europe there are still cities where on Sunday morning the bells ring as they have done for hundreds of years calling the people to worship, and where the churches still receive those who have come to start another week by taking stock of their lives, offering up their anxieties and hopes, and singing out their hymns of prayer and praise, not expecting or demanding magical good luck or miraculous solutions to their problems, but as a simple act of duty and thanksgiving and affirmation.

A sentimentalized vision? Perhaps to some extent it is. But it may succeed in bringing home the idea that religious belief is not just a matter of giving assent to certain doctrines, or finding certain credal teachings intellectually plausible. Religion is integrally bound up with *praxis* – with patterns of action and behaviour and observance that are integrated into the daily and weekly routines of life in ways that confer structure and bestow significance.

Our lives, to be sure, are punctuated by many routines – routines of work and of leisure, of eating and sleeping, of family concerns and business transactions. But the structures and practices of religion are different in kind from any of these. Those who engage in them feel, perhaps not always but at least on some occasions, that they glimpse a deeper meaning and purpose to their lives. At its best, religious observance seems to afford a brief respite from the relentless grind of secular activity, a fragile window into a region that is hard to define or explain, but which something in us recognizes as having a special kind of significance – the region of the sacred.

You do not have to be a committed believer to recognize this elusive and precious dimension of our human

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existence. One of the fiercest contemporary critics of religious belief has recently conceded that there is such a thing as 'spiritual experience', and that it can be among the most 'important and transformative' occurrences in our lives.<sup>3</sup> And another prominent self-styled 'materialist' and representative of the 'new atheism' is on record as acknowledging a 'numinous' and 'transcendent' aspect to our lives, which is 'beyond the material or not entirely consistent with it'.<sup>4</sup>

It remains to be seen how we are to come to terms with this 'numinous' or 'sacred' or 'spiritual' dimension. But a more general point about the framework for our inquiry may perhaps already have emerged from these opening remarks. When people ask 'Should I believe?' or 'How can I believe?', it is often assumed that what is wanted is an intellectual inquiry into the truth of religious claims, or an analysis of the evidence or arguments that support religious belief. This calls to mind the detached, sceptical standpoint of Charles Ryder in our opening epigraph – 'How can you possibly *believe* all that?' But while there is nothing wrong with approaching religion via analysis and scrutiny of the relevant beliefs and doctrines, this is not the only way to tackle the subject – not even the only philosophically respectable way. There is another way: to start by thinking not about the doctrines but about the practices and observances that give religion its shape, and the heightened human experience (of the sacred, the spiritual, the numinous, or whatever term we use) that nourishes it. If we focus on these things, then perhaps the question 'How can I believe?' will end up answering itself.