

NEW ATHEISM'S ALTERNATIVE TO RELIGION

NEIL BROWN

FROM BEING content to attack religious belief, New Atheism in recent times has switched to considering alternatives. AC Grayling, for instance, has compiled *The Good Book* in imitation of the Bible and, as he hopes, an alternative source of inspiration for non-believers. Perhaps the most remarkable section of *The Good Book* is entitled 'Lamentations'. The following are a few samples:

The brief effortful, confused span of existence between two nothings, burdened with care and trial, is a tale traced on water, a story written in dust.¹

Surely, human life is a mistake. Man is a compound of needs and necessities which are hard to satisfy. And even when they are satisfied, all he obtains is a state of painlessness, where nothing remains to him but the dangers of boredom. This is proof that existence has no value in itself; for what is boredom but the feeling of the emptiness of life.²

Alas: the truth is that we suffer, and carry the burden of existence, and there is no remedy other than illusion.³

No opponent of the New Atheism could better express what is at stake in the current debate between belief and unbelief. The response the book offers to such laments is illuminating. 'Songs' and 'Consolations' are beautiful, celebrating the joys of love and friendship, and the arts, helped along by a glass of wine, even though such joys are tinged with nostalgia, ageing, personal sorrows and difficulties—all a mixture of Epicurean delight and Stoic endurance, reflecting the sources Grayling draws upon.

'Narratives' tell of the struggle of the Greeks against the barbarian Persians in defence of their freedom and honour. 'Proverbs'

give practical advice about making the best of one's life and situation. 'Wisdom' is reason at the service of becoming as self-sufficient as possible: 'For the pain arising from loss is mitigated as soon as its inevitability is perceived.'⁴ 'Epistles' also celebrate 'reason': 'Consult your reason betimes: I do not say it will always prove an unerring guide; for human reason is not infallible; but it will prove the least erring guide you can follow.'⁵

There is not a lot to disagree with in *The Good Book*—freedom, reason, courage, friendship, moderation, virtue, are all goods we can recognise and agree upon. What is revealing, however, is what is missing. There is little, if anything, of the flesh, blood, tears, communal and personal failures, injustices, victims, and passions, no widows and orphans, outcasts and sinners, that you find in the Bible. Even though many of his sources would have relied on religious beliefs of some kind these have been carefully edited out. What is missing is 'heart', which is what Jerusalem has offered Western culture down through the centuries.

For Grayling, reason seems to exist in a realm of its own, ideally cut off from emotions, circumstances, beliefs and influences.⁶ *The Good Book* itself illustrates, despite its high ideals, that reason always belongs to a time and place, and the time and place of the book's compilation is firmly entrenched in a very affluent and elite corner of Western society. The tumultuous and suffering world of the Bible appears a much more just and compassionate ground for 'reason' to stand upon to face life's turmoil. *The Good Book* hasn't the resources to respond to its own 'lamentations'.

Perhaps it is a failure of nerve, but New

Atheism has gone to great lengths, even at the cost of the truth, to discredit religion totally, as, for example, this statement of Grayling in *The Meaning of Things*:

But religious morality is not merely irrelevant, it is anti-moral. The great moral questions of the present age are those about human rights, war, poverty, the vast disparities between rich and poor, the fact that somewhere in the third world a child dies every two and half seconds because of starvation or remedial disease. The church's obsessions over pre-marital sex and whether divorced couples can remarry in the church appears contemptible in the light of this mountain of human suffering and need.⁷

It is hard to see that statement could be made in good faith, given the social teaching and charity commitments of religious groups around the world. But that is just a more blatant example of a general trend. Christopher Hitchens' *God is not Great* sets out to demonstrate that there is no good at all, and, in fact, much that is immoral, in religion. From the long list of charges levelled at religion, a number stand out:

- religion is infantile, a human invention, a product of primitive fear.⁸
- religion is illusory as it contradicts science and outrages reason—'Thanks to the telescope and microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important.'⁹
- religion is servile—it teaches eternal reward and punishments and imposes impossible rules, such as 'love thy neighbour as thyself', and 'love one another as I have loved you.'¹⁰

In place of religious belief, we must accept that

Our place in the cosmos is so unimaginably small that we cannot, with our miserly endowment of cranial matter contemplate it for long at all. No less difficult is the realisation that we may be quite random as presences on earth.¹¹

Hitchens describes the Old Testament as a 'nightmare', the New Testament as 'evil' and the Koran as 'borrowed'. His principal manoeuvre



Neil Brown taught at the Catholic Institute of Sydney for thirty-four years. He is currently the Parish Priest of Bondi Beach in the Sydney Archdiocese.

is to deny the existence of any originating experience, even the historical existence of Jesus. He concludes 'that monotheistic religion is a plagiarism of a heresy of a hearsay, of an illusion of an illusion, extending all the way back to a fabrication of a few nonevents.'¹²

Historical and scriptural study here barely exists. For Hitchens, the scriptures seem to have sprung together over a period of some thousand years without any originating experience, except illusion, without any continuing narrative holding them together, down through the centuries of struggle and reflection, without movement or development of any kind, and without any genuine explanation of why they have been able to inspire people ever since, except to say that it is infantile, illusory and servile. As human beings we do have deep-seated needs, but the vast majority of people turn to their scriptures to discover a way to live justly and compassionately, not because of Hitchens' tired old clichés and stereotypes.

There is no concept that believers might accept their scriptures as a whole, rather than piecemeal, that there might be rules of interpretation as beliefs are refined, that justice, mercy and love might begin to overcome the worst human tendencies as time proceeds, that Christians re-interpret the Old Testament in the light of Christ, who few but the totally biased would deny existed, and that the conclusion, after centuries of anguished searching, is that God is not a figure of fear but that God is *Love*, and that, with all our shortcomings, that is what we should seek to show one another.

For the most part, however, Hitchens' target

is not God, but religion. Even on this count, there are few better at rehearsing the faults of religion than believers, but Hitchens can only look through his ‘microscope’ and ‘telescope’ and see what such instruments let him see. He poses a false dichotomy between science and religion.

The fact is that the language and life setting of religion is radically different from science. God is not an object, but an encounter, a relationship that is offered. Science makes important discoveries by examining whatever can be turned into an object of observation and experimentation. The language of faith, on the other hand, is that of human relatedness and engagement, with its narratives, creativity, poetry, longings, loves and failures, violence and victims. This language has its own logic and reasons which relate to our love and compassion, our seeking justice, reconciliation and peace, and our coming to terms with grief and guilt. Genuine science and religion are not opposing worldviews. So, whatever criticisms New Atheism brings against religion they have their origins, not in science, but elsewhere.

Dawkins maintains that atheism offers a positive vision of life in contrast with that of religion:

The atheist view is correspondingly life-affirming and life enhancing, while at the same time never being tainted with self-delusion, wishful thinking, or the whingeing self pity of those who feel that life owes them something.¹³

If that is meant to be a depiction of Christianity, it is a gross misrepresentation. What is interesting, however, is where this positive vision is coming from, given that atheism itself is a ‘denial’ rather than an affirmation. If science, as they allege, provides the ‘facts’, where do the ‘values’ come from?

For Hitchens, they come from the ‘study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals.’¹⁴ This is coupled with the cautious hope that ‘human development is still under way.’¹⁵ While literature and the arts do add great meaning and value to life, it is not their stated purpose and they would be most likely

to sink under such a burden. Dawkins, perhaps realising this, looks to another source:

How, then, do we decide what is right and what is wrong? No matter how we answer that question, there is consensus about what we do as a matter of fact consider right and wrong: a consensus that prevails surprisingly widely. The consensus has no obvious connection with religion. It extends, however to most religious people, whether or not they think their morals come from scripture.¹⁶

Dawkins’ exclusion of religion from what he calls the ‘moral *zeitgeist*’ is a good example of New Atheism’s doctrinaire approach to most matters, but especially religion. While it is true that a person can be moral without religious belief, morality itself is not belief-free. All morality, whether religious or not, depends on fundamental beliefs about such things as what it is to be human, what is valuable in our world, and how we should respond and act towards the world around us. Such beliefs are built into religions, just as they arise from elsewhere. When the vast majority of the world’s population hold religious beliefs of some kind, it is bizarre to try to legislate religion out of the equation.

A more fundamental problem with his solution, however, is the way it glosses over the crucial moral issues of the day, particularly where the West is involved, as for example, the amount spent on arms each year, industrial pollution, torture, abortion, exploitation of labour, consumerism, world poverty and war. Factual agreement or complacency is no guarantee that a truly moral stand has been taken. In all such cases people are forced back on whatever ultimate beliefs about good and evil they have, including religious beliefs.

Dawkins offers his own lists of values, such as, no harm, love, honesty, sexual enjoyment, non-discrimination, valuing the future, and no indoctrination, all of which, in some shape or form, believers would agree with.¹⁷ What is also interesting however, is how many of those values historically have Judaeo-Christian origins.

Alain De Botton is also an atheist, but with a difference. In *Religion for Atheists* he dis-

cusses what he considers are the virtues of religion, such as harmonious community, mechanisms for expressing gratitude and grief, the preservation of sacred spaces, charity, nourishment for the soul, forgiveness, antidotes to destructiveness and institutions to preserve and hand on traditions. In sum:

Religion's great distinction is that while it has a collective power comparable to that of modern corporations pushing the sale of soap and mashed potatoes, it addresses precisely those inner needs which the secular world leaves to disorganised and vulnerable individuals.¹⁸

The challenge for atheists, he maintains, 'is how to reverse the process of religious colonisation: how to separate ideas and rituals from the religious institutions which have laid claim to them but don't truly own them.'¹⁹

He laments that in secular society education is not about life, literature is not to inspire, role models are lacking, life is driven by stimuli, freedom is unchannelled and 'soul' is neglected:

The signal danger of life in a godless society is that it lacks reminders of the transcendent and therefore leaves us unprepared for disappointment and eventual annihilation. When God is dead, human beings—much to their detriment—are at the risk of taking psychological centre stage. They imagine themselves to be commanders of their own destinies, they trample upon nature, forget the rhythms of the earth, deny death and shy away from valuing and honouring all that slips through their grasp, until at last they must collide catastrophically with the sharp edge of reality.²⁰

Culture, he claims, is 'more than adequately equipped to substitute for religion.'²¹ Is it? We live in a modern consumer culture which is governed by instrumental reason, mass production, the amassing of wealth, the profit motive, exploitation of resources, a huge entertainment and advertising industry and commercial competition. To what extent is such a society capable of addressing the inner and relational needs of heart and soul? Like religion, serious literature and the arts struggle against such an all pervasive pressure.

In Western culture all of the contributions De Botton notes have emerged from and are supported by Judaeo-Christian beliefs. How many of them could survive once severed from that lifeblood? Even now they exist only precariously given the inroads of the surrounding culture. What new beliefs could be found to ground and nurture them?

That question is one that hangs over all of New Atheism's attempted alternatives to religion. Their fundamental belief is that we exist as accidents in a vast and indifferent universe struggling, ultimately in vain, to give some meaning and value to our lives. Such a worldview is the elephant in the room when their alternatives are on the table. As 'Lamentations' says:

But there are no eternities other than grief while it lasts, no certainties other than that grief must come, no escape other than from life itself and what it asks us to endure.²²

It is to these 'griefs' that religion gives a positive and life affirming response.

NOTES

- 1 *The Good Book* (New York: Walker & Co, 2011) 73.
- 2 *ibid*, 79.
- 3 *ibid*, 83.
- 4 *ibid*, 15.
- 5 *ibid*, 566.
- 6 *ibid*, 593.
- 7 *The Meaning of Things* (London: Phoenix, 2002) 102-3
- 8 *God is Not Great* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2007) 75.
- 9 *ibid*, 339.
- 10 *ibid*, 245.

- 11 *ibid*, 106.
- 12 *ibid*, 336.
- 13 *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) 361.
- 14 *God is Not Great*, 340.
- 15 *ibid*, 111.
- 16 *The God Delusion*, 262-3. See also, 268.
- 17 *ibid*, 263-4.
- 18 *Religion for Atheists* (London: Penguin, 2012) 280.
- 19 *ibid*, 15.
- 20 *ibid*, 200.
- 21 *ibid*, 160.
- 22 *The Good Book*, 74.