

DAVID FERGUSON

FAITH AND ITS CRITICS

A CONVERSATION

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford ox2 6DP

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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fergusson, David. Faith and its critics: a conversation / David Fergusson.
p. cm.

Comprises the Gifford lectures delivered in Apr. 2008 at the University of Glasgow.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-0-19-956938-0

1. Christianity and atheism. 2. Faith. 3. Apologetics I. Title.

BR128.A8F47 2009

261.2'1—dc22

200901167

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

ISBN 978-0-19-956938-0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

PREFACE

THIS book comprises the Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Glasgow in April 2008. I am grateful to the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Muir Russell, for his invitation, and also to the members of the Gifford Committee for their generous hospitality, in particular Professor David Jasper.

The occasion of these lectures provided a welcome opportunity to return to my home city and the *alma mater* where I first studied philosophy more than thirty years ago. I am grateful for the many friends, family, colleagues, and former teachers who attended the six lectures and participated so constructively in discussions each evening, many of them proving thereby that Glasgow and Edinburgh are not so very far apart.

In preparing and writing up the material, I have had to draw upon the expertise of colleagues in a wide variety of fields. For comments, suggestions, and corrections, thanks are owed (in no particular order) to Robert Segal, Steve Sutcliffe, Ian Hazlett, David Clough, Lisa Jane Goddard, Mona Siddiqui, Jeremy Begbie, Gordon Graham, Wilson Poon, Michael Fuller, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Neil Spurway, Sandy Stewart, Alexander Broadie, Graeme Auld, Hans Barstad, George Newlands, Paul Heelas, Iain Torrance, Larry Hurtado and Christian Lange. I am especially indebted to my former colleague Michael Partridge for reading and commenting at some length on the typescript of the lectures. Our conversations enabled me to gain much greater clarity on many points, though the flaws remain entirely my own. I am grateful also for the assistance of Sean Adams in the preparation of the index.

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INTRODUCTION

THE 'new atheism' is a term coined recently to describe a wave of writings that offer a full-frontal attack on the intellectual claims and moral effects of religion. Associated primarily with Richard Dawkins, it also characterizes the work of other intellectuals who share much of his hostility towards religion. Despite the tendency in some theological circles to dismiss this literature rather scornfully, I consider it worth engaging for several reasons. At the very least, it is incumbent upon theologians of whatever stripe to offer a response to the arguments, criticisms, and dismissal of some of their central claims. The New Testament, which contains a number of references to the philosophy of the ancient world, enjoins its readers to give an account of the hope that is within them.¹ At the same time, the work of the new atheists is intensely interesting; the range of questions and subjects raised are of concern to every person. These can generate a heated discussion in any pub or senior common room. Every human being ought to have an understanding, however implicit, of the nature of the world in which we live, the significance of our lives, and our deepest convictions. To evade this is simply to miss the significance of these questions and the commitments that will inevitably be reflected in the responses we offer.

We live in an age when for many of us there are competing options and different ways of living. Charles Taylor sees this

as one of the most significant differences from the world of pre-modernity. Belief in God is no longer a default position in our society. It has become an ‘embattled option’ that is taken amidst doubt, criticism, challenge, and the sometimes easier alternatives of unbelief.² One cannot ignore those beliefs that are different to one’s own—we need to gain some appreciation of what these are like and how they look from the inside, as it were. In doing so, one might have an enhanced sense of one’s own faith and why it is that one sticks with it. Perhaps the most important reason for a theological study of atheism is that it may have something salutary to teach those of us who remain committed to faith. Of course, this is far removed from the intention of the new atheists, who advocate the abandonment of religion rather than its renovation. No quarter is given and no compromise is sought. Yet the consideration of the most powerful challenges that can be levelled against religion may itself enable a clearer and more chastened perception of what it is one believes and to which one is committed. Jonathan Sacks has spoken in this context of the ways in which atheists can save the faithful from believing too much. There are times and places where silence and scepticism serve us better than the passionate certainties that may later appear misplaced and even harmful. At least, this can sometimes happen. The history of Christian theology reveals that the tradition developed and was shaped decisively by encounter with opponents and revisionists. Much of what we intuitively believe is the product of history and patterns of interpretation that have evolved over many centuries. This process is ongoing. So in what follows I aim to pursue a more patient and constructive conversation with the new atheism in the hope that there are possibilities for occasional alliances and recognition of mutual insights. In this respect, it will heed Bernard Crick’s plea for a coalition of humanists and believers who can together find ways of working for common goals even amidst significant intellectual disagreement.

How new is the new atheism? The present movement probably comes closer to the combative work of Bertrand Russell than to other modes of sceptical thought, particularly the more wistful agnosticism that we find in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. Hostility to the intellectual claims of religion, the attack on its pathological effects, and the conviction that people can live better without it are all features of several recent high-profile studies. But what is now missing is the elegiac tone. God's funeral, to use Thomas Hardy's phrase, is long since passed. There is no need for mourning. The text of the new atheism might be Psalm 30:5. 'Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.' There is indeed a good deal of confidence that atheism can provide a more wholesome, morally alert, and psychologically liberating way to live. One recent attempt at a psychological profiling of atheists concludes that the typical atheist is male, tolerant, law-abiding, well-educated, and less authoritarian than many of his contemporaries. Atheists, we are assured, make good neighbours.³

To a large extent, we are dealing with an English-language movement, although we can find other European thinkers expressing similar sentiments. Today's leading exponents of atheism are: Richard Dawkins, an Oxford scientist; Daniel Dennett, an American philosopher; Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, both writers based in the USA (although Hitchens is English); Anthony Grayling, a London philosopher; and Michel Onfray, a French philosopher. These leading figures are all men, a fact that has not gone unnoticed. In her study of the movement, Tina Beattie complains that we are witnessing today a testosterone-charged fight. 'There is something a little comic, if not a little wearisome, about this perennial stag-fight between men of Big Ideas, with male theologians rushing to defend the same pitch that they have fought over for centuries, which is now being colonised by men of Science, rather than men of God.'⁴ On the other

hand, Beattie herself proves capable of throwing a few good punches.

Much of the debate has been conducted through the internet on websites and blogs. This has resulted in a high level of public participation, although one may wonder whether the phenomenon of blogging tends to encourage extremist sound bites as opposed to more patient deliberation. On the fringes of the movement, there are a significant number of journalists, novelists, and popular thinkers who act as their cheerleaders. Consider Muriel Gray's sycophantic introduction of Richard Dawkins at the 2007 Edinburgh Book Festival. After introducing him as one of the world's top intellectuals, she then declares that he has not merely started a debate but actually closed it. So powerful is his case that the argument is effectively over. There is little more to be said about religion after being confronted by all this 'fantastic evidence'.⁵

The movement also has the support of leading literary figures, including Martin Amis and Ian McEwan. It has been suggested that Henry Perowne, the central character in McEwan's acclaimed novel *Saturday*, resembles an ideal type of new atheist.⁶ He is not passionate about atheism or scornful of religion, but he is someone who lives well without any sense whatsoever of the need for faith. A neurosurgeon working in London, Perowne leads a fulfilled professional and personal life. Yet he is perplexed by the political events around him following 9/11 and the war on Iraq. Religion has now become a menacing force on the horizons of his consciousness. In the closing phase of the novel, he looks out from the bedroom window of his London house and contemplates how its original owner a hundred years earlier would have had little comprehension of what awaited the world in the century ahead. So too, the twenty-first century has suddenly become an enigma with the gathering of strange and alien forces that have reached his doorstep.

A hundred years ago, a middle-aged doctor standing at this window in his silk dressing gown . . . might have pondered the new century's future. February 1903. You might envy this Edwardian gent all he didn't yet know. If he had young boys, he could lose them within a dozen years, at the Somme. And what was their body count, Hitler, Stalin, Mao? Fifty million, a hundred? If you described the hell that lay ahead, if you warned him, the good doctor . . . would not believe you. . . . Here they are again, totalitarians in different form, still scattered and weak, but growing, and angry, and thirsty for another mass killing.⁷

This recent wave of writings has emerged in the aftermath of the events of 9/11. A world in which religious convictions appear resurgent and dangerous seems different from that inhabited by secularized intellectuals a generation ago. Then religion could be allowed to wither on the vine. The secularization of western society led many to believe that, under the conditions of modernity, religion would gradually disappear as a socially significant phenomenon. It would be reduced at most to a private life-style choice that was both quaint and harmless. Now, however, we are confronted with significant adjustments to the secularization thesis. Fears have been expressed about the emergence of a new Islamic Europe—*Eurabia*. As a result of patterns of immigration, the capacity of Muslim populations with their high fertility rates to outbreed everyone else, and the misguided policy of multiculturalism, Europe, it is argued, soon will unwittingly have a new religious identity. This thesis is further encouraged by the siren call of some American commentators who argue that secular Europe has lost its moral and spiritual direction and is now ready to be conquered. These stark claims have all been patiently refuted and countered by Philip Jenkins in his recent book *God's Continent*, but they persist in the media and are widely circulated.⁸

The dramatic resurgence of religion is even conceded by a recent issue of the *Economist*. Having proclaimed the death

of God at the turn of the millennium, the *Economist* now concedes that this was a mistaken diagnosis. Its leader writes, 'God is definitely not dead, but He now comes in many more varieties.'⁹ In global terms, religion remains a potent socio-political force. The sociologist Peter Berger in his study of de-secularization describes our world today as being 'furiously religious'.¹⁰ Having abandoned his earlier espousal of the secularization thesis, Berger claims provocatively that what is required is sociological study of the exceptions, for example Swedes and New England college professors.

In its classical form, the secularization thesis was indebted to two of the founding fathers of sociology—Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. The theory of rationality proposed by Weber implied the disenchantment of the world and with it the steady and irreversible decline of religious belief. Having lost its plausibility structure as a result of the encounter with modern science, medicine, and politics, religious faith was no longer sustainable. For Durkheim, the differentiation of functions in a modern society implied that much of what had previously been controlled by the churches was now assumed by professional organizations, secular institutions, and the political state. Following this loss of influence, it was assumed that the activities of faith communities would inevitably decline in terms of their public significance. With this shift in both belief and action, the secularization of modern society has been a widely held axiom of scholars for over a century. Around 73 percent of the world's population now adheres to one of the four global religions—this figure represents a sharp increase from figures earlier in the twentieth century.¹¹ The counter-example of the USA, the world's wealthiest nation, is perplexing for the classical secularization thesis. This can be dealt with in either of two ways. It may be that America is an exception, requiring particular explanation for the salience of religion there. One might also seek to show that there are some symptoms of religious decline even there. Alternatively, a case

can be made to demonstrate that, from a global perspective, Europe is the exception rather than the rule. The resurgence of faith in much of the southern hemisphere and in Asia suggests at the very least that the secularization thesis requires to be significantly qualified. China and India, the world's two most populous countries, do not immediately strike one as travelling on a road to secularization in the slipstream of economic modernization. At the same time, even the most rapidly secularized societies of western Europe may be witnessing not so much the decline of religious activity and belief as its displacement into alternative expressions. Grace Davie's thesis about 'believing without belonging' suggests that human lives continue to be enchanted in significant ways alongside the decline in adherence to traditional institutions. The current interest in 'spirituality' may be symptomatic of this, although some rigorous questioning is required of much of its rhetoric.¹²

Much of today's new atheism is frustrated by the sociological evidence. Religion is resurgent, thus disconfirming much of the Durkheimian thesis. At the same time, the Weberian account of rationality and disenchantment seems intuitively right. Religious faith still lacks plausibility for many intellectuals, thus rendering secularization the only rational outcome. Still in the grip of Weberian assumptions, much modern atheism is therefore not merely dismissive of religion but angry and frustrated by its re-emergence as a powerful social force. This is particularly evident in two ways. First, the American context, with the ongoing wars over the teaching of creation science and intelligent design theory in public schools, remains at the forefront of contemporary debate. Much of the hostility heaped on religion is directed at the perceived obscurantism of evangelical Christianity and its particular disbelief in Darwinian evolution. A second feature of the recent debate concerns what is called 'Islamism', a militant and deviant brand of Islam that advocates violent opposition to the hegemony of

western, democratic capitalism. This is sometimes traced to developments from the 1970s onwards, although it is likely that a much longer historical explanation is required for the various dispositions of Islam, particularly in the middle east, towards western culture. For example, the frustration caused by the hegemony of the west has precipitated reform movements in Islam since at least the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the colonial era is perceived by many Muslims to have ideological links with the crusades of the middle ages.¹³

The relationship between theology and sociology is here quite complex. Neither belief nor unbelief requires to be closely annexed to a particular reading of the secularization thesis. One might readily accept it as an explanation of the decline in religious belief and activity in the modern world without assuming that this renders religion untrue or lacking in value. Truth claims, after all, are not settled by counting heads or finding out who is in charge. Conversely, one might recognize that much of the older secularization theory was just too simplistic to deal adequately with the phenomena. At the same time, a sceptic might even claim that human beings are universally disposed to be religious, whether genetically or otherwise, without thereby committing to the validity or ineluctability of faith. In this way, mass adherence to religious practice and belief would be entirely compatible with a naturalist explanation of its origin and function.

Indeed a more nuanced relating of theology to sociology might offer some prospects that are welcome on both sides. For example, the recognition that a religiously diverse society facilitates choice and human responsibility does not always have to be the possession of secular liberalism. Several decent theological arguments were advanced in support of religious plurality in the early modern period, particularly after the traumas of the Thirty Years War. Some forms of

secularism, therefore, can be seen as the upshot of distinctively religious convictions about the character of faith and religious disagreement.¹⁴ And, second, a degree of disenchantment and differentiation of functions may help to sober some religious sensibilities and offset the potential for pathological expressions of faith. This ought to be recognized by exponents of belief. It would be hard to argue that this has not played a positive factor in the gradual decline of sectarianism in Scotland and Northern Ireland over the past generation. In the eighteenth century, the moderate philosophers and theologians in Glasgow and elsewhere recognised that some heat needed to be taken out of religious controversy if Scotland were to be pacified and to achieve a greater measure of cultural, political, and economic flourishing. The Scottish Enlightenment thus took root in Presbyterian soil, partly through this recognition and the transformation that it afforded.

For the new atheism, however, much if not all religion is treated as pathological. It is destructive of social harmony, individual responsibility, and patterns of cooperation across languages, tribes, and nations. The anthem of this movement might be John Lennon's *Imagine*.

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace

Within this current debate, there is also the sense amongst some public intellectuals that religion has been treated as a no-go area for robust criticism. It is suggested that the politics of tolerance, the need to integrate immigrant and religiously diverse groups into our western societies, the attempt to promote dialogue and better understanding of Islam have all

contributed to a soft-centred intellectual culture that fails to engage robustly with religion.¹⁵ Clearly this is a source of irritation if not outrage amongst many critics who have assumed for years that religion is irrational, pointless, and often highly destructive. So we are witnessing a fierce counter-attack on the part of secularism. This may explain the campaigning language of much of the literature. Dawkins writes for people who want to question religion and to find the courage to doubt publicly and openly some of the strongest convictions of their fellow-citizens. Dennett speaks about the need to ‘break the spell’ and so to end the taboo surrounding critical discussion of religion. He argues that atheists need to find their identity, not negatively as those who reject what others believe, but as those who have a positive and healthy account of the world and the ends of human life. A new label has even been proposed, that of ‘brights’. Atheists are to be termed ‘brights’, people who have the wit and wisdom to reject the discredited habits and convictions of their ancestors. If believers find this term patronizing then they are invited to devise their own comeback label. Why not call yourselves ‘supers’, as in ‘supernaturalists’, suggests Dennett?¹⁶ So you can be bright or super, it seems, but not super-bright.

This sense of heroically championing a worthy but persecuted cause may appear strange to some audiences, particularly in Europe. After all, it is not particularly difficult in our media or public institutions today to proclaim oneself a sceptic or atheist. Indeed Richard Dawkins keeps telling us that most intellectuals in this country do not bother with religion. Nevertheless, we should probably not underestimate the hostility that atheism still arouses in sections of American society, nor the particularly vicious postbags that Dawkins and others receive. Recent sociological investigation into cultural attitudes towards atheism in the USA suggests that of all outsider groups, atheists are regarded with most suspicion as a dangerous influential elite.¹⁷ Catholics,

Jews, and now Muslims may be accommodated under the sacred canopy that bestows meaning upon public life, but non-believers can find no such acceptance in American public life. This works not so much at the level of personal persecution, but in terms of the symbolic meaning attached to principled unbelief.

However, notwithstanding this American phenomenon, it is simply not the case that in our own society the critical study of religion has become taboo. On the contrary, hardly a day passes without a journalist offering us a considered opinion on religion. We are seeing a steady annual increase in the number of school pupils presenting for certificates in Religious Studies, and despite the relative decline in those seeking ordination there are more students in university courses and degree programmes in religion than ever before. The vast majority take the subject out of a non-vocational interest. The study of religion now forms a part of the liberal arts curriculum in many universities.

We are told that it is important to have an open and critical debate about religion. However, one wonders whether the current flurry of books, debates, and blogs has really achieved this. Democratic societies are marked by informed argument and civil disagreement over these and other important issues. Yet the rhetoric employed by the new atheists is often as hostile and shrill as those of the most vehement religionists. The tone of the debate is often threatening and patronizing in ways that are sometimes counter-productive.¹⁸ Some of the heat needs to be taken out of the discussion if we are to reach a measured and balanced account of the validity of the arguments. This we are frequently reminded is how science ought to be practised—what is required of us is a judicious weighing of the evidence, a fair consideration of alternative hypotheses, a willingness to revise and even on occasion to abandon deeply held convictions. These are the marks of the scientific spirit which need to be brought to the study of religion. Yet the

recent criticism of religion is at times too rabid and disabling of patient and constructive debate. In the preface to *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins thanks his wife for coaxing him through all his hesitations and self-doubts. More than one critic has remarked that Mrs Dawkins must have had an easy time of it, so little sign is there of any doubt or reservation in this work.

In identifying 'the new atheism', however, we should not forget that the field is wider. There are important if less publicized thinkers who maintain a sceptical position on religion but without engaging in dismissive or vituperative attacks. They reckon the conversation worth having, not all the considerations stacking up with overwhelming force on one side. Reasonable people of good will can disagree without demonizing or sneering at the opposition. So the philosopher Thomas Nagel, while himself sceptical, argues that a debate is worth having over whether the order of the natural world and the phenomenon of human consciousness require a transcendent explanation. To see exponents of this view as on a slippery slope leading to 9/11 is just absurd.¹⁹ Similarly, Edward O. Wilson, a leading exponent of sociobiology, claims that we do not know enough to pronounce on the truth claims of religion but we can at least recognize that it has its articulate and decent defenders. Describing himself as on the diplomatic rather than militant wing of secularism, he searches for common ground with religion.²⁰

In what follows, my claim is that a conversation needs to be established between those occupying the middle ground of scepticism and faith, where each side recognizes that it has something to learn from the other whether that is about the persistence of faith or its many pathological expressions in the world. This, moreover, may be a moral imperative in today's world where international cooperation and cross-faith alliances are increasingly needed.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15.
2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
3. Benjamin Beit-Hallahim, 'Atheist: A Psychological Profile', in Michael Martin (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 313.
4. Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007), 9–10.
5. Edinburgh Book Festival, 19 August, 2007. For a recording of the interview see <http://www.edbookfest.co.uk>. Even Dawkins himself appeared to be taken aback by such fawning praise and demurred, somewhat embarrassed, that not all his readers were like her.
6. Tina Beattie's insightful critique of *Saturday* seems to miss the extent to which Perowne is uncertain and puzzled by his changing world. See *The New Atheists*, 157ff.
7. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006), 276–7.
8. Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
9. 'A special report on religion and public life', *Economist*, 3–9 November 2007, 6.
10. Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
11. 'A special report on religion and public life', *Economist*, 4. Figures are drawn from the World Christian Database.
12. Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) and *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002).
13. See for example the discussion in David Wainey, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 173ff.
14. I have tried to argue this in *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
15. Note the comments on the Salman Rushdie affair and the more recent controversy over the Danish cartoons.
16. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2007), 21.

17. Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, 'Atheists as "Other": Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society', *American Sociological Review* 71(2) (2006), 211–34. I owe this reference to Chuck Mathewes.
18. Interestingly, this may be less true of continental Europe, where scholars often express surprise at the intemperate nature of the new atheism in the English-speaking world. The stronger foothold of theology in mainstream intellectual life may have something to do with this. One example of this greater accord of mutual respect is the recent dialogue between the Pope and Jürgen Habermas.
19. Thomas Nagel, 'Review of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*', *New Republic*, 135 (23 October 2006), 25–9. Nagel concludes that, 'Blind faith and the authority of dogma are dangerous; the view that we can make ultimate sense of the world only by understanding it as the expression of mind or purpose is not. It is unreasonable to think that one must refute the second in order to resist the first' (p. 29).
20. Interview with Brian Appleyard, *Sunday Times*, 23 December 2007.

I

ATHEISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

ATHEISM is a term of contested meanings. As the Greek alpha privative suggests, 'a-theism' is essentially the negation of a position. It is not surprising, therefore, that it signifies the rejection of quite different views across space and time. A passing acquaintance with the competing philosophies of the ancient world reveals that atheism is not a new phenomenon that has emerged with the rise of modern science or the European Enlightenment.

In the ancient world thinkers as divergent as Socrates and Justin Martyr were charged with atheism, yet both were far from being atheists in the contemporary sense of that term. In the case of the former, Socrates sought the purification of popular Greek religion with its multiplicity of anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. The divine was something higher, more transcendent and ineffable, to be approached by philosophy and virtuous living. For denying their gods and corrupting the youth of the city, the Athenian authorities made him drink the hemlock. Justin, a second-century apologist of the church, notes that Christians too are charged with atheism—they do not honour pagan deities, celebrate their feasts, or offer sacrifices. For this, they are regarded as dangerous and subversive. Like Socrates and Jesus before him, Justin is martyred for his faith.

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