

That God of Stephen Fry doesn't exist

I don't believe in the God that Stephen Fry doesn't believe in either

There's bravery in the entertainer's imagined confrontation with God – but in describing it he shows that he misunderstands the nature of Christianity



Stephen Fry Photograph: Ilpo Musto/Rex

Someone once told me that, when he was a young man, Stephen Fry thought about becoming a priest. Now I don't know if this is true, but it wouldn't surprise me one bit. Because the way he expressed himself in a recent interview – calling God an “evil, capricious, monstrous maniac” – was almost biblical in its theological intensity. And though I think there is a whopper of a mistaken assumption at the heart of his answer, I nonetheless think it was an admirable one.

Why? Because what Fry was asked was what he would say to God if he met him face to face. And this presumes that God exists. So imagine: Fry is sitting opposite God and telling him that he is a bastard because he invented cancer and insects that burrow into children's eyes. These things are pinned on God by Fry because God is literally the creator of everything and all-powerful. God could have done something to change the situation, but he chose not to. QED: he is a bastard.

What greater example of speaking truth to power could there be than this? And for absolutely no reward. For if Fry is right about God being an omnipotent bastard, then he could hardly expect to be rewarded for his honest observations. He tells the truth then burns in eternity. In this scenario, Fry is entirely heroic in his truth telling.

Too many religious people actually worship power. They imagine the source of ultimate power, give it a name (God, Allah, Yahweh) etc, and then try and cosy up to it, aligning their interests with those of the boss. In this they are just the same as many non-religious people, except they believe that ultimate power is metaphysically situated. Whether it be a king or a prime minister or a CEO or God: the temptation is always to suck up to power.

This is why the Jesus story is, for me, the most theologically revolutionary story that there can be. Because it imagines God and power separated. God as a baby. God poor. God helpless on a cross. God with a mocking and ironic crown of thorns. In these scenes it is Caesar who has the power. And so the question posed is: which one will you follow when push comes to shove? You can follow what is right and get strung up for it. Or you can cosy up to power and do as you are told. By saying that he will stare ultimate power in the face and, without fear, call it by its real name, Fry has indicated he is on the side of the angels (even though he does not believe in them). Indeed, Fry is following in a long tradition of religious polemic, from Job to Blake and beyond.

Furthermore, this powerless thing subverts Fry's accusation of God's iniquity. For if we are imagining a God whose only power, indeed whose only existence, is love itself – and yes, this means we will have to think metaphorically about a lot of the Bible – then God cannot stand accused as the cause of humanity's suffering. Rather, by being human as well as divine, he fully shares in it. This is precisely the point of Christianity: that God is not some distant observer but suffers alongside all humanity. Which is why, even in the midst of absolute horror, he has the authority to whisper in my ear that all will be well.

The other problem with Fry's argument is philosophical. Simply put: there is no such thing as the God he imagines. It is the flying teapot orbiting a distant planet about which nothing can be said. Such a God doesn't exist. Nilch. Nada. It's a nonsense. Indeed, as no less an authority than Thomas Aquinas rightly insists, existence itself is a questionable predicate to use of God. For God is the story of human dreams and fears. God is the shape we try to make of our lives. God is the name of the respect we owe the planet. God is the poetry of our lives. Of course this is real. Frighteningly real. Real enough to live and die for even. But this is not the same as saying that God is a command and control astronaut responsible for some wicked hunger game experiment on planet earth. Such a being does not exist. And for the precisely the reasons Fry expounds, thank God for that.

Giles Fraser - The Guardian