

Introduction

The distinguished author Philip Pullman, writing in *The Independent Education Supplement* in March 2006, complained about the lack of atheistic education in schools, and more particularly about how this general deficiency had allowed young people to be ‘taken in by religious people claiming that science is a faith position no different in kind from Christianity. Science is not a matter of faith, and too many people are being allowed to get away with claiming that it is, and that my ‘belief’ in evolution is a thing of the same kind as their ‘belief’ in miracles. What we need in schools, really, is basic philosophy.’

In one respect Pullman was being unfair. Already by 2006 there had been a discernible shift towards the teaching of Philosophy at school level, not dramatic perhaps but certainly apparent; and this had been going on for some years. By the time of Pullman’s article the old-style Divinity Departments had all but disappeared and along with them the heavy diet of Old Testament and New Testament studies. These had largely been replaced by Departments of Religious Studies, in which biblical work had been relegated to the periphery. Now the focus was on the more culturally relevant study of other world religions and on ethical questions of more general social concern. By the 1980s, however, a still more radical development had occurred. This was the creation of Departments of Religion and Philosophy, of which my own at The Manchester Grammar School was the first.¹ The overt replacement of Theology by Philosophy at Sixth Form level, while strenuously opposed by colleagues of a more evangelical temper, was a move justified by the growth in student numbers. Whereas before it had always been a hard task to convince pupils that Religion was an intellectually demanding subject, no such problems attended an encounter with Plato, Aristotle and Kant. In my own case at Manchester additional staff had to be appointed to meet the need and new courses written. One result was my *Moral Problems* (The Lutterworth Press, 1991), a philosophy coursebook specifically targeting schools and colleges; and the many thousands of copies subsequently sold testify to the growth of an emerging and demanding audience.

In my experience the introduction of Philosophy into the school

¹ See my article: ‘Philosophy at Manchester Grammar School’, *Cogito*, Vol.3, No.1, 1989, pp.72-76.

curriculum, with the ensuing acquisition of analytical techniques, had a deleterious effect on how religious belief was viewed. Religion still rightly held an important place within the syllabus – and still does – but the traditional arguments for theistic belief no longer held sway within the classroom. Now exposed to the likes of Hume, Russell, Ayer, Nietzsche and Sartre – all of whom became specific topics within the newly-designed examinations – it was small wonder that students became altogether more critical. So the pendulum began to swing against the case for God.

And into this mix must be added a still more potent factor. Today atheism receives an unparalleled degree of publicity, unknown before. Television reveals the agnostic sympathies of David Attenborough as he provides evidence of evolution, and the militant atheism of Richard Dawkins, the most prominent of the neo-Darwinians, seems to be almost constantly on view. The internet, too, has played its part in providing easy access to a vast library of atheistic literature. Here, in the many dedicated websites, one can see how international the debate about God has become – and how acrimonious. The divisions appear stark and unbridgeable. On one side of the divide stand atheists like Michael Martin, Victor Stenger and Daniel Dennett, attacking for all they are worth, and on the other believers like William Lane Craig and Alister McGrath, who, far from digging into defensive positions, have mounted attacks of their own.

As I have just indicated, and as Pullman's earlier remarks made clear, much of this debate focuses on the work of Charles Darwin (1809-1882). One can see why. For Attenborough and Dawkins and their many supporters, the theory of natural selection is not a 'theory' but a 'fact' – or at least as near to a scientific truth as we are ever likely to discover, equal to the discoveries of Galileo, Newton and Einstein. With credentials such as these, it would be foolish not to accept that our world is as evolution depicts it: haphazard, barbaric, bloodthirsty and entirely blind to the sufferings of the innocent creatures caught up in its merciless web. It is at this point that the theological dilemma emerges. For how can this square with the notion of a benevolent deity? How, when viewing such terrors as these, can anyone of sense retain any belief at all in an omnipotent being: in a deity, who could have created a very different world had he felt so inclined, but who, for reasons best known to himself, chose the cruel one we inhabit? Strictly speaking, this may not be an argument against God's existence; but it is certainly an argument against his character. This is sufficient for the atheist. For why worship a God as pitiless and impassive as this?

Such has been this concentration on Darwin by the so-called 'new atheists' that the 'old atheists' – by which I mean the historic philosophical atheists – have been pushed into the background and largely ignored. Although we may certainly deplore this from a purely literary point of view, their omission from the frontline of atheism has also immeasurably weakened the struggle against the forces of belief. For, truth to tell, it is not among the scientists that the great arguments against God are to be found but among the philosophers. It is here, indeed, that the

principal landmarks in the history of atheism are to be found, with a venerable tradition of its own, extending back to the time of the ancient Greeks. The arguments here deployed are much tougher targets and the religious camp is, understandably, less eager to take them on. Take a look, for example, at McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London, Rider, 2004). With a subtitle such as this, one may be tempted to conclude that McGrath is orbiting a different planet from our own; but open its pages and one discovers, with jaw-dropping amazement, that his case is to be upheld without any consideration whatsoever of the work of David Hume (1711-1776). This, one begins to suspect, is no mere oversight but a tactical withdrawal, given that Hume is, by common consent, the architect of the most damaging philosophical critique of religious rationality ever devised. But Hume cannot be so easily sidelined and has to be taken on if the case for theism is to have any credibility.

Another philosopher commonly avoided, in this case by both believer and non-believer, is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). This is, admittedly, much more understandable. Nietzsche is an intrinsically difficult author – his poetic flights of fancy often obscuring his philosophical agenda – and he represents an alternative brand of atheism, one far removed from the more familiar Anglo-Saxon mainstream of empiricism and its rejection of religion because lacking evidence. Nietzsche is a very different animal: he cares no one jot about whether faith has or has not any evidential support and would certainly dismiss the current debates on the issue as entirely sterile – in that respect he would regard the work of Dawkins as an intellectual cul-de-sac. This is because, for Nietzsche, 'God is dead' and the game is already up. Consequently it is no longer worth bothering about why this death occurred – admittedly the most singular event in the entire history of humankind – because God's obituaries have already been written, that book is closed, and we must now move on. So however much believers may wish things were different, with the old verities still in place, the landscape has been utterly transformed and changed forever; and the result is that we are now faced with an entirely new set of problems, different from anything encountered before. For now it is not so much a question of asking why God died but of examining the impact of his death; of what lies ahead for human beings, both culturally, morally and psychologically, once this tremendous fact – that there is no God – has finally sunk in. As we shall discover, Nietzsche is, in this respect, the analyst *par excellence* of the post-theistic world – a world that an increasing number of us recognize as our own – and to that extent he remains one of the most potent forces in the whole arsenal of atheism to whom authors of the calibre of Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus and, more recently, Michel Onfray, freely acknowledge their debt.

Hume and Nietzsche stand alongside many other philosophers discussed in *Atheism for Beginners*. In this my intention is as I have already indicated:

to bring the philosophical case against God to the fore and thereby to reveal the strength of its arguments and the wonderful richness of its literature. In doing so, I have drawn extensively upon two previous books of mine: *The Atheist's Creed* (2010, hereafter cited as *TAC*) and *The Atheist's Primer* (2012, hereafter cited as *TAP*), both published by The Lutterworth Press. I am also very grateful to Routledge for allowing me to make considerable use of my *Freud and Jung on Religion* and *The Question of God*, published in 1997 and 2001.

Atheism for Beginners, although having a great deal in common with *TAC* and *TAP*, is nevertheless a rather different kind of book, as I shall now explain. *TAP* is a stripped-down version of *TAC*: it omits entirely the primary source material – the original texts drawn from the ancient Greeks to the present-day – as well as the extensive range of biographical and bibliographical information accompanying those texts. While this material provided a useful scholarly guide to the literature, it was felt to be rather surplus to requirements for a more general readership – and the result was *TAP*.

Atheism for Beginners is like neither of these two books. For while there are certain unavoidable overlaps – the sections on Nietzsche, Marx and Freud remain substantially unchanged – the specific intention has been to design a *coursebook* and so to focus very much on the student-teacher dynamic, at what actually goes on as the teacher or instructor guides a class through the sometimes tortuous processes of philosophy. With that in mind, I have tried to be as helpful as possible to both parties. The format will be familiar to those already acquainted with my *Moral Problems*. The main narrative is frequently interrupted by Exercises to aid comprehension, signposts are given in the margins as the discussion proceeds, and essay questions appear at the end of each chapter, together with a Guide to Further Reading. I have also added an Appendix in which I give fourteen short biographies of prominent figures in the history of atheism. Although I have tried to keep philosophical jargon to an absolute minimum, some terms are unavoidable. Accordingly, the book concludes with a Glossary, which I hope will be useful. As with *TAC* and *TAP*, I begin the book with my own 'Atheist's Creed'. *Atheism for Beginners* is, as far as I know, the first book of its kind in this format, with this apparatus, and having this particular audience in mind.

I am happy to report that it is the sixth book I have published with The Lutterworth Press. My association with this famous publishing house now extends to well over two decades. I must therefore sincerely thank its Managing Director, Adrian Brink, for his continuing support and friendship. I am also grateful to my editor, Bethany Churchard, who has made the preparation of this volume an entirely painless and almost pleasurable process.

Michael Palmer