Aggressive Atheism

Kieran Beville

Atheism is sometimes defined as the rejection (or absence) of belief in the existence of God. But it is more accurate to define it as *belief* that there is no God.[1] It is a belief system that affirms the nonexistence of God. Whereas a theist is someone who believes in God, an atheist is someone whose disbelief in God is central to his worldview. Atheism, therefore, is not merely uncertainty or doubt about the existence of God such as agnosticism or scepticism.

Atheists assert that there is insufficient credible evidence to warrant belief in the existence of God. When asked what he would say when facing God on judgment day, Bertrand Russell replied, 'Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!'

Whereas explicit atheism asserts that no God exists, implicit atheists would include people who do not believe in a deity, but have not explicitly rejected such belief. Whether atheism is an assertion in its own right or merely the absence of belief is a moot point.

Although atheism is a minority view in Western culture it is nevertheless growing in popularity. Historically, atheism would have been a scandalous view that elicited hostility by the wider society and often led to ostracism and persecution. Today it is far less objectionable. In fact in some circles atheism is a well-respected worldview.

Godless Gurus

There are many celebrities in contemporary society who are atheists (actors, musicians, entertainers, writers etc). They have a 'live and let live' attitude to their views in relation to other people's opinions. But there are other people of renown who have achieved celebrity status by virtue of the fact that they are exponents of atheism. Not only do they not believe in God but they actively encourage disbelief in God. Using their influence to that end they are part of a movement known as 'New Atheism.' In this new movement the mood has changed from passive non-belief to become more aggressive. Atheistic writers advocate the view that religion should not simply be tolerated but its influence should be countered and criticized. They have a less accommodating attitude toward religion and see it as superstition and are dedicated to its eradication.

[1] The word 'atheist' is derived from Greek, '*a*' means 'not' and '*theos*' means 'god.' Thus its very name expresses its negativity.

Poisoned Penmanship

Following the recent death of Christopher Hitchens, the obituaries described him in glowing terms as an articulate journalist, incomparable critic and masterful rhetorician. Hitchens had a world platform from which he advanced atheism.[2] In reality he was an inherently anti-religious writer who espoused prejudicial views that were unfair and unkind.

He once described Mother Theresa as: 'a lying, thieving, Albanian dwarf.' This is not just libellous; it is ludicrous.[3] This kind of comment is typical of the poisoned penmanship he used to promulgate contempt for people who hold religious views. This is not just being outspoken, it is outrageously insulting, personal, and cruel. Furthermore, it is discriminatory because the woman's nationality and stature are factors beyond her control. Hitchens used his distorted understanding of truth as a weapon to do violence on all who did not share his perception. He was not just hard-headed but hard-hearted and harsh, and he is a harbinger of what is to come as aggressive atheism advances.

Such a predisposed antipathy to a religious perspective has spawned pseudo-intellectuals who feel it is open season on people of faith. Many of these zealots are equally dogmatic in their opinions. The truth is that Hitchens had vinegar in his veins and yet he is considered to be an exemplary journalist. No doubt he will be emulated by many a hack who wants to do a hatchet job on religion.

Celebrity Cult

Richard Dawkins, author of The God Delusion, is probably the most well-known advocate of atheism today. He believes that science and religion are mutually incompatible. He is committed to the evolutionary theory of Darwin as a means of undermining religious belief and sees religion as a negative force that has inhibited and corrupted society. He (and there are many others like him) uses his scholarly and popular platforms to promote an atheistic worldview.[4]

Some of these celebrity new atheists and their cult of devotees use the word 'fundamentalism' as a pejorative and convenient label to express contempt for certain kinds of people whose religious convictions shape their worldview. Such a broad definition includes suicide bombers and ordinary Christian worshippers. As such they lack perspective and the

[2] His works include *God is Not Great* and *The Portable Atheist*.

[3] I certainly do not share Mother Theresa's theological views and have critiqued them briefly in my book *Cultivating Christian Character: The Fruit of the Spirit* (Leominster: Day One, 2005).

[4] C.f. Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (London: SPCK, 2007).

nuances one might expect from intelligent debate. Ironically these outspoken atheists have a form of evangelical zeal and a strident tone. It seems to me that they have much in common with the 'fanaticism' they despise.

I suspect that many of them are angry that (as they see it) right-wing Christian fundamentalists have hijacked the creation debate and transformed it into an anti-science polemic. They no longer speak like the besieged who have retrenched into defensive enclaves. Rather they have gone on the offensive in their belligerent assault on faith.

Atheism is now a dogmatic creed that crushes the interrogative spirit and insists that its doctrinaire views are the only legitimate creed. As a belief system (for what it asserts in relation to the origin of the universe is in fact an unproven and un-provable theory), it is itself a form of orthodoxy which is intolerant of any disagreement. Those who do not subscribe to its views are deemed heretics and treated as outcasts who are ostracized and ridiculed. New Atheists are characterized by a new mood of animosity as well as the certitude they despise in 'fundamentalism.'

Anathema to Atheists

Believers are detested and despised by atheists. Several years ago I bought a book about atheism, written by an atheist. While browsing in the bookshop I read the Preface which included the following statement:

> This book is intended for a variety of different readers, including atheists looking for a systematic defence and explanation of their position, agnostics who think they might be atheists after all, and religious believers who have a sincere desire to understand what atheism is all about.[5]

As I belonged to the last category in this list I thought this would be helpful to me. Some time later as I read this book I was surprised and disappointed to read Baggini's vitriolic attack on evangelical faith. He speaks of, 'The crass simplicity of this world view' and describes it as 'comforting idiocy.'[6] This is typical of the kind of vitriolic attack one can expect from New Atheism. I felt cheated because the book was not what it promised in the Preface. I was, after all, a religious believer (an evangelical Christian) who had a sincere desire to better understand what atheism is all about. Instead of a balanced dialogue this book rubbished belief in God by referring to religious beliefs as 'superstition' and 'comforting fictions.'[7]

---

[5] Julian Baggini, preface to *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), (no page number).
[6] Baggini, *Atheism*, p.10.
[7] Baggini, *Atheism*, p.10.

Baggini describes belief in God as 'wishful thinking' and 'self-delusion' and associates belief in God with believing in goblins and hobbits.[8]

Altruism, Philanthropy and Charity

Genuine faith has inspired altruism, philanthropy, and charity and acted as a stimulus in developing an enduring system of jurisprudence. There is a faith that is reasonable and welcomes intellectual inquiry and contributes positively to the debate on issues such as social justice, human rights and the environment. Faith has produced development agencies who work selflessly in underdeveloped countries. But these New Atheists trawl through history for supporting data to underpin their atheistic presuppositions and undermine faith. They ignore the positive contribution of religion to the development of society, particularly in the field of doxological science. They are biased, subjective and disrespectful of dissenting views and as such are quite authoritarian. Much of their anti-religious diatribe is more philosophical in nature than scientific.

The atheistic, socialist experiments of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, North Korea and elsewhere were rooted in humanistic philosophy and delivered a dystopian nightmare rather than a utopian dream. These tyrannical regimes are essentially atheistic and they have produced censorship (something that atheists seem to think is a uniquely religious phenomenon) and persecuted and imprisoned religious dissenting voices. Such authoritarian systems of atheistic government do not allow freedom of thought or freedom of speech or freedom of assembly.

Rogues Gallery: Who's Who in Atheism

These are people who promote atheism with missionary zeal with the intention of making converts to this new religion. I think it is fair to call it a religion because it shares the characteristics of a religious worldview. Darwin's theory of evolution is a theory (unproven and un-provable) yet they are committed to *believing* it.[9] They engage in scientism which is cognitive idolatry. They revere their pantheon of saints (celebrating Darwin's birthday and the publication date of the *Origin of the Species*, which is for them a sacred text). They are committed to winning converts. So, in addition to Dawkins and Hitchens, the following is a list of who's who in atheism.

---

[8] Baggini, *Atheism*, pp. 21 and 17 respectively.

[9] In my opinion the case for God is overwhelmingly convincing but ultimately unproven and un-provable in a strictly scientific sense and requires faith, as God intended it should.

Sam Harris, neuroscientist and popular author, is another outspoken atheist who is known, amongst other things, for his public criticism of Islam. He has written *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*.

Daniel Dennett, together with Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens, completes what has been called the 'four horsemen' (referring to the four horsemen of death in the biblical book of Revelation). Dennett is a philosopher who has argued for materialistic atheism in everything from human consciousness to evolutionary biology. He has written *Breaking the Spell* and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*.

Stephen Hawking is one of the world's greatest theoretical physicists. His book, *A Brief History of Time*, had a phenomenal impact when it was first published in the late 1980s. In that work he raised the prospect of a self-creating universe. This theory has since been developed at length. His consistent theme is the extraneousness of the God hypothesis. Another of his influential books is *The Grand Design*.

Steven Pinker is a cognitive scientist who deconstructs all elements of human thought that might be construed as pointing to a non-material origin. With a Harvard professorship and a steady stream of popular books arguing for a materialistic view of cognition, he has been a remarkably effective apologist for atheism. Some of his best known works are *How the Mind Works* and *The Blank Slate*.

Michael Shermer, a former evangelical Christian, promotes scepticism which eliminates any vestige of supernaturalism. Founder and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, he is an indefatigable voice for atheism through popular books, highly visible debates and television interviews, and a monthly column with Scientific American. His books include *Why People Believe Weird Things* and *The Science of Good and Evil*.

Peter Singer is a Princeton bio-ethicist who argues that religion's main problem is its promotion of what he calls 'speciesism'—the view that the human species is in some way exceptional compared to the rest of the animal world. In thus challenging human exceptionalism, Singer attempts to fundamentally undermine all of western monotheism. His books include *Animal Liberation* and *One World*.

Steven Weinberg is a Nobel laureate physicist and deemed to be one of the great scientists of our time. He is also a remarkably good writer, as demonstrated in his popular books on physics, which advance an atheistic view of the universe. According to him, science's greatest cultural achievement will be to eradicate religion. His books include *The First Three Minutes* and *Lake Views: This World and the Universe*.

Paul Kurtz is the preeminent advocate of secular humanism, which eschews religion in the quest for human flourishing. He has been incredibly productive in fostering secular humanism by, among other things, directing the Council for Secular Humanism, editing the *Skeptical*

Inquirer, and founding *Prometheus Press*. His Books include *What is Secular Humanism*? and *Science and Religion*.

Lawrence Krauss is the darling of U.S.A. television networks who see him as a well-credentialed, articulate and eloquent scientist whom they frequently engage to discuss the relation between science and religion. A physicist with solid credentials as well as a ready pen, who has written many popular science books, Krauss has effectively used this platform to promote atheism. His books include *Hiding in the Mirror* and *The Physics of Star Trek*.

Edward O. Wilson is the inventor of sociobiology and the inspiration behind contemporary evolutionary ethics. He started life as a Southern Baptist only to become an ardent supporter of evolutionary naturalism under the inspiration of Charles Darwin. A two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, he sacralises nature and argues for nature to replace traditional conceptions of God. His books include *Sociobiology* and *The Future of Life*.

P.Z. Myers is an associate professor of biology at the University of Minnesota. He was catapulted to atheist stardom through his devastatingly popular blog 'Pharyngula.' He is a hard-core atheist who is outrageously blasphemous.

James Randi was once a professional stage magician. He has used his skills at deceiving the eye to uncover the techniques, tricks, and stratagems of charlatans who use religion as a cloak for fraud. But he has gone further and turned against religion generally, regarding it as 'silly' and 'fantastic,' promoting instead a naturalistic understanding of the world. His books include *The Faith Healers* and *Flim-Flam: Psychics, ESP, Unicorns and Other Delusions*.

Jennifer Michael Hecht has expertise in history and philosophy and she is providing theoretical underpinnings for New Atheism. A prolific author and wide-ranging speaker, she is demonstrating that the leading new atheists no longer comprise a 'gentlemen's club.' Her books include, *Doubt: A History* and *The End of the Soul*.

Peter Atkins is an Oxford University professor of chemistry and a prolific author of both academic and popular science books. He champions using science to advance secularism, arguing that religious belief denigrates the power of human understanding whereas science elevates it. His books include *The Four Laws that Drive the Universe* and *Galileo's Finger*.

John Brockman is the literary agent and publicist for all the leading atheist authors. Through his Edge Foundation he channels the energies and talents of his authors, advancing what he calls 'the third culture,' an effort to integrate humanistic and scientific thought that excludes traditional religious belief. His books include *This Will Change Everything* and *What We Believe but Cannot Prove*.

Philip Pullman is an Oxford-educated best-selling author. He sees himself as 'undermining the basis for Christian belief.' Viewing C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series as religious propaganda, he has written the *His Dark Materials* trilogy as an atheistic foil. He has written a fictional account of Jesus, representing Christ as a cynically manipulating deceiver. His books include *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* and the *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

Barbara Forrest is an active secular humanist who came to prominence as the leading philosophical voice against the form of creationism known as intelligent design. Criticizing intelligent design as religious propaganda and as an attempt to insert God into educational curricula, she has been effective at making conceptual space for atheism. She has written *Creationism's Trojan Horse*.

David Sloan Wilson is a biologist and anthropologist who argues for the pervasiveness of selection in the evolutionary process. In consequence, he sees religion itself as an adaptation that can motivate humans to cooperate and behave altruistically. At the same time, he denies that religion has any basis in transcendent reality. His books include *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* and *Darwin's Cathedral*.

Ray Kurzweil is an author, inventor and entrepreneur. He sees technology as fulfilling all aspirations previously ascribed to religion, including immortality. He argues that computing machines will soon outstrip human cognitive capacities, at which point humanity will upload itself onto a new, indestructible digital medium (an atheist version/vision of 'resurrection'). His books include *The Age of Spiritual Machines* and *The Singularity is Near*.

William B. ('Will') Provine is a Cornell historian of biology. He is one of the most forceful advocates for using evolutionary theory to both justify atheism and disqualify theism. According to him, evolution destroys not just belief in God but also all the vestiges of that belief, such as the view that humans have free will. His books include *Sewall Wright and Evolutionary Biology* and *The Origins of Theoretical Population Genetics*.

Kai Nielsen is a classical old-school atheist who still casts a long shadow in contemporary debates over God's existence. An academic philosopher, he has written and debated at length not just on the coherence (or lack of it) of theism but also on the proper formulation of atheism. His books include *Ethics Without God* and *Atheism and Philosophy.*

Susan Blackmore is a writer, speaker, and parapsychology sceptic who addresses the question of human consciousness from the perspective of Richard Dawkins' idea of 'the meme,' a unit of cultural information transmitted once organisms evolve sufficient consciousness. For Blackmore, religion is not only a noxious meme but also false. She has written *The Meme Machine* and *Conversations on Consciousness*.

Richard Carrier trained as a historian. He is a dominant presence on the so-called 'secular web.' He is known especially for his writings at Internet Infidels. Besides critiquing theism on philosophical grounds, he also challenges Christianity head-on, considering it 'very probable Jesus never actually existed as a historical person.' He has written *Not the Impossible Faith* and *Sense and Goodness Without God*.

Hide and Seek

Without faith God is hidden and even with faith there are times when God seems to be concealed. The idea of God's hiddenness is expressed in Scripture, for example, the lament of the Psalm, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.' (Psalm 22:1–2). Isaiah also expresses this sentiment, 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself' (Isaiah 45:15). But both authors (David and Isaiah) knew God well. This merely reflects moments in their experience. God's hiddenness is not a valid excuse for non-belief.

One of the first philosophers to contemplate the problem of hiddenness was Anselm of Canterbury who in his *Proslogion* complains:

> I have never seen thee, O Lord my God; I do not know thy form. What, O most high Lord, shall this man do, an exile far from thee? What shall thy servant do, anxious in his love of thee, and cast out afar from thy face? He pants to see thee, and thy face is too far from him. He longs to come to thee, and thy dwelling place is inaccessible. He is eager to find thee, and knows not thy place. He desires to seek thee, and does not know thy face. Lord, thou art my God, and thou art my Lord, yet never have I seen thee. It is thou that hast made me, and hast made me anew, and hast bestowed upon me all the blessings I enjoy; and not yet do I know thee. Finally, I was created to see thee and not yet have I done that for which I was made.[10]

A person may be stubbornly blind to evidence of the divine, but the claim is that some non-believers have tried hard to believe in God. Schellenberg introduced the distinction between culpable and inculpable non-belief, where the latter is defined as 'non-belief that exists through no fault of the non-believer.'[11]

---

[10] Cited in the introduction to Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[11] John L. Schellenberg, 'The hiddenness argument revisited (I),' *Religious Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 41 (2) (2005), pp. 201–215.

Human beings possess an intuitive sense of God. This *sensus divinatis* (sense of divinity) means that the presence of God is universally perceived by all humans. Paul Helm explains, 'Calvin's use of the term "sense" signals that the knowledge of God is a common human endowment; mankind is created not only as capable of knowing God, but as actually knowing him.'[12] Thus there is no inculpable or reasonable non-belief. Jonathan Edwards claimed that while every human being has been granted the capacity to know God, successful use of these capacities requires an attitude of 'true benevolence,' a willingness to be open to the truth about God. Thus, the failure of non-believers to see 'divine things' is due to 'a dreadful stupidity of mind, occasioning a sottish insensibility of their truth and importance.'[13]

Cognitive Idolatry

Today's aggressive atheists demand that God should prove his existence. A detailed treatment of these kinds of demands, and their moral implication, is provided by Paul Moser who calls this 'cognitive idolatry.'[14] He defines idolatry as 'our not letting the true God be Lord in our lives' and instead committing to something other than God by pursuing a quest for self-realisation on our own terms. If this is idolatry in our actions, then idolatry in our knowing he explains as follows:

> Cognitive idolatry relies on a standard for knowledge that excludes the primacy of the morally self-transforming knowledge of God central to knowing God as Lord. It rests on an epistemological standard, whether empiricist, rationalist, or some hybrid that does not let God be Lord. Such idolatry aims to protect one's lifestyle from serious challenge by the God who calls, convicts, and reconciles. It disallows knowledge of God as personal subject and Lord to whom we are morally and cognitively responsible. It allows at most for knowledge of God as an undemanding object of human knowledge.[15]

[12] Paul Helm, 'John Calvin, the Sensus Divinitatis, and the noetic effects of sin,' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (2) (1998), pp. 87–107.
[13] Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London: William Ball, 1839), pp. 137, 141, 159.
[14] Paul K. Moser, 'Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding,' in *Divine Hiddenness*.
[15] Moser, 'Cognitive Idolatry.'

Without God

Although in Western culture atheists tend to be irreligious some are spiritual and some believe in the paranormal. Moreover, atheism also figures in certain religious and spiritual belief systems, such as Jainism, Buddhism and neo-pagan movements. Even in Hinduism atheism is possible. Many people in contemporary society would describe themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' but stop short of defining themselves as atheists.

The Greek word *atheoi*, as it appears in Ephesians (2:12) is usually translated into English as 'without God.' In ancient Greek the adjective *atheos* meant 'godless.' It was first used as a term of censure roughly meaning 'ungodly' or 'impious.' In the fifth-century B.C. the word began to indicate more deliberate and active godlessness in the sense of 'severing relations with the gods.' Atheists were those who impiously denied or disrespected the local gods, even if they believed in other gods. Thus the word 'atheist' was originally used pejoratively and as such was an insult. Nobody would willingly have assumed such a title.

A person could be a professed atheist or a pragmatic atheist. The latter lives as if there is no God but has never actually professed atheism. There are many such people today and some of them are nominal adherents of religion. Such a person explains natural phenomena without resorting to the divine. For such an individual, God does not provide purpose or significance and does not influence everyday life. This kind of practical atheism can take various forms and is especially notable in the absence of religious motivation for moral action. The notion of God does not engage the intellect or stimulate religious responses. It is not that such people actively exclude God. Rather they are indifferent to the concept of deity. The theoretical atheist, however, explicitly posits arguments against the existence of God by responding to common theistic arguments such as the idea that intricate design in nature implies that an intelligent designer exists.

Axiological, or constructive, atheism rejects the idea of the existence of God in favour of a 'higher absolute,' such as humanity. This form of atheism favours humanity as the absolute source of ethics and values. Marx and Freud used this argument to promulgate ideas of liberation, full-development, and unfettered happiness.

One of the most common criticisms of atheism has been to the contrary—that denying the existence of a god leads to moral relativism leaving the individual and society with no moral or ethical foundation and this renders life meaningless or even miserable.

Dangerous Dogmatism

New Atheism is a form of dogmatism which could be described as scientific imperialism. Michael Novak reviewing books by Sam Harris, Daniel C. Dennett and Richard Dawkins writes: 'all three pretend that atheists "question everything" and "submit to relentless, almost tedious, self-criticism." Yet in these books there is not a shred of evidence that their authors have ever had any doubts whatever about the rightness of their own atheism.'[16] Stephen Jay Gould criticized Richard Dawkins for having a 'Darwinian fundamentalism' and 'uncompromising ideology.'[17]

Some atheists have doubted the very need for the term 'atheism.' Sam Harris has said:

> In fact, 'atheism' is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a 'non-astrologer' or a 'non-alchemist.' We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.[18]

In answer to that it could be said that 'astrologers' are a tiny minority, unlike those who believe in God, so one would not need to define oneself in such a way. If anybody is practicing alchemy today they certainly are few in number. This kind of 'guilt by association' style of writing is typical of atheists whereby believers in the existence of God are identified with the superstition of astrology, the medieval and thoroughly unscientific practice of alchemy and the cultish belief in extra-terrestrial activity in our solar system. With regard to the statement, 'we do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive' it should be obvious that such a cohort comprises a vast majority, just like those who believe in God. It is the atheist who is in the minority not the believer.

This kind of writing is disingenuous, disparaging and designed to diminish people of faith in the minds of others by using false analogies in a sleight of hand manner. Besides, the term 'atheist' is merrily adopted by those who want to make it known that they are opposed to a religious worldview. Sam Harris' reputation is built on his identity as an atheist.

Atheists usually deny not only the existence of God but also a range of other phenomena including the existence of any spiritual, supernatural or transcendental concepts. Harris professes to be an atheist but

[16] Michael Novak, 'Lonely Atheists of the Global Village,' *National Review,* March 19 2007.

[17] Stephen Jay Gould, 'Darwinian Fundamentalism,' *The New York Review of Books,* June 12 1997.

[18] Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 51.

retains belief in the paranormal. This peculiar position understandably raises some questions about his atheistic credentials even among his godless peers.

Harris has been criticized by some of his fellow contributors at *The Huffington Post*. In particular, R.J. Eskow has accused him of fostering intolerance towards faith, potentially as damaging as the religious fanaticism which he opposes.[19] New atheists are intent on destroying religion. Their arguments are filled with the language of intolerance and rife with logical flaws.

Madeleine Bunting wrote in *The Guardian* that the purpose of recent books by the so-called 'Four Horsemen' of the New Atheism (Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens) 'is to pour scorn on religious belief—they want it eradicated,' and argues that the books are 'deeply political,' sharing a 'loathing' of the role of religion in American culture and politics. Quoting Harris as saying, 'some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them,' Bunting says '[t]his sounds like exactly the kind of argument put forward by those who ran the Inquisition.'[20] Quoting the same passage, theologian Catherine Keller asks, '…could there be a more dangerous proposition than that?'[21]

Historical Overview

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 341–270 B.C.) disputed many religious doctrines, including the existence of an afterlife or a personal deity. He considered the soul purely material and mortal. While Epicureanism did not rule out the existence of gods, it asserted that if they did exist, they were unconcerned with humanity.

The Roman poet Lucretius (c. 99–55 B.C.) agreed that, if there were gods, they were unconcerned with humanity and unable to affect the natural world. For this reason, he believed humanity should have no fear of the supernatural. He expounded his Epicurean views of the cosmos, the soul, mortality, and religion in *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), which popularized Epicurus' philosophy in Rome. The word 'epicurean' originally referred to a disciple or student of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. They were essentially devotees of sensual

[19] R.J. Eskow, 'Blind Faith: Sam Harris Attacks Islam,' *The Huffington Post,* 11 October 2005. 'Reject Arguments for Intolerance—Even from Atheists,' *The Huffington Post,* January 2006.

[20] Madeleine Bunting, 'The New Atheists Loathe Religion Far Too Much to Plausibly Challenge it,' *The Guardian*, 17 May 2007.

[21] Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 5.

enjoyment. Many people today might not call themselves epicureans but they are practically hedonistic.

The meaning of 'atheist' changed over the course of classical antiquity. The early Christians were labeled atheists by non-Christians because of their disbelief in pagan gods. During the Roman Empire Christians were accused of being atheists for not worshiping the pagan deities and many were executed for their rejection of the Roman gods in general and Emperor-worship in particular.[22]

The Renaissance did much to expand the scope of free thought and sceptical inquiry. Individuals such as Leonardo da Vinci sought experimentation as a means of explanation, and opposed arguments from religious authority. He was one of several critics of the church during this period. But generally the Renaissance and Reformation eras witnessed resurgence in religious fervour, as evidenced by the proliferation of new religious orders and the emergence of Protestantism. Ironically this era of inter-confessional rivalry permitted an even wider scope of theological and philosophical speculation, much of which would later be used to advance a sceptical worldview.

Criticism of Christianity became increasingly frequent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially in France and England. Some thinkers who emerged from a Protestant tradition (such as Thomas Hobbes) espoused a materialist philosophy and scepticism toward supernatural occurrences, while the Jewish-Dutch philosopher Spinoza rejected divine providence in favour of naturalism. The philosopher David Hume developed a sceptical epistemology grounded in empiricism, undermining the metaphysical basis of natural theology.

The French Revolution took atheism and anti-clericalism into the public sphere. There was a restructuring and subordination of clergy with respect to the civil authority of the state. The enforcement of it led to anti-clerical violence and the expulsion of many clergy from France. The Napoleonic era institutionalized the secularization of French society, and exported the revolution and inspired the founding of other republics.

Before the eighteenth-century, the existence of God was so universally accepted in the western world that even the *possibility* of true atheism was questioned. This is the notion that all people believe in God from birth. According to this view atheists were simply in denial. But in the eighteenth-century Paul-Henri Thiry, an advocate, of atheism asserted:

[22] Similar to what is happening in North Korea today.

> The source of man's unhappiness is his ignorance of Nature. The pertinacity with which he clings to blind opinions imbibed in his infancy, which interweave themselves with his existence, the consequent prejudice that warps his mind, that prevents its expansion, that renders him the slave of fiction, appears to doom him to continual error.[23]

In the nineteenth-century, atheists contributed to political and social revolution, facilitating the upheavals of 1848, the Risorgimento in Italy and the growth of an international socialist movement. Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) would greatly influence philosophers such as Engels, Marx and Nietzsche.

Atheism in the twentieth century, particularly in the form of practical atheism, advanced in many societies. Atheistic thought found recognition in a wide variety of other, broader philosophies, such as existentialism, secular humanism, nihilism, anarchism, logical positivism, Marxism, feminism and the general scientific and rationalist movement.

Atheism and Totalitarian Regimes

The philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and the psychologist Sigmund Freud (amongst many others) have argued that belief in God and other religious beliefs are human inventions, created to fulfill various psychological and emotional needs. This view is shared by many Buddhists. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, influenced by the work of Feuerbach, argued that belief in God and religion are social functions, used by those in power to oppress the working class. For such philosophers, psychologists, and social theorists, the concept of God implies the abdication of human reason. It is an abandonment of liberty which has led to the enslavement of mankind.

The twentieth-century also saw the political advancement of atheism, spurred on by interpretation of the works of Marx and Engels. After the Russian Revolution (1917) there was increased freedom for religious minorities, which lasted for a few years. While the Soviet Constitution of 1936 guaranteed freedom to hold religious services, the Soviet state under Stalin's policy of state atheism did not consider education a private matter; it outlawed religious instruction and waged campaigns to persuade people, at times violently, to abandon religion. This spirit of intolerance was the hallmark of all subsequent Soviet regimes and religion was repressed.

---

[23] Paul-Henri Thiry, *Système de la nature* (The System of Nature), (2 volumes; London: 1770), p. 57.

Several other communist states also opposed religion and endorsed state atheism which deemed religion to be subversive. Among these totalitarian atheistic states are China and North Korea.

In the former U.S.S.R. many Christian Orthodox churches, Muslim mosques and Jewish synagogues were shut down. Godless nations have been responsible for aggressive campaigns against religions and religious people. Such atheistic extremism offers sobering lessons from the twentieth century. The exclusion of God, religion and virtue from society leads ultimately to a poorer vision of humanity. The Bolsheviks were inspired by an ideological creed which professed that religion weakened society and resolved to eradicate it. In 1918 Orthodox hierarchy were summarily executed and children were deprived of any religious education outside the home. Increasingly draconian measures were employed to suppress religion. In addition to direct state persecution, the League of the Militant Godless was founded in 1925 and this resulted in churches being vandalized. By 1938, eighty bishops had lost their lives, while thousands of clerics were sent to labour camps.[24]

In 1967 Enver Hoxha's regime conducted a campaign to extinguish religious life in Albania. By the end of that year over two thousand religious buildings were closed or converted to other uses, and religious leaders were imprisoned and executed. Albania was declared to be the world's first atheist country by its leaders, and Article 37 of the Albanian constitution of 1976 stated, 'The State recognizes no religion, and supports and carries out atheistic propaganda in order to implant a scientific materialistic world outlook in people.'[25]

Stalin (Russia), Mao (China), Pol Pot (Cambodia) and a host of others, all committed atrocities in the name of a communist ideology that was explicitly atheistic. Their bloody deeds were perpetrated in an attempt to create a new 'secular' order, a utopia free of the curse of religion. These were mass murders performed with atheism as a central part of their ideological inspiration, they were not mass murders done by people who simply happened to be atheist.

Demographic Distribution

It is difficult to quantify the number of atheists in the world. Respondents to religious-belief polls may define atheism differently. A 2005 survey published in *Encyclopedia Britannica* found that the non-religious made up about 11.9% of the world's population, and atheists about 2.3%.[26]

[24] C.f. Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 41-43.
[25] R. Elsie, *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology, and Folk Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), p. 18.
[26] This 11.9% 'Nonreligious' refers to persons professing no religion, nonbelievers, agnostics, freethinkers, uninterested, or the lapsed religious secularists who are

This figure did not include those who follow atheistic religions, such as some Buddhists.

A November–December 2006 poll published in the *Financial Times* gives rates for the United States and five European countries. The lowest rates of atheism were in the United States at only 4%, while the rates of atheism in the European countries surveyed were considerably higher: Italy (7%), Spain (11%), Great Britain (17%), Germany (20%), and France (32%). The European figures are similar to those of an official European Union survey, which reported that 18% of the E.U. population does not believe in god.[27] Other studies have placed the estimated percentage of atheists, agnostics, and other nonbelievers in a personal god as low as single digits in Poland, Romania and Cyprus. In Scandinavian countries the percentage of the populations describing themselves as atheists is very high (up to 85% in Sweden, 80% in Denmark, 72% in Norway, and 60% in Finland).[28] According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 19% of Australians have 'no religion,' a category that includes atheists.[29] Between 64% and 65% of Japanese are atheists or agnostics.[30]

---

indifferent to all religion but not militantly so. The 2.3% 'Atheist' refers to persons professing atheism, scepticism, disbelief, or irreligion, including the militantly antireligious who are opposed to all religion.

It is difficult (if not impossible) to get statistics for some countries. I am aware that, although there are millions of Christians and millions of people of other faiths in China the vast majority of people are irreligious. Including them in the statistics (if it were possible) would change the percentages significantly. However, is irreligion not an imposed order in China? As religion is licensed and monitored to ensure compliance with strict regulations, much of the Christian church in China is, of necessity, underground and therefore under the radar of accurate/reliable statistical analysis.

[27] *Social values, Science and Technology,* pp. 7–11. This survey was requested by Directorate General Research and coordinated by Directorate General Press and Communication. The fieldwork was conducted January–February 2005 and Published in June 2005. It is available on the internet in PDF at the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf (accessed 1 March 2012).

[28] Phil Zuckerman, 'Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (ed. Michael T. Martin; Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 49–51.

[29] 'Characteristics of the Population,' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

[30] 'Worldwide Adherents of All Religions by Six Continental Areas' in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2005).

Beauty, Music and Love

Is our appreciation of music merely a neurological response to vibrations in the air? Is there nothing sublime in an orchestra's performance of a classical composition? Is there nothing transcendental in our appreciation of beauty? There is no doubt that subjective and cultural factors influence our admiration of beauty, but is it simply cultural conditioning? Admiration of beauty is not the sole domain of poets and painters. Everybody can enjoy the exquisite beauty of a sunset or the rhythmic music of the sea and this must be more than a subjective neurological response to stimuli. As the psalmist said, 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork' (Psalm 19:1). Is our capacity to love just a biological urge to perpetuate our genes? Although one can attempt to make plausible evolutionary explanations for finding beauty in potential sexual partners the experience of beauty is much wider than this category and includes visions of things for which there can be no direct evolutionary advantage (like clouds seen from airplanes, or images from telescopes). We also have a strong intuition that there is a transcendent quality to love.

Although one can attempt to make plausible evolutionary explanations for loving potential sexual partners, ancestors and children, the experience of love is wider than these categories and is experienced as more intense and fundamental than sexual desire or the propagation of ones genes. Love is more than a matter of neurons and chemistry and if it is not irrational to love someone then it should not be seen as irrational to believe in God.

Morality

In Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov,* there is the famous argument that if there is no God, all things are permitted: "But what will become of men then?' I asked him, 'without God and immortal life? All things are lawful then, they can do what they like?" In his Templeton Prize address Alexander Solzhenitsyn said:

> Over a half century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: 'Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.' Since then I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate

> as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: 'Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.'[31]

Normal people are typically aware of actions as being right and wrong. Furthermore, this awareness binds them to certain obligations. A proposition such as, 'torturing babies for fun is wrong' is generally regarded as a statement of fact, a position known as moral realism.[32] The existence of God provides a better explanation for this than various alternatives.

Moral norms exist and have authority beyond the socially mediated. It is, for example, perfectly coherent for someone like William Wilberforce to say 'slavery may be approved by society, but it is morally wrong.' If moral statements such as this have authority then there should be a rational argument why human beings should act in accordance with moral norms, over and above what may be normative in a given society at any particular time in history. Belief that God created human beings with a moral dimension is more reasonable than alternative worldviews that do not offer such explanations. Without such a universal moral code people could act solely in terms of self-interest.

Social organisation strategies in the West (such as systems of jurisprudence) have evolved over time and are based on the transcendent ethical code of the Commandments. If morality is transcendental in nature then theism provides the best explanation for this. Thus the existence of morality provides good grounds for belief in God. Thus theism provides the most intelligible explanation for such moral reality. People, therefore, intuitively understand the difference between right and wrong even if they are not acquainted with a code (oral or written) that expressly commands and/or forbids certain actions. A non-theistic worldview cannot adequately account for universal normative morality.

God's moral commands are not arbitrary. They are an objective standard like true north in the moral compass. It is not that God decides what is right and wrong in the same way that a government decides which side of the street cars should drive on. Rather this moral standard relates to our divinely created human nature. Individuals and societies can deviate from such a standard but it remains as the objective criterion for evaluating right and wrong. God made people in his image, and morality reflects something of the nature of God. Thus morality is best

[31] John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (2d ed., updated and expanded; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010), p.697.

[32] C.f. Richard Boyd, 'How to Be a Moral Realist,' in *Essays on Moral Realism* (ed. G. Sayre-McCord; Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181–228.

explained within a theistic hypothesis. Therefore, if God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. But objective values do exist and thus we must conclude that God exists.

This is Fyodor Dostoevsky's position, as expressed in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov,* of which the first premise is 'If there is no God, everything is permissible.'[33] Moral statements (such as 'honesty is good' and 'slavery is unjust') express propositions that are true. In the absence of consensus in postmodern culture, what is morally acceptable or otherwise is becoming increasingly subjective and relativistic.

Believers need to consider their own role in encouraging atheism through their moral shortcomings and intellectual laziness. Let us love the Lord with all our hearts, souls and minds. Christians must create a safe space for those with intellectual doubts to ask questions and find answers without recrimination. Those who profess faith in God need to reveal something of that divine nature and not conceal it or distort it. But even if all believers did this perfectly well there would still be atheists because atheism is essentially rebellion against God.

The psalmist says, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"' (Psalms 14:1; 53:1). This is not to say that atheists are stupid, rather that they are godless and impious. I suspect that some people adopt an atheistic position because they do not want to subscribe to a system of morality that holds them personally accountable for actions which are proscribed by Scripture. This is not to say that atheists have no morality or virtue. I am sure that there are varying degrees of morality within atheism, as indeed there are within the household of faith.

Belief in God cannot be adequately explained in terms of psychological and sociological hypotheses. Although I believe there is sufficient evidence for the existence of God to warrant sincere investigation, it must also be said that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.[34] Faith is more than a shared neurological and cultural framework based on cognitive processes in the brain. Belief in God is one of the most powerful impulses in human development and a strong impetus to personal transformation and collective progress. There are countless examples of its transformational power, and faith should be

[33] Jean-Paul Sartre made an inverse form of this argument, taking the non-existence of God as a premise and logically deducing the non-existence of objective values. Thus the reality of atheism is that there is no foundation for morality.

[34] C.f. Alister McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism*, (London :SPCK, 2011); Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (London: Pocket Books, 2007); Anthony Flew, *There is a God* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

acknowledged as a constructive force that makes a positive difference in the lives of individuals and communities.

DR. KEIRAN BEVILLE is Pastor of Lee Valley Bible Church in Ballincollig, Co. Cork, Ireland and also serves as visiting professor of Intercultural Studies and Practical Ministry on the faculty of Tyndale Theological Seminary, Badhoevedorp, the Netherlands.