



Christian Today Digest

August 2018

Large print 25pt

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CHRISTIAN TODAY DIGEST is available in the following formats: audio CD, braille, large print (17, 20, 25 and 30 point) and email. It can also be downloaded from the Torch website either as an audio or HTML file.

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Christian Today Website Articles

Unless otherwise stated, articles in this magazine are transcriptions of material selected by the editor at Christian Today and were first published recently on www.christiantoday.com.

Laughter lines: How a Christian comedian is tackling the 21st century's search for meaning

[Andy Kind is a comedian who's won rave reviews for his stand-up routines and his writing. He's also a Christian who deals with faith with insight and wit. His new show, *Hidden In Plain Sight*, is subtitled '5 clues that you might have missed in the search for

meaning'. He spoke to Christian Today about what he's hoping to achieve.]

CHRISTIAN TODAY: Where did the idea for the show come from?

ANDY KIND: I heard the phrase 'hidden in plain sight' on an episode of Sherlock, and I haven't been able to shake it – so I'm giving in to its demands and writing a show about it.

For most 'normal' Christians, communicating the Gospel can be incredibly tough in our current societal zeitgeist. If you quote the Bible, you get told that it's an old unreliable book with errors and it can't be trusted. If you talk of God healing people today, people will tell you that 'I wasn't there and, anyway, where's the medical evidence?' The persistence needed in these situations can be frustrating and demoralising.

As a church we need to be looking at new ways to infiltrate a shifting society

with eternal truth. HIPS is an attempt to get the gospel across in a fresh and funny way, without losing the sense of 'this is a comedy show'. After 14 years of being a comedian, I only now feel ready to tackle such a great endeavour! I have experience and a reasonable profile, so I'm trying to step up and help people other than myself for a change.

CT: Your show's subtitled '5 clues you might have missed in the search for meaning'. Without giving too much away, can you give us a couple of hints?

AK: I'm applying a sort of 'minimal facts' approach. Using five phenomena that most people in our society believe to be true, I'm asking what the best explanation for these phenomena is and seeking to compare them to the Bigger Stories from history. What does Islam say about unconditional love? Is Brahman a good grounding for universal human rights? Does atheism make

sense of the power of forgiveness, hope and purpose? Did the Buddha tackle our awareness that death feels unnatural and our inbuilt desire for a happy ending?

So essentially, there are certain things that you know are true. What makes the most sense of those things collectively? Is there a line of best fit through those accepted truths? The aim is to help dismantle the amorphous worldview of 21st century Britain and offer a better, more captivating story. The vehicle for this will of course be stories about my own personal chaos and idiocy.

CT: Christians are quite used to being laughed at by atheists. Is this you turning the tables?

AK: I hate tribalism. I'm not interested in attacking people or engaging in any sort of triumphalism. 'My arguments are not aimed at flesh and blood, but

powers and principalities.’ I do think that the arguments for atheism are superficially convincing but fundamentally vaporous. And I might even accept the reverse about Christianity: the story of Jesus seems ridiculous until you realise how well it fits your internal hopes and needs – and how incapable the other Grand Narratives are of doing the same thing.

So I’m certainly wanting to respond to a lot of the atheistic comedy that I’ve seen, as someone who thinks, ‘So much of this is hilarious but, you know what guys, life might be better than you think.’ I am happy to mock an idea, but I don’t have permission to treat other people as laughable – atheism, rather than atheists, is my opponent.

CT: Who’s the show actually aimed at?

AK: Well you write for yourself first of all, so on one level it’s just the things

that are on my heart at the moment. But it's a show that adds my voice to the discussion on meaning that is raging in our society. It's a show that goes after the zeitgeist belief that meaning is self-constructed. In practice, I imagine most of the crowds will be 66 per cent Christians and then 33 per cent guests invited by the 66 per cent – and that's what I'm working to. My expectation and hope is that 95 per cent of the bookings will be churches who want to put on something which is both quality entertainment but also a robust presentation of 'mere Christianity'.

CT: Tell us more about 'meaning'. Is it something people are searching for?

AK: I don't know what you mean.

We all live rationally within our own worldview, and we're all trying to work out what the boundaries for human living are. We all want to know who we

are, but to know who you are, you need to know by what measurement of identity you're asking that. So that's the search for meaning, I think, and that's precisely what we're looking at in the show. It won't be overly-intellectual though – it's still a comedian trying to make people laugh. I can compromise a bit on the laughs, but I can't remove them.

CT: What is it about comedy that makes it possible to make serious points really powerfully?

AK: Well, it's psychologically impossible to hate somebody you have laughed with, so that's part of it, and when the mouth is open for laughter, you might be able to shove in a little food for thought. So I think that comedy softens the ground a little bit, but I don't think the serious point is ever the laughter point. You won't laugh at things you don't recognise from your own life, and

we tend not to laugh at things that we fundamentally disagree with. So the jokes are not what convince people – they just demolish emotional barriers that let the deeper stuff get through.

I've just re-watched JURASSIC PARK, and comedy and drama work together like raptors. The comedy is the raptor you can see and think you're supposed to be looking at, and then the serious point is the 'clever girl' who hits you in the flank. This won't make any sense unless you've seen that film – and maybe not even then. Sad face.

CT: Is it possible to argue people into believing?

AK: Faith about anything comes through hearing, and by 'faith' I mean 'putting your trust in'. Practically everything we believe is because of what we've been told – none of us are closed systems. So absolutely, it's entirely possible to

persuade people of a greater truth – and that’s what the Book of Acts is full of. I think we are quite semantically naïve in our culture at the moment. We hear ‘argue’ and we instantly equate it with having an argument. And in that sense, no, I don’t think having an argument tends to lead people to belief. But what we can do is destabilise the reasons people have for holding to a view, and then offer them something more tantalising. Some people would say we shouldn’t bombard others with our views, and I agree, but we need to realise that people are being bombarded all the time by messages about their identity. To remain silent through a desire to remain liked is not enough. Boldness is not aggression – it’s just fearlessness.

CT: What counts as a good show for you?

AK: Great question! When I'm watching someone do their full show, I want to see that they care and that they're enjoying themselves. I love seeing people freely geeking out on their passions. On the comedy circuit, you aren't given a huge amount of artistic leeway; you have 25 minutes to entertain the people in front of you and so you need to cater to their needs, not your own. But with a show at somewhere like the Edinburgh Festival, you have so much more freedom. People will come or they won't, but you are not bound by the same homogenising regulations.

More personally, a good show is when I've been able to express myself on-stage, and that usually coincides with a good amount of ad-libbing. Ad-libbing is great because it's dangerous and unplanned, but on nights where you're allowed to do it, it shows

that the audience is for you. You can't ad-lib for very long with an intransigent crowd.

CT: Are you a comedian or an evangelist?

AK: I'm both. For years I was just a comedian who wanted to see people meet Jesus without ever really joining the dots in my own career. Now I'm trying to use my comedy to help them do just that. So I don't think there's a proper noun for what I do now. Comedy evangelist and funny preacher both sound naff and don't do me any justice. Like Hidden in Plain sight, my work has two natures!

Assumptions Christians make about God when life falls apart

Niki Hardy

Still groggy from the anaesthesia, I was ushered into a small, lifeless room where I was given the news. They'd found a large tumour that was either cancer or lymphoma. No third option.

Just six weeks before, on New Year's Eve as partygoers pulled poppers and drank champagne, I watched my sister lose her battle with cancer. Eight years before that it had taken my mum. But all I said was, Oh.

As the drugs wore off and I was rushed through biopsies, oncology appointments and scheduled for surgery, radiation and chemo, the reality

of my diagnosis finally began to sink in. What on earth was God playing at?

We'd moved our family to America to plant a church, hadn't I done enough for him? Was he mad at me? Perhaps he didn't care as much as I thought. Maybe he was off helping someone more spiritual than me who didn't think praying for a parking space made up for a missed quiet time or screamed at her kids on the way to church.

As my world shook, so did everything I knew and understood to be good and true. It felt like I was drowning, gasping for air. I latched onto anything to keep me afloat and explain why the ground was swallowing me whole.

I knew in my head these explanations were nonsense, but to my aching heart they were easier to grasp and made more sense than the alternative – that somehow God was still good, his love

for me was as infinite as ever and he knew my deepest longings. The lies, for that's what they were, made sense in the face of my pain. His love didn't.

When our world falls apart or life is messy and overwhelming, we rationalise our suffering with easy-to-believe but incorrect theology. It's a theology that places us as the victim and God as the villain, or at least an uninterested bystander. Nothing is further from the truth. Just because life sucks it doesn't mean God does. Just because we can't make sense of things it doesn't mean they are senseless.

My cancer wasn't lung cancer like my mum's and my sister's, mine was rectal cancer. Yes rectal, and when you have a tumour the size of a fun-size KitKat up where the sun doesn't shine it focuses the mind. I had to decide what I believed about God and how he felt about me. Did I believe these lies or did

I believe what his word says. Would I believe my pain or the pain Jesus suffered on the cross for me? At the end of the day, however great or painful life is, it's a decision we must all make.

So, what do you believe?

God's forgotten you, or he'll never leave you (Deuteronomy 31:8)?

He's mad at you and doesn't care, or you're forgiven and his love is unconditional (John 3:16)?

You've got to fight this alone, or he will fight for you (Exodus 14:14)?

He is no help so you need to be strong, or he is with you and will help and strengthen you (Isaiah 41:10)?

In my darkest moments, hooked up to clear IV bags of cancer killing drugs, or fighting an ostomy bag with a mind of its own, I had to decide. Each day, and

often each minute, I had to choose to believe that God is my rock, my salvation, my fortress, and my strength, and even as my world crumbled, with him, I would not be shaken (Psalm 62). Sure I wobbled, a lot. But each time I chose to believe the truth about God, who he is and who I am to him, the power of those lies to completely flatten me faded.

No one gets to skip the tough stuff in life and even if you're not battling rectal cancer, I'm sure you've got something keeping you awake at night or overwhelming you in some way and when life stinks it's completely normal to think these things. In fact, these thoughts seem to be our default setting, our go-to explanations, so we must intentionally reset our thinking if we are to conquer the lies and not spiral into self-pity. By saying these truths out loud and asking for his help to believe

them when we struggle we can do just that.

Ask yourself this: which is my go-to explanation when life's hard? Why do I believe this and what scripture counters it? Am I willing to intentionally choose to believe God's truth over the lies?

Repeat the scripture daily and every time you find yourself thinking he's mad, doesn't love you, or has forgotten about you. Hold on to his truth. It will steady you, holding you firm as your world shakes. He loves you and he's not going anywhere. There's no third option.

Hothouse Earth: With the world facing a climate change tipping point, how should Christians respond?

Ruth Valerio

In the middle of the estate I live on is a lovely green. It's a communal area where children play, people walk their dogs and families have picnics. Locals unofficially call it The Green. Today though it would be more appropriate to call it The Yellow. The heatwave is having its impact.

In the UK we've been facing our longest heatwave for five years, with temperatures regularly hitting 33 degrees Celsius and water companies issuing water warnings and urging people to use water carefully. With the

worst wildfires ever in California, wildfires in Greece and Portugal, and deadly heat in Japan, this will be a summer to remember.

Or will it? Will it just become one summer among many, each one breaking temperature records – the norm in a world that is one degree warmer than at the start of the industrial revolution and is warming fast?

Am I allowed to admit that this scares me? The thought of no rain and running out of water (as was nearly experienced by the residents of Cape Town as they headed towards Day Zero) and the impact of long periods of severe heat is awful. The vegetables in my garden this summer have been noticeably less bountiful than usual, but that's nothing compared to the people Tearfund serves who have been hit by drought over the last few years in places like Ethiopia,

Kenya, South Sudan and Somalia where millions need food aid to get back on their feet.

This summer's heatwave is a wake-up call. We've had a few of those – things like floods, droughts, unreliable rain, and record typhoons which have been pushing people into poverty, and so have shaped Tearfund's work over the last 10 years and more. We've had quieter wake-up calls too, like our garden birds migrating earlier in the UK. This week we had another loud one from the 'Hothouse Earth' report from the American Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, reminding us how terrible it will be if we go past the Paris Agreement target (1.5 degrees) and get warmer by two degrees since pre-industrial times, reaching a tipping point which will probably set in train a range of feedback

loops that will lead to further warming. At that point . . . we dread to think.

The question facing us is, will we wake up? The science is certain. We know we are on a certain trajectory already, even if we were to stop CO2 emissions overnight. The challenge for us now is, armed with the scientific knowledge we already have, how bad are we going to let it get? Will we take bigger steps than we already have to keep us from getting to that two degree level?

The authors of the report (more properly entitled ‘Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene’) tell us that what is needed is ‘a fundamental re-adjustment of our relationship with the planet’. As Christians we can say a loud ‘Amen’ to that.

The consumer culture we are in teaches us to see the planet as simply ‘the environment’ – something akin to

a stage on which we, the important actors, play out and make our lives. We have been taught to see the world simply as a resource, for us to use however we like for our own benefit.

However, Scripture gives us a different picture. The world is something that God has made and loves. He thinks it is ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31) – so good in fact that he creates a whole species which he tasks with the job of looking after his precious creation (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:15). We are ‘ADAM from the ‘ADAMAH (Hebrew for earth), intricately connected to the rest of creation. When the wider creation is harmed then we will be too.

The planet was made BY Jesus and THROUGH Jesus and FOR Jesus (Colossians 1:16). That’s a stunning declaration of the value that is in this world. It is as if the planet was created to be a gift from the Father to the Son.

How dare we defile something that bears the hallmarks of God in this way?

So how will we live out this transformed relationship with the earth? Or maybe the better question is, how will I live out this relationship? I need to make a response myself, I can't just tell you what to do. So here goes:

Because I want to love this world and don't want to see millions pushed into poverty or other species destroyed through climate change, I've looked long and hard at how I live my life. This year, any travel I've done in the UK and mainland Europe I've done by train or car rather than flying (it's more time consuming but it's much nicer, and I can get work done or look out the window depending on my mood). I turned down an offer to be the main speaker at a conference in Australia (that was tough – I would have liked to have done it). But I also know I've flown too much

because of my work and am determined not to do that next year.

I've switched to a mostly plant and grain based diet and grow a lot of my own vegetables as well as supporting a local organic grower. When I took my job at Tearfund and knew I'd have to drive more, I asked them to install charging points and I got an electric car which is charged with electricity from a green energy supplier (and from my solar panels at home). Take a look here for more we can all do.

Because of the urgency of this situation, I started up Eco Church, a scheme to help churches look after God's world through all areas of church life. We can act as local churches and as the global church together, acting and praying to see change. Get your church signed up!

I'm determined to use my voice to speak up and push our governments to

fulfil the commitments made under the Paris Agreement – and yes let's push Trump to do so too. And, please join Tearfund in calling the World Bank to switch their billions of pounds of energy investment in developing countries from fossil fuels to renewable power.

What will you do?

As followers of this Jesus through whom all things were made, let us be at the forefront of demonstrating a different relationship with the planet: a relationship of humility, servanthood, gentleness, mercy and compassion; one in which, instead of striving to pile up more and more goods for ourselves, we commit ourselves to working for justice and the flourishing of the natural world. Let us join God in loving this world that he has made.

Should the UK ban the burqa? Why Boris Johnson is right

Mark Woods

Not much happens in August, news-wise, which in part explains the furore over remarks made by a back-bench MP about burqas. When the MP is Boris Johnson, however, publicity is guaranteed.

Boris was rude about women in burqas, the all-enveloping garment worn by some Muslim women out of which they look at the world through a sort of grating in front of their eyes. He said the garment was oppressive and that it was ‘weird and bullying’ to expect women to cover their faces. What got him into trouble, however, was his next line, where he said: ‘I would go further and say that it is absolutely ridiculous

that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes.'

The final straw, as it were, was when he referred to one of his predecessors as foreign secretary, who said in 2006 that he invited constituents wearing burqas or niqabs – which reveal the eyes – to raise them when they visited him. 'If a constituent came to my MP's surgery with her face obscured, I should feel fully entitled – like Jack Straw – to ask her to remove it so that I could talk to her properly,' said Johnson. 'If a female student turned up at school or at a university lecture looking like a bank robber then ditto: those in authority should be allowed to converse openly with those that they are being asked to instruct.' (Straw said Johnson's language was 'insulting and inflammatory').

Straw's strictures, however, are mild compared with the rage that has greeted

his comments from other quarters. He's been widely accused of racism; he's facing a Tory party inquiry; the prime minister has suggested he apologise. On the other hand, some Muslims say he didn't go nearly far enough.

It is, of course, an understatement to say that there are various issues in play here, not least the capacity of Boris to infuriate someone whatever he says. More significantly, there's the perennial question of his ambition to lead his party, which means the 'Stop Boris' wing will take any advantage they can get. Furthermore, the reactions reflect different attitudes to burqas and niqabs in the Muslim community. Are they oppressive and Islamically unnecessary? Plenty think so. Are they just a freely-chosen expression of personal devotion? Plenty of those, too.

More contentiously, do they make women look like letter-boxes or bank

robbers? Here, Johnson is guilty of letting his penchant for heavy-handed humour outrun not just any respect he might feel for those who inhabit these garments, but his political instincts. That one was never going to go down well.

However: commentators who've alleged that Johnson was channelling his inner Steve Bannon and appealing to the extreme right of his party have rather spectacularly missed the point. On the contrary, he was articulating – unnecessarily rudely – a classic liberal position, in contradistinction to the deeply illiberal laws attracted by European countries like Denmark that have banned the burqa. That kind of ban is supported by nearly 60 per cent of British people – among them, no doubt, a disproportionate number of Conservatives. If Johnson really wanted their backing for a leadership bid, he

would have written quite a different article.

Because the whole thrust of his piece is that banning burqas is **WRONG**. And while he may have misjudged his attempt to win over his Tory Telegraph readers by trying to assure them he's really one of them, in this he is absolutely right.

In the UK, we wear what we like, unless it is an outright outrage to public decency. Banning items of clothing is for countries that lack the confidence to be truly liberal. It might be justified in certain circumstances – like the banks that tell people to take motorcycle helmets off, or the shopping centre that banned people wearing hoodies – but it's an extreme and unusual move. And that's especially true when the clothing involved is associated with a particular religion. As Johnson said – though his critics have generally not read that far –

‘I am against a total ban because it is inevitably construed – rightly or wrongly – as being intended to make some point about Islam.’

In banning burqas, he says, ‘you play into the hands of those who want to politicise and dramatize the so-called clash of civilisations; and you fan the flames of grievance’.

He’s not wrong. We don’t ban anything in this country unless it can be shown that it’s harmful. Does that apply to burqas? Well, there’s an argument, certainly, and on the face of it it’s pretty oppressive. But there is something unpleasantly colonial about the idea that the West knows best, and that we have a right to impose our view of what a woman should wear on everyone else. We should not automatically assume that someone is being compelled to bear this garment, and we should not overrule her free choice if that’s what

she wants. And a ban would come nowhere near addressing wider questions of women and Islam, if that's the plan. In the UK, we believe in the maximum possible liberty for the individual, constrained as far as possible only by the liberties of other individuals.

Calls for a burqa ban, however – supported, let's remind ourselves, by nearly three-quarters of Brits – aren't generally based on concern for oppressed Muslim women. They are because they make people feel uncomfortable. People are uneasy about not seeing faces. They don't know how to engage or where to look. And a burqa-clad woman is alien, because there are so few of them, and threatening, because there might be more – and we need to step up and defend our national – white, Christian – identity, don't we?

This kind of thinking is far, far more Islamophobic than anything Boris has said.

We have, in fact, no right not to be made uneasy, any more than we have the right not to be offended. If the sight of a burqa-clad woman worries us, the best thing we can do is get over it. Beneath that outer garment is a human being just like us – who can, and should, wear what she likes. And a Christian national identity that needs the support of a burqa ban is not worth having.

