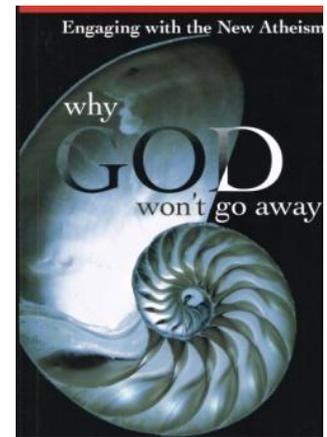


Alister McGrath – Why God won't go away: engaging with the New Atheism

SPCK 2011 - Notes by Alison Morgan



Introduction

How it started – with 9/11, in 2011 – and the suggestion by atheists that religion is responsible for evil. People began to listen to Dawkins et al.

PART I: WHAT IS THE NEW ATHEISM?

1. How it all started

The term New Atheism was invented in 2006 by Gary Wolf, referring to a group consisting of Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*, 2004), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion* 2006) and Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell* 2006). To be added was Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 2007. Harris blamed religion as the cause of 9/11. Critics have pointed out his response to religion is 'scientifically baseless, psychologically uninformed, politically naïve' (anthropologist Scott Atran). Mark Juergensmeyer offered a more rigorous analysis in *Terror in the Mind of God*, 2000, that religious extremism reflects the failure of both secularism and modern nation states (esp the USA) to challenge and confront deprivation and injustice. Harris meanwhile suggests that 'some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them'. McGrath comments 'the Inquisition, the Gestapo, the Taliban and the KGB could not have put it better'. Harris set the tone for New Atheism – what Anthony Flew calls 'pseudo-refuting description' – in which a vicious account of something was assumed to be equivalent to its dismissal on rational and evidential grounds.

Dawkins insists faith is 'non-thinking', evil because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. But religion cannot be reduced to unambiguous good or evil – Dawkins ignores the good side of Christianity and the bad side of atheism. Non religious world views can be as oppressive as anything based on religious belief – eg Stalinism. Dawkins argues that science actually explains belief in God away, as an 'unintended' outcome of evolution (but if evolution is random, how can any outcome be either intended or unintended? Is it steered by some kind of metaphorical mind??). He has also suggested religion is a virus, or a meme (memes are now discredited) – but why should religion be a virus, and atheism not be?

Hitchens' book is driven by anger; it's a piece of theatre. But it's thin on argument/analysis; it won't do not to explore religious ideas properly simply on the grounds that they are ridiculous. He uses anecdotes instead of evidence – citing a Christian, Timothy Dwight, a President of Yale, who opposed smallpox vaccination (Christians obstruct scientific advance), but not Jonathan Edwards, President of Princeton, who supported it to the extent of volunteering for it (and dying as a result). Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King are applauded as humanists and not really Christians.

2. What's 'New' about the New Atheism?

Journalist Gary Wolf points out 'Dawkins does not merely disagree with religious myths. He disagrees with tolerating them.' Which is why so many atheists are embarrassed by the New Atheism. It's more like anti-theism than atheism. It's an intense anger against religion – and that means it effectively defines itself by what it's against rather than by what it's for. It's dependent on its enemies for its identity. Hitchens called Mother Teresa 'a fanatic and a fundamentalist and a fraud' and said 'it's a shame there is no hell for your bitch to go to'...

The God Delusion sold nearly 1m copies in N America – but *The Purpose Driven Life* sold 30m copies. 4% of Americans define themselves atheists, so the figs just reflect that.

Julian Baggini, atheist author of *A Very Short Introduction to Atheism*, wrote an article pointing out that the New Atheism is characterised more by its attacks on religion than by its own positive beliefs; and that it arrogantly claims to have a monopoly on reason. He was vilified by the New Atheism online community.

‘Nobody does nasty as well as New Atheist websites.’ Dawkins had to shut the Forum section of his own site, which caused a furore too.

Many people now regard the New Atheism as another new religious movement, more like a sect than a church, with enforced boundaries, infallible texts, and reverential treatment of its leading figures. McGrath sees it more as a form of celebrity culture – there’s even a T-shirt with the logo ‘what would Dawkins do?’

PART II: ENGAGING THE NEW ATHEISM – THREE CORE THEMES

3. When religion goes wrong : violence

Religion can go wrong, and when it does it must be challenged. But ‘religion’ cannot be treated as a universal; and it’s notable that definitions of religion tend to reflect the agendas of those who propose them. It’s been noted that Harris shows a disturbing trend in New Atheism – credulity. Indian scholar Meera Nanda, and ex Hindu, suggests some atheists believe in anything after they give up believing in God, and Harris goes ‘soft’ on eastern religions, commending ‘spirituality’ or even ‘spiritualism’. Perhaps the difference is just that religion is institutional or social, spirituality individual.

Other scholars note that religion and politics have many core features in common, and that both can tend to fanaticism. Suicide bombing, for example, is as much politically as religiously motivated – it’s the desire to force the withdrawal of foreign forces occupying land believed to belong to an oppressed people who have limited military resources. Others point out that religion cannot simply be equated with violence – the teachings of Jesus are specifically resistant to violence, insisting on forgiveness. Indeed, there is more evidence to suggest that atheism is violent – Lenin set up the League of Militant Atheists to destroy churches and imprison, exile or execute priests. And Stalin... Hitchens explains this by saying communism had become a religion. Dawkins has an unquestioning faith in the universal goodness of atheism which just doesn’t stand up to criticism.

Science too can be abused – eg the social Darwinism that emerged in Nazi Germany. ‘Both science and religion can spawn monsters’. Terry Eagleton says of *The God Delusion* ‘such is Dawkins’ unruffled scientific impartiality that in a book of almost 400 pages, he can scarcely bring himself to concede that a single human benefit has flowed from religious faith, a view which is as a priori improbable as it is empirically false’.

4. Reason: the rationality of beliefs

John Locke: ‘I know there is truth opposite to falsehood, that it may be found if people will, and is worth the seeking, and is not only the most valuable, but the pleasantest thing in the world’. These words could serve as the motto for science, philosophy and theology. Science just does not have a monopoly on truth. Philosophers are still debating the great questions of truth – is there a reality outside our minds? is there a God? What is the good life? There have been many great debates between atheists and theists on these issues. Both Kant and Hume, leading philosophers of the Enlightenment, were clear that reason had its limits; both were sceptical about its capacity to solve metaphysical problems. Reason might be good at critiquing views it perceived to be irrational, but that didn’t mean it could construct alternative visions of reality of its own. Philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin pointed out that human convictions fall into 3 categories:

- those that can be established by empirical observation
- those that can be established by logical deduction
- those that cannot be proved in either of these ways

New Atheism refuses to acknowledge that every world view, religious or secular, goes beyond what reason or science can prove. Both Atheism and Christianity rest upon convictions; both are based on what cannot be proved. Hitchens is simply wrong when he states that New Atheists do not entertain beliefs – ‘our belief is not a belief’. This is an excellent example of blind faith.

Dawkins defines God as the most unpleasant character in all fiction (etc) and then blames him for all evil. But if there’s no God, the holocaust or 9/11 cannot be his fault, but that of human beings. It won’t do to scapegoat a non-existent God for the failings of human beings. New Atheism has two core beliefs: God is evil and nasty; God is a delusion created by human beings. It almost feels as if Hitchens and Dawkins would prefer God to exist, so that they would have somewhere to direct their anger?

New Atheism is wedded to modernism, which is now in retreat – and Dawkins is scathing about postmodernism. But post modernity is not a symptom of irrationality, but a protest against the existential inadequacy of rationalism – which could not deliver what it promised.

5. A Question of proof – science

‘Scientists know that they don’t have to comment on everything – just what can be shown to be true by rigorous and testable investigation. Science seeks only to describe the forms and processes of the world; it declines to make observations on issues of meaning and value.’ Thomas Huxley said science ‘commits suicide when it adopts a creed’.

Science does not ‘prove’ its theories; proof of that kind applies only to logic and mathematics. Darwin believed his theory provided the best explanation of biological life forms; he knew he couldn’t prove it. Standard scientific text books emphasize that science rests on faith – what scientists believe today may not be what scientists believe in the future. Bas Van Fraassen, a philosopher of science, remarks ‘to develop an empiricist account of science is to depict it as involving a search for truth only about the empirical world, about what is actual and observable... it must invoke throughout a resolute rejection of the demand for an explanation of the regularities in the observable course of nature by means of truths concerning a reality beyond what is actual and observable.’ 78. The view that science can solve all our problems, explain human nature or tell us what’s morally good is known as ‘scientism’ or ‘scientific imperialism.’ It claims that all that can be known is capable of verification or falsification using the scientific method. Few natural scientists embrace it.

Stephen Jay Gould speaks for most: ‘science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it’ we simply can’t comment on it as scientists.’ 80. There are a lot of myths about – eg that religion believed in a flat earth (it was known to be spherical by every Christian scholar of the Middle Ages!) or that science and religion have always been at war (this myth arose in the late C19th through polemical popular works). There have been many great debates between Christian and atheist thinkers – eg, on creation vs science, Bernard Russell vs Frederick Coplestone, William Lane Craig and Anthony Flew. NB the Big Bang theory was rejected by atheist astrophysicist Fred Hoyle, who worried it sounded religious. He later wrote about the oddity of the apparent fine-tuning of the universe for human life, saying it was as if ‘a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature.’ A more recent debate was between Dawkins and John Lennox; many believe Lennox won. It seems that both reason and science may actually point towards God rather than towards atheism.

PART III: WHERE DOES THE NEW ATHEISM GO FROM HERE?

6. Where is the New Atheism now?

Rowan Williams has pointed out that the New Atheism merely attacks easy and lazy caricatures or degenerate forms of religion, ignoring the mainstream reality; and that it fails to articulate a positive and compelling approach of its own. ‘Angry atheism does not work’ – Paul Kurtz, an American secular humanist. He says such ‘atheist fundamentalism’ is ‘mean-spirited’.

7. God won’t go away – beyond the New Atheism

Both Christian beliefs and those of New Atheism or any other world view lie beyond final rational proof. But religion is not disappearing, because of the distinctive characteristics of human nature, often called a desire for eternity. Something makes us want to reach out beyond rational and empirical limits. McGrath met a young man who’d read Dawkins and found it so one-sided he started going to church. He now thanks Dawkins for his conversion!

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