

Sermon Delivered by Tristan Prooth
at Essex Church, 25th July 2010

The New Atheism and the Case for God

According to Richard Dawkins, I am a 'sexed up atheist'. As someone who does not believe God is a being, meddling in the world but in a transcendent presence which is beyond and within everything, I believe we are in God and God is in us. In fact, when I think about what I believe, I ask myself what I believe with my head, my heart and my gut: I want to reconcile concepts in all three. Other than that label, he doesn't spare much thought for my sort of theology, probably as it rather interferes with the thrust of his argument: that religion is a pernicious influence practiced by irrational and intellectually inferior people. Needless to say, I disagree and can do so using fancy theological words. Unitarians/UU are one of my counter examples. As rational people of religion, we take responsibility for how we work through our commitment to what we hold to be true and learn to observe the core of our truths from many viewing points.

For us, what Dawkins goes on to say, through myriad examples, isn't as troubling. He posits that those who believe without thinking, who accept the Bible at face value, as he too interprets it, and who become devoted to the finger which points to the moon are in danger. Having grown up in the American Midwest, my early life heavily influenced by a church which believed thus, I am more than sympathetic to a toned down version of the Dawkins rhetoric, as presented in his book *The God Delusion*, one of the leading texts of the New Atheist movement, which cemented his reputation as what some scholars term evangelical atheism. I forced myself to look past his ridiculously inflammatory language and rather poor references, unbecoming of a scientist of his calibre, as he regularly compares chalk and cheese or takes the most extreme examples to create straw men to beat down and then kick.

It was when I encountered the new 10 Commandments, which we read earlier, that I checked back in my notes about some of his points. In the introduction to the paperback edition, he goes as far as nearly to outline Karen Armstrong's argument presented in both her *Charter for Compassion* and in *The Case for God*: it isn't God that's the problem but how we talk about God and are taught to relate to God. Even the common pronoun for God is a problem (and I therefore say God a lot). That Karen Armstrong, one of the foremost religious historians and theologians of our time, makes such a strong statement is encouraging for those who favour rational religion. Even though Dawkins notes two of my favourite religious leaders as positive influences—the retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark John Shelby Spong, author of *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and *A New Christianity for a New World* and Richard Holloway, the retired primus of the ECS and author of *Beyond Belief* and *Godless Morality*—I remained unconvinced by his argument. In my view, Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and the other champions of New Atheism are no more reliable in their interpretations than those they are most against are in theirs.

Karen Armstrong argues that the supernatural theism rampant in many mainline and conservative Christian denominations today is relatively new. For those of us who came to UU from other churches, an omnipotent, interfering God is a memory we may prefer to relegate to experience. To deny the theory of evolution in favour of a six day creation would to the ancients, such as St Augustine, have been unthinkable. For him, to deny reasoned science and take up Biblical literalism is to dishonour the scripture. Similarly, reading the Bible as a code for 21st century morality is bogus. Authors writing nearly 2000 ya were in no way trying to lay out a document for the future. They were chronicling their experiences of the Divine, some of which passed through oral tradition, ideas that go beyond the limitations of human language and turned to metaphor in order to express it. Not only that but, as I'm sure you are all aware, the Bible in its current state has been selected, reordered, translated and hacked. I read just the other day an excellent exploration of the mistranslations of 'abomination' from the Hebrew as it stands in the KJV—mistranslations which have led to the Bible backed persecution of GLBT. Instead of 'taboo' or 'toevah' an umbrella term for foreign cultic practices used not only in the context of Jewish taboo but also foreign taboo, the current standing of the word becomes loaded with negativity: a person who is loathsome or disgusting. Words change meaning through time, just check the OED, but mistranslations are rife throughout the Bible and the Enlightenment's obsession with accuracy caused the Bible to be read as if it were a historical document, demanding it to be factual not experiential. What was lost in translation was again lost in a lack of interpretation. This level of literalism in light of today's Biblical scholarship from not only Armstrong and Spong but also Elaine Pagels, Raymond Brown and Marcus Borg is unconscionable, and is a leading cause of Biblical illiteracy. Those who read the Bible in this way do not hear the ears shut and minds switch off as they quote chapter and verse.

Proponents of what is called progressive/liberal/neo-traditional Christianity, of which I am one, take an entirely different approach. We do not see God as a being nor the Bible as God's inerrant, final word on anything. Our Christology is generally in line with the accepted Unitarian thought, dvs Jesus was human overflowing with Spirit, and we do not believe in hell. Dawkins takes a swipe at us, but I find the quotation from Nobelpristagare physicist Steven Weinberg's *Dreams of a Final Theory* he uses unconvincing: 'Some people have views of God that are so broad and flexible that it is inevitable that they will

find God wherever they look for him. One hears it said that ‘God is the ultimate’ or ‘God is our better nature’ or ‘God is the universe’. Of course, like any other word, the word ‘God’ can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say that ‘God is energy’ then you can find God in a lump of coal.’ He is absolutely right. If we are to use the word in a meaningful way, we need to use it as people understand it: a creator ‘appropriate to us for worship’.

They’re both right. So how can we talk about God in light of the best of theology and with respect for our non-theist or atheist brothers and sisters? Firstly, I think we need to adopt a ‘might be wrong’ clause. Neither the conservative evangelical Christians Dawkins attacks, nor Dawkins himself, adopt such a position. Saying ‘I might be wrong’ is not wishy washy—it’s an honest acknowledgement that we’re open to other ideas and we really have no answers. Secondly, we too must cease to attempt to put God in a box, even if it’s a very big one. If we truly believe that God is beyond and within all, as some of our number do, then we must remember that our language cannot capture the essence of God. Even saying ‘God is love’ is limiting. Anyone who has an interest in the cosmos knows what I mean when I say that space can blow your mind. If our created—however you interpret that—universe is that mind blowing, how much more so is God?

I believe we’re in a time of spiritual change and evolution. It is my hope that soon, people of religion will cease to give God qualities. Universalists like me will stop saying ‘God is love’, we’ll say ‘God is’ and eventually even that will seem superfluous. One word will be enough: God. To paraphrase Forrest Church: Amen, I love you and God’s peace be with you all.