

What science can't answer

Susan Greenfield is one of Britain's best-known scientists, often mentioned in the same breath as atheists like Richard Dawkins. But slowly she has been learning more about religious belief through pilgrimages and conversations with her friend Jack Valero, the public face of Opus Dei. Here she talks to him about her 'zigzag journey'



Baroness Greenfield with Jack Valero. Photo: Mykel Nicolaou

Baroness (Susan) Greenfield should, by all accounts, be another public atheist. Her parents had no time for religion, she espouses no religious creed and she is one of Britain's most influential scientists. A leading neuroscientist at Oxford University, running state-of-the-art research into Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, she was the first female director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain.

She travels the world lecturing on modern technology's impact on child development, holds more than 30 honorary degrees, has written six best-selling scientific books and numerous articles, and her first novel will appear in the spring. As a major scientific celebrity, she has sometimes been linked by journalists with the likes of Dawkins and co. But, ever the rebel, she insists she is neither an atheist, nor even an agnostic.

I first met her in 2005, after one of my closest friends, John, and his wife became her Oxford neighbours. Two years later, John was diagnosed with the most aggressive form of brain tumour, but despite being given only months to live, he is still with us. Just before receiving his traumatic bouts of radio- and chemotherapy, he returned to the Catholic Church. Greenfield watched with close interest and, in November 2008, she asked to accompany John, his wife, another friend and myself when we took John to Lourdes. Soon after that, at the suggestion of another friend, she went to Ampleforth Abbey for a retreat.

Over the years, I have been privileged to share something of the inner journey of a woman with a piercingly honest and well-trained mind, who feels drawn to faith but is not yet comfortable there.

Greenfield, 62, is the daughter of a Jewish father and an Anglican mother, whose marriage scandalised both families: her

grandmothers never spoke because of their different faiths. Her father was an atheist and her mother went to church rarely. At her secondary school, children were divided along prayer lines: "You had Protestant prayers, Catholic prayers, Jewish prayers, and then there was a mixed bag where everyone else went: the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Buddhists, and so on," she recalls. "I had to go to the ragbag one, where we read poems. That was my religious upbringing – or lack of it."

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is very religious and 0 is very anti-, her parents, she says, would have been "about a four", whereas "I'd be a seven."

She rejects what she calls "scientism", namely "this unshakeable belief, which is as strong as any religious belief, that science is the only approach to understanding the world around you." She says agnostic is "too rigid a definition" to apply to herself: "I have already a hazy feel for the spiritual, or the non-material, and that's why I wouldn't call myself an agnostic. Also, as I understand it, an agnostic is waiting for proof, and I am not waiting for proof... I don't think the issue is about proving there is something there or not. I couldn't prove I love my mother, but I know I do."

Greenfield was irritated to see Richard Dawkins recently cross-examine the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, on television about whether the Red Sea actually parted. "That's neither here nor there," she says. "The issue is more the experience that people have that is above and beyond the material. And that, for me, is what seems to be at the heart of people who believe in God: they don't believe in God because someone's proved it to them or because they believe literally in the seaparting. [What matters is] you are having an experience that you know is the case, it's unshakeable. That's what faith is."

And she knows she hasn't got it – yet. She is waiting "for something further, for some kind of steer or feel, because I have a sense of the spiritual, and glimmers of it from time to time, but I cannot say that I am believer in the sense of subscribing to any particular religion".

She sees the effect faith has had in our friend John. "I cannot imagine someone who did not have a faith having that cheerfulness and resilience and lack of self-pity. It might be that people without faith could also endure for a long period of time but it is this almost sense of privilege that I think they sometimes express." Similarly, she says of another Catholic friend that he "speaks as though he just knows that God is there, and you don't have to ask for proof and you don't have to prove it to others, you just know it".

Greenfield occasionally prays. "I say the Lord's Prayer if I'm frightened or worried, but it's rattled off almost, by heart. I don't quite know if I'm doing it right, or what the purpose is, but it's something that I feel comfort in doing." For example, during a recent health scare which required her to have some tests, she made a pact: "If it's all all right, I promise after I've come out of the hospital, that I'll find the nearest church and I'll go and say thank you. And I did do that."

It was not a great religious experience: there was heavy drilling outside the central Oxford church where she went to keep her side of the bargain. But "it seemed right to do it", and praying "feels natural to do". Yet daily Scripture reading, as some have urged her to do, does not sit well with her. Nor does worship. "I went to Mass with some friends some time ago, and it was something one did for an hour. It didn't feel ..." (her voice trails off, before coming suddenly back, with excitement) "... whereas when I went to Lourdes

it did feel different.” Lourdes was Greenfield’s idea. “We were having a drink on a Saturday night in John’s house. And I said, I don’t know why, ‘We should go.’

“I was bracing myself for all the kitsch stuff. You know, Bernadette in the snow, the Pope on a key ring and so on. But honestly, I didn’t mind that, and in a sense it came as a bit of a relief, that there were all these normal, kind of low-grade souvenirs which introduced a light-hearted and fun element to what would otherwise have been a serious and grave place.”

The experience was intense. “The fact that sick people were the norm, and we – the able-bodied people, the healthy ones – we were in the minority. The other thing that struck me was that everyone was a volunteer and people came from all over the world. The amount of love and altruism and removal from all the normal things ... it was the world turned upside down: the sickness being normal, no one working for money, people being kind to each other rather than witty or hostile, or defensive ... so that impressed me hugely.”

The most moving moment for Greenfield came at the Grotto, where, she recalls, her group went to the front because John was in a wheelchair. “The priest had given me a rosary with a crucifix – which I still carry around with me – and I didn’t know how to say the Hail Mary, so you gave it to me on your mobile, and I was reading it off the mobile, hoping that people would not think

that I was being so tactless as to be text messaging at this most sacred place.” She remembers a “lady with long plaits saying over and over again in French the Hail Mary”, and that being “rather mesmerising, very special”.

Greenfield rejects the idea that science and religion are in contradiction as “intellectually bankrupt” and cites scientists such as Francis Collins, the American who mapped the genome and who “speaks freely and openly, and very happily about his faith, about being a Christian”. When she chatted to him recently at Davos, she saw “someone who knows God is there”, who “does not have to go through lots of sophistry”.

It is obvious to Greenfield that there is a spiritual dimension and that “much of what you do in science is not harsh computational-type logic, it’s not algorithmic”. She quotes the physicist Niels Bohr, who once said to a student: “You’re not thinking, you’re just being logical.” In the “human toolkit”, she says, “there is more common sense than algorithm”. Most science is not approached with a ruthless logic but “a hunch and an instinct”. Science, she says, “can answer some questions but not others, such as the meaning of life, or what is love. Of course, someone can say that love is when you have a rise in the hormone oxytocin, but that’s just rather silly ... The subjective feeling you have does not trump or invalidate what’s going on physically in

the body. On the other hand, just because what you can point to correlates to what is going on in the body, does not detract from the subjective state.” The fact that both dimensions exist “has very big implications for accountability”.

Of her three-day retreat at Ampleforth, Greenfield says: “I felt a need to go. I’d only been to church in my whole life probably between 10 and 20 times. So I didn’t know about the services, I didn’t know how to cross myself, or anything. And I said to the monk who had been put in charge of me, ‘I truly don’t know why I’m here,’ and he didn’t seem to mind that. He gave up a huge amount of time walking with me and talking. And so it was a very peaceful time.”

There was “no great revelation” at the time, she says. “It was only after I got back that I just felt so super-charged, and super-detoxed ... amazing, really bursting with energy, and positive. And it was not just that I had three days in the country.” She was struck by how quickly the time passed, despite barely looking at her mobile phone and being without computers or a television. Perhaps, I suggest, all this means that God is looking for her.

“I know,” she laughs. “But he’s playing hide-and-seek at the moment.”

■ Jack Valero is communications director for Opus Dei in Britain and co-founder of Catholic Voices.



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