To the modern, unbelieving, anti-religious, atheistic, scientifically minded skeptic Christianity is silly, obscure, and puzzling. Religious critics insist Christians are unintelligent, foolish, witless, humorless, psychologically needy, emotionally driven, old fashioned, homophobic, misogynistic, child abusing, politically conservative, slavishly devoted to bronze age absurdities, dogmatic, self righteous, and reality denying fanatics.

It is into this context that Christian author Spufford writes his reasons for continuing unapologetically to embrace faith. His generous use of irreverent four letter vulgarities, unfamiliar (British!) literary and cultural references, and in-your-face humor may not work for some readers. But in my opinion his profound insights require serious consideration.

PREFACE

"The most that Unapologetic is trying for is to persuade people that Christianity as such, in any variety, should be seen as something not axiomatically contemptible, [but rather] something emotionally comprehensible even if not shared; something that provides one good enough solution to a set of fundamental human needs," page xi.

"What I want to assert...is the religion's imaginative legitimacy, its rightful (and for that matter inevitable) but nonexclusive place in the domain of what we all dream, hope, conjecture." Page xii.

CHAPTER ONE: UNAPOLOGETIC

After listing page after page of often humorous reasons why his kids are embarrassed by his Christianity, Spufford says,

"In my experience, it's belief that involves the most uncompromising attention to the nature of things of which you are capable. It's belief which demands that you dispense with illusion after illusion, while contemporary common sense requires continual, fluffy pretending," page 7. He describes two realms where the unbeliever pretends.

FIRST: There is a famous atheist slogan on sides of busses in England, "There's probably no God so quit worrying and enjoy your life." Spufford doesn't object to the word probably. He objects to the word enjoy. He disagrees with the implication that faith in God robs us of joy and that joy is our default emotion when unencumbered by worry-inducing faith in God. He also challenges the notion that individuals troubled by sickness, poverty, anger, handicaps, and addiction can find joy on their own without God. An atheistic narrative, he says, offers no hope, no consolation, no optimism.

SECOND: Spufford takes John Lennon to task for the lyrics to Imagine which imply that if we could only take religion out of the picture we'll all automatically live in peace. Peace, says Spufford, is not our default mode. It takes work. Spufford also calls attention to Lennon's hypocrisy (he had, according to reports,
non-peaceful relations with many), adding cleverly that John and Yoko promoted Imagine while dressed in white, the iconography of the heaven they just announced they’re ditching (page 13).

Spufford says these secular calls for joy and peace require a denial of reality, a flight from awkward truths about us and about life. Christianity, he says, offers a ground for hope based in reality. And that reality includes human emotions.

"It is … a mistake to suppose that it is assent to the propositions that makes you a believer. It is the feelings that are primary. I assent to the ideas because I have the feelings; I don't have the feelings because I've assented to the ideas," page 19.

When Spufford experiences positive emotions through Mozart it is a reminder that the universe is merciful, giving him something kind, something better than he deserves or expects. This to him is evidence that, "the universe is sustained by a continual and infinite act of love," page 20.

"The argument about whether the ideas are true or not... is also secondary for me. No, I can't prove it. I don't know that any of it is true, I don't know if there's a God1...." page 20-21.

Emotions don't need to be proved even though they can be misleading. "Emotions are our indispensable tool for navigating, for feeling our way through, the much larger domain of stuff that isn't susceptible to proof or disproof, that isn't checkable against the physical universe," page 21.

"This [book] is a defense of Christian emotions—of their intelligibility, of their grown up dignity. The book is called Unapologetic because it isn't giving an 'apologia', the technical term for defense of the ideas. And also because I'm not sorry," page 23.

**CHAPTER TWO: THE CRACK IN EVERYTHING**

Spufford defines for modern readers Christian notions of sin, evil, guilt, and judgment.

**Sin.** "[Sin is] the human tendency, the human propensity, to fuck things up [HPtFtU]...moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well being and other people's," page 27.

"When our desires do conflict sharply enough to cause us an unhappiness we can't distract away, there's a strong contemporary feeling that it ought to be possible to fix this situation by a change in the rules, an alteration of what is and is not permissible…But the truth that some problems of conflicted desire can be solved this way, some cases in which we desperately both want and don't want to do something, doesn't mean it's true that all can," page 30-31. In other words, sometimes we can redefine what is and is not acceptable, and sometimes we can't.

**Evil.** There’s near universal acceptance that sex with children, serial killers, torture porn, and skinning people alive are evil. There is wisdom in "admitting there's some black in the color chart of my psyche," page 35.

**Guilt.** "[Common] usage assumes a world where we never do anything it would be appropriate to feel bad about. So the old expressions of guilt stop sounding like functional responses to real situations and have become evidence of crazy self hatred," page 36.

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1 Underlined passages hold special significance to me; I highlighted them so I can locate and reread them often.
John Newton felt bad for being a slave trader. Field Marshall Montgomery felt bad for sending 13,500 soldiers to their deaths. It would serve little purpose telling these men their guilt was undeserved.

Judgment. "(Judgment) produces a moralized landscape in which the good people can be told from the bad people; in which all human actions can be split into two categories: pure or impure, clean or dirty, permitted or forbidden," page 45.

Christianity, rather than softening the blow of these terms, does just the opposite. It fosters sin, evil, guilt, and judgment by raising the stakes. Instead of relaxing standards of morality, Jesus condemned wrong actions done with good motives and he condemned good actions done with wrong motives. In other words, we’re all sinners.

“‘It is in that chaos, that true realization of a true formlessness in yourself, that the need can begin which is one of the strong motives for belief, one of the basic emotions from which the rest unfolds,’” page 51.

What do we do when we realize we have messed up? “‘Turn towards the space where the possibility exists that there might be someone to hear us who is not one of the parties to our endless, million-sided, multigenerational suit against each other,’” page 52.

In other words we pray, “Hello? A little help here please?” page 53.

CHAPTER THREE: BIG DADDY

“And nothing happens,” Page 54.

We turn toward God for solace from sin and are often met by silence. God is absent. At this point some become atheists and say, “He doesn’t exist.” Others become Samuel Beckett and lament, “He doesn’t exist, the bastard.” Others become believers and realize that by the every act of turning toward God in prayer something happens inside us.

“…it was then, when we asked [in prayer] and because we asked, that we started, falteringly, tentatively, to be able to notice something that was happening already. Something that did not need to start, it having never stopped, never paused, never faltered. Something that did (we come to see) constitute an answer: something that had been going on all the time unremarked, so steady and continuous that we had never picked it out of the general background roar of the world,” page 56-57.

In church (a “vessel of hush,” page 57) Spufford closes his eyes and hears silence, he breathes, he senses a reality beneath, behind, and beyond the physical world. When he prays he feels “what I feel when there’s someone beside me. I am being looked at, I am being known; known in some wholly accurate and complete way that is only possible when the point of view is not another local self in the world but glows in the whole medium in which I live and move,” page 63. He feels naked yet safe and forgiven.

“I know that we have an evolved tendency to detect personhood or agency in environments, whether or not it is actually there. Since we find faces in wallpaper and puddles of spilled cappuccino, my discovery of consciousness beneath the skin of the universe will not have been much of a stretch, cognitively speaking,” page 66.

He recognizes that emotions are the result of biology, breathing, photons, and brain chemistry.
“But so what? These are explanations of how my feelings might have arisen, physically, but they don’t explain my feelings away. They don’t prove that my feelings were not really my feelings. They certainly don’t prove that there was nobody there for me to be feeling them about. If God does exist, then from my point of view it’s hard to see how a physical creature like myself could ever register His presence except through some series or other of physically determined bodily states,” page 66-67.

When a person falls in love their brains are flooded with neurochemicals; that does not prove the object of their love is imaginary.

“God is not necessary as an explanation…We don’t need God to explain any material aspect of the universe, including our mental states; while conversely, no material fact about the universe is ever going to decide for us whether He exists…For me, it means that I’m only ever going to get to faith by some process quite separate from proof and disproof; that I’m only going to arrive at it because, in some way that it is not in the power of evidence to rebut, it feels right,” page 67.

Many of the so called proofs for the existence of God, Spufford writes, are concocted after the fact. They become rationalizations for deep emotional convictions. “An experience of the presence of God is just not compatible with an instinctual sense of what the world is like. For a lot of people, the world is constituted by stable, dependable, familiar sense-experiences among which it is self-evident that there’s no room for radical strangeness, for breaches of context,” page 69. Any yet encounters with God are unsuspected and emotional.

“[The materialistic] perceptual world isn’t science. It is a cultural artifact created by one version of the cultural influence of science, specific to the last two centuries in Europe and North America. It is not a direct, unmediated picture of reality; far from it. It is a drastically human-centered, human-scaled selection from the physical universe, comfortably restricted to the order of reality which is cooked rather than raw, which happens within the envelop of society. It scarcely touches on what the world is like apart from us. It doesn’t acknowledge the radical strangeness of quantum mechanics, down in reality’s basement; it doesn’t engage with the perturbing immensity of cosmology, up in the attic; it doesn’t admit the extraordinary temporariness of even the familiar things we think we possess securely on our middle floor of the universe. It treats us living creatures as the securely tenured lords of all we survey, rather than as the brief ripples of information we actually amount to,” page 70-71.

“All I’m pointing out is that if the basis for your conviction that there’s no room for God is the comfy familiarity of the universe, it’s a bit of a problem if it [the universe] turns out not to be comfortable or familiar,” page 71.

“What I do find troubling, though, is the uncertainty of the experience I’m talking about: the way it is, tremulously, only just there, the way it slips out of definite reach, the way it eludes definition….It was a shimmer of sensation…a flimsy foundation to rest anything on, let alone a huge and ponderous thing like organized religion….But that’s the way it is—has to be—uncertain right down to the root,” page 71-72.

“That’s what I need to convey and probably can’t: that this is something so elusive that you can’t securely put your finger on it, and yet at the same time is so strongly felt, when it is felt, that it illuminates the world and reorganizes a life,” page 72.

 “[Christianity is] something I came back to, freely, as an adult, after twenty-odd years of atheism, because piece by piece I have found that it answers my need, and corresponds to emotional reality for me. I also find that the elaborated structure of meaning it builds, the story it tells, explains that reality more justly,
more profoundly, more scrupulously and plausibly than any of the alternatives. (Am I sure I’m right? Of course not. Don’t you get bored with asking that question?)” page 75.

The chapter ends with the problem of evil. He elaborates on this “horrified disgust” (page 85) in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: HELLO CRUEL WORLD

“…if anyone is in charge of the universe, it must be a being as cruelly, capriciously amused by human suffering as he is himself,” page 86.

“It’s actually faith that creates the black joke here. Without faith, there’d be nothing but indifferent material forces at work. It’s only when the idea of events having an author is introduced that the universe becomes cruel,” page 86.

“Once the God of everything is there in the picture, and the physics and biology and history of the world we know become in some ultimate sense His responsibility, the lack of love and protection in the order of things begins to shriek out,” page 87.

“No matter how remote you believe God is from the day-to-day management of the cosmos—and for me He’s pretty damn remote, withdrawn from the whole thing as a condition of it existing at all—He still bears a maker’s responsibility for what goes on inside it,” page 87.

“But then there’s that shining, there’s that glimmer, there’s that never-ending song of loving intent threaded through the substrate of things; and if you find you can’t discard that, the cruelties of the world are an emotional, not just a logical, challenge,” page 87.

“From meteor strikes to car crashes, falling masonry to early-onset Alzheimer’s, anything can happen to us and to the people we love….there’s a slight contradiction (to say the least) in seeking that comfort from the party who is Himself finally responsible for the crappiness in question,” page 88.

“We, sapient species that we are, are inclined to take this personally, and to find a special outrage in the fact of our own morality, especially if we are of a metaphysical disposition,” page 91.

What are our options for dealing with the problem of pain? If we don’t want to engage in self deception ignoring the wide world of suffering, then we must argue that suffering exists for a greater good.

“[Theodicies] vary, but they have one thing in common. None of them quite work,” page 94-95.

1. *We suffer because God is refining us.* “Suffering doesn’t on the whole ennoble us. Usually it debases and distorts us…” page 97.

2. *We suffer because God has a plan in which our suffering is necessary.* “If love is love, it can’t manipulate. If love is love, it can’t treat those it loves as means to an end, even a beneficial one,” page 98.

3. *We suffer as part of a package deal that gives us free will.* “What about earthquakes, gangrene, supernovas? You can pull your adult child out of quicksand without threatening their autonomy,” page 99.

4. *We suffer, but it doesn’t matter, because it’s only a momentary prelude to heaven.* “[This theodicy] makes the loving God into a practitioner of dodgy cost-benefit analysis, indifferent to the way our lives feel as
we live them. It turns him into a doctor who thinks it’s OK to chat and dawdle on the way to the emergency room…” page 99.

5. *We suffer because the world is not as God intended it to be.* “How could the God of everything … produce something defective … How can God permit a universe that permits suffering? … *It moves God from being directly responsible for the Fall, to being responsible for the situation that was responsible for the Fall,*” page 100.

“I never heard of anyone being comforted by Kabbala, or by ingenious secret truths, or by the negation of negation—or even feeling that they had been substantially answered by these things. *You get more for your money, emotionally speaking, if you just howl, and kick as hard as you can at the imagined ankles of the God of everything, for it is one of His functions, and one of the ways in which He’s parent-like, to be the indestructible target for our rage and sorrow, still there, still loving, whatever we say to Him,*” page 102-103.

“How do we resolve the contradiction between cruel world and loving God? The shortest answer is we don’t. We don’t even try to, mostly,” page 103.

“The question of suffering proves to be one of those questions which is replaced by other questions, rather than being answered. We move on from it, without abolishing the mystery, or seeing clear conceptual ground under our feet,” page 103.

“We take the cruelties of the world as a given, as the known and familiar data of experience, and instead of anguishing about why the world is as it is, we look for comfort in coping with it as it is,” page 104.

“The impasse is still there. It’s just that we’re not in the jaws of it,” page 104.

“We don’t have an argument that solves the problem of the cruel world, but we have a story,” page 106.

**CHAPTER FIVE: YESHUA**

This chapter is a good intro to Jesus for anyone disinclined to read the New Testament. Spufford gives a contemporary summary of the four gospels. His thesis is that the Jesus story evokes emotions. Since a summary can not give readers the subjective experience he’s trying to induce I will simply choose one quote to give readers a taste of his colloquial style.

“He asks what she’s done. They tell him. Oh, he says. Well then, the one of you who’s never wanted anything bad had better throw the first stone. And he raises his eyebrows and waits, and something in the gaze of his ordinary eyes make the good people shuffle where they stand. There’s a pause. Perhaps it helps that his friends have walked into town with him, equally dusty from the road, and that among the ragtag of this followers, male and female, who are hanging back to see what he does, there are some quite large and burly men. But anyway there’s the hollow klok and klok and klok of stones dropping onto the ground, and the executioners slink away, and in a moment or two only the executee is left there with Yeshua and his friends. She is weeping. He helps her to stand up,” page 118.

**CHAPTER SIX: ET CETERA**

This chapter includes Spufford’s observations about the Jesus story.

1. The deity of Christ is not a second century add on but is integral to the gospel narratives.
2. “It cannot be denied, [the Jesus story is] a very strange story; with a peculiar and untidy vision of the nature of God at the center of it. Claiming that a provincial rabbi somehow embodies the impulse behind billions of years of history and unthinkable expanses of space does not have much philosophical dignity to it as a position. It is—let’s be honest—the kind of silly thing a cult would assert,” page 154.

3. “…the God/man mixture in Jesus brings us something more precious than conceptual purity: hope in trouble, consolation in suffering, help in anguish. It brings us a way out of the far worse and more destructive paradoxes of theodicy,” page 156.

4. “Christians believe that Jesus’ death is, among other things, a way for God to mention it, loudly and with no good breeding at all, a declaration by the maker of the world, in pain and solidarity, that to Him the measure of the waste of history is not the occasional tragedies of kings but the routine losses of every day,” page 161.


6. “You can also believe that Jesus’ death and resurrection ‘redeem’ us right now, in our lives, by acting to free us from our pasts; from the weight, the confinement, the limits, of the HPtFtU [human propensity to fuck things up],” pages 162-163.

7. “I want a way of living which opens out more widely and honestly and lovingly than I can manage for myself, which widens rather than narrowing with each destructive decision,” page 163.

CHAPTER SEVEN: LEAGUE OF THE GUILTY, PART TWO

Chapter seven addresses one of the biggest obstacles to Christian faith, it’s checkered past of “massacre and prejudice and exclusion” page 166. Interestingly, he does not muster the argument often used by well meaning apologists, namely, that along with their atrocities Christians also invented kindness, decency, manners, human rights, and abolition. Instead, he admits, “the bad stuff was, and is real,” page 166-167.

“Deep down it doesn’t really help to draw attention to the existence of a credit side as well as a debit side in the moral ledger of the religion. If Christianity is anything, it’s a refusal to see human behavior as ruled by the balance sheet. We’re not supposed to see the things we do as adding up into piles of good and evil we can subtract from each according to some kind of calculus to tell us how, on balance, we’re doing … cruelty cannot be canceled by equal and opposite amounts of being nice,” page 167.

Whether or not Spufford’s approach works for modern skeptics remains to be seen. I found it refreshingly unique. He responds to this problem two ways.

First response.

“The first and most decisive feature of Christian history is that it has been composed at every stage of the actions of people. And people are subject to HPtFtU. We don’t stop being subject to it when we’re Christians,” page 168.

In other words, he doesn’t try to sanitize Christianity by pointing out it’s virtues; he normalizes it’s vices by pointing out humanity’s vices.
“When I see one of those passionate denunciations of religion which treats Christianity as the great gratuitous cause of all our sorrows, I mainly think: read more history, mate,” page 168.

“The logic of the complaint seems to be that because Christians believe in unreal things, the bad stuff Christians are involved in is unnecessary, and would stop if the unreal beliefs were taken away. Without pernicious Christianity we’d all be grouped around the white piano with John and Yoko,” page 168-169.

“I won’t, myself, be convinced that the bloody wars Christians have fought over points of theology are uniquely the fault of the religion rather than of the species in general, unless someone can point out to me a non-Christian area of the planet, with reasonable population density and enough wealth to underwrite weapons production, where they don’t invest their spare time in butchery for the ostensible sake of ideas,” page 169.

Second response.

“Beyond the category of shit that happens because people are just, fairly reliably, shitty, there are crimes and sorrows in human history that would not exist at all without Christianity. There are ills that would not be there without the specific Christian framing of human behavior, without the presence of our specific story in human imagination,” page 169-170. These include:

1. Seeing the crucifixion as an excuse to inflict more pain, more violence, especially toward Jews— pogroms, anti-Semitism, Holocaust. Seeing the crucifixion as an excuse to embrace suffering by being enthusiastic about it, especially toward our bodies—self harm, self mutilation, rejection of human pleasures.

2. Seeing God’s grace as an excuse to show love to the unforgiveable—terrorists, serial killers, etc. “God is apparently ready to rush right in there and give them all a hug, the bastard,” page 177. Seeing God’s justice as an excuse to show no mercy to the unforgiveable. “We want God’s extra-niceness confined to deserving cases such as, for example, us, and a reliable process of judgment put in place which will insure that the child-murderers are ripped apart with red-hot tongs,” page 177.

3. Seeing the power of a Christian state as rationale for social control. “When Christians try to exercise power as if it were God doing it, cruelty and suffering and tyranny follow swiftly. In short

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2 Spufford’s discussion of hell is instructive. He lists it’s functions: it deters people from doing bad things, it’s a form of social control, it’s a last ditch form of social justice (malefactors will eventually get their due), and it’s a kind of theodicy (the horrors of life with it’s myriad of blessings and occasional innocent sufferer, pale in comparison to the horrors of hell where there’s never any blessing and everyone deserves suffering). “Hell’s handy little bundle of social utility—unlike the grace of God—comes at a cost. Hell makes God Himself a torturer” page 178. “…the whole contrivance, besides being repellently sadistic in itself, is blatantly incompatible with the primary thing Christianity believes about God, and must in fact be another of the shadows of our failure, another vengeful projection of the HPrTu of Christian humans, rather than part of the furniture of God’s universe” page 179. Spufford declares, “No more hell! It’s official!...Except in miniscule enclaves, the centuries are over in which the threat of hell was wielded to ensure conformity, passivity and deference; in which it terrified and tormented the living; in which it was used to justify the cruelties of earthly law; in which it served as a narrow, frightened, legalistic refusal of the generosity we were supposed to be celebrating,” page 180.

3 Spufford calls attention to the folly of refusing power, as do pacifists. “You can refuse the violence all power depends on, as some sects of Christians have always done, and be pacifists like the Quakers or the Amish, but then you end up tacitly depending, for protection and civil order, on those who do get their hands dirty. You become power’s free riders, taking the benefits without paying the price” page 183.
order, we get the steely-eyed monks of the Inquisition trying to drag the Moors and Jews of Spain into perfect orthodoxy, one fingernail at a time,” page 185.

4. “Here is the fourth and last of the areas of persistent damage for which Christianity is to blame: our recurring tendency to give religious sanction to whatever is small-“c” conservative in a society, at the expense of everybody who falls outside the conservative definition of what’s good and natural,” page 186. In other words, Christians tend to put everyone in “good” or “bad” categories. “This produces a moral map of the world where virtue is determined by labels rather than by actions,” page 186. This results in a maddeningly slow response to changes in society (science, race, gender, rights, etc).

Spufford’s response is to acknowledge these failures and work at correcting them. He says it’s probably an impossible task, one at which we will fail over and over, but it is a task, a mission, which engages him. Christian churches are the flawed representation of Christ on the planet.

“We [Christians] don’t, in fact, believe the church is precious because it is good or does good or because it may do good in the future. We care about its behavior, but we don’t believe that its muddled and sometimes awful record is the only truth about it. We believe that the church is precious because it embodies something that the HPtiFtU in general and our sins of complicity in particular cannot destroy … [namely, the mission] to perpetuate the unlimited generosity of God in the world …to embody Jesus … to be a channel by which mending enters the world,” page 195-197.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONSEQUENCES

If one takes the plunge into Christian faith, what will it feel like?

1. **Liberating.** “It’s like a toothache stopping because a tooth has been removed,” page 203. He’s referring to the feeling of being forgiven.
2. **Disconcerting.** “…it exposes our illusion of control,” page 204.
3. **Risky.** “Every step of it requires you to embrace risk in some way or other, from the risk that you’re getting the nature of the universe absurdly wrong, to the risk of putting aside your dignity and signing up to a picture of yourself as pratfall-prone and self-subverting, rather than the proud master of your destiny,” page 204.
5. **Constricting.** “As with any commitment, there are times when you notice the limit on your theoretical freedom…” page 205.
6. **Expectant.** “God makes an elusive lover. The unequivocal blaze of His presence may come rarely or not at all, for years and years—and in any case cannot be commanded, will not ever present itself tamely to order. He-doesn’t-exist-the-bastard may be much more your daily experience than anything even faintly rapturous. And yet, and yet,” page 205.
7. **Uncertain.** “You never stop doubting—how could you?—but you learn to live with doubt and faith unresolved, because unresolvable,” page 206.
8. **Repetitive.** “You discover that repetition itself, curiously, is not the enemy of spontaneity, but maybe its enabler. Saying the same prayers again and again, pacing your body again and again through the set movements of faith, somehow keeps that door ajar through which He may come,” page. 206.
9. **Reoriented.** “[The human landscape] has not had its meaning drained out of it…Or variety. Or endless interesting human particularity. It has not become the mere illustration to some abstract
proposition about the nature of people. If anything it has become solider and finer-grained and more intricately itself, and endless spur to further curiosity,” page 206-207.

10. **Passionate.** “It is supposed, in fact, to send us out, reverent and eager and crazy-curious, full of passion for each other’s minds, hearts, souls, bodies, wanting to recreate as best we can in miniature some fraction of the absolute and inimitable love behind everything,” page. 207.

11. **Hopeful.** “If you’re a Christian, you believe that there’s room even in the darkest places, even when the weight of inevitability seems total, for the sudden and unpredictable and unpredicted leap toward the risk of love,” page. 208.

12. **Unpredictable.** “It is not always clear how though, in a given situation, you are supposed to try to be loving. Since Christianity isn’t one of the law religions, it doesn’t furnish you with a list of rules. It offers instead the impossible ideal of valuing other people as absolutely as you value yourself, which does not translate straightforwardly into a code of behavior… You have the deep patterning in the Christian understanding of the human landscape to guide you; and you have the wisdom embodied in tradition, as well as the prejudices and blindesses; and you have the history of the earlier attempts made by all your predecessors. But none of these can wholly fix of pin down reliably for you what it is going to mean in everyday terms, this very moment, to love your neighbor as yourself. So you will have to decide, and keep on deciding, what you think it means. You will have the freedom—or, to put it another way, the unending responsibility—of working out which way you’re supposed to make your imperfect attempt at the impossible task,” page 208-209.

13. **Inclusive.** “There’s obviously no necessary connection at all between belief in God and virtue. The place is stuffed with atheists and agnostics doing devotedly benign things, acting on ideals of compassion and dignity and mutual aid, relieving suffering, working to save or improve the planet,” page 211-212.

14. **Realistic.** “[Christianity] does, I suppose, have one advantage when it comes to going good, in that your advance certainty, as a Christian, that you’re going to fail at goodness provides a kind of assurance that goodness is worth trying independently of results,” page 212.

15. **Metaphoric.** “It would be nice if people were to understand that science is a special exercise in perceiving the world without metaphor, and that, powerful though it is, it doesn’t function as a guide to those very large aspects of experience that can’t be perceived except through metaphor,” page. 219.

16. **Battered-about-but-still-trying.** “God will still be there, shining. If, that is, there is a God. There may well not be. I don’t know whether there is. And neither does Richard bloody Dawkins, and neither does anyone. It not being, as mentioned before, a knowable item. What I do know is that, when I am lucky, when I have managed to pay attention, when for once I have hushed my noise for a little while, it can feel as if there is one. And so it makes emotional sense to proceed as if He’s there; to dare the conditional. And not timid death-fearing emotional sense, or cowering craven master-seeking sense, or censorious holier-than-thou sense, either. Hopeful sense. Realistic sense. Battered-about-but-still-trying sense. The sense recommended by our awkward sky fairy, who says: don’t be careful. Don’t be surprised by human cruelty. But don’t be afraid. Far more can be mended than you know,” page 220.

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4 Spufford’s add this footnote: “If, by the way, this sounds surprisingly like the standard situation of the autonomous modern individual, then what can I say but, duh. And also: no shit, Sherlock. You live in a very, very Christian culture. Christianity’s eloquent silences about the means to the Christian end lie behind large portions of modern thinking about liberty,” page 209.
Francis Spufford Biography (from Amazon.com)

I'm a writer of non-fiction who is creeping up gradually on writing novels. I write slowly and I always move to new subject-matter with each book, because I want to be learning something fresh every time, both in terms of encountering history and people and thinking which are new to me, and also in the sense of trying out a new way of writing. My idea of a good project is one that I can only just manage. I've written a memoir of my childhood as a compulsive reader, an analysis of the British obsession with polar exploration, a book about engineers which is also a stealth history of Britain since 1945, and a fusion of history with novel called "Red Plenty", about the USSR in the early 1960s. My next book will complete my slow crabwise crawl into fiction by being an honest-to-goodness entirely made-up story, without a footnote in sight. But before that, I have out a short polemic about religion called "Unapologetic". Despite the impression given by some of the reactions to it, it isn't, in fact, an attack on atheism, a position I have no trouble at all respecting. I am a little rude and a little mocking to the likes of Richard Dawkins - but it seems to me that when it comes to the lived experience of faith, Dawkins and co. are, as they say, not even wrong. So, though the book begins at the familiar address where the bust-up over religion has been going on for a decade now, it then goes entirely elsewhere, to try to convey to readers of all persuasions what

"Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense" (HarperOne)

Francis Spufford
(240 pages)

Where We’re Coming From

Francis Spufford explores the emotional life of Christian faith.

A few weeks ago I was sitting with a friend, watching a trendy new sitcom that featured a Christian character. Five minutes into the episode, my friend said, “She fits all the stereotypes, huh?” The character was uptight, more concerned about what people do in the privacy of their bedrooms than about the plight of refugees in the Horn of Africa. When we turned off the TV, I said, “Shows like that make me wonder if the writers know any actual Christians.”

Not that Christians are never holier-than-thou or hung up on sex. But things aren’t so simple. Along with feelings of moral superiority, we also experience shame. We try to live up to our ideals for sexual behavior, but many of us also fret over how best to support aid efforts in Haiti—or our neighborhoods. While we’re worrying about justice, we’re also asking ourselves how to have hope despite heartache. The question is, how do we invite outsiders to walk a mile in our shoes? How do we describe what belief feels like from the inside?

That’s the question driving Francis Spufford’s book Unapologetic: Why, Despite

...that our mean-spirited comment at a fancy dinner party puts us in the same predicament as the guy who tears into his former drinking buddy in a bar fight. We’re trying to describe the sense of mystery and elusive presence that frightens and comforts us—or comforts by frightening us—when we listen to the lilting melodies of Mozart’s “Clarinet Concerto.”

At the heart of Spufford’s book is a long, evocative retelling of the story of Jesus, or Yeshua. When I sent a copy of the book to a skeptical friend, I told him, “Finishing the Yeshua chapter made me want to become a Christian all over again.”

Unapologetic wants to make Christianity seem like “something emotionally comprehensible even if not shared; something that provides one good-enough solution to a set of fundamental human needs.” Even if you don’t pray the sinner’s prayer when you turn the last page, the book will have done its work. But—fair warning—you just might want to pray it after all.

WESLEY HILL is assistant professor of biblical studies at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

Christianity Today review, October 2013, page 68.
Christianity feels like from the inside: actual Christianity, rather than the conjectural caricature currently in circulation. The book isn't an argument than Christianity is true, because how could anyone know that? It's only an attempt to show that it is recognizable, in ordinary human terms - made up of the shared emotions of ordinary adult life, rather than taking place in some special and simple-minded zoo. There is a tumblr for the book at unapologetic-book.tumblr.com.

(Oh, biography. I was born in 1964, I'm married with a seven-year-old daughter, and I teach on the MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College, London.)