

# LEARNING FROM THE NEW ATHEISM

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THE CHRISTIAN faith has its own integrity, a core message that remains ever the same—we retell that story every time we recite the creed. But every age, every culture, presents its own particular needs and challenges, so the message, like St Paul’s on the Areopogas (Acts 17:16-34), will need to be shaped and coloured to attune with the new circumstances.

In a world of blogs, uploads, downloads, twitters, slogans and apps, our sense of ourselves and of our world is being rapidly transformed. John Millbank thinks that everything is blurring around the edges:

Postmodernity means the obliteration of boundaries, the confusion of categories. In the postmodern times in which we live, there is no longer any easy distinction to be made between nature and culture, private interior and public exterior, hierarchical summit and material depth; nor between idea and thing, message and means, production and exchange, product and delivery, the state and the market, humans and animals, humans and machines, image and reality; nor between beginning, middle, and end.<sup>1</sup>

Within this melting pot, fact far outweighs value, individual wants become political demands, scepticism and rationality replace heart and faith, information overwhelms truth, and the interests of production trump all other interests.

Atheism is thriving in this milieu, while religious practice is in drastic decline. It tells a story of a universe without any inherent meaning, of evolution that is blind, of faith that is an illusion, and of a science that will inherit the earth. It seems, however, more a part of the problem than an answer, for all does not seem well with modern culture.

Lurking in the modern collective consciousness are huge infestations of vampires, aliens, super-villains, zombies, and even machines with evil intent, all engaged in a fight to the death with the remnant forces of good, battles for the most part set in the devastated urban landscapes of the future. Coupled with that is our growing fascination with transgression and consciousness-altering substances. Are they just facts? Or symptoms? At the very least they indicate a crisis of ‘meaning’ and ‘value’ in our culture.

These outbreaks of the ‘unnatural’ and ‘sinister’ and ‘violent’, even if under the guise of entertainment, seem to indicate our deep-seated doubts and fears about what we ourselves are becoming and where we might be heading. How ‘inhuman’ do we feel we are? What will a future be like created in our image and likeness? It seems we suspect it could be horrifying. In this scenario things appear deeply uncertain. Surely faith has something vital to say to this modern unease.

In recent months Pope Francis has been showing how we might talk *freshly* of our faith. The New Atheism has revealed a void of meaning and value in modern life—how might we respond? Can rationality replace faith, as the New Atheists want? Modern ‘reason’ divides and conquers. Faith, on the other hand, is about relatedness and engagement. At its base, faith is a *story*, a point perhaps forgotten in the quest to formulate doctrines and rules. It is a vastly different story from that told by the New Atheists.

Instead of a void, the Christian story speaks of a Care, a giftedness, a Promise, at the heart of all reality, of a practice of worship, of love and of a search for justice, that opens up inti-

mations and energies of God's Presence for us, and of God as the ultimate Ground of the universe's intelligibility, of our freedom, and of the value of who we are and the good we do. Without God, we lose our sense of depth and our sense of life as a quest, both of which enrich our lives and history. All we are left with is endless wanting and a stifling chase after material happiness.

John F. Haught maintains that faith makes possible a deeper, hope filled, reading of the story of the universe without conflicting with the findings of science:

Without contradicting any particular scientific reading, can we perhaps also ascertain that the actual shape of the universe and its evolution conforms more compliantly to the contours of hope than despair? Cosmic pessimists claim that science gives us no reason to hope, but religions—or at least some of them—have encouraged us to read the cosmos on a deeper level as a source of meaning that can have a reconstructive effect on our lives.<sup>2</sup>

Faith is too often seen as a closure to questioning, a suitcase of dogmas, when it is more a *wonder* and an *enquiry* at the way the universe has unfolded into the abundance, diversity, complexity, and beauty, of our world. Included in this is our own self-awareness and freedom, which also constitute a *question* and an *openness* to the future, supported by God's promises and grace.

Science is not, and was never meant to be, a source of meaning and value, as Raymond Gaita clearly sees:

The sciences which deepen our understanding of our nature as a species have little to tell us about these things—little to tell us about, for example, love, little even about erotic love. Biology will not teach us the difference between real and counterfeit love... the inner life as we mean it when we say that some people have rich others impoverished inner lives—is not a discovery which a sophisticated culture has made possible for us... It is constituted by our culturally mediated reflective responses to the defining facts of the human condition.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than always teetering on the edge



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of the void opened up by atheism, with our own wants and fears pushing us ever closer to the brink, faith 'holds' the centre of ourselves—who we are and what we do matters.

While it never fully escapes our needs and wants or the culture it exists in, faith at its best conjugates our deepest needs and desires, holding in tension our successes and failures, and ever attempts to foster our connectedness to one another and to the whole of creation.

Faith is essentially about value: particularly our own individual worth and the worth of our human endeavours. Faith is more a verb than a noun—it invites, affirms, celebrates, discloses, inspires, evokes, interprets, guides, forms, challenges, reconciles, enriches, and enlarges our human possibilities.

As John Cottingham states, it is really only faith that is capable of bringing together all the disparate and often conflicting aspects of our lives:

For we human beings were never meant to live fragmented lives, splitting off the intellect from the emotions, or keeping our theoretical beliefs neatly separated from our deepest commitments and responses... Although all the specific secular disciplines and activities may be involved as contributors, no other form of human life... is equipped for this quest in the way that religion, at its rare best, aspires to be: in a way that is truly unifying, and nurturing of our most precious human potential, the potential for wholeness or integrity.<sup>4</sup>

One advantage of reading Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists* is that it can make us aware of the things we do well as Christians, but which we tend to take for

granted. In the current climate we would do well to take more notice. De Botton lists, among many other things, sustaining goodness, countering egoism, attending to the needs of the soul, reminding people of what matters most, teaching wisdom, advocating kindness, helping people face their disappointments and vulnerability, providing a wider perspective on our lives and world, and sustaining hope—it reads like a recipe for our times.

De Botton makes special mention of ‘community’:

Catholicism starts to create a sense of community with a setting. It marks off a piece of earth, puts walls around it and declares that within these parameters there will reign values utterly unlike those which hold sway in the world beyond... gives us rare permission to lean over and say hello to a stranger.. We are promised that here... ‘the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ belong to all who have assembled.<sup>5</sup>

A gathering for worship typically brings together people of all ages, of differing income and educational backgrounds, and of different ethnic groupings, where they celebrate together their shared faith, hope, love, their deepest convictions and aspirations, and their own proneness to frailty. In a world driven by commerce and individual wants, such a community is an achievement of grace and shared humanity. We do more than we realize.

The Church currently lives in a challenging moral climate in affluent societies—its focus on marriage and family, and pro-life stances, are facing strong headwinds. Individual wants and preferences have mutated into ‘rights’. ‘Equality’ also has been excised from its traditional economic context and transplanted into the gender wars.

Pope Francis has sought to break out of this bind and turned attention to the ‘inequality’ which affects the vast majority of the world’s population, but which is largely swept under the carpet in the developed world. Oxfam has recently claimed that some eighty-

five individuals own as much as half the world’s population.<sup>6</sup> It would be difficult to get more unequal than that.

The New Atheists’ attacks have demonstrated that what is fundamentally at stake is the *deep value* of humanity. The subjective or personal viewpoint is being lost, values pared down to a miscellany of individual wants, and the edges on all sides being blurred, so that any clear idea of what is distinctly human is being lost in the mist of conflicting ideological interests.

‘Faith’ has been the principal target of the New Atheists, and their agenda has almost exclusively been the domestic libertarian issues of the Western World, such as marriage equality and privacy. But on a wider front, both within and without the developed world, the world is bigger, much bigger, with bigger issues, such as armament expenditure and poverty. It is especially, on all fronts, a contest about human worth, heart, and soul, as well as genuine equality.

Street credibility is important. Allowing oneself to be manoeuvred into appearing as the enemy of ‘genuine’ social progress is a real impediment to that credibility. The Church lives in many cultures and has a wide and deep vision, derived from its own rich tradition, which needs to be brought more to the fore. Terry Eagleton, who is not a Christian, provides a good example, which is, at the same time, a challenge:

In the end, only love (of which faith is a particular form) can achieve the well-nigh impossible goal of seeing a situation as it really is, shorn of both the brittle enchantments of romance and the dishevelled fantasies of desire. Clinical, cold-eyed realism of this kind demands all manner of virtues—openness to being wrong, selflessness, humility, generosity of spirit, hard labour, tenacity, a readiness to collaborate, conscientious judgement, and the like; and for Aquinas, all virtues have their source in love.<sup>7</sup>

I am not sure how much of our present selves we are able to see in that portrait.

Yet the New Atheists are helping to make clearer what the deep issues are, although rising to the challenge might require more changes in our current ways of thinking and acting than we may care to contemplate. Casting off the shackles of affluence is not easy. It has infiltrated our mindsets and our behaviour.

For the New Atheists religion is not only delusional, but also irrelevant to modern 'scientific' societies. As the Second Vatican Council remarked 'no small part' of this charge can be sheeted home to Christians themselves (*GS* 19).

It is a matter of shifting priorities, which at present appear focused on the internal issues of Church life, to a more prophetic con-

cern for those disadvantaged or made vulnerable by our own pursuit of affluence. It is an integral part of the Church's heritage: it needs to be more prominent a part of the Church's mission, if street credibility is to be regained. It goes without saying that this applies also to the Church's treatment of people.

Essentially, however, the challenge is to show that without faith life is shallower and poorer. Faith is able to broaden our horizons to include others, especially those in need. It is able to enrich and deepen who we are and what we are to become. It is able to hold open a very different future than the one modern anxieties tend to predict, a future created in God's image and likeness, not our own.

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### Gentle As Silence

**Oh, the love of my Lord is the essence  
Of all that I love here on earth.  
All the beauty I see, He has given to me,  
And his giving is gentle as silence.**

**Every day, every hour, every moment,  
Have been blessed by the strength of His love.  
At the turn of each tide, He is there at my side,  
And his touch is as gentle as silence.**

**There've been times when I've turned from his presence,  
And I've walked other paths, other ways,  
But I've called on his name, in the dark of my shame  
And his mercy was gentle as silence.**