

The end of postmodernism: the "new atheists" and democracy

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The *Economist* recently published a colour supplement titled "[In God's Name: A Special Report on Religion and Public Life \[1\]](#)" (3 November 2007). The accompanying leading article included a rueful admission: "The *Economist* was so confident of the Almighty's demise that we published His obituary in our millennium issue." There is an almost palpable sense of discomfort at a leading international journal finding itself confronted with the unexpected resurgence of religion as a newsworthy topic which merits serious debate.

As the article points out, much of this can be attributed to the upsurge in various forms of religious extremism during the last thirty years, and the recent atheist backlash by bestselling authors [7] such as Richard Dawkins, [Sam Harris \[8\]](#) and [Christopher Hitchens \[9\]](#). If we are to understand this phenomenon and its social and political implications, then we must go beyond the headline-grabbing confrontations between religious and atheist extremists. We need to explore some of the complex underlying reasons for the persistence of religion after a century in which it more or less disappeared from view in western politics and public life, and was banished by totalitarian communist regimes.

The wrong argument

We might begin by recognising that the concept of religion is misleading, so that our discussions become mired in misrepresentations and over-simplifications. Our modern understanding of religion is informed by a [post-Enlightenment \[10\]](#) approach in which science, reason and progress have replaced religion as the organising focus of western life, but the word "religion" also has connotations associated with 19th-century western imperialism. The word derives from the Latin *religio*. It has had different meanings through Roman and then Christian history, but it acquired its present meaning during the quest for objective, scientific knowledge and colonial conquest which together shaped modern British history.

During the Victorian era, new "sciences" such as anthropology and ethnology developed in order to study the "primitive" peoples and societies whom Europe's empire-builders encountered in their travels. Enthusiasm for [Charles Darwin's](#)

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Tina Beattie's latest book is [The New Atheists \[6\]](#) (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007)

Also by Tina Beattie in **openDemocracy**:

["Pope Benedict XVI and Islam: beyond words \[6\]"](#) (17 September 2006)

["Veiling the issues: a distractive debate \[6\]"](#) (24 October 2006)

["Religion in Britain in the Blair era \[6\]"](#) (10 January 2007)

[11] theory of evolution meant that the study of religion came into being as a way of ranking and studying other cultures in comparison to the defining norm of western civilisation, by scholars who believed that the white western male stood on the highest rung of the evolutionary ladder. The word "science" also changed its meaning during the 19th century, from a generic word used to describe all forms of knowledge including theology and philosophy, to one more narrowly focused on an objective, rationalist approach to knowledge based on empirical evidence alone. That is why the nature of the current confrontation between "science" and "religion" is so problematic, because we are dealing with two slippery concepts which come freighted with a deeply ambivalent historical legacy.

The 19th-century confrontation between religion and science was largely fuelled by a power-struggle between men of science and men of God, most of them members of the Victorian ruling classes. Whereas the clergy and the Church of England had previously ruled the roost of English public life, in the mid-19th century the dynamics of power shifted, and scientists began to wrest much of the authority from their clerical counterparts in shaping intellectual enquiry and values. But just as this "war" masked a much more amicable and creative dialogue between scientists and theologians in a society which was still [12] largely Christian in its beliefs, so today the attempt to portray the relationship between science and religion as one of irreconcilable conflict is a distortion of a more pluralist intellectual and religious environment.

Many scientists see no fundamental conflict between science and faith, and some argue that quantum physics challenges any attempt to maintain a strict distinction between scientific and philosophical or theological knowledge. Some scientists - such as the head of the human-genome project, Francis S Collins [13] - have converted from atheism to Christianity as a result of their scientific research. Many members of the scientific community have sought to distance themselves from the self-publicising polemics of Richard Dawkins [14] and his fellow "new atheists" [15], for they see the fact that Dawkins in particular has become so dogmatic and ideologically driven in his militant atheism as a betrayal of the very scientific values which he claims to represent.

The attempt to stage a war between religion and science - whether fuelled by religious or scientific fundamentalists - is part of the problem and not part of the solution with regard to the times we are living in. If we seek to preserve our liberal western values, then we need to resist the spirit of aggression and confrontation which is becoming increasingly characteristic of public debate - in Britain and the United States especially - concerning the role of religion in society.

With regard to debates about Islam, we must recognise how the portrayal of Muslims as violent fundamentalists still resonates with those 19th-century beliefs that white westerners are inherently superior to their savage and barbaric counterparts in other cultures and religions. Also lurking within the media treatment of religion today is a masked anti-Catholicism [16], for that too has been a feature of modern societies such as Britain and America whose values have been largely shaped by Protestantism. Unless we are attentive to these subtexts, our discussions about religion risk being vehicles for unacknowledged prejudices and historical animosities which can only serve to fuel conflict in these uncertain times.

The limits of rationalism

One way to understand the current crisis in values and beliefs is to situate it in the context of late modernity or postmodernity, when the democratic and scientific values which emerged in the various intellectual and political revolutions of the 18th century are disintegrating. Today, we face a world of complexity and plurality which some find exhilarating in its freedoms and opportunities, but others find terrifying in its lack of certainties and truths.

The term "postmodernism" is associated with Jean-François Lyotard [17]'s book, *The Postmodern Condition* [18], published in 1979, but the era of postmodernity had its genesis in the aftermath of the second world war, when all the values which had sustained modern western societies for two centuries were in meltdown. How could visions of progress and the civilising power of reason survive two world wars and the Nazi genocide [19]? How could science provide answers to human suffering, when it had provided us with such a devastating capacity for destruction and killing?

This uncertainty has increased as the full implications of the 20th century have dawned upon us. Never in human history did so many people slaughter [19] one another in the name of so many ideologies and visions of progress, all of them informed by a post-religious secular ideology - whether it was the quasi-paganism of Nazism or the atheism of the Soviet Union, China or Cambodia. If the Enlightenment signified the liberation of western societies from the tyranny of religion and theocratic rule, we discovered in the 20th century that the cruelty of God-fearing societies might be rivalled only by that of godless societies.

Although the new atheists are dogmatic in their refusal to accept that line of argument, it remains the context in which we must situate our reflections on the crises confronting us at the beginning of the 21st century. Those with greater historical sensitivity and philosophical insight than Dawkins know that the gulags, Hiroshima and the gas-chambers have cast a pall over western memory and consciousness, and we are right to distrust the forms of knowledge and the political systems in which such violence was able to take root and grow.

Contrary to what many people hoped, scientific rationalism did not deliver us from the evils of violence, war and hatred, nor did religion wither and die in the glare of the scientific gaze. Instead, religion has revived in virulent new forms which are parasitic upon modernity, for religious extremism is informed by the same ahistorical and literalistic understanding of truth which informs scientific approaches to knowledge, with their shared resistance to ambiguity, doubt and complexity in the quest for meaning. In both cases, the poetic and holistic wisdom of past generations - much of it embedded in religious traditions - is set aside in favour of an aggressive and one-sided dogmatism which ruptures the fabric of human life in its communal and creative dimensions.

But if modernity created the conditions in which religious and scientific fundamentalisms [20] took root, it is postmodernity which has created the kind of volatile social environment in which these opposing forces encounter one another with potentially explosive violence. While postmodernism destabilises all claims to truth and creates a widespread mood of doubt and scepticism, it also creates a cultural vacuum in which every form of extremism and identity politics can flourish, while sapping us of the collective vision and energy needed to challenge corrupt and unjust political structures.

One of the great myths of postmodernism is its celebration of the death of the "meta-narrative", its paradoxical claim that the only universal truth is that there is no universal truth. But this is a lie, for never has humankind been so dominated by a single meta-narrative as it is today, when global capitalism threatens to eliminate every other narrative and every other meaning from human life. While the histories and traditions which have bound people together and conferred upon communities a sense of meaning and belonging are under siege from all directions, a relentless and inhumane system of global economics is sweeping away the last vestiges of human dignity and hope for those who are exiled, exploited and commodified by the wars, corruptions and burgeoning inequalities which our economic system brings in its wake. This is the context in which we must situate our reflections if we want to ask why so many people are attracted to rigid and dogmatic forms of religion.

A fury for certitude

Mark Juergensmeyer [21], in his fine study of religious violence, *Terror in the Mind of God* [22] (2001), argues that religion is rarely in itself a cause of war and violence, but it can provide a potent moral justification for violence as a form of resistance to perceived injustices and inequalities. Thus the current phenomenon of religious extremism must be understood in the context of the widespread failure of secularism and the modern nation state in their inability to challenge deprivation and injustice. Faced with the combined forces of western military and economic power, disenfranchised and alienated groups begin to see the West as the primary source of global injustice and moral corruption.

From this perspective, religious zealotry can be interpreted as the other face of the metropolitan fancy-dress parade which constitutes the consumerist lifestyles of postmodern urban elites, reflecting as they do the banality and homogeneity of a global market which is no respecter of boundaries, cultures and traditions. Instead of freedom we have choice, and instead of values we have labels and lifestyles. We citizens of the western democracies have become solipsistic consumers indifferent to the squandering of our hard-won freedoms and rights by governments for which terrorism has become a byword for ever-more draconian strategies of surveillance and control.

As democracy withers and the political forum is colonised by the suave-speaking mediocrities of the soundbite era, as blatant self-interest on the part of the world's most powerful nations becomes an excuse for every kind of collusion in the politics of corruption and violence, we in whose names the battles are being fought have allowed our horizons to shrink so that we see no further than the nearest shopping-mall. And we are the privileged ones, the citizens whose security merits any injustice, any violation of human rights, against the immigrants, fanatics and foreigners who threaten our vacuous existence. Should we be surprised that some of them are declaring war on us?

For many others, it is religion - particularly in its more dogmatic forms - that offers a potent alternative; those drawn to it include people both disenfranchised from the beginning because they are too poor or too oppressed to participate in the postmodern shop-fest, and people who are afraid of what they perceive as the moral meltdown of modern western culture. In these forms of religion, people can find certainty instead of confusion, clear rules instead of ambiguity, tight-knit communities instead of shifting and transient relationships; and all this is presided over by a wrathful male God who hates all the things they hate - particularly gays, feminists and libertarians of every description - and who sanctions violence in order to keep His values safe from corruption.

What vision of democracy?

On 9/11, the postmodern condition met its nemesis. When Osama bin Laden's [24] suicidal supporters selected their

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targets, they were selecting symbols which represent the west's economic, military and political hegemony with all its corrupted values and degenerate politics. Living as we do in the swirl of history which followed that event, we lack the critical distance to assess its impact and evaluate its consequences. However, the shift in western attitudes from the *laissez-faire* pluralism of postmodernity to the more hard-edged antagonism of cultural commentators such as Dawkins, AC Grayling [25], Polly Toynbee [26] and other guardians of secular truth has to be understood in that context.

2006)

Faisal Devji, "Epistles of moderation [23]" (18 October 2007)

Olivier Roy, "Secularism confronts Islam [23]" (25 October 2007)

If sufficient critical distance is not possible, it is possible to say that since 9/11 we have gone beyond the postmodern condition; and that what we do next will determine whether we discover in our new circumstances the abyss of a violent nihilism and war without end [26], or the beginnings of a new and hopeful flourishing among peoples in harmony with our natural environment, which is our only hope of redemption. The latter would require that we recognise the awesome responsibilities which come with our much vaunted values of freedom, democracy and human rights. In the era of war without end in Afghanistan [26], Iraq and elsewhere, the contrast between the protests of the public and the indifference of its leaders (as after the huge worldwide demonstrations of February 2003) is a stark expression of how these values are routinely traduced.

The most pressing question confronting us lies here: how to respond to the slow death of democracy. The recent confrontation between religion and science is in this context a smokescreen which is distracting us from much more urgent political and intellectual issues. It allows the secular intelligentsia to hide behind a convenient and inflated - where not fabricated - myth of religious extremism which masks from us our own complicity in the murder and mayhem by which western global supremacy and our own privileged status within that are now maintained.

The Buddhist monks of Burma [26] have shown us that religion is not always the enemy of freedom. Sometimes it can inspire very great acts of courage in the name of democracy and human rights. If religions have too often sanctioned killing in the name of God, they also have the capacity to instil in their followers the understanding that sometimes, there are values worth dying for. Let us listen to the silence of those - for now - defeated monks. In our noisy and increasingly violent defence of freedom, we must ask ourselves what vision of democracy inspired them to protest in peace and to die in hope. I think it was Martin Luther King who asked: "If there is nothing you are willing to die for, is there anything you have that's worth living for?" The postmodern condition gave us nothing to die for and nothing to live for, but it seems to have given us a great deal we are willing to kill for.

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