Last week the Guardian science correspondent James Randerson rhetorically asked What is God for? I attached to it the following comment: "I'm not a religious man but this literalist, one-eyed, pious school of atheism makes me ill." I apologise to James for my intemperate language but nonetheless offer these cautionary thoughts about hardline opposition to the whole idea of faith among evangelists for the sciences of human nature and other born again rationalists, not least those on the left.

First, a little list of disclaimers.

1) I am still not a religious man.

2) When I hear the words "Jonathan Edwards" I head for the hills as fast as anyone else.

3) In arguing for a more nuanced view of how faith weaves into society's fabric I am NOT being an apologist for authoritarian fundamentalist theists of any variety. They scare the hell out of me and I consider it my business to defeat them.

My problem with the vehemently anti-religious is not their atheism as such but that they conceptualise faith too simplistically. Even those who acknowledge that religious groups and individuals often do good works in the world still insist that in the end the worshipful are at best deluded dimwits and at worst passive vessels into which frothing fanatics may pour the deadly fuel of obscurantism any time.

But this view acquires the arrogance of academic abstraction when tested against reality. Yes, harmful Christianist certainties define the mindset of George Bush and, yes, Islamist savagery demonstrates only too well the human capacity for redefining cruelty as virtue when believers think a deity is whispering in their ear. Yet it does not follow from this that all religious people are hopelessly obedient to the scriptures and authority structures of their faith. And even when they are it should never be assumed that the content, the style or implications of their observance are incapable of change.

Eleven years ago, I married into a large Irish Catholic family. For a Godless soul like me it's been a voyage of discovery. Forget fearful Roman conformity. In warm kitchens from Croydon to County Westmeath I've listened and learned as various acquired relatives argue the merits or otherwise of this or that local priest, the pronouncements of the pontiff and the way forward for the church, so damaged by scandal recently. Some of them never miss a Mass, others scarcely ever attend one. The most devout sometimes turn out to be the most liberal, the most lapsed, the most conservative. I enjoy the paradoxes greatly: my mother-in-law goes to confession regularly and I still can't figure out what she's done wrong. But what has always struck me most is how grounded their debates are in broader social conversations about morality, politics, culture and authority. They serve as a vivid reminder that, like all individuals, the identities of believers are formed and constantly reformed by subjective experience of the wider world and of people who are different from them. And the character of such experiences can promote in them, as in all individuals, a beneficial openness and curiosity or a fearful withdrawal into a sectarian shell.

There are implications here for how we go about building alliances against the theological extremes, and the stridently irreligious should take heed. Those of us who find some manifestations of Islam intolerable should avoid challenging them in ways that risk branding Muslims in general as
robotic bearers of a fixed, impermeable creed that, by definition, cannot be debated with, only opposed or ridiculed. And just as faith can be subtle and reasoned with, so atheism can be intolerant and crude. As someone who's always been somewhere-or-other on the left, I've long found the scorn often directed at the godly from those quarters illogical. Opium of the masses? Maybe. The same opium, though, that gave us Aretha Franklin and Martin Luther King, to name but two who've brought enlightenment to me. I dislike the government's propagation of faith schools. But are such schools more divisive than the overtly selective or expansively independent varieties that some prominent left-of-centre critics of the policy send their children to? As for those who hosanna science as our saviour from the follies of religion, they would do well to recall the false idols their belief system has assembled over the centuries and to reflect upon the missionary zeal with which some of its devotees promote the often speculative findings of genetic research and evolutionary biology - a theme to which I'll be returning.

To conclude, don't get me wrong: I'll take democracy over theocracy, scepticism over supernaturalism every time. But that does not make God my enemy. God is an idea. And like all ideas, He changes, He evolves. He is and always has been what every one of us makes Him, including we who don't even believe He's there.