

Alister McGrath

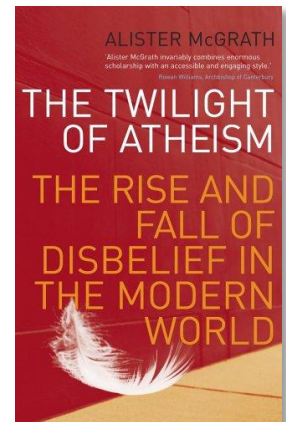
The Twilight of Atheism – the rise and fall of disbelief in the modern world

Rider 2004

Notes by Alison Morgan, July 2007

Introduction

Churchill, Harvard 1943 – ‘the empires of the future will be empires of the imagination’ ie ideologies. The greatest such empire of the human mind is atheism. In 1960 half the world was nominally atheist. ‘The idea that there is no God captured human minds and imaginations, offering intellectual liberation and spiritual inspiration to generations that saw themselves imprisoned, mentally and often.. physically, by the religious past.’



1. The Dawn of the Golden Age of atheism

Atheism flourished between 1789 (fall of Bastille) and 1989 (fall of Berlin wall). Fall of Bastille symbolised the viability and creativity of a godless world; the fall of the Berlin wall symbolised a growing recognition of the uninhabitability of such a place.

Atheism captured the imagination of an era. It is one of the greatest achievements of the human intellect; it was an intellectual revolution, tracing its history back to the Greeks.

- Homer, c900BC, depicted the gods as corrupt and vain; human beings writ large, the immortal counterparts to human weakness. His story shaped growing Greek concerns over the morality of their gods. Term atheist came into being – one who denies the traditional religion. This is the sense in which the first Christians were called atheists. Lucretius claimed religion merely evoked terror.
- By 17th century belief in God was embedded in Western culture. But wealth and power of church seemed increasingly scandalous; attacking church was seen as the way to break the bondage with which it was associated. So ‘the historical origins of modern atheism lie primarily in an extended criticism of the power and status of the church, rather than in any asserted attractions of a godless world’.
- 18th century conceived a brave new world, free from the bonds of tradition. Most British intellectuals had lost patience with traditional religion; but few declared themselves atheist; intellectuals preferred to make fun of the church rather than undermine its ideas – eg Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Pietism and Wesley effectively acted as guardians of the Christian faith, ensuring only the institution was criticised. This was not the case in Europe.

2. The French Revolution

Fall of Bastille was seized on as icon of liberation of humanity from tyranny and superstition at the hands of church and state, symbolising the sweeping away of an old order based on superstition and oppression. Atheism became conceivable.

- Fr Jean Meslier was one of the first serious advocates of atheism in France; he denounced church as a fraud, based on ludicrous ideas, with dishonest priesthood, serving a credulous people.
- Rousseau, Diderot and Voltaire were Deists; Voltaire advocated the reconstruction of religion on the basis of the supreme being disclosed in nature, saying ‘if God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him’ on that account. *Candide* is a satire of the contemporary Catholic church. He wasn’t an atheist, but believed atheism to be dependent on the corruption of Christian institutions.
- La Mettrie, d’Holbach and Helvetius however were.
- Descartes set out to make belief in God impregnable, by saying it based on reason, and abandoning any claim to experience – a bold strategy, which backfired spectacularly.
- De Sade presented idea of God as outmoded superstition, in satirical dialogues which livened up the whole debate.

While Voltaire was arguing that every religion had corrupted a pure, rational concept of God, known to all through nature and reason, others claimed that the oppression of the French people by court and church could be put down to a belief in God. The church was hostile to the Revolution. Between 1790-95, France moved from constitutional monarch in which the Catholic church had a key role, to an atheistic republic in which the only gods were the ideas of the republic. For the first time in modern history, the idea of an atheist state was explored.

3. The intellectual foundations – Feuerbach, Marx and Freud

Pascal had argued that the best way of advancing any idea is to make people wish it were true, and then to show that it is. This was achieved by Feuerbach, Marx and Freud. Intellectuals became a secular priesthood, addressing a people increasingly frustrated with the moral failures and cultural unsophistication of their clergy.

- Feuerbach – God as an invention, Christianity as a kind of insurance company. The human mind projects its longing for immortality onto an imaginary screen, and calls it God.

- Marx – God as an opiate. Historical materialism – idea that humanity builds its philosophy on the foundation of its material needs. Changing the social structures will change the ideas. Religion is just an outcome of unjust social conditions.
- Freud – God as illusion. Concept of God is a human construction, based on the projection of human ideas and longings.

Credibility of these criticisms of Christianity rested on the belief that they were scientific in character – that religion could be explained in socioeconomic or psychological terms.

4. Warfare – the natural sciences and the advancement of atheism

C19th saw the advance of the idea that there is a permanent conflict between the natural sciences and religion. Science is at war with religion, and can only win, leaving religion as a relic of old superstition. Scientists are the liberators of humanity from their bondage to religious tradition and superstition. This concept has come to dominate the corporate consciousness of W culture, boosted by the memory of Copernicus and the experience of Darwin.

- Bertrand Russell – Christianity as the obstacle of mod W philosophy. Accused Calvin of pouring scorn on Copernicus – but it was a false quote.
- Science thought to:
 - liberate humanity from bondage to superstition and oppression
 - be able to prove all its theories, in contrast to religion which can't
 - evolution makes belief in God impossible

One of these survives at popular level – myth that an atheistic, fact-based science is permanently at war with a faith-based religion. The new professional scientist went into battle against the traditionally elite clergy.

- Clifford, prof of maths in London, argued that it is wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence.
- Huxley coined the term 'agnostic' for someone who recognises that the great questions of life lie beyond demonstration.
- **Dawkins** argues that theology says nothing which is either of any use or demonstrably true and not obvious. He compares faith to smallpox but harder to eradicate, and defines it as 'belief that isn't based on evidence'. Science, on the other hand, is free of faith. Not so – cf Polanyi. Science shows a steady progression from one theory believed in its day to another. We believed Einstein's theory of relativity long before we had the evidence for it. Theory is faith. Darwin's theory of evolution has not yet been proved; we trust it because it is the best available. Paley argued that the universe bears witness to intelligent design. William Temple argued that God did sth more splendid than just make the world – he made it make itself. Botanist Asa Gray claimed a theistic view of nature is implicit in Darwin's writings.

A survey of religious views of scientists in 1916 showed that 40% had some form of personal religious belief.

5. A failure of the religious imagination – the Victorian crisis of faith

At the forefront of the revolt against God were poets and novelists, looking for new sources of inspiration; christian ideas and images were now held to be deficient. Maybe the erosion of the Christian faith in later Victorian Britain was due not to its diminished appeal to human reason but to its failure to capture the imagination of its culture.

Historians date the birth of intentional atheism in UK to c.1782, when a man publicly declared himself an atheist.

- Key figure William Godwin, who replaced God with nature as the place to anchor a sense of transcendence. Gradually God was replaced by the more predictable and unimaginative enterprise of attending church...
- Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats. Keats held that nature was capable of disclosing truth and beauty through an engagement with the imagination; if God is to be removed, there must remain some corresponding metaphysical category to which human emotions and imagination may be linked.
- In 1811 Shelley was expelled from Oxford for publishing an essay 'The necessity of atheism'.
- George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) grew up to become an evangelical Christian; but felt the quality of a person's faith was now judged by doctrinal correctness rather than a love for Christ. She gave up church and translated Strauss instead.
- Swinburne rebelled against prudery; wrote sketches featuring eg the Revd Simplicius Pricksmall of Little Pissing. Rebellion against Jesus meek and mild; no reason to suppose in meeting him one was stepping over the threshold of a mystery
- The Life of Jesus movt proposed a naturalist reading of his sigfice, as a religious teacher and moral educator. Goes back to GE Lessing, saying life of Christ full of accretions for which there was no foundation. Jesus became a moral teacher, the Great Prohibitor. Strauss's Life of Jesus was key.

It became meaningful to speak of the death of God in W culture.

6. The Death of God – the dream of a godless culture

- Dostoyevsky explores atheistic world view; how can one believe in God, when the created order itself is so riddled with injustice and contradiction?
- Nietzsche did not form a project to kill God, but found him dead in the soul of his contemporaries (Camus). Morality is the herd instinct; moral and philosophical truths are just beliefs we create to help us cope. There are no facts; just interpretations.
- Camus – life is rendered meaningless by death.
- Sartre – if there is a God it's one we have invented.

The 1960s was a period of transition, impatience with the ways of the past, boredom with existing ideas and values, belief in something new just round the corner. It marked a crisis point for W Christianity. Meanwhile the CofE was busy with

revision of canon law. 'While the bishops fiddled around with the arcane world of church legislation, their nation came close to losing its faith in God.' Robinson, *Honest to God*, suggested we should dispense with notion of God out there, and bring our ideas into line with the culture, or die.

Atheism, like Marxism, never caught on in US, where the history and social situation were different; not so much to rebel against.

1917 Russian Revolution. Lenin wrote that religion is opium for the people, a kind of spiritual intoxicant in which the salves of capital drown their humanity and blunt their desire for a decent human existence' – and yet it persisted. The first atheist state was founded; and yet even Stalin's campaigns failed to eliminate personal faith.

7. The Unexpected resurgence of religion

By 1970 many had concluded religion was on the way out. 'But everywhere there are signs that atheism is losing its appeal... the term 'postatheist' is now widely used to designate the collapse of atheism as a worldview in E Europe and the resurgence of religious belief'. Postatheism now becoming a recognisable presence within W culture. 'Atheism, once seen as Western culture's hot date with the future, is now seen as an embarrassing link with a largely discredited past'.¹⁷⁴. It's being redefined from those who reject belief in God to those who do not believe at present in any supernatural beings – ie agnostics.

His own journey – atheist as student (Ayer, Russell, Camus, Sartre...).

It is increasingly recognised that philosophical argument about the existence of God has ground to a halt; the matter lies beyond rational proof, and is ultimately a matter of faith. The belief that there is no God is just as much a matter of faith as the belief that there is a God. If faith is defined as 'belief lying beyond proof', both Christianity and atheism are faiths. There is no watertight means of arguing from observation of the world to the existence or nonexistence of God. The grand idea that atheism is the only option for a thinking person has passed away. Augustine and Aquinas argued for the existence of God – but really they were reassuring Christians that their faith made sense. Feuerbach, Marx and Freud did the same for atheism.

In C18-19 Christianity failed the imagination; the church offered a rendering of reality that was less than compelling. Jesuit William Lynch (1975) has pointed out that an appeal to the imagination is essential if Christian theology is to remain viable. Faith is not a conceptual bundle of ideas but a life of the imagination. Atheism invited humanity to imagine a world without God, in which it could do as it pleased without looking over its shoulder at a disapproving deity. But it's no longer necessary to imagine a world without God. The Soviet Union did it. ++RW points out that secularism leaves us bereaved; it fails to sustain the imaginative life and so fails; and its failure produces a fascination with the spiritual. Perhaps there is sth fundamental in human nature which causes us to seek the spiritual. Augustine, Anselm, said this. The illusions of religion have not after all been outgrown. Jung – God's death is always followed by his resurrection. Religion has grown globally since the 70s. Look at Star Trek; Mind Body Spirit bookshop depts.

Everyone ignored Pentecostalism while all this was going on. But it stresses a direct, immediate experience of God, and avoids the dry, cerebral forms of Christianity; and it uses a language and form of communication which enables it to bridge cultural gaps. Denys Turner remarks that 'it is indeed extraordinary how theologically conservative some atheists are, and one might even speculate that atheists of this sp have an interest in resisting such renewals of Christian faith and practice as might require the renewal of their rejection of it'...

8. Disconnection from the sacred – protestantism and atheism

Did the Reformation contribute towards the rise of atheism, by marginalising the sacred?

Protestantism was the new religion of the middle classes.

- One of its key features was the desacralisation of nature, opening the way to seeing it as machine. The natural world was no longer a means of knowing God; he had chosen to reveal himself through the Bible. But throughout the Catholic MA God had been encountered in the sacraments and in the natural world – in everyday life. Now God was absent, known indirectly, through the mind not the imagination. The world was no longer charged with the grandeur of God; direct knowledge of God was theologically unsound. For modern Africans this is hard to understand; for them, everything about the natural world and human existence proclaims the existence of a spiritual reality.
- Another key feature was elimination of imagery, holding that words are preferable to images in representing God. This impoverished the Christian imagination. Imagery was imp in MA; cp churches. Imagery and architecture helped the imagination rise beyond the visible and connect with the divine. Colour was replaced by whitewash, so as to not distract the faithful from the word of God. Baroque period, Orthodox church, went the opposite way. But Protestantism encouraged the notion that God was absent from human culture and experience. Some sects continue to emphasize theological correctness; the mind is engaged, but emotions and imagination remain untouched. Pentecostalism however celebrates the resurgence of primal spirituality, and refuses to allow the experience of God to be limited to ideas. this is the form of Protestantism which will resist erosion by atheism.

Atheism is the ideal religion of the modern period, reflecting its ideas, values and agendas.

9. Postmodernity – atheism and radical cultural change

Cultures undergo change. The uninhabitability of modernism led to a loss of enthusiasm of its goals. Certainty has come to be seen as the grounds for coercing belief. 'The Enlightenment stereotype of the all-knowing mind has been replaced by

the image of the searcher, questing for truth as she journeys through an ambivalent and complex world, where simple answers are likely to be wrong answers', 219. Modernity = confidence, uniformity, logic, rationality. Foucault accused modernism of control; failure to respect difference and diversity. Postmodernism is, like modernism, a cultural mood, determined by the failings of its predecessor. It's a confession of modesty, despair; 'a cultural mood that celebrates diversity and seeks to undermine those who offer rigid, restrictive, and oppressive views of the world.' Atheism is embarrassingly intolerant; it wants to eradicate religion. It 'has a disturbing tendency to see itself as the only true faith, and demands that everyone conform to its beliefs'. So even atheism is the true religious philosophy of modernity. Communism ended up with a body count exceeding anything previously known in history – the desire to eliminate religion tends towards a desire to eliminate people.

10. The atheist's revolt – Madalyn Murray O'Hair and others

Atheists often rebelled against the faith of their father.

11. End of empire – the fading appeal of atheism

The attraction of atheism proved not to be universal, but limited to certain situations; distant memories of atheism as liberator competed with more recent ones of atheism as oppressor. Nietzsche foresaw that people would transfer their faith in God, if he was dead, to something else. He said it'd be barbaric brotherhoods with the aim of robbery and exploitation of the non-brothers.. And so to Hitler, Communism.

Creation of community has become increasingly important in W cultures. Churches have long been centres of community life. Many atheists fail to understand that people actually like their faith, and inconveniently believe that it might actually be true. Atheism is wedded to philosophical modernity; both are ageing gracefully in the cultural equivalent of an old folks' home. It's derivative, defined by what it denies. It now finds itself in something of a twilight zone. It's become a pressure group, its agenda dominated by concerns about limiting the growing political influence of religion.

Revd Dr Alison Morgan

For more book summaries visit www.alisonmorgan.co.uk