THE CALLING

A year exploring what the secular world can learn from religion

Niki Harré

'*The Calling* is a beautifully written, insightful blend of biography, ethnography and spiritual reckoning. Harré's reflections on God, ministry and hospitality are intimate and expansive, while the final chapter evokes enchantment and mystery, with some irony given her atheist lens. A deeply thoughtful and enchanting read, the "new language" Harré seeks – for those who do not possess the God "shortcut" to love, connection and compassion – remains both a vital observation and a complex, unresolved challenge in the twenty-first century.'

— Richard Egan, Associate Professor, University of Otago, Ōtākau Whakaihu Waka

'This is a brave book, and a riveting read, by a lifelong atheist about an audacious year-long experiment in faith. As a Christian, I found it moving and humbling to see faith through the eyes of an outsider / fellow traveller. Believers of all kinds will be encouraged to learn that a longing for duty, community and love can draw a long-time sceptic and academic into the hinterlands of faith. Everyone, believer or not, will be challenged, but also informed, about the practices and commitments of religious community.'

— Dr Nicola Hoggard Creegan, author of *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

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To Keith and my siblings –
Chris, Laila, Ivan and Sophia.

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Preface

It's not only possible, but easy, to live an entirely secular life in many contemporary societies. In New Zealand, where I live, Christianity is by far the largest religion; but in the 2023 census only 32 per cent of the population identified as Christian, with 52 per cent indicating they had no religion. The latter group has been rising rapidly: in the 2013 census, 42 per cent chose 'no religion', while only 30 per cent did so in 2001.[1] According to a 2023 national survey, 14 per cent of people attended a church or place of worship in the last month, down from 20 per cent when the same survey was conducted in 2010.[2] Similar trends away from participation in a religious community can be found in many parts of the high-income world including most European countries, Japan, Australia, Canada and, to a lesser extent, the USA.[3]

Although people of faith are part of the mix in predominantly secular societies like New Zealand, one's religion, or lack of it, is usually considered a private matter in the community at large. On the one hand, this religious indifference allows us to function in reasonable harmony as a multicultural democracy. On the other hand, it means that our public institutions pay little, if any, attention to helping us turn outward – beyond our personal or narrow collective interests and towards, well, everyone and

everything else; a task religions take seriously. By peeling off religion, we secular-only types have also lost access to religious ministers whose job it is to help us navigate life's difficulties and contribute, as best we can, to the common good. The daily, difficult task of living well together – a collective project that we all contribute to whether we like it or not – is somehow ignored or considered a 'problem' relegated to managers and consultants. And this, I think, has allowed us to drift into the vague sense of entitlement and aloneness that taints modern life. Despite our age of plenty, something is missing – as if we are not firing on all cylinders or dealing with the issues we face head-on.

So, in 2021 I set out to try and understand what we lost when we lost religion, and if any of it could, and should, be retrieved.

This book outlines my year exploring what the secular world can learn from religion. I came to the project at its centre as a religious outsider. I am an atheist – that is, the concept of God or gods as something 'real' is not part of my lexicon – and I was brought up that way. I am also an academic community psychologist and so most of my research is in collaboration with communities on issues of interest to us both.

My exploration consisted of both investigation and a field experiment of sorts. In terms of investigation, I attended a Christian church, immersed myself in Christian literature and podcasts, interviewed people with formal roles in Christian settings, and had numerous informal conversations with Christians about their faith. As a woman of European descent, living in New Zealand, Christianity was the religion of my cultural heritage. I wanted to focus on the 'religious' elements of a faith, and Christianity, I reasoned, was where I could do so most readily. My field experiment involved setting myself up as a secular 'priest' with bespoke vows, and offering services, ceremonies and personal conversations.[4] I intended to put what I was learning into practice as I went: could

this or that be plucked out, any intellectually troublesome aspects brushed off, and it then be recreated with whoever was willing to experiment with me? I had a personal motive too: I wanted to be a priest. Actually, I thought I *was* a priest (at heart). It's a (not too) long story outlined in Chapter One.

As will become clear, my experiment didn't turn out quite as I'd hoped. A lot of my secular peers stayed away from my priestly offerings, especially the environmentalists *I* thought would appreciate what I was trying to offer. Religion is a touchy subject, and many people have deliberately turned their backs on it for a variety of reasons. I was also an upstart, although the people of religious faith I feared would be most offended by my presumption were among the most open.

Despite my patchy success as a secular priest, my inkling that secular communities have lost something important by abandoning religion grew over the course of the year. Gradually I developed a more nuanced sense of what it means to regularly turn towards humility, the unknown, reflection, listening to and care for the other, and awareness of the world as it is rather than as we wish it was: qualities of a religious orientation as I experienced it. These qualities seemed especially valuable, and missing, when there was an outbreak of the culture wars at my university in the middle of the year. In the final chapter, I discuss the notion of a (secular) religious orientation further and how it may help soften the excesses of contemporary life.

What follows details my year. I wanted to understand in the psychological sense of appreciating as fully as I could what it is to be or do whatever it is. If I did not feel, beyond language, that I knew what a person meant when they described their world, or experience the resonance of a practice or setting such that it did not need explaining, I kept trying to understand better. This, necessarily, involved self-observation and as much honesty as

I was willing to, and could, articulate about what I was experiencing and learning. This book, then, could be called auto-ethnography or even autobiography. Certainly I am the central character and my attempt to be a secular priest is the central story.

A number of writers have described their ambivalence about writing first-person accounts. There's something distasteful, even disgraceful, about it – who wants to know how I've experienced this or that? But autobiography is my favourite genre because it's so effective at revealing the human experience. There are fewer places to hide than in genres – like most academic writing and fiction – that require the author to stay largely or completely out of sight. In recent decades, psychology, as an academic discipline, has tended towards methods that fall short of understanding in the sense I mean here. Surveys that require participants to indicate the extent to which they agree with a statement designed by researchers, or one-off interviews in which the interviewer is trained to gather information rather than keep probing until they really *get* it, only take us part way. I wanted depth, and I wanted to convey that depth to readers in the hope that you, too, might understand something important more fully than you did before. Not, by the way, just something about religion, but something about what it is to be a person and what it takes for us to live well together.

I kept notes throughout, and the book is largely chronological and based on my notes. Midway through the project I read over my notes and could see phases marked by external events or a shift in my thinking. I was then alert to these shifts and so from time to time over the rest of the year added to the structure that was emerging. Once I had identified a phase it became a chapter, and although I tinkered with the chapter titles, I tried to preserve their central tone and content. I wanted to convey the growth in my understanding and the people and events that prompted it. I have, however, sometimes amalgamated or shifted the order of events in order to simplify the narrative. I have also attempted to obscure the identities of those who took part in a

personal conversation by changing their names and other details. Everyone else goes by their real name. Some quotations were constructed from my notes and most were tidied up to make them more suitable for reading and to take out fillers. In almost all cases I checked the final quotations and my description of an event with the person or people concerned, and in several cases made small changes in keeping with their feedback.[5] Extracts from the talks I gave at services have been edited, sometimes extensively, mostly to increase clarity and make them more succinct.

Something I started to say to people when they asked 'How's your year as a secular priest going?' was 'Everyone should do a my-year-as-whatever if they can.' Aside from what I learnt about religion and its lessons for the secular world, it was wonderfully liberating to have a year of deliberately constraining and directing my actions and choices. A year does not last forever, but it is still a long time. It's long enough to get a sense of what it is to see, and live in, the world differently from the way you did before.