

## Atheism By Mercedes Ferrari

God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! Yet his shadow still looms. How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of. (Nietzsche *Gay Science* 120)

Bullivant and Ruse open their introductory essay in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* with this incisive aphorism that appeared in the *Gay Science*, title also translated as *The Joyful Pursuit of Knowledge and Understanding*. *Gay Science* is a book of aphorisms by nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche published in 1882. The philosopher repeated the same cry about the “death of God” in his other work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Bullivant and Ruse comment on the aphorism as “shockingly famous” in the post Enlightenment culture of the time. The marching ahead of science and Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* published in 1859 had a deep influence not only on the scientific development, but also on the rejection of Christian and biblical beliefs. A few years earlier, in 1850 the English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson had echoed this loss of faith by calling nature “red in tooth and claw” shrieking against God’s love (*In Memoriam* 56:15). Nietzsche had never been a believer. In his aphorism, he meant to say that “the western idea of a god had been rendered an obsolete concept of the past. Europe no longer needed God as the source for all morality, value, or order in the universe; philosophy and science were capable of doing that for us” (Bullivant and Ruse 1). Yet against this cultural shift, the shadow of God has continued to “loom” even in our culture because theology is deeply imbedded in western tradition, and two thousand years of belief in the Christian God cannot be eradicated.

Atheism is at times a hotly contested subject requiring a discourse where metaphysics and transcendence are no longer present. Atheism, in general, is the critique and denial of metaphysical beliefs in God and spiritual beings. As such, it is usually distinguished from theism, which affirms the existence of God. Atheism is also distinguished from agnosticism, which leaves open the question whether there is a God or not, professing to find the questions unanswered or unanswerable. In common discourse and also in scholarly research the word “atheism” may be used according different meanings. Bullivant names at least five different usages:

1. ‘Atheism is the belief that there is no God or gods’
2. At its core, atheism designates a position that includes or asserts no god(s)
3. An atheist is someone without a belief in God; he or she need not be someone who believes that God does not exist’
4. An atheist does not believe in the god that theism favors
5. Atheism is a principled and informed decision to reject belief in God (Bullivant 2).

In this paper the definition adopted is an absence of belief in the existence of a God. “The utility of such a broad definition,” Bullivant states, “is taking atheism to be an ‘umbrella concept’ that admits the exploration of a range of topics” (2).

In choosing the topics which the scope and length of this paper allow, I have adopted the umbrella definition as a guide and relied mainly on the essays which are part of the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. I have also tried to maintain a balance in the debate between theism and

atheism. In our secular age, the belief in the Judeo-Christian God is considered merely one option among others. Frequently, it is an embattled and contentious choice to embrace in the post-Christian society. Atheists, nevertheless, should be aware of the possible existence of the deity and consider their options:

To be a believer, a theist in some sense, or to be a non believer, an atheist in some sense—is no mere matter of academic concern and interest. A world with God and a world without God are two very different places, with very different meanings and obligations for us humans. Humans created, loved, and supported by the deity are very different from those who wander alone creating their destinies (Bullivant and Ruse 1).

In the closing section of the paper, I have extended my research to authors who defend the ‘belief option’ and argued against the militancy and noise of the so called New Atheists.

### **Arguments for the Existence of God**

In the history of theology and western philosophy there have been a number of classic ways of arguing for the existence of God. The arguments were first formulated by the early Fathers of the Church during the first and second century A.D., by Augustin of Hippo (345-430) and by Thomas Aquinas (1225-12740) in his *Summa Theologica*. The most important of these arguments are the teleological or argument from design, the ontological argument and the cosmological argument. Augustine, considered by many the founder of Christian theology, insisted that it was natural to employ our reason for an understanding of the truths of the Christian faith. Faith, however, must be prior to understanding. The first step is to believe in the existence of God and the words of Scripture. “I believe in order to understand” is the principle that guided the early theologians in the formulation of their arguments. They realized all too well that our limited reason cannot deal with too much eternity and infinity. They could only describe the Christian God with attributes expressed in the human terms that constituted the foundation of their faith: all good, infinite, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, infallible. Since the dawn of the scientific age and especially in the post-Enlightenment period, reason and faith have become mutually exclusive, and the principle guiding the philosophical arguments about the Christian God has become ‘I understand in order to believe.’ God, however, is not an entity of this world; we cannot empirically see him or argue his existence with scientific evidence. The traditional arguments are now at the center of heated debates and even forcefully refuted by the New Atheists Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Demonstrating the weaknesses of these proofs is crucial for establishing the case for atheism.

The following critique of the arguments for the existence of God can be found in a more extended form in A. C. Grayling’s essay in *The Oxford Handbook* 38--56.

The teleological argument aims at proving the existence of God from the appearance of design in nature. It was thought particularly convincing in the eighteenth century, when philosophers and thinkers inherited two centuries of productive scientific enquiry into the beauties and complexities of nature yet still lacked enough scientific knowledge to contemplate natural origins and developments of the universe and life. Perhaps the most familiar statement of the argument is the one given by William Paley in his *Natural Theology* published in 1802. In this work, Paley talks about finding a watch on the ground while crossing a heath, and having to conclude from an inspection of its properties that it was created by an intelligent agent. “But if we think a watch must be designed by a purposeful agency, “how much more so the eye,” he wrote, “would be alone sufficient to support the conclusion which we draw from it, as to the necessity of an intelligent Creator ’(Paley 395).

Grayling cites as the best statement ever given of the design argument, the account Cleanthes gives in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: Look round the world; contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since, therefore, the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence (Hume 19-20).

Hume, rejected the design argument and maintained that the analogy between nature and human-built machines is weak, that there are numerous alternative explanations of how natural phenomena came to be as they are; and that at most and best, if it were established that natural phenomena could not have been other than deliberately designed, the most that this could imply is a designer. This last was the position accepted by most deists of the eighteenth century, who, lacking alternative, scientific explanations for the emergence of a world like this one, rested content with the idea of a fabricating agency which has since ceased to be involved with the universe or perhaps even ceased to exist.

A more contemporary form of the design argument invokes 'cosmic fine-tuning.' T.J. Mawson presents this argument as follows: Cosmic fine-tuning begins from the observation that the initial conditions of the universe, and the physical laws and parameters operative within it, are 'fine-tuned' for life to appear on this planet. Had they differed by the smallest fraction, life as we know it, would not have emerged. If the strong force in the atomic nucleus had varied in either direction by more than 5 percent, or if the electromagnetic force binding electrons to atomic nuclei were stronger or weaker, life would not be possible. If the relative masses of neutrons and protons were any different, life would not be possible. If the gravitational force were different even by a minute amount, main sequence stars like our sun could not exist and therefore life at least of our kind would be vastly less likely. If the 'big bang' had not been exactly as it was, either the universe would have collapsed upon itself immediately, or it would have expanded too rapidly for the evolution of stars like our sun, with the result once again that our kind of life would not have appeared. The concurrence of a number of just-right values in these cases prompts what by physicist and cosmologist Paul Davies, some call 'the Goldilocks enigma', namely, the apparently puzzling fact that the universe is just right for life. And from this some conclude that it must therefore have been designed by a purposive agency whose aim was to bring it about that, after some nine billion years or so forms of life would emerge that would *eventuate* in us (22-23).

According to this argument, it would seem that we exist because the concatenation of events are as they are; had they been different, we would not exist. The fact that we exist as a result of what happens to be the laws of universe's, however, does not demonstrate purpose or design. It is a lucky or unlucky outcome of how things happen in fact to be. Mawson concludes that the universe's parameters and laws are not fine-tuned *on purpose for us to exist*. Matters are the other way round: we exist because the laws happen to be as they are.

## The Ontological Argument

An ontological argument is a philosophical argument studying how we determine if things exist or not. It attempts to take things that are abstract and establish that they are, in fact, real. The first ontological argument in support of the existence of God western tradition was proposed by Saint Anselm of Canterbury in his 1078 work, *Proslogion (Discourse on the Existence of God)* in which he defines God as "a being than which no greater can be conceived," and argues that such being must exist in the mind. From this, he suggests that if the greatest possible being exists in the mind, it must also exist in reality, because if it existed only in the mind, then an even greater being must be possible—one who exists both in the mind and in reality. Therefore, this greatest possible being must exist in reality.

One can easily see why the Anselm argument does not get us with logic to God. The same applies if one substitutes the phrase 'most perfect being' for 'greatest being,' as in other versions of the ontological argument. The most perfect or greatest being in the universe might still be short of perfection and not at all a suitable candidate for existence as a deity. Grayling observes that "from the outset of this argument, therefore, there is the difficulty of attempting to get from the fact that a being must have some property in the greatest, largest, most perfect degree relative to other similar beings is a deity let alone the traditionally conceived God (50)"

Since its initial proposal, the ontological argument has generated a lot of interest and discussion, but a number of criticisms and objections have also been mounted. Thomas Aquinas rejected the argument on the basis that humans cannot know God's nature. David Hume also offered an empirical objection, criticizing the lack of evidential reasoning and rejecting the idea that anything can exist necessarily.

## The Cosmological Argument

Also called arguments from causation the cosmological argument was first formulated by Thomas Aquinas as the second proof of the existence of God. The argument begins with observations about the world and concludes from them that there is a God. It focuses upon the facts that the world came into existence, that it could have been different (it is 'contingent'), and that everything is causally linked to antecedent conditions and circumstances. A pristine cause, therefore, "caused" the world to exist. Grayling describes the steps of the argument as follows: because the world came into existence, it must have (or have had) a creator. Because it is contingent, it must be rooted in something necessary. Because everything is the causal outcome of other things, there must be a first uncaused cause in order to halt a regress of causes going back infinitely, and to get the chain of causality going (47). One immediate objection to these steps is to say that they are expressions of the human mind needing to have explanations about why there is a world and how it began and continues. This causal claim states that every contingently existing thing has a cause of its existence, that the chain of causes cannot run back infinitely, and that therefore there has to be a first cause. And since this first cause is itself not contingent upon anything else as its cause, it must be necessary. The conclusion is that the necessarily existing first cause is God. In the light of our ignorance about the why, how, and origin of the world, the invocation of the idea of God as its source and the reason for its existence is 'the best available explanation.'

Defenders of the causal principle say that without it, we cannot make the universe intelligible, but a number of objections are possible. One is to dispute the necessity of a non-contingent first cause. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume argues that "if you explain each individual contingent thing in the universe, you have thereby explained the universe, and that it is a fallacy to suppose that you still have to explain the existence of the

universe taken as a whole”(66). Hume also called into question the principle of causation that underlies the argument: “why accept a priori that everything has a cause, given that we can conceive of effects independently of any putative cause”(66)? Contemporary philosophers and cosmologists also pose the possibility that the universe has its own reason for existing.

### **Arguments based on Pragmatic Grounds**

The most famous pragmatic argument is the one formulated by Blaise Pascal, French writer and mathematician. He formulated his pragmatic argument for the existence of God by affirming the prudence or desirability or expected utility of theistic belief with the most famous, ‘Pascal’s Wager’ originally found in Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* (1670).

This wager is different from the arguments formulated to prove the existence of God. It is based on the advisable and prudent decision to believe in God. Pascal said that because the existence of God can neither be proved nor disproved by rational argument, we should consider what the advantages and disadvantages of such belief are. “If there is a God, then the advantage of believing in its existence is vast; it is a benefit for all eternity. If there is not, one has not lost much by believing it anyway. So one should believe (Pascal 66–8). In contemporary theory, this is stated in terms of ‘expected utility.’ Pascal’s point is that if, by any chance God exists, the utility of believing in him far outweighs the disutility of spending eternity in hell; therefore, it is rational to believe in him.

Some theistic critics argue that this pragmatic ground for belief is too cold and calculating to be the kind of love that God requires from his creatures. Utilitarian belief, Grayling observes “might weigh against the utility of believing in this way: if God exists and is offended by the calculating nature of the belief, the sought-for benefits will not be forthcoming. So it is self-defeating”(49). The main criticisms of the argument is that Pascal’s argument does not do what he requires, that God’s existence cannot be disproved, for it can.

### **Morality and Atheism**

From the beginning of Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian faith, religion and morality have been closely intertwined, and our moral vocabulary is still deeply infused with this history. In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates the question ‘Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?’ With this famous question, criticism of theistic approaches to morality begins in the Western philosophical tradition. Modified to fit the present context, Socrates’ question becomes: are morally obligatory actions obligatory because God commands them, or does God command them because they are morally obligatory (Wielenberg 96)? The notion of God commanding us is central in the Judeo-Christian account, but God adds love to the notion of command, so that the covenant in which the commands are embedded is a covenant by which God blesses us, and we are given a route towards our highest good which is union with God. In the Gospel, Jesus explains the two essential commandments: the love of God, the love of neighbor and forgiveness. All are welcome to join him including the Gentiles, the atheists of the time who worshiped Roman Gods. In our own times, the so called religious conservatives betray the forgiving Christian God of love when they express their unforgiving worries about the psychological and social consequences of atheism. They show prejudice in their view of atheists as self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good.

There is also a long tradition of atheists viewing religion as a source of immorality, encouraging irrational thought, divisive and promoting the persecution of non-believers. Recently these attacks have been hurled against Christian believers by the New Atheists. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins argues that teaching of the doctrine of hell to children amounts

to psychological child abuse (317–18). Against all the abuses of the church, Dawkins believes that scientific development and moral evolution go hand in hand. Hiroshima is only a temporary setback, but the general ‘upward trend’ is unmistakable

For atheists objective moral truths do not require a theistic foundation, and the attempts to ground such truths in God are problematic. Some atheists deny the reality of objective moral obligation; some endorse nihilism (the view that there are no moral properties at all), or relativism (the view that moral properties exist but only in some cultural contexts that may vary). Wielenberg notes that, “when it comes to objective morality in a secular context, a pressing question is the following: without God, what serves as the ground or foundation for objective moral principles”(98)? One answer to this question might be to propose something other than God as a foundation. For instance, some atheists believe that objective moral truths are truths about human well-being. Some contemporary atheists believe that objective moral truths can be reduced to scientific truths about the natural world. Wielenberg proposes another option worth considering. He believes that some objective moral truths are foundational, neither reducible to nor grounded upon non-moral truths. Explanation must come to an end somewhere; there must be some foundational truth or truths that have no further ground, foundation, source, or explanation beyond themselves. We might think of such truths as ‘metaphysical axioms’ (99). One possibility, then, is that at least some of these metaphysical axioms are objective moral truths. On this view, the foundation of morality would consist of these axiomatic objective moral truths; objective morality does not have a non-moral foundation beyond itself. For instance, the principle that inflicting terrible harm on another for no good reason is morally wrong seems a good moral axiom. The question remains as to how deeply evil human beings can rise to power, formulate evil axioms and convince whole nations that they are the absolute moral imperative to put into action. We should not forget that a Hitler did exist and imposed his “moral axiom” that Jewish people had to be tortured and exterminated.

The relationship between religiosity, secularism, and moral behavior suggests a complex picture. Atheists are likely to point out a correlation between secularism and morally praiseworthy progressiveness and tolerance. Religious conservatives, on the other hand, are likely to point to atheism as evidence of how the loss of religious beliefs precipitates a hellish descent into immorality. They have distanced themselves from Jesus’ teachings and forgiveness. So while we can say that religion does not poison everything and that atheists are not always selfish, amoral beings, the full story of the relationship between atheism, religiosity, and morality remains complex.

### **The Problem of Evil**

Throughout the centuries, the problem of evil has been the dominant intellectual objection to theistic belief and a major support for atheism. Peterson cites Hans Kūng, the catholic theologian, as stating that the “the problem of evil is the rock of atheism” (432). It is not difficult to understand why this is so since the problem in its most simple formulation seems to contradict the attributes of God. The search for a theodicy or reasons why a perfectly good, almighty and all-knowing God permits evil began with the early patristic and Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine offered the most inspiring analysis of evil in his *Confessions*. In his youth before converting to Christianity, Augustine had been a Manichaeon. This dualistic school of thought, similar to Gnosticism, maintained that there are two principles at work in the world: darkness and light or evil and goodness. Augustine tells us how he gradually realized that if God is omnipotent and infinitely good God, he could not be limited by an opposing principle of evil

(*Confession* 85). He then formulated a “deprivation theory” and regarded evil not as an existing force opposing God, but as a kind of deficiency of being. Evil is a lack, negation, defectiveness, deprivation. It is a kind of malfunctioning, a flaw at the heart of human existence. Physical pain, for example, is evil because it tampers with the way the body works. It is an incapacity for an abundance of life. Augustine takes this line mainly because he wants to argue against the Manichaeans. For them evil was a force or substance which invades us from the outside. On the contrary, Augustine argues that evil is not a kind force at all. It springs from us, not from some alien power beyond us. It springs from us because it is the effect of human freedom and original sin. He explains it as “the inclination of what has more being for what has less being” (*Confessions* 85). We have inherited the inclination from our ancestors and their decision of disobeying God. Evil is the a result of a historical fall from a perfect original state. If evil in nothing in itself, Augustine concludes, then not even an all powerful God could have created it.

In his book *Evil*, Terry Eagleton, British literary theorist, observes that there are those who feel uneasy about this way of viewing evil. He poses the question as to how “we can possibly speak of those who perished in the Nazi concentration camps as victims of a simple deficiency”(28)? He wonders whether deprivation of being risks underestimating the terrifying positivity of evil. But in confirming Augustine’s theory, the critic argues that: Evil is a kind of deprivation with formidable power. The power in question . . . is essentially that of the death drive, turned outward so as to wreak its insatiable spitefulness on a fellow human being. Yet this furious violence involves a kind of lack, an unbearable sense of non-being, which must, so to speak, be taken out on the other. It is also oriented towards another kind of absence: the nullity of death itself. Here, the terrifying force and utter vacuousness come together. Evil is a nothingness of corruption and destruction”(Eagleton 28).

Augustine’s theodicy continues to be a mainstay for theists because it is the most obvious strategy for locating accountability for evil in human beings rather than in divine activity.

Another theodicy developed by Irenaeus, an early theologian Father of the church, continues to be supported in various forms by current philosophers. Irenaeus posits a vision of the development of the human race from self-centeredness to love of God. John Hick, one of the most important and influential philosophers of religion of the second half of the twentieth century, explains that “evil and suffering are present in the world so that persons created in the ‘image of God ’become transformed to the likeness of God in a world of soul making. God’s goal is that human beings progress spiritually and morally from relative immaturity toward greater maturity.” (Hicks as cited). It is in the face of challenges, hardships, temptations, and even pain and suffering that we have opportunity to grow or fail spiritually as persons. Petersen reports two very serious objections to the idea of soul-making come from: that some physical evils provide counter-examples to soul-making by destroying or debilitating persons and that the enormity of evil in the world is inexcusably inefficient since ostensibly few persons achieve God’s goal (83).

As the debate about the presence of evil and suffering in the world continues, the argument from gratuitous evil is a powerful way for expressing the fact that pointless evil seems to count against theism and for atheism. Theistic responses to the problem of evil can only be supported by Scripture and doctrine. Believers in God do not ordinarily report that they are simply theists; instead they claim faith. On the other hand, people who critically evaluate theism as incapable of accounting for evil may simply assert more directly that there is no God. Philosopher of Religion Leonard Rowe has written that “in this age of reason and science, . . . the idea of God no longer plays an essential, rational role in explaining the world and human

existence. Horrendous world evils become additional evidence that tips the rational scales on the side of atheism (86). Rowe concludes that the best explanation of reality in contemporary secular western culture, atheism is best positioned within the worldview of naturalism, which lays claim to ‘reason and science’ (86).

### **New Atheism**

The term ‘New Atheism’ can be characterized as an umbrella term, which has originated in the public discourse of the Western world during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and which has been, and still is, used to describe several writers. The most prominent ‘new-atheist’ authors and their books, are: Sam Harris *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (2004); Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion: A Darwinian Criticism of Religion* (2006), Daniel Dennett *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006) and Christopher Hitchens *God Is Not Great: Religion Poisons Everything* (2007).

Thomas Zenk, the author of the essay on “New Atheism” published in *The Oxford Handbook*, rightfully poses the question as to how these very different writers and books became subsumed under the one, unity-implying label “New Atheism” (249). In his answer to this question, Zenk explains that it was “an external factor: the comprehensive media coverage” (250). After Dawkins had published *The God Delusion* in August 2006, the books cited above were retrospectively referred to as ‘neo - atheistic’. Once the label had been established in the public discourse, it was reproduced again and again, not only in the USA but in several other European countries as well. After its start in 2006, the debate over New Atheism reached its height between 2007 and 2009 but appears to have since calmed down. The label itself was extensively used in hundreds of articles and became a catchphrase. Leading writers, critics, journalists and even TV personalities, including Bill Maher, joined the public discourse about “New Atheism.”

Zenk reports that on September 30, 2007 Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens all gathered in person for a round table discussion. Here, they exchanged stories of the public’s reaction to their books. A recording of the two-hour debate was released with the ambitious title ‘The Four Horsemen,’ an allusion to the biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation—can be considered a result of the discourse. It is not a self-identification, but rather an ironical reflection of their continuous characterization as aggressive, belligerent, and dangerous. Interestingly, the label ‘New Atheism’ as such was completely ignored and not advertised when the recording was released (.)

The label ‘New Atheist’ is an external attribution which does *not* conform with the self-identification of the actors who are labelled as such. Zenk has recorded how they do call themselves: ‘unbeliever’, ‘non-believer’, ‘infidel’, ‘atheist’, ‘godless’, ‘anti-theist’, ‘critic of religion’—however, they neither call themselves ‘New Atheists’ nor have they ever claimed to have presented an especially innovative kind of criticism of religion. According to Zenk, the term ‘New Atheism’ has several conceptual weaknesses. Criteria to define or determine what qualifies an atheist to belong to the “school” of New Atheism are not clear, and it is ultimately a successful catchphrase and a matter of “discursive” politics (257).

### ***The God Delusion* - Overview**

For reasons of space only Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* will be reviewed in this paper. The overview of the book will be followed by the comments of Terry Eagleton.

The British ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins was already well-known to the general public before the publication of *The God Delusion*. He had written

numerous bestselling books and become a TV personality. For decades, he has popularized the Darwinian theory of evolution and highlighted the antagonism between Darwinism and creationism. He has also argued that the evolutionary theory is of superior explanatory value as compared to religious creationism and especially to 'intelligent design.' *The God Delusion* in this regard is a continuation of Dawkins' previous works. His criticism of religion encompasses all those religions in which the concept of a personal God is a central tenet. He refutes the common proofs for God's existence (Dawkins 76–109) and, then, employs Darwinism as the main argument against theism, deism what he calls, the 'God hypothesis' (113–159).

Dawkins' critique is based on a scientific and naturalistic worldview: God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice. If he existed and chose to reveal it, God himself could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favor. And even if God's existence is never proved or disproved with certainty one way or the other, available evidence and reasoning may yield an estimate of probability far from 50 percent (73).

Dawkins' critical examination of the validity of religious doctrines is ruthless. He assigns religion to an early, infantile stage of humanity, one that has outrageously overstayed its welcome childhood of our species as a brake to what one might see as an otherwise inevitable progress. . . . The point is to shake off the lingering the remnant of superstition and leap bravely forward into nineteenth century Victorian rationalism. He reflects on the effects of religion and considers the religions of the world to be dangerous (281–308). Dawkins' argument against theism is at the same time an argument for atheism. Atheism is a central 'consciousness-raising' message of the *The God Delusion*. In the first page he declares that "You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled" (1).

In his comments on *The God Delusion*, Zenk informs us that hundreds of books and articles have been written to comment on Dawkins' book. The following responses to Dawkins' claims are from Terry Eagleton's *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*:

"The New Atheism makes a fundamental mistake in considering that Christianity offers a view of the universe that rivals science. To read *Genesis* as a scientific treatise of the origin of the world is an error in genre about the kind of thing Christian belief is. He imagines that it is a pseudo science that conveniently dispenses itself from the need of evidence. But Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place. God for Christian theology is not a celestial engineer at work in on a superbly rational design. He is not a mega-manufacturer. He is rather what sustains all things in being by his love. God is the reason why there is something instead of nothing. He created out of love, not need" (5).

"Dawkins makes an error of genre or category mistake about the kind of thing Christian belief is. He imagines that it is some kind of pseudo-science, or the, if it is not that, then it conveniently dispenses itself from the need of evidence altogether . . . . But Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place"(7).

"In a sense, science does not go back far enough as theology requires although not in a chronological sense. The questions of origins cannot be answered in scientific terms. Even if we accept darwinian origin of the species, or the big bang, we cannot explain how the original cells or gases were created. Science and theology are not for the most part talking about the same kind of things not in the sense that theology does posit a Creator, but in the sense that it does not ask

question such as why there is anything in the first place, or why what we do have is actually intelligible to us” (Eagleton 11).

### **Faith, Reason, Science and Terry Eagleton**

Organized religion has caused untold misery in human history. For the most part, it has been a sad tale of bigotry, superstition, and oppressive ideology. Suffice it to mention the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Thirty Year War. During the dawn of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the church of Rome and the Pope proclaimed as true the doctrine of the heliocentric system over the evidence of Copernicus’ and Kepler’s discoveries. Their writings had to circulate secretly throughout Europe. Galileo was tried and condemned by the Church papal tribunal for his scientific discoveries. In our own culture, the church has betrayed its own revolutionary origins and shifted from the side of the poor and dispossessed to that of the rich and aggressive.

On a personal level, doubts about the belief in a Judeo-Christian God may also arise when we witness corruption or hypocrisy in religious institutions, or see a faithful believer suffer. To experience a good deal of sympathy with rationalist and humanist critics of religion would seem justifiable. Many of these critics, however, “buy their rejection of religion on the cheap ” as Terry Eagleton points out in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflection on the God Debate* (125). He goes so far as stating that when it comes to the New Testament, at least, what these critics usually write off is a worthless “caricature of Scriptures,” rooted in prejudice. Radicals, however, might discover that there are invaluable insights in the Christian Gospel. The Jewish scriptures have much to say about some vital questions--death, suffering, love, self-dispossession, and the like (Eagleton 125).

Rejection of the Christian faith may also occur because in our secular age, reason, empirical evidence, science are considered infallible. It was mainly during the Age of Enlightenment that the proofs of the existence of God became under attack and were refuted. David Hume was the champion in testing the traditional arguments based against his empirical philosophy. Religious faith was considered to have dispensed with reason altogether in the post Enlightenment periods of history.

As Eagleton explains in *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, “God is not an entity that exists in the world. . . . In this at least, believers and atheists seem to agree (111). Because we cannot prove God’s existence in a tangible, straightforward and empirical way, atheists think that believers have to put up with something less than certain known as faith. Rationalists traditionally consider faith as intelligent guesswork or speculation and regard it as inferior to indisputable knowledge (112). The certainty appropriate to faith, however, is not of the same kind as that of an empirical scientific observation. Eagleton proceeds to give us a subtle analysis of reason, empirical evidence and faith that calls into question the secular blind trust in science and its unstoppable progress. “Does empirical evidence give us the same comfort and certainty of faith?” Eagleton wonders. In the epistle to the Hebrews, Paul defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of the unseen. The virtue of hope for Christianity is a matter of an assured trust, “not of keeping one’s fingers crossed (112).” Faith should not be an argument for irrationality or belief based on impulse alone. Non-rational leaps of faith, prejudice, and unquestioning traditionalism are wrong. We should have as many good reasons as possible for what we believe. Above all, we should make a clear distinction between organized religion and the truths of the Bible.

The whole question of faith, reason and knowledge, however, is a good deal more complex than the rationalists suspect. Eagleton looks at science through history and points out its fallibility. A rational belief supported by empirical evidence, may not be true. It was rational, given their assumptions of stock knowledge for our ancestors to hold certain doctrines which later turned out to be false (*Reason, Faith, and Revolution* 125).” For instance, they thought that the sun circles the earth because it looks as though it does. Scientific claims about the world can also be true, but in a sense seem not rational. That was true in the past and still is in the present. “No doubt,” Eagleton points out, “much of what the nuclear physicists tell us is true would hardly have seemed rational to our ancestors, and scientists also stretch our sense of the nature of things to the breaking point” (131). We just have to believe that what they tell us about the Quantum Theory is true. Science, then trades on certain articles of faith like any other form of knowledge.

Do human beings appeal to faith only when they assert that they believe in God? Eagleton does not think so when he tells us that “nobody has ever seen the unconscious, yet many people believe in its existence because it is an excellent way to formulate people’s psychological behavior and reactions to their environment “(117). A great deal of what we believe, we do not know first hand; instead, we have faith in the knowledge of specialists. Scientists are in an important sense believers because all communication involves faith. There is no point for scientists to accept the evidence unless they have a degree of trust in those who have gathered it, have some criteria that count as reliable evidence, and have argued with those in the know. Furthermore, we secular liberals distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. Science, however, contradicts itself all the time, and this is known as scientific progress (125). The implicit certainties taken for granted truths that underpin all our formal reasoning are as obvious in the case of science. Science, then, trades on certain articles of faith like any other form of knowledge.

Is human reason infallible? Can we, on the basis of reason reject the proofs of the existence of God and conclude beyond any shadow of doubt, that atheists are right and have found the absolute truth that should guide our lives? Or is atheism just another form of faith which denies Christianity? In that case, a world where God is dead, human beings must come to terms with the unique and intimate experience of their end and annihilation. The intimation of truth for atheists comes to them through the unique experience of dread that leads them to the ultimate unveiling face to face with nothingness.

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