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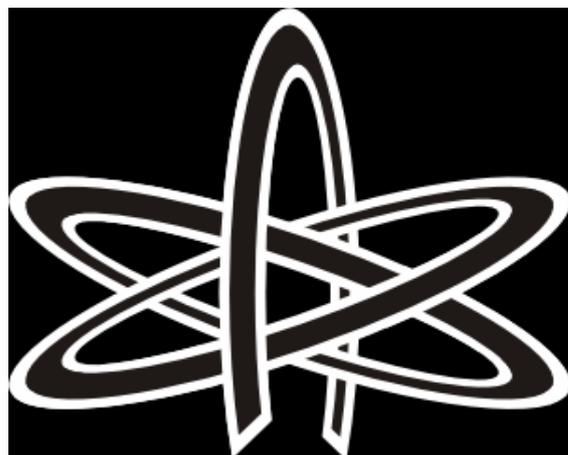
Atheism under Scrutiny

by Kel Willis

Just a few years ago I would never have imagined I would be writing an article like this! Atheism seemed to be too entrenched and was extending its influence even further. However there have recently been some stunning reversals in the atheist world. Some more moderate atheists are currently embarrassed by the strident attacks and aggression of the 'new atheists' who are writing against those of their former bedfellows who are now positively engaging with new scientific discoveries that challenge the premise that God does not exist, and which in some instances make the atheist argument implausible. Far from being a threat to the gospel, I am now finding that any discussion on atheism is a special opportunity to share the reality of our awesome creator, God.

The other exciting fact is that there is a wonderful resurgence of people seeking to connect with the ultimate; they are spiritually hungry and seeking answers to the void within. Materialism, socialism and the cult of self-centeredness have been tried and found wanting, and across the world, in the most unexpected places, people are turning to religion and millions (literally!) are becoming followers of Jesus. I want to share with you what I have discovered in my reading over the last twelve months or so, and I hope you will be as excited as I have been about the challenge that such material presents, for while at this point of time in Australia such changes are not as apparent, I have no doubt we will see them in days to come.

I was recently speaking to a man who was vehemently denouncing the whole idea of a personal God. 'I simply do not and will not believe in him,' he declared. 'Surely intelligent people in today's world could not accept the notion of a personal God.' When I replied that whether or not he believed in God did not change the fact of his existence, he went on to insist that religion is a spent force and that only the inadequate and uneducated accept the notion of God these days. I am sure he expected me to quietly drop the topic. He didn't know me very well! The reality is very different: it is *atheism* that is currently under scrutiny with the resurgence of interest in the existence of God, and many who are highly educated are embracing a personal and life-changing faith.



Over the last century scientists, psychologists, philosophers and sociologists predicted the dawn of a new age in which people would no longer believe in God. In the last decade the term 'new atheist' was coined and hundreds of books, articles and documentaries debunked the idea of belief in God. But I must say I am always intrigued why anyone would want to spend time, energy and money arguing against what they believe doesn't exist! Perhaps they have a lurking fear that God actually does exist. It says something of the arrogance of some atheists who think that by their repetitive arguments they can somehow make him go away. The problem they confront of course is that there has never been a credible alternative to theism that adequately answers the many questions about life and its purpose. Atheism, with all of its ramifications, provides no such answers and simply leaves us in the darkness of our own imaginations with no meaning, morality or confidence in the future.

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Thomas Nagel, professor of philosophy at New York University, in what was perhaps an unguarded moment, wrote in his 1997 book entitled (somewhat facetiously) *The Last Word*, 'I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.'⁽¹⁾ Such statements affirm the mindset of many so-called atheists who simply do not want to accept even the possibility that God exists, making a deliberate choice to refuse to begin to engage with the evidence. Atheism is a crutch for those who cannot bear the reality of God, as Tom Stoppard says.

I once heard the prominent playwright, author and poet Dorothy Hewett, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, say, 'I've always been absolutely obsessed with the whole thing of dying because I hate the thought of it. I really hate the idea of going out into nothingness and of course being an atheist, that's what I think will happen to me.' I wondered what the so-called 'new atheists' would have to say to this lady to give her hope and confidence with which to face the dilemma of death and her fear of its 'nothingness'.⁽²⁾

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In the 60's the British Church of England Bishop Robinson wrote a book declaring that God as we now know him is dead. In April 1966 the cover of *Time* magazine asked: 'Is God dead?' In 1980 *Time* again ran an article declaring that God was no longer relevant. The result of these articles was a plethora of anti-God books affirming his decline into oblivion. On the surface these looked well researched and written but, upon closer scrutiny, just the opposite was true: many were shallow and badly researched, showing an appalling ignorance of what Christians believe and of the valid and intelligent arguments that form the basis of our faith.

You can imagine my interest when I recently heard that someone had written a book called *God is Back!* I heard the author being interviewed on the ABC's *Lateline*.⁽³⁾ John Micklethwait, who makes no claim to any religious allegiance, declared that throughout the world (with the exception of Australia and Western Europe) there is a rapid resurgence of belief in God. This is especially so in Africa, South America and, of all places, in Communist China! Jane Macartney states that 'Christianity in China is booming. With 100 million believers, far more than the 74 million-member Communist party, Jesus is a force to be reckoned with.' She goes on to say that 'those who participate in non-sanctioned churches run the risk of police raids, a beating or even jail ... but that doesn't seem to put off the growing congregations. Indeed, official numbers fall far short of the actual total ... almost one in every ten Chinese may now be a Christian ... if you bring Christianity into the conversation, everyone seems to know someone who is a convert.'⁽⁴⁾

Furthermore, Spengler in the *Asia Times* in 2007 reports that 10 000 Chinese become Christians every day and that 200 million Chinese may comprise the world's largest concentration of Christians by mid-century, and the largest missionary force in history. Spengler concludes that 'China may be for the 21st century what Europe was during the 8th – 11th centuries, and America has been during the past 200 years: the natural ground for mass evangelisation. If this occurs, the world will change beyond our capacity to recognise it. Islam might defeat the western Europeans, simply by replacing their diminishing numbers with immigrants, but it will crumble beneath the challenge from the East. China, devoured by hunger so many times in its history, now feels a spiritual hunger beneath the neon-exterior of its suddenly great cities. Four hundred million Chinese on the prosperous coast have moved from poverty to affluence in a single generation, and 10 million to 15 million new immigrants come from the countryside each year, the greatest movement of people in history. Despite a government stance that hovers somewhere between discouragement and persecution, more than one million of them have embraced a faith that regards this life as mere preparation for the next world.'⁽⁵⁾ It's interesting to note Micklethwait's comment when asked to explain why Christianity is growing so fast in China which is a Communist country that doesn't encourage organised religion at all, and in fact discourages it: 'One reason is the Government has cleverly hit on the one formula to make religion grow. It's something the ancient Romans did to Christianity, and it was a brilliant way inadvertently to cause religion to grow. The Chinese have set a limit on the number of people that can meet in a place, basically 25. Once you reach 25 people meeting in one of these house churches ... the church has to split and start again. Automatically it's almost a formula for amoeba-like growth.'⁽⁶⁾

But it is not only in China that such amazing change is taking place. In their book *God is Back*, Micklethwait and Wooldridge state that 'For most casual observers the revival of religion means the revival of Islam. But Christianity is also growing rapidly, particularly across the developed world. In 1900 there were roughly ten million Christians in Africa. Today,



Christianity in China is booming.

thanks to waves of evangelisation, there are 400 million, almost half the population ... in most of these places, the growth in faith has coincided with a growth in prosperity. People are choosing to be Christians or which sort of Christians they want to be. Man, whether the neo-atheists like it or not, is a theotropic beast: given the option, he is inclined to believe in a God...⁽⁷⁾ And this from men who are not even evangelicals and certainly have no axe to grind!

Micklethwait also makes the point that the assumption made by many atheists is that the more educated and modern the world becomes, the less interest there is in God and religion. In fact, he says, in China it's precisely the most modern go-ahead people who are often turning towards religion.⁽⁸⁾

One would think that with the consistent antagonism and intense persecution confronting Christians throughout history (where in many parts of the world one can forfeit one's life or be imprisoned simply by declaring a belief in the Christ of the Bible), to say nothing of the intense ridicule of the intellect of believers that has always been part of the atheist's weaponry, that the church would have declined to the point of going out of existence. Instead, what we see is a growing, vibrant movement in which the God of creation who has revealed himself in so many ways is still impacting and transforming millions of people throughout the world. The truth is that the alternatives have been tried and found wanting. Communism, materialism and academic, self-promoting intellectualism, in the final analysis, are not credible alternatives.

Atheists themselves are now under siege.

What is also happening in many instances is that atheists themselves are now under siege and find among their own number those who can no longer intellectually agree with the position taken by the Richard Dawkins of this world. Matthew Parris, a prominent British atheist, visited Christian Aid workers in Africa in 2008 and was inspired by what he saw: not only the lifesaving material aid, but the enormous spiritual help the workers gave to the people. In an article entitled *As an atheist, I believe that Africa needs God* he affirmed the positive impact of the Christian message on Africa, describing the Christians he met as standing tall and knowing their place in the world because of their link with God. 'In Africa, Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real, the change is good.' He was also honest enough to say, 'It confounds my ideological belief, stubbornly refuses to fit my worldview, and has embarrassed my belief that there is no God.'⁽⁹⁾ Parris describes himself as having a foot in each camp and is obviously struggling with his atheism in terms of its values and relevance in a world of need.

Another one-time atheist is A N Wilson who, having spent years mocking Christianity in his various books and articles, has recently 'returned to the faith'. Wilson developed a growing awareness of our spiritual dimension as humans, along with a realisation of the inability of atheism to answer basic human needs: 'Watching a whole cluster of friends, and my own mother, die over quite a short space of time convinced me that purely materialist 'explanations' for our mysterious human existence simply won't do.' He began to sense that what he instinctively felt was the case—that human beings

have a spiritual dimension and are not mere 'animated pieces of meat'—was most likely to be true.⁽¹⁰⁾ Wilson says, 'I was drawn, over and over again, to the disconcerting recognition that so very many of the people I had most admired and loved, either in life or in books, had been believers.' He says he came to realise that atheists cannot account for such things as love and language and music, and nor can they understand how the Christian faith transforms individual lives. He has become convinced that the Easter story fits and applies to the human condition.



But the greatest shock to the atheist world has been the defection of Antony Flew from their ranks. It has so angered people like Dawkins that he speaks of Flew as 'that apostate, Flew!' But who is Antony Flew? Until 2007 he was one of the champions of an atheistic worldview and author of over thirty professional philosophical works that helped set the agenda for atheism for half a century. He was clever and witty, with a wonderful ability to argue his case, and built his highly acclaimed academic career publicly debunking the existence of God. But now the renowned philosopher has come to the opposite conclusion, officially joining those who hold a theistic view.

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Flew recently said, 'All my life I have followed the principle of Socrates: 'Follow the evidence, wherever it leads.'⁽¹¹⁾ Whilst not yet a Christian, Flew has a new openness to continue to follow the evidence. In his book *There is a God* he declares, 'I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that this universe's intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God. I

believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source.'⁽¹²⁾ 'The origin of life cannot be explained if we start with matter alone,' declares Flew. When asked if recent work on the origin of life pointed to the activity of a creative intelligence he said; 'Yes I now believe it does ...What I think the new DNA material has done is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce life, that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinary diverse elements to work together. It is the enormous complexity of the number of elements and the enormous subtlety of the ways they work together. The meeting of these two parts at the right time by chance is simply minute.'⁽¹³⁾

The Atheist's Dilemma

Interestingly, much of what we now read in new atheist material about those who were once heroes in the world of atheism, like Antony Flew, Parris and Wilson, is extremely antagonistic and vitriolic. When one does not have a rational argument the best approach is ridicule! Have you noticed this in some politicians? It is also a theme in most of the new atheists' works. All kinds of dubious statistics are bandied about to support their claims that better educated people are not 'sucked in to believing in God' and that if you are a believer, you are somehow intellectually deficient. The so-called 'free thinkers' are not keen to allow others to think differently, especially about religion. As Varghese says in his introduction to Flew's book, 'Curiously, the response to the AP story from Flew's fellow atheists verged on hysteria. One atheist web site tasked a correspondent with giving monthly updates on Flew's falling away from the true faith. Inane insults and juvenile caricatures were common in the freethinking blogosphere. The same people who complained about the Inquisition and witches being burned at the stake were now enjoying a little heresy hunting of their own. The advocates of tolerance were not themselves very tolerant. And, apparently, religious zealots don't have a monopoly on dogmatism, incivility, fanaticism, and paranoia.'⁽¹⁴⁾ So, what to do with such people?



So it is interesting to read a critique of the writings of the new atheists by a former atheist, which is what Flew does in *There is a God*. He cites works like Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Victor Strenger's *The Comprehensible Cosmos* and Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and *Open Letter to a Christian Nation*, all of which are especially antagonistic towards Christianity. They not only argue the credibility of atheism, but are overtly antagonistic towards organised religion of any kind and are vitriolic towards believers in Jesus in particular. In fact, Flew writes with some feeling about having been a target of the hatred and ridicule of some of his former atheist friends, and says of the tone of some of the new atheist books: 'The chief target of these books is, without question, organised religion of any kind, time or place. Paradoxically, the books themselves read like fundamentalist sermons ... It's black and white. Either you are with us all the way or one with the enemy.'⁽¹⁵⁾

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Varghese's argument against such writers is that they refuse to engage on the real issues involved in the questions about God's existence. For example, he states that Dennett spends a mere seven pages on the arguments for God's existence and Harris none! Upon closer scrutiny we discover that most of the current crop of so-called new atheists rarely attempt to deal with the real issues that concern humanity. They simply regurgitate the same tired, old arguments that have been done and dusted by sharper minds and by those who have significant and sustainable reasons for rejecting atheism.

I have noticed that Dawkins is keen to quote Bertrand Russell as one of his own, however, there is another side to the story. Although he believed that there must be a superior intelligence that he called Nature, Russell claimed there was insufficient evidence to believe in God. Indeed, Russell's daughter Katherine Tait said that when she was growing up, her father was not open to any serious discussion about God's existence and that she could not even talk to him about religion. 'I would have loved to convince my father that I had found what he was looking for, that ineffable something he had longed for all his life. I would have liked to persuade him that the search for God does not have to be in vain.' Tait believed that her father's whole life was a search for God. 'Somewhere at the back of my father's mind, at the bottom of his heart, in the depths of his soul, there was an empty space that had once been filled by God, and he never found anything else to put in it.'⁽¹⁶⁾

It is important that we place atheism in perspective. Firstly, it is important to remember that not all atheists are angry and antagonistic. Like Antony Flew, some no doubt became disillusioned with people in the church and could simply find no answers to the questions they were asking. They have been honest in their inability to accept the presence of a God who cares for his world.

What has atheism given to the world?

Secondly, we must not think of the world as essentially atheist. The opposite is the case; whilst it is true that the atheist voice is very loud and has many vocal advocates, the numbers of those who are true atheists is smaller than you would suppose. I have found that when they are under scrutiny, most of those who talk about being atheist quickly either become agnostics (a much more defensible position) or suddenly find a connection with religion as they remember a grandfather who was a minister, or a cousin who goes to church, etc.

The Presumption of Atheism

The essence of atheism flows from a naturalistic worldview that claims that everything evolved through natural causes. In response to the question 'What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it?' on BBC Radio 4, Dawkins replied, 'I believe that all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all 'design' anywhere in the universe, is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection. It follows that design comes late in the universe, after a period of Darwinian

evolution. Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe.⁽¹⁷⁾ He rejects ultimate Intelligence and cannot abide those who say otherwise.

This is typical of those who lack consistency and integrity in their belief structure. He accuses others of blind faith in God, an unprovable faith, and yet in the same interview goes on to concede that he needs faith to accept some of his own premises. I was recently speaking with a man who told me he was a Darwinian. When I asked how certain he could be of the theory, he assured me that it was more certain than Christianity. I then asked whether he knew that in his book *The Origin of Species*, Darwin's most used statement is 'We can reasonably assume'. There is not a great deal of certainty in that! The man then confessed to never having read Darwin's works; instead he had relied on the claims made by 'significant atheists'.

The conclusion of atheism is that we as human beings are nothing more than matter that ultimately has no value. Dawkins declares, 'We are survival machines, robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as Genes.' The end result of atheism is the devaluing of all humanity. What has atheism given to the world? Is it a better place because of a philosophy that dehumanises and devalues us? Are we better people because we believe there is no God and no accountability? Does it enhance our character? The reality is that there is nothing in atheism that will positively enhance our view of life and the value of the individual. It states that we have no spirit or soul and therefore no capacity to connect with God; death will be the end. Just like all other creatures, we are born, we live, we die and the strongest rules and rages at will. Some of the history of the influence of atheism is horrific. Hitler, Mao and Stalin were all greatly influenced by the atheistic philosophy of Nietzsche. Because their philosophy totally devalued and dehumanised people, they were able to murder and exterminate millions with ease.

The core issue is that, like it or not, humanity has a spiritual dimension that longs for fulfillment. This spiritual dimension has been called a 'God shaped vacuum'. We may try to find fulfilment through materialism, pleasure or intellectual pursuits. Philosophies like atheism will always leave us with the vacuum unfilled. Furthermore, even religion will not meet our spiritual need. We need to connect with God through the one he sent to make that possible, his son Jesus. It is significant that in those places in the world where people have suffered for their faith the church has grown, and this has always been the case. Now we are seeing that where atheism has held sway, socialism and communism have left people feeling oppressed, empty lost. The natural awareness of the ultimate is a persistent voice that will find its way through the maze of substitutes for spiritual reality. When the gospel begins to impact people and lives are transformed, its message is enhanced and people are attracted to what they see happening in the lives of others. In that context, I was challenged when I read that Bertrand Russell refused to engage on the possibility of God's existence because of the kind of religious believers he had encountered. His daughter said that it was hopeless trying to talk with him about her faith because 'he had known too many blind Christians, bleak moralists who sucked the joy from life and persecuted their opponents; he would never have been able to see the truth they were hiding.'⁽¹⁸⁾

Do we have a reasoned faith that is anchored?

I wonder in reading this article if your response is like mine? I am excited and encouraged. Perhaps we are seeing the beginnings of a vast movement of God that will draw millions more to faith. The greatest challenge to us is how we can both respond to the growing opportunities as atheism loses its credibility. Do we have a reasoned faith that is anchored in the authority of a demonstrably believable book and sustainable historical events? I know that sometimes language like this is a little scary to the average Christian, but surely our role as pastors and leaders in the church is to equip our people for the work of ministry. To me this means that in whatever way I am able, I will invest in people, seeking to encourage them to be bold and proactive in engaging others about their faith; not in a dogmatic and assertive way, but in a winsome and reasoning way that allows the process of reason to be used by God to bring revelation of himself to people.

'...he had known too many blind Christians, bleak moralists who sucked the joy from life and persecuted their opponents; he would never have been able to see the truth they were hiding.'



I encourage you to engage further with these ideas by exploring in more detail some of the references below.

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