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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbet-01.php

OBSERVATIONS ON NEW ATHEISM

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Anything which calls itself or is called ‘new’ in our day suffers from a double disadvantage. Firstly, novelty soon wears off and the trademark ‘new’ soon appears to more fittingly and demeaningly designated ‘old’. Secondly, because its novelty passes, it is easily supposed that its relevance and significance pass as well, when it comes to the world of ideas. This latter point should make us vigilant. What it dubbed ‘new’ may be new because it breaks the social and cultural surface in a way it had not before, but has erupted from soil long prepared and is destined to scatter its matter far abroad and long after it has lost its novelty status. So it surely is with new atheism.¹

ORIENTATION

In 2004, Alister McGrath published *The Twilight of Atheism*, in which he contended that ‘the sun has begun to set’ on an empire of the mind, namely, the empire of atheism. Atheism is a phenomenon which ‘seems to have lost so much of its potency in recent years...’, a ‘tidal wave... gradually receding’.² These words have the ring of misplaced optimism. There are social conditions under which the cultural power of ideas can grow even as their intellectual force diminishes, just as Hellenistic culture could expand even as the Greek (Macedonian) empire declined centuries before Christ. If there ever was an epoch when intellectual strength was a condition of cultural success and intellectual weakness a guarantor of cultural marginalization, it is certainly not ours.

¹ Thomas Carlyle gave striking expression to the principle of how we might read the relation of intellectual to social history: ‘While the unspeakable confusion is every where weltering within, and through so many cracks in the surface sulphur-smoke is issuing, the question arises: Through what crevice will the main Explosion carry itself? Through which of the old craters or chimneys; or must it, at once, form a new crater for itself? In every Society are such chimneys, are Institutions serving as such...’. *History of the French Revolution* (London, Melbourne, Toronto: Ward, Lock & Co., 1891), p. 48.

² Sub-titled, *The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider, 2004), pp. xi-xii; 3.

Judged by the quality of its literature, what has come to be called 'new atheist' thinking is usually intellectually unimpressive. Much of it invites psychological explanation more than argumentative refutation. This is illustrated, for example, by the way in which Scripture is handled. According to Sam Harris, 'Jesus seems to have suggested, in John 15:6, further [i.e., beyond the Old Testament] refinements to the practice of killing heretics and unbelievers'.³ He says this with a straight face. Richard Dawkins, eager to show that we do not, in practice, 'get our morals from scripture'—and that this is just as well—cites the accounts of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis and the rape of the Levite's concubine in Judges in support of his contention.⁴ It is hard to disagree with Tina Beattie's conclusion, picking up a remark made by Christopher Hitchens in *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, that '[o]ne cannot possibly have an intelligent debate with this kind of polemic, for Hitchens is so defiantly obtuse in his representation of Scripture and its role in the Christian life that there is no point of entry into a sensible and informed discussion'.⁵ Ignorance need not, of itself, be a problem, where the ignorant are willing to learn. However, it is hard to rustle up the confidence that such new atheist willingness is abroad. In one respect, unwillingness is understandable: how many of us who find a world-view profoundly distasteful will spend time dispassionately studying and sympathetically trying to understand the texts which underlie it?

Should we, then, be contemptuous and dismissive of new atheism? Certainly not. Quite generally, contempt has no place in life and there are at least two important reasons for not dismissing this phenomenon. Firstly, it is influential. Secondly, there are arguments for atheism which, even if not well formulated (as a rule) in the most prominent new atheist literature, have long deserved intellectual consideration. Of course, questions legitimately arise about both the point and the method of an apologetic response to new atheism in a world of sound-bites, blogs, and atheist summer camps for school-children. Even those who generally accord to apologetic reason an important place in such a world may doubt its usefulness in the case of new atheism. However, without either adopting a particular view of apologetics or apologetic method, three reasons may be adduced for taking new atheism with apologetic seriousness.

³ Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 82.

⁴ *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), p. 283; see pp. 269–83.

⁵ T. Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007), p. 53.

Firstly, apologetic engagement is worth it for the sake of the one in a thousand who might listen and there are spaces and cultures where the audience is larger than that.⁶ Secondly, new atheists are not immune from the possibility of a change of mind. Last, but not least, as Christians in a pluralist world we should constantly be thinking about the grounds and nature of our own beliefs. If theology is faith thoroughly seeking understanding, some of us will not espy a wide or fixed gulf between theology and apologetics. All this holds good even as we acknowledge that the times in which we live lend themselves to massively sustained and illusory detachment from reality. In thinking that she saw that the tree of good and evil was desirable for gaining wisdom, Eve succumbed to illusion. Sustained illusion may be classified as a species of insanity. Nevertheless, reasoning has its place.

Is there such a thing as genuine atheism? Many conclude that there is not, particularly on the basis of Paul's observations in Romans 1:19-20 which appear to declare God's existence to be evident, whatever human suppression and distortion accomplish. It is certainly true that new atheists often come over as theists who intensely dislike God. Nonetheless, while I do not wish to interpret Romans 1 dogmatically, we must be cautious. The chapter as a whole portrays a dynamic: as humans persist in rejection, so God hands them over to concomitant states and consequences. This invites the question of whether Paul is committed to the claim that cultures can *never* degenerate and decay to a point where there is genuine atheism. We have to attend to the testimony of converts from atheism here. All that I assume in what follows is that, whatever we conclude on this matter, it is in order to speak in terms of 'atheism'. In doing so, we note that atheists sometimes designate themselves more positively as 'humanists'.⁷

If we aspire to capture new atheism in a single formula, the sub-title of the work by Sam Harris cited earlier helps us: *Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*. While the logical sequence is not mapped out in the following way, the relevant claims can be schematically rendered thus: (a) religion is irrational; (b) irrationality breeds dogmatism; (c) dogmatism breeds intolerance; (d) intolerance breeds violence. That last proposition makes the attack on religious irrationality socially vital and urgent.

⁶ This figure is lifted from Ecclesiastes 7: 28, a rather obscure text. Its observation on women calls to mind Beattie's judgement that the debate surrounding new atheism is 'testosterone-charged', *The New Atheists*, p. 10.

⁷ See, e.g., Peter Cave, *Humanism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

A good deal of new atheist passion has been fuelled by the conviction that religion is a—even, you sometimes get the impression, ‘the’—cause of war. In response, Christians will doubtless (a) urge that the general category of ‘religion’ can be unhelpful; (b) emphasize that, however we read the Old Testament accounts of war and slaughter, Jesus Christ inaugurates a new dispensation and (c) draw attention to the violence perpetrated by atheist states precisely in the name of irreligion. All this needs to be said; however, the scene may now be changing a little. It is hard to say, but if statements by Richard Dawkins widely reported earlier this year are anything to go by, there may now be a greater willingness than there was some years ago to make religious distinctions between Islam and Christianity in relation to violence.⁸ Whatever the significance of this concession, it is sobering to read J.C. Ryle’s comment on Jesus’ rebuke to James and John when they entertained the thought of fire from heaven destroying Samaritan villages (Luke 9:54): ‘No saying of our Lord’s, perhaps, has been so totally overlooked by Christ’s church as this one. Nothing can be imagined more contrary to Christ’s will than the religious wars and persecutions which disgrace the pages of church history.’⁹

We should welcome the gain in instilling into popular consciousness the assurance that firm Christian conviction is no recipe for war. Yet, the gain must not be exaggerated. The penultimate step in the sequence of atheist reasoning which I, perhaps artificially, formalized above remains decisive: Christianity is socially intolerant. Social oppression remains even if military aggression fades. War is just the contingent expression of a perverse social mentality. The mentality is the problem.

In 1864, Nietzsche remarked that ‘the ice-filled stream of the Middle Ages...has begun to thaw and is rushing on with devastating power. Ice floe is piled upon ice floe, all shores are being flooded and threatened.’¹⁰ Later, he came up with his celebrated and dramatic expression of the belief that God was dead and, in that same work, he also said that we must get rid of God’s shadow.¹¹ Christian morality is the shadow. New atheism is apparently founded on the claim that science has dislodged religious

⁸ According to reports on the web, Dawkins apparently said that Christianity might be a bulwark against something worse. In noting this, I am not assuming anything about Islam one way or another.

⁹ J.C. Ryle, *Luke* (Wheaton, Illinois/Nottingham: Crossway, 1997) p. 133.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Schopenhauer As Educator’, in *Unfashionable Observations*, tr. by Richard Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 200.

¹¹ ‘After Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow.’ Frie-

belief, but is Christian morality equally as offensive or even more offensive to it than is epistemological folly? Without trying to ascribe relative weights to various causes of offence, we turn now to the matter of morality.

MORALITY

‘[W]ho wishes that there was a permanent, unalterable celestial despotism that subjected us to continual surveillance and could convict us of thought-crime and who regarded us as its private property even after we died?’ Thus, the late and prominent new atheist, Christopher Hitchens.¹² Supposing that we answered the question like this: ‘Well, I wish it. All my thoughts are humble and generous, pure and kind. I should be disappointed if no one were there to observe all this. Further, I am more than happy to be his private property at death, because that is the only way I shall make it to the new earth and earthly virtue receive its immortal reward.’ This caricature of a response points to what underlies Hitchens’ question. It is not so much the formal quality of divine omniscience that perturbs the new atheist as the material quality of what omniscience perceives. Nietzsche was agonizingly honest: God ‘*had* to die: he saw with eyes that saw *everything*—he saw the depths and grounds of the human, all its veiled disgrace and ugliness. His pity knew no shame: he crawled into my filthiest corner.’¹³ Omniscience decked out in pity or compassion does not mollify Nietzsche; it compounds his revulsion. Nothing so antagonized him about Christianity as its moral teaching and it is hard to read leading new atheist writings without suspecting that it is much the same here.

Just as it is not the formal quality of omniscience, so it is not God’s purely formal quality as a transcendent lawgiver, robbing us of dignified, rationally-based morality, that is the real trouble. Supposing Christians believed that there was certainly, even necessarily, a God who gave the moral law, its exhaustive content being that we should do what we liked in life as long as we did all that we could to avoid hurting others. Would such a belief provoke spirited atheistic disbelief? Scarcely. It has been claimed

drich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by Bernard Williams, tr. by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 109.

¹² Quoted in Peter S. Williams, *A Sceptic’s Guide to Atheism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), p. 105. I heartily recommend this volume.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, tr. Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), § 4.7, p. 232. Cf. the new atheist, Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p. 227.

that much in the moral substance of Christianity is agreeable to new atheists, whose protest is principally that this substance is wrongly grounded in revelation rather than reason.¹⁴ This is an exaggeration. Nothing is more prominent in new atheist criticisms of Christian morality than substantive issues surrounding sexual morality.¹⁵ When Grayling, in the very first page of his 'Introduction', refers to 'individuals struggling with feelings of sinfulness because of perfectly natural desires', this is clearly what he has in mind.¹⁶

New atheists are not moral relativists and they sometimes not only advocate universal moral truths but also seek to ground them in science.¹⁷ Our response to them at this point must be cautious. Two familiar claims bear mention. The first is that there is a distinction between facts and values such that a moral 'ought' cannot be derived from a factual 'is'. If that is the case, any ambition to derive values from science is misplaced. The second is that the Enlightenment project to establish a universal rational morality is misguided. It wrongly accords normative status to a culturally specific rationality. We may sympathize with both these objections but sympathize also with at least elements of what someone like Sam Harris is up to. On the first point, we surely wish that all eyes would see the unity of fact and value, e.g., the biological fact of the unborn child's dependence on the mother and the value of her loving care or the physical fact of human or animal suffering and the value of being relieved of it.¹⁸ On the second, we long for universal consensus on the good and the evil, the right and the wrong, and if reason could sometimes get us there, we could but rejoice. One argument often deployed against atheism old and new is that it is impossible to account for moral right and wrong, i.e., for the proper objectivity of our moral sense, unless there is a divine

¹⁴ Craig Hovey, *What Makes Us Moral? Science, Religion, and the Shaping of the Moral Landscape: A Christian Response to Sam Harris* (London: SPCK, 2012), pp. xiv, 73.

¹⁵ See Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (London: Atlantic, 2007), pp. 3-4. Note what Sam Harris takes to be the nature of Jesus' eschatological judgment of humans: *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (London: Transworld, 2012), p. 215. See Williams, *A Sceptic's Guide*, pp. 106-8.

¹⁶ A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument*, 1. See the contextually forceful chapter on 'Marzipan' in Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (New York etc: Scholastic Press, 2000), the third volume of the trilogy titled: *His Dark Materials*.

¹⁷ On the blurb of Sam Harris' book, *The Moral Landscape*, Richard Dawkins intimates that the author persuaded him on that score.

¹⁸ Admittedly I both make this point loosely and only loosely connect it with, e.g., Sam Harris' approach.

author and lawgiver. This contention has had a long run under the title: 'The moral argument for the existence of God'. I am not commenting here on its validity or force. However, if some of the substantive content of Christian morality is objectionable, the argument that God is necessary to explain morality will not get far off the ground as far as new atheists are concerned, holding, as they do, that some obnoxious material goods may be packed in that basket labelled 'morality'.

In considering the new atheist critique of Christian morality, we cannot play down the foundational truths of God's right to command and our innate human desire to want our own way. At the end of the eighteenth century, Schleiermacher sought to inculcate in the cultured despisers of religion a taste for the infinite, but the theological infinite repels new atheists.¹⁹ 'What decides against Christianity now is our taste—not our reasons', said Nietzsche three-quarters of a century after Schleiermacher's *Speeches* and while new atheists will disagree with the second, they will agree with the first of his propositions.²⁰ We should not stereotype the dispositions of contemporary new atheists. The literature, however, is characteristically militant. Bearing this in mind, we might think about morality in at least two ways which we are liable to neglect more than we should.

The first is in the form of wisdom. In this connection, the book of Proverbs is instructive. It looks at action in terms of wisdom, prudence and consequences, though not only in these terms. Consider the vexed, emotive and sensitive subject of sexual morality. Sam Harris despises the thought of a creator of the universe who is concerned about hem-lines.²¹ So let us imagine the caring atheist father—let us call him 'Sam'—of a thirteen-year old daughter who is going out to a weekend party in what he regards as an excessively short dress. He is very worried lest she become sexually active. His pleas that she wears something less suggestive fall on deaf ears. Finally, resolute atheist though he is, knowing that she has a religious friend going to the same party, he appeals to his daughter to emulate the dress-sense which he assumes will be that of her more modest religious friend. His daughter answers: 'She'll be dressed much the same as me, Dad, because she said that God is not concerned about hem-lines.' Sam none-too quietly curses such a God.

The second is in terms of beauty. '...The beautiful', said Kant, 'is the symbol of the morally good' and, if we may domesticate its meaning a

¹⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, tr.. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁰ *The Gay Science*, 3, p. 132.

²¹ *The End of Faith*, p. 46.

little, this is an important word for those of us who stand in a Christian tradition where talk of truth and goodness have usually eclipsed talk of beauty.²² Beauty may be regarded not only as something alongside truth and goodness but (loosely speaking) as a quality of truth and goodness. If our selfishness or culture did not blind us, we should see and feel the evil all around us all the time. An encounter with manifest evil has a singular capacity to open people up to reality. An atheist, like a religious believer, may encounter a moral ugliness so extreme that it cannot simply be described in those terms; rather, it must be named as evil. Talk of God as holy and good should then take on new meaning. The idea of God is the idea of a being who is the antithesis of evil. This is the beauty of holiness. It ought not to repel but to deeply attract anyone who has encountered evil.

Morality is rooted in God's holy goodness. Because we are fallen, we experience moral law as an imposition, but, in fact, it enshrines a revelation of what goes with the grain of our humanity, not an attack on it. When we describe the law of the nature of any being, animate or inanimate, we are not describing something imposed upon it; we are describing its innate constitution. Its constitution only limits any being because all existing entities are 'limited'; an indeterminate form of existence would not be anything at all. Morality, which seems to limit humans, actually helps to give them their definition.

If God's moral commands inform us, in the form of an imperative, of the law proper to our nature, we can understand the reason for the prohibition in Eden.²³ The prohibition that Adam and Eve should eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was neither an arbitrary test nor a divine temptation. It was informative. Since there exists a sphere which humans are capable of entering, they need to be told about it and told not to enter it. We prohibit children from touching fire because it is the law of fire to burn and this imperative arises from the indicative fact of how the body is constituted. We do not prohibit just for the sake of prohibiting, still less of tempting.

To believe that morality has a transcendent source should be no threat to reason. Reason itself might convince me that morality has an (ontologically or epistemologically) transcendent source. I am summoned to moral action in some important spheres of my life long before I have the capacity to think things through, even if I confidently reckon that my

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, tr. by J. H. Bernard (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1951), p. 198.

²³ It is not suggested that all God's commandments must be understood in this way.

reason is functioning properly. It is entirely rational to trust a transcendent source of instruction, conveying moral truth to me long before I can reason anything out. If only new atheists could see that this source is a transcendent goodness!

SCIENCE

New atheists allege that a scientific world-view eliminates the possibility of religious, certainly of theistic, truth. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, our scientific world-view is both the product and exemplifies the operation of rational principles of thought and enquiry, whereas religion is not only a matter of blind and ungrounded faith, but even makes a virtue of it. Secondly, it is Darwinian or neo-Darwinian and this is taken to eliminate the postulate of a Creator and creation. Proper exploration of this second reason would lead us into areas both too detailed and too contentious to discuss in this article, so I confine myself to just two comments on it.

Firstly, new atheists are clueless in connection with the Christian understanding of God.²⁴ Richard Dawkins claims that, since the evolutionary process is one where biological simplicities mutate into greater complexities, then, if there were a God, he would have to emerge at the end of and could not initiate the process, since he transcends the world in terms of his complexity.²⁵ In response, some will invoke the classical tradition of divine simplicity. However, it is not necessary and may not be productive to do so; arguably, all we need to note is the absence on the part of new atheists of any kind of conceptual or imaginative grip on the notion of a being who is not material and not to be understood in material categories.²⁶ What accounts for this intellectual failure may not be easy to pinpoint and Paul Holmer's observation of almost forty years ago remains apt: '[J]ust what religious unbelief is among the educated today is... difficult to say. Exactly what the breakdown of concepts has to do with it is a very complicated matter.'²⁷ A. C. Grayling suggests that we substitute the name 'Fred' or the description 'the supreme egg' for 'God' in such sentences as 'God created the universe' or 'God forbids homosexual acts' to demonstrate that '[t]here is no greater explanatory power or meaning

²⁴ We could refer to 'theism' rather than Christianity, but I leave it to the reader to enlarge, where appropriate, the application of what I say about Christianity.

²⁵ *The God Delusion*, chapter 4.

²⁶ In his *Confessions*, Augustine records his pre-Christian struggle to make sense of the notion of a spiritual substance.

²⁷ Paul Holmer, *A Grammar of Faith* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 125.

if one puts 'god', 'God' or 'the supreme being' in place of 'Fred' or 'the supreme egg'.²⁸ I am reminded of the old schoolboy joke: 'What's the difference between an elephant and a mail-box?' 'I don't know.' 'In that case, I wouldn't trust you to post a letter.' We cannot trust Dawkins and Grayling when they post words on God if they really do not detect any relevant difference between God and a supreme egg.

Secondly, if we step away from the question of specifically biological evolution to the general question of cosmic origins, we note the current consensus amongst astrophysicists that, if we are operating with a linear notion of time, the universe must have had its beginning in time and cannot have been eternal in the sense of time extending unendingly backwards. This invites attention to cosmological arguments which purport to show that the causal nexus of the cosmos is inexplicable without reference to a unique and divine creative causality. Without committing myself one way or another either to the following argument or to any version of the cosmological argument, I once asked a militantly atheistic scientist what he made of the following. '(1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause; (2) the universe began to exist; (3) therefore, the universe has (or had) a cause.'²⁹ In a surprisingly polite letter, he agreed that the a-causal inception of the universe presented him with a problem but complained that religious believers were so irrational that they did not even worry their heads about such things. A little knowledge of intellectual history would have muted his complaint. This returns us to the first of the two considerations mentioned at the beginning of this article: the perception that religion is irrational.

The turn against Christianity in the West can be described from many angles, so here we pick out just one factor. The religious strife which characterized sixteenth century Europe and which included magisterial Protestant antagonism towards Anabaptists as well as Catholic-Protestant conflict, rumbled on until a vital phase of it culminated in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which concluded the Thirty Years War. Simultaneously, the sixteenth century witnessed the printing of works of classical Greco-Roman Scepticism.³⁰ In an Europe where adherents of diverse Christian confessions regarded themselves as right and everybody else as wrong—I deliberately exaggerate—the challenge offered by ancient Sceptics to confident knowledge-claims had social and not just philosophical potency. In the same epoch, a promising alternative source of knowledge

²⁸ *The God Argument*, pp. 24-25.

²⁹ This is the *kalām* cosmological argument.

³⁰ See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1979).

was making headway: science. Whatever its original status, in time, science came to be widely perceived as an epistemic and social alternative to religious belief. Science trades in the wares of observation and demonstration, whereas religion enjoys commerce in opinion and faith. Science is the paradigm of rationality, religion of credulity. So it seemed.

It is easy to dislodge these suppositions. New atheists characteristically misunderstand both reason and faith. Secular critics of the claims of reason, as these are advanced by new atheists, are not wanting, whether we think of Nietzsche's conviction that philosophy is driven by moral aims and that reason is instrumental in that purpose or of the postmodernist line that there is no such thing as universal, neutral, undifferentiated and normative Reason.³¹ More congenial to new atheists than either of these is the figure of John Locke, the 'intellectual ruler of the eighteenth century'.³² Locke let reason loose with no holds barred; no religious veto reined it in.³³ Yet, the result was reason's discovery of its own severe limitations.

In the New Testament, faith is grounded in three of our five familiar empirical senses: sight, hearing and touch (1 John 1:1). Our inability to investigate the biblical witness directly is not due to the fact that Scripture seals faith off from any form of investigation as a matter of principle. It is because, centuries on, we are removed from the scene as a matter of practice. Where Jesus told Thomas that those who have believed without seeing are blessed, Richard Dawkins judged Thomas 'the only really admirable member of the twelve apostles' because he insisted on evidence.³⁴ However, Jesus was here contrasting faith with our own sight, not with the sight of others, which is the foundation of apostolic testimony. Members of a jury who insisted that, on principle, they would not believe any testimony unless they had themselves seen the alleged incidents, would not be hailed as heroes of unswerving rationality. True, the testimony to the resurrection is remarkable in a way different from standard court-room testimony, but it was not as though Thomas did not share the theistic presuppositions of his comrades or had any reason to think either

³¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil/On the Genealogy of Morality*, tr. by Adrian Del Caro (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 9.

³² Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 1 (London: Smith Elder, 1876), p. 86.

³³ See the whole of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed., Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975). From a different point of view, see too Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), section 1.13.

³⁴ *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 330.

that their senses were less reliable or that their persons less responsible than his own.

In practice, none of this will get us very far with new atheists most of the time; unfortunately, rational argument does not usually get far with such champions of reason. It is a moot point to what extent they represent or have succumbed to the intellectual and cultural phenomenon which we call 'scientism': the belief that cognitive values are basically scientific and that any knowledge or belief-claim which does not measure up to that status is, at best, epistemically extremely inferior. Perhaps the thinker most outstandingly credited with enabling this move in modern times is Francis Bacon, whose influence, in this respect, came to its zenith in the nineteenth century, a century when the distinct figure of 'the scientist' came to cultural prominence.³⁵ Bacon himself may have been free of scientism, but the cultural context of his nineteenth century reception made him eminently available for its promotion. It has been seriously argued—and invites our sober reflection—that, in his own day, Bacon subtly declared holy war on religion in the name of science.³⁶ This is what new atheists do without subtlety.

I leave open the question of the complicity of new atheists in 'scientism'. Generalization is surely impossible and I have nowhere set out criteria for who should count as new atheists. However, both the substance and effect of their critique of religion in the name of science contribute to the perilous contemporary atrophy of a range of human non-scientific sensibilities. To appreciate what is at stake, we can do little better than ponder Iain McGilchrist's thesis that the calculative left hemisphere of our Western brain has usurped the place of its rightful, right-hemispheric master and is displacing the humanly basic foundations of our civilization.³⁷ McGilchrist's analytic and historical *tour de force* is open to both theological and neuro-scientific criticism, but the underlying thesis is one which we ignore at our peril.

Deep divisions in the Christian world on the relationship between neo-Darwinism and Christianity or between evolution and creation hinder a

³⁵ See Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes and Nietzsche* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1993), Part One.

³⁷ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2012).

united response to new atheism in this area.³⁸ Differing intra-Christian views on reason and rationality likewise hinder a united epistemological response, although these cut across broader intra-secular disagreements on epistemology and bear more on the philosophical than on the scientific commitments of new atheism. Nevertheless, a positive and vigorous, glad and grateful use of the reasoning capacities of our Christian minds, whether in relation to Scripture or to science, should help to defang new atheist accusations of irrationality—at least for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. The atheist has a ready riposte: what those with eyes to see will see and those with ears to hear will hear is the agony of human suffering. To this we finally turn.

SUFFERING

According to Sam Harris, '[t]he entirety of atheism is contained in this response', the response in question being an unqualified 'No' to the possible existence of a God simultaneously all-good and all-powerful.³⁹ A homicidally maniacal being who created multiple cruel diseases and 'intentionally loosed such horrors upon the earth would be ground to dust for his crimes.'⁴⁰ When he expressed cognate thoughts, the comedian and television personality, Stephen Fry, attracted much publicity. Richard Dawkins wrote a book whose title was drawn from Darwin's words, *A Devil's Chaplain*.⁴¹ Expressed in logical form, the claim is that it is impossible to square three propositions: (a) God has sufficient power to prevent suffering; (b) God is good; (c) There is suffering.⁴² Existential difficulty remains even if logical consistency is demonstrated.

Obviously, this is not a peculiarly new atheist objection, but it would be a complete misrepresentation of new atheism if we narrowly concentrated our gaze on any new atheist distinctives (and I have not troubled to ask precisely what is distinctive in new atheism). We should miss what they had to say. Of all objections to Christian belief, this is surely the one with which Christians most sympathize, for they themselves will often

³⁸ For an introduction to non-Darwinian evolutionary schemes, see Thomas B. Fowler and Daniel Kuebler, *The Evolution Controversy: A Survey of Competing Theories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) chapter 8.

³⁹ *Letter to a Christian Nation* (London: Bantam, 2007), p. 51.

⁴⁰ Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 172.

⁴¹ The sub-title is *Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

⁴² Alternative formulations are possible. A standard text-book in logic is capable of giving this as an example of logical difficulty; see Wilfrid Hodges, *Logic* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977), pp. 44-5.

be perplexed by the co-existence of divine goodness and power not only with suffering but also with evil. ‘The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted.’⁴³ Perhaps it is worth venturing three reflections on this question.

Firstly, the existence of evil is a mystery flagged up in Scripture itself. However the Genesis story is read on the literary level, it announces a dark mystery: how is there in, or in proximity to, the garden of Eden a serpent, explicitly described as a God-made creature in a God-made creation explicitly described as ‘good’ or ‘very good’—a serpent which successfully verbally seduces Eve? Nowhere is the question answered or mystery dispelled in Scripture. Evil is not a problem introduced by atheists to Jews or Christians; it is a problem introduced in their shared Scripture. In principle, theology is not forbidden from attempting to throw light on the mystery. In practice, many of us judge that it does not throw much. We might even venture to say that belief precisely in the darkly and intellectually *problematic* nature of the existence of evil is a Christian tenet. Theology may say true things in connection with evil and suffering, things which need to be said and which contribute to dispelling complete incomprehension on this point or that, but these things just do not add up to an explanation.⁴⁴

Secondly, if there is no theological resolution, there is no extra-theological resolution either. In any proper treatment of the relevant matters, we should need to distinguish between evil and suffering and between the different forms of each.⁴⁵ Here, let us simply restrict ourselves to saying that metaphysical or moral evil and the resultant suffering are inexplicable on any religious or non-religious account. This point may be put in more than one way. We could say they are inexplicable in connection with the existence of the world: the fact that the world exists at all is inexplicable a-theistically so, in that connection, the existence of evil in particular is indirectly inexplicable. Alternatively, we could say that evil is directly inexplicable: no one can explain how such a phenomenon—seen in its reality, impelling our agonized apprehension of evil as objective—can

⁴³ Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p. 192.

⁴⁴ If those who are persuaded by John Walton’s argument in *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2015), Proposition 14, pp. 128-49, demur from my emphasis on Genesis 3, my point can be made more widely in relation to the canonical witness of Old and New Testaments.

⁴⁵ It would be too cumbersome to keep qualifying terminology throughout this article; I assume that readers will make appropriate applications when I use the terminology of evil or suffering.

emerge in a non-divine material universe. The failure to explain applies to non-Christian religious traditions as well as to atheism. I cannot spell out this argument here, but, if we come to this conclusion, then Christianity is not at an explanatory disadvantage.

Thirdly, what we should resist is the move from the inexplicability of evil and suffering to the affirmation that God does not exist. In attending to one major aspect of reality, we are always in danger of drawing unwarranted conclusions about the whole of it. If evil and suffering were all that characterized the cosmos, that would be one thing and an atheistic conclusion or a conclusion that the world was created by a malevolent being might be drawn. But the world is not simply like that. If we search for someone in a house, we do not enter a vacant room and conclude that there is no one in the house. Our world might be likened to a three-roomed house. One is pitch black. That is the room marked: 'Evil'. Let us agree that we shall not find God there. Another is somewhat light, judgement on how light it is varying from person to person. That is the room marked: 'Cosmos', signifying not only the fact that something rather than nothing exists, but also the various properties of the world, including its inhabitants and their histories. People will find there more or less evidence for the existence of God. The third is sheer light. It is marked: 'Jesus Christ'. Those who have seen the Son have seen God present in glory, whatever they have seen or not seen in the other rooms. Evil and suffering do not disprove the existence of God because a world exists which contains in it things other than evil and suffering. In particular, it contains Jesus Christ, who absorbed evil and suffering.

Faith is not the same as explanation nor does it contain total explanations. That is not to say that faith is irrational. This is a persistent new atheist mistake on which we have already commented. It is just to say that Christian faith is not a total and comprehensive explanation. It is irrational, not rational, to suppose that we are warranted only in believing that which is explicable.⁴⁶ No one of us can comprehend in one conceptual sweep all that there is to be comprehended more than I can look at every part of a vast building at the same time. Indeed, if humanity pooled the totality of its knowledge and wisdom, it would still be a vain attempt to catch sight of an ontic and noetic sphere far too vast to be encompassed by human comprehension. The Christian confession is that 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5). It has an empirical foundation (1:1) and a soteriological implication (1:6-9). What it lacks is

⁴⁶ Joseph Butler famously spelled out a version of this line of thought in *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, first published in 1736 and available in various editions.

the accompaniment of total philosophical or intellectual illumination. It has this in common with every other world-view.

CONCLUSION

New atheism feeds into and partially reflects the practical atheism of our time, which has lost sight of transcendent reality whether in hedonism, despair or hedonistic despair.⁴⁷ Scientific and moral thought have destroyed the credibility of Christianity, whose internal coherence is, in any case, wrecked by the realities of suffering. In response, we must bring out treasures old and new which are more than sufficient to meet the needs of atheism old and new. The old are found in plenty not only in Scripture but also in the rich heritage of theological and philosophical reflection which we are in danger of forfeiting in the churches as capacity for thought and serious ability to step outside the moral and cognitive framework prescribed for us by the social mainstream decline alarmingly. It would be a foolish and invidious business to pontificate on the production of the new, but such works as James Orr's *The Christian View of God and the World* and Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* surely beckon us to consider the need to state Christian truth in terms of a comprehensive world-view or life-system relevant to contemporary times. Yet, such endeavours will have little or no effect unless the renovating Spirit transforms our lives in their very detail as the ground from which thought will emerge and to which it will return in the form of enriched obedience.

⁴⁷ To his oft-quoted words, 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation', Thoreau added: 'A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.' *Walden and Other Writings* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2000), p. 8.