

What awaits us after this life

In the end, how could I resist? I bought Jim Tucker's book and I'm now mired in its convoluted final chapters, wondering how it will all end.

I know what you're thinking. Has this man finally revealed the full extent of his eccentricity? Well, no, but first I need to give you some background. It began well enough when I interviewed the Very Reverend Peter Beck for a story about the soul-saving of St Mary's, the Taranaki Cathedral, or more exactly the need to raise millions to make it safe from earthquakes.

As many of you know, Peter Beck is a thoroughly engaging character, born in an English pub and happy to declare he could just have easily been an innkeeper as a man of God. And in the last word of that sentence lies the heart of my dilemma, the one I'm going to tell you about - do I give it the respect of a capital "G" or lower-case it?

Beck and I got on well during the interview (I can't imagine him not getting on well with anyone), which spanned his life as much as the need to save the church. I proffered the idea of doing a book on him. He said someone had tried that already, but it lay on a dusty shelf somewhere after he got busy (something to do with a ruined cathedral in his New Zealand hometown, Christchurch, to which he has just returned). He might have another look at the idea, he said. We still mention it when we meet.

And there lies the nub. After a celebratory dinner for my birthday in February, we were leaving the Nice Hotel when I spotted Terry Parkes, the owner. I stopped to talk, and somehow we got on to the subject of my atheism, a philosophical position held by many journalists whose faith in anything and everything tends to crumble before what we see and report on.

In a voice emboldened slightly by good wine, I said my non-epiphany began at age eight when I attended the church Sunday school end-of-year prize-giving and didn't get an attendance certificate like everyone else. I was told I'd missed too many Sundays.

God – but not his frail agents - would presumably have known that I missed 13 straight weeks of school that year because of glandular fever. I couldn't get out of bed except for necessary visits, and became thoroughly versed in the radio soaps, *Dr Paul*, *Portia Faces Life*, et al. I turned to my mother sitting alongside me on the pew and said in a non-too-subtle falsetto: "If that's your bloody religion, you can stick it." She agreed.

So began my path to disillusionment, agnosticism at first - the fear of God was, after all, bred in us all in those days – then confirmation as work presented me with actual hellfire and damnation.

Terry Parkes smiled at all this, then flicked a glance to his right, to a man wearing casual shorts and an even larger smile – Peter Beck. There's no recovering from that kind of gaffe, but he laughed with me, as kind men are wont. I ventured the idea we should have another chat.

I'm leaning closer to that now, after reading Jim Tucker's book. Not one of mine, but that of world-wide best-selling author Jim B. Tucker, a professor of psychiatry and neuro-behavioural sciences in Virginia.

His *Return to Life: Extraordinary Cases of Children Who Remember Past Lives* (2013) is about the possibility of afterlife and much more, including the meaning of dreams. He even brings in one of physicist Stephen Hawking's specialities, quantum mechanics, part of an armoury of theoretical methodologies cosmologists use to explore universes.

Jim B. (I don't know what the B. stands for – maybe Brian) discusses the possibility of other realities that people may pass in and out of. His theories are based on properly moderated academic study of children who talk about other lives they seem to have led.

JT column for April 14 2018 – the afterlife

The main problem he faces is that most of the children he studies are too young to give consistently coherent accounts, and their recollections of having lived before fade by the time they reach seven or eight years of age.

However, his evidence is convincing, and there's enough in the book to set me thinking there may be crossovers to religious belief. My late-life revelation is probably too late, though – Peter's left Taranaki and I doubt we'll meet again.