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Theism or Atheism: Which Faith?

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Theism or Atheism: Which Faith?

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 citation? (Nietzsche qtd. Bullivant and Ruse 1)

Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, open their introductory essay with this “shockingly famous” aphorism that appeared in the *The Gay Science*, a book by nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche published in 1882. The philosopher repeats the same cry about the “death of God” in another work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 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 echoed this loss of faith by calling nature “red in tooth and claw,” shrieking against God’s love (*In Memoriam* 1964). Nietzsche was not a believer. In his aphorism, he meant to say that “the western idea of a god considered as the source for all morality, value, and order in the universe had been rendered an obsolete concept of the past. 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 secular culture because theology is deeply imbedded in western tradition, and two thousand years of belief in the Christian God cannot be so easily eradicated.

Atheism is at times a hotly contested subject requiring a discourse where metaphysics and transcendence are no longer present, but the debate between believers and atheists should not be a mere matter of academic concern and interest. Bullivant and Ruse point out that “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” (1). The opposing arguments between faith and atheism rest mainly on the dichotomy between faith and reason. In our secular culture, faith and reason are mutually exclusive, and science has taken primacy over theology.

Atheism, in general, is the critique and denial of metaphysical beliefs in God and spiritual beings. In common discourse and also in scholarly research, the word “atheism” may be used according to 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 13).

In this paper the definition adopted is number one: a belief that there is no God or gods. “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 as belief in the Judeo-Christian God, and atheism. In our secular age, the belief in such a God is considered merely one option among others. Frequently, it is an embattled and contentious choice to embrace Christianity in the post-Christian society. However, this particular faith has so deeply influenced the West, as we know it, for the past 2000 years, that I consider it a worthy theistic juxtaposition to atheistic patterns of belief.

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 Augustine of Hippo (345-430) and by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in his *Summa Theologica*. The most important of these arguments are the teleological, ontological, and cosmological arguments. 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 come prior to understanding God. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes, “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (Hebrews 11.1). The first step is to have faith and believe in the existence of God and the words of the Scriptures in order to begin to understand these sacred writings. “I believe in order to understand” is the principle that guided the early theologians in

the formulation of their arguments. They described the Christian God as 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. Furthermore, theology is not science. As a result, the traditional arguments for the existence of God have been at the center of heated debates. Because faith plays a far greater role in originating and sustaining the arguments for God's existence, the atheist critique based on reason and empirical evidence, raises the question as to whether *faith* —understood as adoption of beliefs -- should retain the positive status that religious apologists have accorded it. David Hume, generally regarded as the founder of Empiricism in the eighteenth century, attacked and refuted the traditional arguments in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Recently, God's existence has been fiercely attacked by the New Atheists Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Demonstrating the weaknesses of these arguments is crucial for establishing the case for atheism.

The Argument from Design

The teleological argument or argument from design aims at proving the existence of God from the appearance of design in nature and is also known as Aquinas' fifth proof of the existence of God. It focuses on plan, purpose, intention, and design and concludes with the existence of a designer. For Aquinas, that designer is God. The Scriptures contain language that

suggests evidence of divine design in the world. Psalms 19:1 of the Old Testament says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handy work.” Similarly, the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans in the New Testament states, “For what can be known about God is plain. . . . Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1.19-21). The argument for design was thought particularly convincing in the eighteenth century, when philosophers and thinkers inherited two centuries of scientific enquiry into the complexities of nature yet still lacked adequate scientific knowledge to contemplate the 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 on a walk and having to conclude from an inspection of its properties that it must have been created by an intelligent agent. “But if we think a watch must be designed by a purposeful agency, how much more so the eye,” Paley wrote, “would be alone sufficient to support the conclusion which we draw from it, as to the necessity of an intelligent Creator” (Barash 416).

This argument is forcefully criticized by David Hume. The philosopher rejects the design argument and maintains 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 if it could be established that natural phenomena could not have been other than deliberately designed, the most that this could imply is a designer. The clockwork concept of the universe was accepted by most deists of the eighteenth century, who, lacking alternative

scientific explanations for the emergence of a world, rested content with the idea of an absent God who had since ceased to be involved with the universe he created or perhaps even ceased to exist.

A more contemporary form of the design argument invokes ‘cosmic fine-tuning.’ David Barash, evolutionary biologist and psychologist, 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 (415).

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, however, does not demonstrate purpose or design. It is a lucky or unlucky outcome of how things happen in fact to be. Mawson concludes: “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” (49).

The scientific view of this argument maintains that it is a matter of chance and evolution that the universe has the fine-tuned properties needed to sustain life.

The Ontological Argument

An ontological proof 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 proof in support of the existence of God 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 which no greater can be conceived," and argues that such a 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. It seems evident that Anselm’s argument cannot logically be concluded with the existence of God, as the most perfect or greatest being in the universe. The being hypothesized by Anselm might still be less than perfect and not at all worthy to be called God. A.C. Grayling, British philosopher and author, observes, “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 can be 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 always been mounted even in medieval times. Thomas Aquinas rejects the argument on the basis that humans cannot know God's nature. David Hume also offers empirical objections, criticizing the lack of rigorous reasoning and rejecting the idea that anything can exist by necessity.

The Cosmological Argument

Also called argument from causation, the cosmological argument was first formulated by Thomas Aquinas as the second proof of the existence of God. It uses a general pattern of argumentation that makes an inference from particular observations about the universe (cosmos) to the existence of a unique being, generally identified as God. Among these initial facts and observations, there are particular beings or events in the universe that are causally linked to antecedent conditions and circumstances. From these facts, philosophers infer that there must be a first uncaused cause in order to halt a regress of causes going back infinitely. The best explanation is that a first or sustaining cause, a necessary being, an unmoved mover, exists that caused and sustains the universe. The unmoved mover is God. This conclusion is supported in the Scriptures in Exodus 3.14 when God reveals his name to Moses: “ ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘I AM HAS SENT ME TO YOU’ ”.

The NKJV commentary explains, “THE ONE who spoke to Moses declared Himself to be the Eternal One --uncaused and independent. Only the Creator of all things can call Himself I AM in the absolute sense. All other creatures are indebted to Him for their existence” (421). Matthew Henry agrees with this comment: “He is he self-existent; he has his being of himself, and no dependence on any other” (79).

Defenders of the causal principle say that without it, we cannot make the universe intelligible, but a number of logical objections to this principle are possible. One is to dispute the necessity of a first cause. The “unmovable mover” may just be an expression of the human mind needing to have explanations about why there is a world and how it began and continues. In the light of our ignorance about the why and how of the 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.

According to David Hume, “If you explain each individual, contingent thing in the universe, you have thereby explained the universe, and it is a fallacy to suppose that you still have to explain the existence of the universe taken as a whole”(qtd. Grayling 46). Hume also calls 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”(qtd. Grayling 46)? Contemporary cosmologists use contemporary scientific developments to pose the possibility that the universe has its own reason for existing.

Argument 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 his *Pensées* published in 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 his existence is a benefit for all eternity. If there is not, one has not lost much by believing it anyway. So one should believe. Grayling points out that this theory would now be defined 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 (48).

Some theistic critics argue that this pragmatic ground for belief is too self-serving and does not express the love that true faith in God produces. “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 major criticism is that Pascal’s argument does not ultimately prove God’s existence.

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 pervaded with this history. In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato put into the mouth of Socrates the following question: “Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it? (Plato qtd.

Wielenberg 96). 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 tradition, but God adds love to the notion of command so that the context in which the commands are embedded is a covenant by which God blesses us. We are given a route towards our highest good which is union with God. In the Gospel, Jesus explains the two essential commandments: love of God and the love of neighbor “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ / This is the first and greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ / All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”(Matthew 22.37-40). This love extends to the forgiveness of sinners who are welcome to join Jesus (Mark 2.17). The theological idea that moral commandments are wrapped in God's covenantal love towards his believers is often omitted from atheists' arguments against religion as a source of morality.

There is a long tradition of atheists' viewing religion as encouraging irrational thought and division and promoting the “immoral” persecution of non-believers. 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). Erik Wielenberg, notes, “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, the New Atheists believe that objective moral truths can be reduced to scientific truths about the natural world. Wielenberg, philosophy professor of ethics, proposes another option worth considering. He believes that there must be some foundational truths that have no further ground, foundation, source, or explanation beyond themselves. We might think of such truths as “metaphysical axioms” (99). According to this view, the foundation of morality would consist of axiomatic, moral truths. For instance, the principle that inflicting terrible harm on another for no good reason is morally wrong seems a good moral axiom to Wielenberg. The question remains as to by whom and how these axioms are established. Evil human beings can rise to power, formulate evil axioms, and convince whole nations that they are the absolute moral imperatives to be put into action. Hitler, for example, imposed on the German nation the “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 without the option of forgiveness. Evangelism and the spreading of the word of Jesus’ teachings and forgiveness would help to improve this dichotomy. 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. Bullivant and Ruse cite Hans Kūng, the Catholic theologian, as stating that the “the problem of evil is the rock of atheism”(4). 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 begins with the early patristic and Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine offers the most inspiring analysis of evil in his *Confessions* and in *City of God*. In his youth before converting to Christianity, Augustine had been a Manichaeon. This dualistic school of thought, similar to Gnosticism, maintains 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, he could not be limited by an opposing principle of evil (*Confessions* 85). He then formulates a “deprivation theory” and regards 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 and disables human beings. Augustine takes this line mainly because he wants to argue against the Manichaeans. For them evil is a force or substance which invades us from the outside. On the contrary, Augustine argues that evil is not a kind of force at all: “It is merely the lack of something good” (*Confessions* 85). Evil does not spring from some alien power beyond us. It springs from within us because it is the effect of human freedom and our ancestors choice to disobey God. Original sin “was the first

defect, the first lack of that nature which having turned from Him was doomed . . . to have so much less of being that it was bound to be wretched” (*City of God* 251). Evil, therefore, has no positive nature. What we call evil is simply “the inclination of what has more being for what has less being” (*City of God* 217). It is the result of a historical fall from a perfect original state. If evil is nothing in itself, Augustine concludes, then not even an all powerful God could have created it.

In his book *On Evil*, Terry Eagleton, a British philosopher, 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, he argues as follows:

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 (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 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. According to John Hick, one of the most important and influential philosophers of religion of the second half of the twentieth century, “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” (qtd. Petersen 80). It is in the face of challenges, hardships, temptations, and even pain and suffering that we have the opportunity to grow or fail spiritually as persons. Michael Petersen, professor of philosophy of religion, reports serious objections to the idea of soul-making through suffering and evil. Some physical evils, for example, “provide counter-examples to soul-making by destroying or debilitating persons to the extent 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 the Bible and theology. 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”(qtd. Petersen 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) instead of Scriptures and doctrine.

New Atheism

The term ‘New Atheism’ can be characterized as an umbrella term, which originated in the public discourse of the Western world during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and which 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, German philosopher and author, 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 subsided. 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.”

On September 30, 2007, at the outset of their popular success, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens all gathered in person for a round table discussion described by Zenk as “The Curious Case of the Four Horsemen.” Here, Zenk reports, 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. This title 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 (254).

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 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’ are not clear. Ultimately New Atheism appears to be 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 publishing his bestseller. He popularized the Darwinian

theory of evolution and debunked religious creationism on TV. *The God Delusion* in this regard is a continuation of Dawkins' previous works. In this book, Dawkins refutes the common arguments for God's existence (76–109) and employs Darwinism as the main argument against theism, the "God hypothesis" (113–159). His 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 analysis of the validity of religious doctrines is scathing. He assigns religion to an early, infantile stage of humanity, one that has outrageously overstayed its welcome. The point is to shake off the lingering 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, "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 about the book. The following responses to Dawkins' claims are by Terry Eagleton:

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 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).

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

Conclusion: Faith, Reason and Science

In our secular culture, reason and science have become more important than faith and God. Belief has to survive in a culture of skepticism which gravely weakens them. Many people consider themselves non-religious or atheists. They believe that moral issues are highly complex and are suspicious of any individual institutions that claim moral authority over the lives of

others. Timothy Keller, American pastor and Christian apologist, in *The Prodigal God* points out: “On a personal level, doubts about the belief in a Judeo-Christian God may also arise when we witness corruption, hypocrisy, and prejudice in religious institutions. Many of these skeptics, however, buy their rejection of religion on the cheap . . . and what they usually write off is a worthless caricature of Scriptures, rooted in prejudice” (125). In the research completed for this paper, I found that attacks against belief are in most cases launched against “the church” as a human and therefore fallible religious institution. The biblical writings are for the most part ignored or misinterpreted. Dawkins’ book contains inaccuracies and does not acknowledge important historical facts that would invalidate his own theories. A careful reading of the Bible might reveal to radicals that “there are invaluable insights in the Christian Gospel, and the Jewish Scriptures have much to say about some vital questions--death, suffering, love, self-dispossession, and the like” (*Reason* 125).

Rejection of the Christian faith may also occur because in our secular age, reason, empirical evidence and science are considered infallible whereas faith is considered as guesswork and regarded as inferior to indisputable scientific knowledge. The certainty appropriate to faith, however, is not of the same kind as that of an empirical scientific observation. As I have previously written, in the epistle to the Hebrews, the Apostle Paul defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of the unseen (Hebrews 11.1). The virtue of hope for Christianity is a matter of an assured trust, “not of keeping one’s fingers crossed (*Reason 112*).” Faith and reason should not be categorically separated. Believing in the Scriptures as well 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 teachings of Jesus Christ.

The whole question of faith, reason, and knowledge 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. For example, it was rational, given the assumptions of stock knowledge for our ancestors, to hold certain doctrines which later turned out to be false. They thought that the sun circles the earth because empirical evidence indicates that the sun moves and not the earth. The scientific geocentric claim is true but does not seem rational. As Eagleton points out, “Science contradicts itself all the time, and we accept these contradictions as scientific progress” (*Reason 25*).

What is then the difference between humans who live in a world where God is not dead and have faith “in things not seen” and humans who just believe in the here and now and can only appeal to their own reason and scientific progress? In a world where God is dead, humans must come to terms with the unique and intimate experience of their end and annihilation. I hope this paper has given its readers some food for thought on the question of God’s existence or non-existence as well as the cultural assumptions and presuppositions to believe in an atheistic or theistic world. At the very least, we hopefully understand that both faith and reason play a prevalent role in informing both ends of these beliefs.

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