

# The Twilight of Atheism

ALISTER E. MCGRATH

**Alister E. McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University.**

It is a very great pleasure to be able to give this lecture tonight. I have chosen a title for the lecture that is perhaps a little provocative—partly because I believe it will get a good discussion going afterwards. But let me begin by telling you a little about myself, before we get down to the real meat of this intriguing subject.

If I had been told that I was to be giving such a lecture this evening when I was growing up in Northern Ireland back in the 1960s, I would have been very surprised for two reasons. First, my horizons were rather limited. Travelling more than 20 kilometres was a major adventure. We did this once a year, when we took our annual holidays at such exotic locations as Duffy's hotel in Dunfanaghy, County Donegal. The first time I travelled to London, I nearly died with excitement. It was so much more exciting than the Donaghadee Donkey Derby. So to be in *Sydney*—well, you can see my point.

But the second reason is perhaps more interesting. Like many who grew up during the late 1960s, I was an atheist. Northern Ireland was noted for its religious tensions, which exploded into violence while I was in my final years at school, living in Belfast. It seemed obvious to me that religion was the cause of violence, just as it seemed equally clear that the elimination of religion would lead to peace. I was into Marxism at that time—again, like many others—and found its predictions of the triumph of socialism and the demise of religion intellectually compelling. And, more than that, I was studying the natural sciences, which seemed to me to leave no conceptual space for God. God was a redundancy, a relic from the past that seemed to have no place in the future of things.

Now atheists come in different sorts. There is the rather gracious type who doesn't personally believe in God, but is very happy if other people find the idea meaningful. And then there is the rather aggressive, intolerant sort, who regards people who believe in God as fools, knaves and liars, and wants to rid the world of them. I have to tell you that I was in that second category.

Part of the reasoning that led me to this conclusion was based on the natural sciences. I had specialised in mathematics and science during high school in preparation for going to Oxford University to study chemistry in detail. While my primary motivation for studying the sciences was the fascinating insights into the wonderful world of nature they allowed, I also found them to be a highly convenient ally in my critique of religion. Atheism and the natural sciences seemed to be coupled together by the most rigorous of intellectual bonds. And there things rested, until I arrived at Oxford in October 1971.

Chemistry, and then molecular biophysics, proved to be intellectually exhilarating. At times, I found myself overwhelmed with an incandescent enthusiasm as more and more of the complexities of the natural world seemed to fall into place. Yet, alongside this growing delight in the natural sciences, which exceeded anything I could have hoped for, I found myself rethinking my atheism. It is not easy for anyone to subject their core beliefs to criticism; my reason for doing so was the growing realisation that things were not quite as straightforward as I had once thought. A number of factors had converged to bring about what I suppose I could reasonably describe as a crisis of faith.

Atheism, I began to realise, rested on a less-than-satisfactory evidential basis. The arguments that had once seemed bold, decisive and conclusive increasingly turned out to be circular, tentative and uncertain. The opportunity to talk to Christians about their faith revealed to me that I understand relatively little about Christianity, which I had come to know chiefly through the not-always-accurate descriptions of its leading critics, such as Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx. Perhaps

more importantly, I began to realise that my assumption of the automatic and inexorable link between the natural sciences and atheism was rather naïve and uninformed.

My doubts about the intellectual foundations of atheism began to coalesce into a realization that atheism was actually a belief system, where I had assumed it to be a factual statement about reality. I also discovered that I knew far less about Christianity than I had assumed. As I began to read Christian books and listen to Christian friends explaining what they actually believed, it gradually became clear to me that I had rejected a religious stereotype. I had some major rethinking to do. So in the end, I turned my back on one faith and embraced another. Although I am no longer an atheist, I retain my respect for it, and continue to be interested in atheism as a major belief system that deserves careful, respectful, yet critical attention.

In this talk, I thought that I would look at some areas of interest in relation to atheism, especially in relation to the cultural changes that are taking place in the west at the moment, which we often refer to loosely as ‘postmodernism’. But let me begin by looking at some classic areas of debate which remain intriguing. Let’s consider three familiar atheist arguments. There are, of course, others, and I would be very happy to explore any of these afterwards in our time of discussion. On the streets, the three big objections to religion tend to be these: religion leads to evil; God is a consoling delusion for losers; and science has disproved God. Let’s have a look at these.

## Religion leads to evil

When I was growing up in Northern Ireland during the 1960s, one of the things that distressed me most was religious violence. For many, religion is something that creates conflict. It brings violence. Wouldn’t the world be a better place without it? I certainly thought so as a young man. I could easily empathise with John Lennon’s song, ‘Imagine’, which asks us to imagine a world without religion. Get rid of this, and the world would be safer and kinder. It’s an argument that you still find in some older atheist writings.

There’s no doubt that religion does lead people to do some very bad things. I don’t think any of us here tonight would disagree with that. But it’s not the real issue. We all know that extremism results from a number of sources. When atheism came into power in the Soviet Union and its satellites, some appalling outrages ensued.

Once, it was possible to argue that religion alone was the source of the world’s evils. Look at the record of violence of the Spanish Inquisition, or the oppression of the French people in the 1780s under the Roman Catholic church and the Bourbon monarchy. The list could be extended endlessly to make the same powerful moral point: wherever religion exercises power, it oppresses and corrupts, using violence to enforce its own beliefs and agendas. Atheism argued that it abolished this tyranny by getting rid of what ultimately caused it: faith in God.

Yet that argument now seems tired, stale and unconvincing. It was credible in the 19<sup>th</sup> century precisely because atheism had never enjoyed the power and influence once exercised by religion. But all that has changed. Atheism’s innocence has now evaporated. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, atheism managed to grasp the power that had hitherto eluded it. And it proved just as fallible, just as corrupt and just as oppressive as anything that had gone before it. Stalin’s death squads were just as murderous as their religious antecedents. Those who dreamed of freedom in the new atheist paradise often found themselves counting trees in Siberia, or confined to the Gulags—and they were the fortunate ones.

Like many back in the late 1960s, I was quite unaware of the darker side of atheism, as practiced in the Soviet Union. I had assumed that religion would die away naturally, in the face of the compelling intellectual arguments and moral vision offered by atheism. I failed to ask what might happen if people did not want to have their faith eliminated. A desire to eliminate belief in God at the *intellectual* or *cultural* level has the most unfortunate tendency to encourage others to do this at the *physical* level. Lenin, frustrated by the Russian people’s obstinate refusal to espouse atheism voluntarily and naturally after the Russian Revolution, enforced it, arguing in a famous letter of March 1922 that the “protracted use of brutality” was the necessary means of achieving this goal.

Some of the greatest atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were committed by regimes which espoused atheism, often with a fanaticism that some naïve western atheists seem to think is reserved only for religious people. As Martin Amis stressed in *Koba the Dread*, we now know what really happened under Stalin, even if it was unfashionable to talk about this in progressive circles in the west until the 1990s. The firing squads that Stalin sent to liquidate the Buddhist monks of Mongolia gained at least something of their fanaticism and hatred of religion from those who told them that religion generated fanaticism and hatred.

The real truth here seems to be that identified by Nietzsche at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: there is something about human nature that makes it capable of being inspired by what it believes to be right to do both wonderful and appalling things. Neither atheism or religion may be at fault; it might be some deeply troubling flaw in human nature itself. It is an uncomfortable thought, but one that demands careful reflection.

Yet many people still believe that faith in God is pathological, basing themselves on Sigmund Freud. Now that the virtual absence of experimental foundation of Freud's approach has become widely known, fresh energy has been directed to the question of what empirical difference faith makes to human wellbeing and longevity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this evidence points in a significantly different direction. Without wishing to overstate things, the evidence clearly points to religion being a good thing for most people. So yet another stereotype bites the dust.

## God is a consoling delusion for losers

A second argument that many of us have encountered runs like this: God is just an invention corresponding to a human desire. We want there to be a God—perhaps to console us—and so we invent him. It's a great philosophy for suckers and losers. This argument has its roots in the works of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) who argues that the idea of God arises understandably, but mistakenly, from human experience. Religion in general is simply the projection of human nature onto an illusory transcendent plane. Human beings mistakenly objectify their own feelings. They interpret their experience as an awareness of God, whereas it is in fact nothing other than an experience of themselves. God is the longing of the human soul personified. This idea was developed by Karl Marx, who argued that belief in God arose from sociological factors, and by Sigmund Freud, who argued that it arose from psychological pressures. Neither, I must add, had any scientific warrant for doing so!

So what might we say in response? First, it is reasonable to ask whether all human beings do indeed long for the existence of God. Take, for example, an extermination camp commandant during the Second World War. Would there not be excellent reasons for supposing that he might hope that God does *not* exist, given what might await him on the day of judgement? And might not his atheism itself be a wish-fulfilment?

Second, Feuerbach's critique of religion is just as effective a criticism of atheism. He argues that the wish is father to the thought. In that human beings wish for God, their longing is satisfied by their invention of that God by a process of projection. On the basis of Feuerbach's analysis, it is not simply Christianity, but atheism itself, which can be regarded as a projection of human hopes. This resonates with much sociological and historical analysis of the rise of atheism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which has emphasised how so many longed for a godless world—and chose to create one, in which reality was adapted to their longings.

The Polish poet Milosz Czeslaw (born 1911), who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980, has an interesting point to make here. Having found himself stifled intellectually, first under Nazism and then under Stalinism, Czeslaw had no doubt as to the ultimate source of despair and tyranny in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a remarkable essay entitled, 'The Discreet Charm of Nihilism', he pointed out that it was not religion, but its nihilist antithesis, which lay at the root of the century's oppressive totalitarianism:

Religion, opium for the people! To those suffering pain, humiliation, illness and serfdom, it promised a reward in afterlife. And now we are witnessing a transformation. A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death—the huge solace of thinking that, for our betrayals, greed, cowardice and murders, we are not going to be judged.

The Marxist creed has now been inverted. The true opium of modernity is the belief that there is *no* God so that humans are free to do precisely as they please. Life can become our privately scripted and controlled story without any impeding thought of ‘a scale to weigh sins and good deeds’.

## Science has disproved God

But the third point is perhaps more serious. There is a logical error in Feuerbach’s analysis. As has often been pointed out, it is certainly true that nothing actually exists because I wish it to. But does this mean that, because I want something to be true, it cannot be? Hardly!

Let me now move on to a third argument, often encountered in some populist atheist writing. Science, we are told, has disproved God. The most vigorous intellectual critique of religion now comes from atheist scientist Richard Dawkins, who has established himself as atheism’s leading representative in the public arena. Yet a close reading of his works—which I try to provide in my book, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*—suggests that his arguments rest more on blatant misrepresentation, fuzzy logic and aggressive rhetoric than on serious evidence-based argument. My Oxford colleague Keith Ward has made this point repeatedly, noting in particular Dawkins’s “systematic mockery and demonising of competing views, which are always presented in the most naïve light”. But the sciences cannot be abused in this way. As America’s leading evolutionary biologist, the late Stephen Jay Gould, insisted, the natural sciences simply cannot adjudicate on the God-question. If the sciences are used to defend *either* atheism *or* religious beliefs, they are *misused*.

Dawkins argues that faith “means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence”. It is an interesting definition, but it is not how any philosopher of religion, Christian writer or Christian creed understands it. As is so often the case, Dawkins sets up a straw man and proceeds to demolish it. The fact that it bears no relation to religious reality is overlooked, presumably on the basis of the assumption that Dawkins’s readers share his anti-religious views and his marked ignorance of basic religious ideas. Again, he makes the most ludicrous statements, such as, “Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument”. Has he not read, or even heard of, writers such as C. S. Lewis, Richard Swinburne, Nicholas Wolterstorff or Alvin Plantinga, to mention four very obvious 20th-century figures who regard the establishment of a core intellectual foundation to faith as essential, and who, in the judgement of many, have done precisely that? I do not expect Dawkins to agree with them, but at least he ought to acknowledge their existence and interact with them.

The real issue is whether the sciences has limits beyond which they cannot be pressed. The calibration of the field of competency of any discipline is immensely important, and Dawkins appears to adopt a naïve and utterly simplistic approach to this question. A very different approach is found with Sir Peter Medawar, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1960:

The existence of a limit to science is, however, made clear by its inability to answer childlike elementary questions having to do with first and last things—questions such as ‘How did everything begin?’; ‘What are we all here for?’; ‘What is the point of living?’

As he points out, the exaggeration of the scope of the sciences simply generates incredulity and scepticism:

There is no quicker way for a scientist to bring discredit upon himself and upon his profession than roundly to declare—particularly when no declaration of any kind is called for—that

science knows, or soon will know, the answers to all questions worth asking, and that questions which do not admit a scientific answer are in some way non-questions or ‘pseudo-questions’ that only simpletons ask and only the gullible profess to be able to answer.

There is, of course, a deeper philosophical point here, which is raised by many philosophers of science, and resisted by those wanting to peddle a simplistic atheism, rather than deal with the important intellectual questions associated with the limits of science. It is this: the sciences are, by their very nature, incapable of answering ‘big picture’ questions. As Gilbert Harman pointed out some years ago, these questions simply cannot be answered by science, and are not capable of the kind of ‘proof’ that they offer. Instead, we must use techniques such as ‘inference to the best explanation’—which cannot offer any degree of certainty, partly on account of the malleability of the evidence, partly on account of the universal problem of the ‘underdetermination of theory by evidence’, and partly because of the lack of any agreement on what criteria must be agreed to determine which of many competing theories is the ‘best’.

This is not a problem for the scientist. It is, however, a problem for those who wish to argue that the sciences necessitate atheism when they so clearly do nothing of the sort. The simple fact, as T. H. Huxley pointed out in the 1870s, is the sciences are capable of being interpreted in theistic and atheistic ways. They don’t necessitate either, but both views can be sustained. In his view, the best approach was agnosticism—a principled refusal to reach a judgement because the evidence is not sufficient to reach any decision on the question of God.

And that’s where most philosophers are today. Belief in God cannot be proved; it cannot be disproved. If you are going to commit yourself to either view, you do so as a matter of faith. The agnostic’s answer is that no safe judgement can be reached on either side. This is devastatingly honest but it is not the answer that atheist apologists want.

To suggest that atheism is a belief system or faith will irritate some of its followers. For them, atheism is not a belief; it is the Truth. There is no god, and those who believe otherwise are deluded, foolish or liars (to borrow from the breezy rhetoric of Britain’s favourite atheist, the scientific populariser turned atheist propagandist, Richard Dawkins). But it’s now clear that the atheist case against God has stalled. Surefire philosophical arguments against God have turned out to be circular and self-referential.

Faith is infantile, Dawkins tells us—just fine for cramming into the minds of impressionable young children, but outrageously immoral and intellectually risible in the case of adults. We’ve grown up now, and we need to move on. Why should we believe things that can’t be scientifically proved? Faith in God, Dawkins argues, is just like believing in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy; when you grow up, you grow out of it.

This is a schoolboy argument that has accidentally found its way into a grown-up discussion—just fine for a schoolboy debate, but hopelessly out-of-place in the real world. It is as amateurish as it is unconvincing. There is no serious empirical evidence that people regard God, Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy as being in the same category. I stopped believing in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy when I was about six years old. After being an atheist for some years, I discovered God when I was 18, and have never regarded this as some kind of infantile regression. As I noticed while researching my book, *The Twilight of Atheism*, a large number of people come to believe in God in later life—when they are ‘grown up’. I have yet to meet anyone who came to believe in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy late in life.

If Dawkins’s rather simplistic argument has any plausibility, it requires a real analogy between God and Santa Claus to exist—which it clearly does not. Everyone knows that people do not regard belief in God as belonging to the same category as these childish beliefs. Dawkins, of course, argues that they both represent belief in non-existent entities. But this represents a very elementary confusion over which is the conclusion and which the presupposition of an argument.

Undeterred, Dawkins introduced another pseudoscientific idea into the debate about God. God, he announced, is a highly contagious virus of the mind, which infects people in much the same way as a malignant virus infects a computer and corrupts its capacity to work properly. There is, of course, no evidence that belief in God—or any other belief, for that matter, including atheism—is a

‘virus of the mind’. Nobody has ever seen one, and nobody expects to. In the end, Dawkins ends up making his own subjective judgement the criterion of what ideas count as imaginary mental viruses, and which are legitimate, trustworthy ideas. It’s not a serious argument, so I will give it no more time, but one encounters it occasionally.

Now I think we need to turn to some more general considerations. Let me begin by making the point that the cultural appeal of atheism often seems to be determined by its social context, rather than being intrinsic to its ideas. Where religion is seen to oppress, confine, deprive and limit, atheism may well be seen as offering humanity a larger vision of freedom. But where religion anchors itself in the hearts and minds of ordinary people, is sensitive to their needs and concerns, and offers them a better future, the atheist critique is unpersuasive. In the past, atheism offered a vision which captured the imagination of western Europe. We all need to dream—to imagine a better existence—and atheism empowered people to overthrow the past, and create a brave new world.

The appeal of atheism as a public philosophy came to an end in 1989 with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Atheism, once seen as a liberator, was now cordially loathed as an oppressor. The beliefs were pretty much the same as before; their appeal, however, was very different. As the Soviet empire crumbled at a dizzying rate in the 1990s, those who had once been ‘liberated’ from God rushed to embrace him once more. Islam is resurgent in central Soviet Asia, and Orthodoxy in Russia itself. Harsh and bitter memories of state-enforced atheism linger throughout Eastern Europe, leading to major implications for the religious and cultural future of the European Union as former Soviet bloc nations achieve membership.

Where people enjoy their religion, seeing it as something life-enhancing and identity-giving, they are going to find atheism unattractive. The recent surge of evidence-based studies demonstrating the positive impact of religion on human wellbeing has yet to be assimilated by atheist writers. It is only where religion is seen as the enemy that atheism’s demands for its elimination will be taken seriously. Atheism’s problem is that its own baleful legacy in the former Soviet Union has led many to view it as the enemy, and religion as its antidote. In eastern Europe, atheism is widely seen as politically discredited and imaginatively exhausted.

But what of western Europe, which has known state churches and a religious establishment, but never the state atheism that casts such a dark shadow over its future in the east? Surely atheism can hope for greater things here? The west, having been spared first-hand experience of atheism as the authoritarian (anti)religion of the establishment, still has some vague, lingering memories of a religious past that atheism could build on. Yet there are real problems here. For a new challenge to atheism has arisen within the west, which atheist writers have been slow to recognise and reluctant to engage: postmodernism.

Historians of ideas often note that atheism is the ideal religion of modernity, the cultural period ushered in by the Enlightenment. But that has been displaced by postmodernity, which rejects precisely those aspects of modernity which made atheism the obvious choice as the preferred modern religion. Postmodernity has thus spawned post-atheism. Yet atheism seems to be turning a blind eye to this massive cultural shift, and its implications for the future of its faith.

In marked contrast, gallons of ink have been spilled and immense intellectual energy expended by Christian writers in identifying and meeting the challenges of postmodernism. Two are of particular relevance here. First, in general terms, postmodernism is intensely suspicious of totalising worldviews which claim to offer a global view of reality. Christian apologists have realised that there is a real challenge here. If Christianity claims to be *right* where others are wrong, it has to make this credible to a culture which is strongly resistant to any such claims to be telling the whole truth. Second, again in general terms, postmodernity regards purely materialist approaches to reality as inadequate, and has a genuine interest in recovering ‘the spiritual dimension to life’. For Christian apologists, this is a problem, as this new interest in spirituality has no necessary connection with organised religion of any kind, let alone Christianity. How can the churches connect up with such aspirations?

Atheism has been slow—even reluctant—to engage with either of these developments, tending to dismiss them as irrational and superstitious (Richard Dawkins is a case in point). Yet it is easy to see why the rise of postmodernity poses a significantly greater threat to atheism than to Christianity. Atheism offers precisely the kind of ‘metanarrative’ that postmodern thinkers hold to leading to intolerance and oppression. Its uncompromising and definitive denial of God is now seen as arrogant and repressive, rather than as principled and moral.

For intellectual historians, atheism is a superb example of a modern metanarrative—a totalising view of things, locked into the world view of the Enlightenment. So what happens when this same Enlightenment is charged by its postmodern critics with having fostered oppression and violence, and having colluded with totalitarianism—when a new interest in spirituality surges through Western culture—when the cultural pressures that once made atheism seem attractive are displaced by others that make it seem intolerant, unimaginative and disconnected from spiritual realities? It is an interesting question. I don’t see many atheists rushing in to engage with it.

The postmodern interest in spirituality is much more troubling for atheism than for Christianity. For the Christian, the problem is how to relate or convert an interest in spirituality to the church or to Jesus Christ. But at least it points in the right direction. For the atheist, it represents a quasi-superstitious reintroduction of spiritual ideas, leading postmodernity backward into religious beliefs that atheism thought it had exorcised. Atheism seems curiously disconnected from this shift in cultural mood. It seems that atheists are graying, inhabiting a dying modern world, while around them a new interest in the forbidden fruit of the spiritual realm is gaining the upper hand—above all amongst young people. What, I wonder, are the implications of such developments for the future of atheism in the west?

Anyway, postmodern culture’s criterion of acceptability is not ‘Is it right?’ but ‘Does it work?’ ‘Is it relevant?’ The old arguments about the ‘truth’ of belief in God or atheism are stalemated, and increasingly irrelevant in our new cultural mood. The simple fact is that religious belief works for many, many people, giving direction, purpose and stability to their lives (witness the massive sales and impact of Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life*). Atheism, already having failed to land the knockout punch by proving that God does not exist, has not even begun to engage with this deeper question; instead it mumbles weary platitudes about mythical ‘God-viruses’ or mass ‘God-delusions’.

So what is the cumulative effect of these straws in the wind? Is atheism going into decline? I see no reason why atheism cannot regain some of its lost ground—but not as a public philosophy, commanding wide assent and demanding privileged access to the corridors of power. It will do so as a private belief system, respectful of the beliefs of others. Instead of exulting in disrespect and contempt for religious belief, atheism will see itself as one option among many, entitled to the same respect that it accords to others. The most significant, dynamic and *interesting* critic of western Christianity is no longer atheism, but a religious alternative, offering a rival vision of God: Islam. It’s not what the atheist visionaries of the past wanted, but it seems to be the way things are going.

## For further reading

### WORKS BY THE LECTURER OF RELEVANCE

Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.

Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

Alister E. McGrath, “Spirituality and well-being: some recent discussions.” *Brain: A Journal of Neurology* 129 (2006): 278-82.

### WORKS THAT ARE MORE BROADLY OF INTEREST:

David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*. London: Croom Helm, 1988.

- Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Peter Gay, *A Godless Jew : Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.