

Introduction

Atheism is currently enjoying the limelight, both in academic circles and in the popular press. The so-called 'new atheists' are in vogue, and books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006), Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (2004) and his *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006) and the two volumes published in 2007 by the late Christopher Hitchens – *God is not Great* and his wide-ranging anthology *The Portable Atheist* – have caught the public imagination. Unsurprisingly, believers have not been slow to enter the lists. Alister McGrath has countered with his *The Twilight of Atheism* (2004) and with two books on Dawkins – *Dawkin's God* (2004) and *The Dawkins Delusion* (2007); and mention should also be made of Keith Ward's *Is Religion Dangerous?* (2006) and Francis Collins' *The Language of God* (2006), the last-named being subtitled 'A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief,' which gives a clear indication of its general thrust. Nor does it take much time on the internet to see how international this debate has become and how acrimonious.

At the centre of this controversy stands the well-worn debate between science and religion, a debate that highlights the differing methods by which each discipline seeks to obtain knowledge. The charge levelled against religion is that faith never places itself within the cold light of empirical confirmation, and so is free to wander off unhindered into its own private world of fantastical delusions; and the charge against the scientist is that the limitation of knowledge to only that which may be observed and verified is a restriction that cannot be sustained: that scientific truth can lay no claims to infallibility and that it straightjackets the scope of our experiences, which may include, after all, not just religious experiences but also moral, aesthetic and psychological experiences as well, none of which can be easily confirmed or refuted solely by reference to observed facts and the evidence of the senses.

This old controversy between science and orthodoxy has been considerably sharpened, however, by the emergence of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) as the central protagonist. For Dawkins and his allies, Darwin's achievement is on a par with those of Galileo, Newton and Einstein, and the evolutionary process that he unravelled is as near

to a scientific fact as we are ever likely to discover. But the theory of natural selection that Darwin presents is one of unparalleled barbarity, impersonal and haphazard in form and subject only to the vagaries of environment; and this picture, so the neo-Darwinians contend, is totally at variance with any notion of an omnipotent, benevolent and purposive deity, of a loving God who cares for his creatures but who is yet quite prepared to subject them to a life of unremitting brutality and hardship. To put the matter more strongly: if Darwin is right, then it would appear that we have here an irreducible *incompatibility* between scientific evidence and religious belief which no amount of theological ingenuity can resolve. Chance cannot accommodate design and cruelty cannot accommodate benevolence, at least not on this scale, on the scale of omnipotence, when presumably other options were available to God and the creation of a happier and less barbaric world a real possibility. The only rational conclusion to draw from this, so the argument runs, is that the theistic case should be jettisoned altogether.

These are important matters and I shall refer to them again. There is, however, one further feature of the current debate to notice. With Darwin centre stage, and given the scientific backgrounds of most parties to the dispute, it is entirely understandable that arguments of a more overtly *philosophical* stamp should remain in the background; and this despite the fact that it is these which, by and large, have provided the principal landmarks in the history of atheism. This has produced some puzzling, and at times exasperating, results, and they are to be seen on both sides of the dispute. If we look again at McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism*, with its subheading 'The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World', we notice with some astonishment that this argument is sustained without any consideration whatsoever of the work of David Hume (1711-1776) – a quite extraordinary omission, given that Hume is, by common consent, the architect of the most damaging philosophical critique of theistic rationality ever devised. But whereas Hume is mentioned just twice in passing, fourteen pages are devoted to Madalyn Murray O'Hair (1919-1995), the founder of *American Atheists*, and to her exposure as a 'crude and abusive spirit'.¹ I think that McGrath establishes his point: O'Hair was probably unpleasant – a conclusion from which we may infer that 'Some atheists are unpleasant'. But quite where this gets us is hard to see. For atheists, after all, have no monopoly of unpleasantness.

But similar omissions are evident on the other side. What McGrath includes, some atheists exclude. The most startling omission here is of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who hardly gets a mention from any of the authors I have so far cited. This is very strange, and its strangeness

1 *Ibid.*, New York & London, Galilee & Doubleday, 2006, p.255.

lies in the fact that what has here been excluded remains perhaps the most potent force within the whole arsenal of continental atheism and indeed provides an entirely different brand of atheism from that found within, say, the tradition of British empiricism. Nietzsche is unconcerned about discussions to do with whether belief has or has not any evidential support – and to that extent he would regard the work of Dawkins as an intellectual cul-de-sac – and is much more concerned with questions to do with the ‘death of God’, with the moral and psychological implications for human beings once this tremendous fact – that there is no God – has been accepted. Nietzsche’s influence, which I shall discuss later at some length, also provides an important corrective to the impression, so easily gained, that the ‘new atheism’ is exclusively an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. But such is not the case, as is evidenced by the French philosopher Michel Onfray’s hair-raising polemic *In Defence of Atheism* (2007), which is set quite deliberately within a Nietzschean mould.

My intention, then, is to bring some of these important philosophical arguments to the fore, and to provide a selective overview of the extraordinary richness of the atheistic literature, which extends from the time of the ancient Greeks down to our own day. Among the many authors cited there are many familiar and unfamiliar names, with four authors singled out for more extended treatment: David Hume, Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. It goes without saying that for each of their arguments there is a theistic response, but to include them as well would have made this a very big book indeed – although I should add in defence that many of these counter-arguments are presented in the two volumes of my *The Philosophy of Religion* (Lutterworth, 2008, and published by Viking Press of Minneapolis in one volume, 2010). I am also grateful to the publishers, Routledge, for giving me permission to make extensive use of two other publications of mine – *Freud and Jung on Religion* (1997) and *The Question of God* (2001).

The Atheist’s Primer is an abridgement of my *The Atheist’s Creed* (2010), omitting entirely the primary source material – original texts drawn from the time of the Ancient Greeks to the present-day – and the extensive range of biographical and bibliographical information accompanying those texts. While I hope this material provided a useful scholarly guide to the literature, it was felt to be rather surplus to requirements for a more general readership. At any rate, all that has now been jettisoned; and I have retained only my Introductions, for the most part unchanged, and a slightly modified Guide to Further Reading that now stands at the end of the book. The result is well under half the original length, requiring, as before, no specialist knowledge of philosophy, with any unavoidable philosophical jargon kept down to an absolute minimum.

I am grateful to my friend, Paul Keyte, Headmaster, for pointing out some infelicities in the original edition and these have now been corrected. I am also grateful to the editor of this volume, Oliver Barham, and to Adrian Brink, the Managing Director of The Lutterworth Press, for their encouragement and advice. It is worth recording that my connection with The Lutterworth Press at Cambridge now reaches back to 1991, with the publication of my *Moral Problems*, and I am pleased to record that it has been an entirely amicable association from that day to this. The fact that The Lutterworth Press is one of the oldest Christian publishing houses in the world, which started life in 1799 as The Religious Tract Society, makes its publication of *The Atheist's Creed* and *The Atheist's Primer* a further indication, if ever one was needed, of the remarkable breadth of its interests.

The Atheist's Creed began with my own opening statement, fashioned like a creed; and this I have retained for *The Atheist's Primer*. I am well aware that this may create difficulties. Atheism itself is not all of a piece, and some atheists will claim that theirs is not a belief-system at all but a matter of demonstrable fact. I realize also that in composition my creed will appear to some far too bland, lacking any kind of rhetorical resonance, such as we find in the familiar creeds of the liturgy. But this is quite intentional. To each proposition of my creed could be added innumerable sub-clauses: about the nature of the universe, the complexities of our evolving world, the autonomy of individuals, and so on; but all these I have avoided, partly through fear of succumbing to platitudinous overload, and partly because I wanted to keep to the strictest and least controversial minimum, providing only the barest outline of atheism's landscape and of what I take to be its core beliefs.

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