

Faith, Secularism and Reason

The last few years have seen a spate of books responding to the scathing attack by Richard Dawkins in which he maintains the irrationality of religion in a series of books he has published since 1976 culminating in *The God Delusion* in 2006. There he describes God as a 'psychotic infant' invented by mad, deluded people and faith as a form of 'blind trust, in the absence of evidence even in the teeth of evidence' and a process of non-thinking by deluded people.

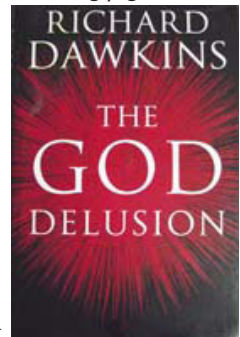
Professor Alister McGrath, a former atheist who became a Christian and who is now a scientist and theologian rightly, to my mind, sees Dawkins' arguments as largely a re-cycling of old objections to Christian belief which also rest upon a caricature of what Christianity actually believes, drawing ammunition from fringe or fundamentalist expressions of it. By contrast there is a striking optimism about the prospects for human life without religion. The source of human evil is externalised and located in religion or is mocked rather than seriously engaged with, and is increasingly given 'no quarter' in the public square.

The events of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks by fundamentalist groups associated with forms of Islam further give credence to the idea that religion is not only deluded but dangerous, being radically irrational and infantile, and the cause of many of the world's conflicts. What is ironic, notices McGrath, is that both he and Dawkins are Oxford academics who love the natural sciences but this love has taken them in entirely different directions: Dawkins to atheism, McGrath to faith.

What is different perhaps is the ferocity of these attacks and the pervasiveness of the arguments put forward that are now finding their way into educational circles, including 'A' Level texts, and the media and arguably have influenced recent legislation. Increasingly theology departments are under threat in universities leading to several recent closures. Faith is not something that is seen as having any relevance to public life, least of all in politics or economics, and is often caricatured as something to be pursued in private rather like some idiosyncratic personal hobby. Newman foresaw the consequences of this very clearly when he wrote: *Now, everywhere that goodly framework of society, which is the creation of Christianity, is throwing off Christianity. ...Hitherto, it has been considered that religion alone, with its supernatural sanctions, was strong enough to secure submission of the masses of our population to law and order; now the Philosophers and Politicians are bent on satisfying this problem without the aid of Christianity...they would substitute first of all a universal and a thoroughly secular education, calculated to bring home to every individual that to be orderly, industrious, and sober, is his personal interest.... As to Religion, it is a private luxury, which a man may have if he will; but which of course he must pay for, and which he must not obtrude upon others, or indulge in to their annoyance.*

Recent events, notably the so-called credit crunch and the Parliamentary expenses scandal have led to some warning voices. Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth asked:

The big question is: how do we learn to be moral again? Markets were made to serve us;



we were not made to serve markets. Economics needs ethics. Lose that and we lose not just money but something more significant still: freedom, trust and decency, the things that have a value, not a price.

His is not the only voice warning us that to remove faith from society is to create a void which will be filled by something else and lead to a loss of what has been called the moral compass and the canopy of religious understanding which are what make us distinctively human and which can inform all our endeavours. In fact what happens is their replacement by a secular ideology as pervasive yet more covert which is never really critiqued or analysed.

Secularism

Wilson in his important work *Religion in Sociological Perspective*² provides us with a useful definition of this phenomenon which can be summarised as follows:

- The sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies
- The shift from religious to secular control of the various activities and functions of religion.
- The decline in the proportion of time, resources and energy given to religion
- The decay of religious institutions.
- The supplanting of religious precepts by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria.

All this leads to a privatisation of values and beliefs, again foreseen by Newman:

So little is religion even the profession of the world at present, that men, who do feel its claims, dare not avow their feelings—they dare not recommend measures of whatever sort on religious grounds. If they defend a measure publicly, or use persuasion in private, they are obliged to conceal or put aside the motives which one should hope do govern them.

Charles Taylor's analysis in *A Secular Age*³ distinguishes between three senses of secularism: the first is the emptying of God from public spaces or of any reference to ultimate reality, so that we function within our various forms of human activity without any reference to God; the second is the falling-off of religious practice and decline in church-going which has been going on steadily at least since the 1840s; thirdly to what he calls the conditions of belief in which religious belief is simply one option amongst others and the emergence of hostile *milieux* in which faith may be very difficult even for the staunchest believer.

Contrast this with the theological assumption behind much of medieval thinking and way of life. For medieval society the church is the means whereby the divine order is brought into the human realm and becomes expressed in human laws and codes. Human institutions and values thus only have meaning if they are rooted in the mind and will of God. The way of life, worship and structures of the medieval church also sought to provide living symbols whereby this assumption could be internalised by everyone from the monarch and pope to the lowliest priest and peasant. It was psychologically impossible to be an atheist for it was religion that made sense of reality. The reasons for the collapse of this world-view are complex but clearly the historian would point to developments in society, the political arena, economics and science - as well as intellectual movements both before and during the Reformation. Many

would see secularism as a logical outcome of the Reformation movements themselves, a view that Newman himself came to share but it would be a mistake to regard that as the whole story.

Reason

Within a predominantly secular view of the world the charge of irrationality as applied to faith makes more sense but the charge rests on three false premises: first, a failure to acknowledge or appreciate that Christian theology from the earliest times has used philosophical thinking extensively to articulate its beliefs; secondly, a definition of reason that is so narrow as to exclude anything that is not either mathematical arguments or what can be derived from strict empirical demonstration; thirdly, the use of almost exclusively extremist forms of religion to justify rejection of the whole. This is particularly the methodology of Dawkins. In his defence, however, I want to suggest that his cause has been helped by forms of Christianity and other faiths which appear actually to exclude reason altogether, or nearly so, and which represent faith as entirely subjective or, are fundamentalist. I will say something about each of these.

First, Christianity's use of reason or philosophy. The Early Church, coming from a Jewish background and context, was soon faced with a number of problems. If it remained within its Jewish heritage then it would not have been able to speak to the world in which it found itself. On the other hand, if it identified itself too closely with its philosophical environment then it ran the risk of being unfaithful to the Gospel. However, the genius of this period is represented in the way that major patristic theologians and writers adopted and adapted Greek philosophical terms to re-express and develop its beliefs. This process is known as *syncretism* and *enculturation* and is particularly visible in the doctrines contained in the Creeds and the pronouncements of the Councils from Nicaea to Chalcedon in 451.

This trend continued with the development of monasticism and stimulated, too, the mystical tradition such as that represented by such figures as the Pseudo Denys and was carried on in the High Middle Ages in the monastic schools of the time. By this period (c. 1100) Europe could be described as Christendom in which Christian assumptions underlay the whole way of life. It has been suggested that the medieval of this time lived in what has been called a sacramental universe which spoke of God. It was the age of much spiritual writing but it also saw the rise of the Cathedral schools and the Universities which brought together scholars from all over the then known world.

In many ways the late 14th and the 15th centuries could be described as a times when society was moving into crisis. It was the Renaissance which helped to see the relation of Christianity and Philosophy differently. 'Renaissance' was the literary and artistic revival in the 14th and 15th centuries, mainly in Italy. This is a French term dating from the 16th century and covers a number of different movements. What they had in common was a return to the cultural glories of antiquity and a marginalization of many of the intellectual achievements of the middle Ages. Although there were different European versions Italy was the cradle of this: partly because scholastic theology had never been particularly influential in Italy, partly too because it was an area saturated with monuments from antiquity and partly, too, because with the collapse of Constantinople in 1453, many Greek intellectuals fled westward especially to Italy. 'Humanism' was a particular form of this phenomenon but is difficult to define because

it covers so much but the following covers most:

- A cultural and educational movement to promote eloquence in all its forms
- Appeal to Classical Antiquity as a model especially in art, architecture and letters
- Corporate revival of Christian Church from within
- Return to sources - emphasis on ancient languages of texts and culture. Re-birth of letters

Most humanists of the period were religious and were concerned to purify and renew Christianity rather than (as today) to eliminate it. Humanism was a return to the wellsprings and sources of western culture and to a study of how ideas could and should be expressed, rather than seeking agreement as to what ideas should be expressed. It was not a homogeneous movement at all. It variously influenced the Reformation movements: Calvin had a strongly Humanist background through his education in France but Luther seemed relatively untouched by it; he was concerned to reject Aristotle's influence on theology and to assert the doctrine of scripture alone.

Meanwhile Copernicus (1473-1543) put forward a heliocentric theory about the universe which was developed by Newton in his *Principia Mathematica* (1687) and still further by the writings of Richard Bentley (1662-1742). This paved the way for the Argument from Design, which in turn seemed to edge God from an interventionist role to that of a designer only. This influenced the rise of **Deism**, which denies the idea of a personal God involved in history. Hobbes (1588-1679), Locke (1632-1704) and Hume (1711-1776) all helped to popularise this view.

This undermined a belief in Revelation, in the Incarnation and the Trinity. Matthew Tindal argued (1730) that Christianity was nothing other than the re-publication of the religion of nature. Many of these ideas were exported to Europe. In Germany, however, the rise of **Pietism** is also important. This was a reaction against rigid orthodoxy and lifeless worship and emphasised devotion and the subjective in religion. An outstanding figure here was Count von Zinzendorf. Pietism had a tendency to reject reason.

René Descartes (1596-1650) is regarded as the founder of modern philosophy and was a committed Christian. His method, based on systematic doubt (*cogito ergo sum*), was an attempt to bolster the certainty of religion. He was concerned not with faith but with where faith and reason overlapped. His disciple was the Oratorian Malebranche who argued that to be a Christian was to be a philosopher. He felt that **Cartesianism** provided the perfect vehicle for Christian truth. Spinoza (1632-1677) took this further, but maintained that all traditional beliefs must be abandoned. His pantheistic beliefs were based on the idea of a single substance of which all were part.

The **English Empirical** tradition had some common ground with Continental views but emphasised the importance of sense experience. At the end of the 18th century the prestige of English thought was very high largely due to the work of Newton (1642-1717) and Locke. The influence of England on the Continent was two-way. As the new science disposed people to regard the Universe as an ordered system, guided and governed by laws, so the new philosophy opened the way to a deeper understanding of the human mind and human nature. Locke's view was that Christianity was a religion of reason and the Christian God the God of nature.

A number of philosophies and intellectual movements under the general heading of

The Enlightenment give pointers to the kind of climate, which challenged religious belief and views of what it meant to be human and was to give birth to further developments in the 19th and 20th centuries. The term **Enlightenment** is difficult to define but is usually reserved for the period 1720 – 1780 and refers to the free and constructive use of reason in an attempt to demolish old myths, which seemed to have oppressed people in the past. Reality could thus be known by reason alone. In fact The Enlightenment itself was the inheritor of the Reformation and the advance of Science as well as philosophical ideas of the 17th century.

All of these were to have a profound effect on the modern theological agenda of the Church and subsequently. In particular, they are: The possibility of miracles, revelation, original sin, evil, the interpretation of Scripture, the person and role of Christ and the nature of God. On all of these were topics later theologians were to have something to say. Sometimes traditional beliefs were simply abandoned; in other cases they were to be substantially reinterpreted. The importance of philosophy for an understanding of religious belief should not be underestimated during the 17th -20th centuries.

The 18th century in Germany saw a significant development in philosophy from Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who, in effect reduced religion to morality although he recognized the limitations of Pure Reason and emphasised along with the Empiricists the importance of sense experience. However, he had little time for the concept of a Christian Revelation in the conventional sense. Hegel (1770-1831), famous for his development of the idea of the 'dialectic', in effect reduced religion to a rather vague doctrine of the Spirit, to philosophy and the exercise of reason. Reaction to this rather arid understanding of the role of reason came from Schleiermacher (1763-1834) who wanted to reintroduce warmth into theology and religion from his role as a preacher but perhaps went too far the other way by treating religion as largely deep feeling.

A different kind of support for this position came from Frederick Schlegel (1772-1829) who said that poetry gave expression to the infinite mysteries of life but it needed a mythology. He proposed creating new religion on this basis. He was part of the movement known as **Romanticism** in Germany, which had a significant impact on Catholic theology. This had its counterpart in England in the poetry of Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Coleridge (1772 – 1834) as well as the novels of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832).

Tempering harsh philosophy

J. S. Mill (1806-1873) was to draw heavily from Coleridge to temper the harsh philosophy of **Utilitarianism** developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) who believed that society could be governed by a set of self-evident principles analogous to economics e.g. "the greatest good of the greatest possible number". Bentham rather crudely made the starting point for this the pleasure principle and taught that all progress was measurable by its usefulness, its Utility as observable outcomes.

Sir James Stephens in 1836 exhorted the young Newman to answer the Benthamites' challenge to religion which he described as "the most subtle enemy which Christianity has ever had". Newman rose to the challenge while not sharing Stephens' implied view that religion, while being expressed in poetic forms (amongst which he included the liturgy), is simply a philosophy expressed through the affections as Schleiermacher might do.

It is important to say all this because it helps us to understand, I think, the background to the Science and Christianity debates of the 19th century of which there are three features:

Biblical literalism: A radical misunderstanding of the ways in which truth comes to us. The development of biblical criticism, which applies what has been learnt from literary criticism as well as scientific forms of enquiry to the biblical text, thus seems to transform an argument between religion and science into an argument within religion itself and to encourage liberalism which in turn, some thought, leads to atheism or, at best, agnosticism. For some traditionalists the Bible is literally the Word of God with God as its author though using human means. It must be read with receptive devotion rather than a critical mind.

The Vatican II document *Dei Verbum* argues for both devotion and a reasoning mind. The biblical critic argues that this is to misunderstand the nature of the Bible itself since it is clearly a human document tied to particular contexts and with a very mixed literary character, a product of its time. How is that compatible with the idea of Revelation and Inspiration? The biblical critic allows the Bible to be challenged by science or literary techniques. He does not hold fast to the cosmology it contains but he is then faced with the question: once you start emptying it of this kind of content where do you stop?

This clearly troubled Protestants more than Roman Catholics because for Protestants (other than the Liberals) the Bible was the fundamental and only source of truth whereas, for Roman Catholics, Tradition and the Church are also very important. Protestants, especially in Germany, were also closer to the scholars who pioneered this approach. The only option for them seemed to be either to regard the Bible as a purely human set of writings or to retreat into a kind of literalism, which rejected the findings of Science or history altogether. There is, I believe a middle way which actually helps the science/religion debate rather than hindering it and Catholicism offers it.

The growth of scepticism with its roots in rationalistic philosophy. We have already seen something of the influence and position taken by the Utilitarians who attacked religious language because of its affinity with the poetic. By the mid-19th century there were already calls to recognize that religion was no longer the well-spring of our society. However, the scepticism rested on another factor which was a very narrow view of what constituted reason. Broadly speaking this meant that the only thing that could be regarded as rational is what it called analytical, logical or mathematical reasoning that relied upon plain language. Locke's view of Christianity as a religion of reason only was followed by Logical Positivists including Auguste Comte who in 1830 suggested that all attempts to discover theological and metaphysical explanations for the world should be abandoned in favour of considering observable and verifiable states of affairs to work out laws. It is this view which in effect people like Dawkins espouse.

Claims made by some scientists and philosophical theologians to be able to substitute religious statements by scientific ones. This had led in the 17th and 18th centuries to Deism rather than Theism on the grounds that many religious beliefs were either nonsensical or impossible judged by scientific criteria. Here some Christian thinkers and leaders simply added fuel to the fire.

The first indications of trouble ahead in the 19th century came from geology. In the 1830s books by Sir Charles Lyell and Dean Buckland established the geological succession for rocks and fossils and showed the world to be a much older reality than had been supposed by biblical literalists. One scientist tried to bridge the gap by saying that God had put fossils into the rocks in order to test the faith of mankind or that the days in Genesis meant simply long periods of time.

It was Darwin's work published in 1859 based on a mass of carefully-gathered data that seemed to cause the damage. The idea that man and higher animals had evolved by a process of struggle from lower forms of life was obviously fatal to a literal interpretation of Genesis. Not only could God not be seen as a being that created man directly but also stories such as the Fall (and therefore the need for an Incarnation) seemed to be under threat also.

By the 1890s university theologians at least were largely prepared to make an accommodation between Darwinism and its variants and Christian belief. However what had started out as an argument between science and religion became all too often an argument within religion itself centring round the view people had of the Bible and of religious language, religious authority and of science. There was a failure, too, to recognise that the question "why is there something rather than nothing at all?" is a religious or metaphysical one to which religion tries to give an answer; but the questions "what are things like?" and "how are they what they are" are scientific ones. It is this that makes dialogue between science and religion possible and, indeed very fruitful.

Credentials of belief

So we live in an age in which being a Christian is seen as counter-cultural and in which the credentials of belief are being attacked and undermined, particularly by philosophically-minded secularists. Pope John Paul II showed, however, in *Fides et Ratio* that Catholicism has a particularly rich tradition of seeing Faith and Reason as partners rather than enemies and that for writers like Newman - who had studied the sciences such as geology, chemistry, mathematics - religion had nothing to fear from any discipline which searched after truth in accordance with principles proper to them.

The Pastoral Constitution on 'The Church in the Modern World' known as *Gaudium et Spes* spoke of the role of the Church as a kind of 'leaven' or 'soul' of society bringing about change from within and went on confidently to describe all the ways in which it saw the potential for a mutual relationship with the society in which the Church was. This was warmly welcomed and a real change from the fortress model of Church that had preceded the Council. Experience perhaps must now make us temper that optimism. Adrian Hastings in his seminal work *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990*⁴ sums it up:

Seen in retrospect the 1950s seem almost like a golden age of King Solomon, the sixties an era of moral prophecy of a fairly Pelagian sort. The period in which we have arrived is quite other, an age of apocalyptic, of doom watch, in which the tragedies of an anguished world become just too many to cope with, yet in which there is the strongest feeling that there may still be worse to come.

Hastings goes on to argue that there are three possible responses to this view: the first is simply to despair of the kingdom and of any ultimate meaning in the world or in history and argues that many Christians in the 1980s in effect adopted this position.

The second is retreat into a privately religious, sacral sphere, abandoning the struggle for the secular state as irremediably corrupt and this, too, he says has been seen to be attractive by many Christians. The last position, he says, is that of Augustine in *The City of God*: to take the long view of a Christian belief in the ultimate redeemability of things, despite all apparent evidence to the contrary. Rather fewer, he suggests, seem to want to adopt this view. If we take the last position then it seems to me that we need to respond to our situation on a number of levels:

- Recognise that is probably going to be largely left to the Church through its own higher education opportunities to engage with the religious sceptics and to defend and explain the relationship of faith and reason through all the means that are available to it. Catholicism should not leave this to other denominations to do but draw from its own rich tradition and to communicate this. Catholic institutes of higher education are now more important than ever they were. The contributions of places like Heythrop, Maryvale, Blackfriars, Oxford, and The Catholic Centre in Durham need to be replicated elsewhere.
- We have to recognise that there is a great deal of misinformation about religion deriving from the media but also from the academic world. It is particularly noticeable in schools (even in faith schools) where caricatures of religion are put about especially in history, religious studies, science, and social sciences.
- Ongoing adult education in parishes needs to be given a much greater priority if Newman's dream of a well-educated laity who 'know their religion' is to be realised. I have yet to hear a sermon on faith and reason and religious scepticism.
- The metaphor of the Church as 'leaven' put forward by Vatican II is an important one for to act as 'leaven' is to be an agent of change from within. Amongst other things this means being engaged in dialogue and discussion as well as offering a moral challenge.
- We need to challenge the Utilitarian ethic especially in education which sees human beings in primarily economic terms, valuing only measurable outcomes and not the holistic development of the whole person that has always been fundamental to the Christian tradition.

The Church perhaps has two main roles: the first obviously is to proclaim the Gospel and to guide people towards God through their own personal sanctification; the other is to ensure that certain discussion and explorations are kept going. In the latter way it is rather like the grit in the oyster. The Church aims to assist in the transformation of both the individual and society as a whole. On both issues the Catholic Church has had much to say and a great deal to give and should not hesitate to do so.

Dr Mervyn Davies is Scholar in Residence at Sarum College, Salisbury.

This article is based on a talk delivered to the North Gloucestershire Circle in March, 2012¹.

1. Morals: the one thing markets don't make, *The Times*, March 21st 2009

2. Wilson B.R. (1982): "Religion in Sociological Perspective", OUP

3. Taylor C (2007): "A Secular Age", Belknap Press, Cambridge Mass.

4. Hastings A (1991): "A History of English Christianity 1920-1990", London SCM