

Former Atheist Works to Convince Godless Europeans to Accept Christ

British novelist and essayist Francis Spufford's spirited defense of the Christian **religion** is in some ways like eavesdropping on a **missionary** conversation with the pagans of antiquity.

"Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense"—is the latest attempt at an ancient literary form, the Christian apology, and it makes its appearance in the United States more than a year after it was published in England.

Spufford's defense of **Christianity** is aimed primarily at what he calls "godless Europeans," the post-Enlightenment elites who tend to regard religion with bemusement as a silly fairy tale, if not with open hostility as a dangerous superstition.

The analogy to converting heathens is only partially applicable, he said in a phone interview from his home in the village of Duxford, near Cambridge.

The heathens, after all, had their own gods, temples, **prayers** and rituals, unlike so many secular Westerners today.

"What's interesting about his book is that he really does speak to a dramatic cultural change that's pervasive in Europe," said religion professor Randall Styers of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "What happens with that is this increasing privatizing—or individualizing—of religious belief."

Indeed, "Unapologetic" is an intensely personal account that includes Spufford's own mystical encounter with God. But

unlike the missionaries of yore, his evangelistic ambitions are rather modest: not to win souls, but simply to win back some respect for the emotional dignity of the Christian **religion**.

Spufford's acronym for sin, HPtFtU, refers to the "human propensity to foul things up." Not foul, to be precise. A creative writing teacher at Goldsmiths College in London, Spufford drops the f-bomb, forcing reviewers to come up with cheerful euphemisms.

Spufford's Christianity can be hip and edgy, cheeky and irreverent. It is uncompromising but nonconfrontational at the same time.

"It's the most recent version of that kind of indirect, charming and in some ways conciliatory approach to apologetics, as opposed to the frontal assault," said John Stackhouse Jr., a theology professor at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and author of "Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today."

"Unapologetic" prompted The Times Literary Supplement to predict that Spufford's bravado could win him as much public attention as has been showered on Christopher Hitchens and other **atheists**. Spufford's testimony serves as a kind of wise antidote to the recent spate of faddish atheist manifestos that Spufford describes as so much arm-waving.

"If you're trying to write a book for people who don't have a God-shaped space in their lives, and have no idea what the noun spelled G-o-d refers to," Spufford said, "then you're under this ridiculous compulsion, you've got to bring God on, you've got to say this is what we're talking about it."

A member of the **Church of England**, Spufford is a former **atheist** who now calls himself an orthodox Christian and believes in the literal resurrection of Jesus and other core tenets of the Christian faith. And despite professing amiable

relations with the sister religions, he is convinced that Christianity is right about Jesus being Messiah and Son of God. Islam and Judaism have got it wrong.

Only with this caveat: **Religious** truths can't be demonstrated with ironclad logic, as if they were a "repeatable laboratory experiment," which leaves open the possibility that Christianity is a mistake. Its validation necessarily lies in the inner emotional register of its believers.

"We could be wrong," Spufford said. "As a matter of intellectual honor, I need to represent my faith as what I feel it is, which is a gamble on meaning in a state of radical uncertainty."

L. Gregory Jones, a professor of theology at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C., said that the effectiveness of "Unapologetic" lies in its illustration of a Christian life animated by humility, forgiveness and grace. "When people see a genuinely holy life there is something compelling that says, 'this is what we were created for,'" Jones said.

Stackhouse noted that Spufford cleared a space where the merits of Christianity can be discussed frankly but without the usual acrimony.

"Part of what makes professional apologetics so effective with a minority and so repellent to the majority is that (the minority) clearly are frightened of losing," Stackhouse said. "They're worried about the stakes and everything is ratcheted up to this emotional intensity.

"It's like the whole world is at stake and we have to settle this tonight," Stackhouse said. "Spufford is offering us this other mode—coming in, as it were, through the side door rather than bashing down the front door."

At the same time, Spufford makes it a point to reject some **Christian** traditions that secular critics have seized upon as

arguments against the religion. He renounces the theological concept of hell, for example, as one of the great disasters committed by Christianity. He embraces gay rights, with the prediction that acceptance of gays will enter the Christian mainstream within several generations.

And Spufford refers to the historical Jesus as Yeshua, focusing on anti-Semitism as “the greatest shame of Christian history.”

Novelist Nick Hornby (author of “High Fidelity” and “About a Boy”) declared in a review that while Spufford didn’t turn him into a Christian, Spufford did give him a greater respect for Christians. Given the stumbling blocks ahead, such a response should be celebrated as a success, Spufford said.

“It is a book designed to get people only part of the way,” Spufford said. “In my setting, at least, it takes a mighty heave to get people even part of the way.”

“In a setting like the contemporary English one, where people have no reason to find religion or Scripture authoritative, the one thing that people listen to and find authoritative is somebody’s individual story told in a way that other people can recognize,” he said.