



23<sup>rd</sup> November 2008  
The Sunday Next before Advent  
Choral Evensong  
Ecclesiastes 8 vv. 1–9, 16–17  
Revelation: 21 v. 22– 22 v. 9

## Science as a Moral Endeavour

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During the last few years we have seen something of a revival. Not exactly a religious revival, but in a curious way, something not that dissimilar – a revival of a particular brand of atheism which sees itself as making a stand squarely on the foundations of science. I refer to authors like Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens and of course Richard Dawkins and their books *God is Not Great*, *The God Delusion* etc. It is a revival in the sense that the kernel of what they have to say can be found in writers at least 100 hundred years ago<sup>i</sup>. Clearly it is not a religious revival, and yet...ironically in so many ways these 'new Atheists', as they have been dubbed, incorporate many of the features of certain forms of religion which they regard as deeply unattractive: crusading certainty, evangelistic fervour and moralizing zeal. Indeed, one commentator has pointed out that:

*Many militants of the secular cause look astonishingly like clergy. Worse: like caricatures of clergy.*<sup>ii</sup>

I should perhaps point out that the author of that statement is a convinced atheist who has himself written a book *Atheist Manifesto*. Well, plenty of theologians and others<sup>iii</sup> have argued the case against the 'New Atheists' and I do not intend to join their number tonight. Instead, as someone who has been a convinced Darwinian longer than I have been a person of Christian commitment, I want to defend the cause of science from some of its' would-be friends, champions and even the occasional practitioner.

As a field of human activity and indeed creativity, science has been fantastically successful and wonderfully fruitful generating technological innovations that have improved our lot on earth. The philosophically-inclined author of our first reading, *Ecclesiastes*, would have been astonished at such developments and forced to retract his statement that: *'a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun'*: (*Ecclesiastes* 8:17) Our debt as individuals and communities to the scientific enterprise is then awesome and truly difficult to innumerate: The sheer scope of science touching on the origins of the universe, the nature of matter itself, the profligate diversity and adaptedness of biological forms, and on certain aspects of the human condition has raised all sorts of interesting questions which have an impact on what it means to be a human being. It is of no surprise, as a result, that the enterprise of science carries with it great authority and prestige. Indeed in the twentieth century, science has generated a sense of awe traditionally associated with religion. It has become a source of hope; a vehicle for people's dreams and fantasies. For many, science itself begins to be looked to as a spring of fresh human wisdom, ethical thinking, turned to, even, to provide a moral vision of the future. Such a moral vision is frequently portrayed as an all-embracing upward surge of progress. With science so to guide us the future is seen as bright. Such sentiments appear in all sorts of political visions within the twentieth century – it was integral to the logic of the Communist empires and the Nazi programme, but has also provided much of the rhetorical charge to the speeches of Democratic politicians in the post war period from Nehru to Harold Wilson.

It also has a long pedigree in the writing about science, where there is a well-documented tendency in the last chapter of books to map out a future which bears little reasoned relationship to the detailed and evidence-based chapters that have preceded them. One such (and I really could pick dozens of examples) comes from the work of the Nobel Prize winning biochemist Jacques Monod. Writing of the role that scientific knowledge could play in society he states, that it could prescribe:

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*'... institutions dedicated to the defence, the extension, the enrichment of the transcendent kingdom of ideas, of knowledge, and of creation – a kingdom which is within man, where progressively freed from material constraints... man could at last live authentically, there he would be protected by institutions which, seeing him as both the subject of the kingdom and its creator, would serve him in his unique and precious essence.'*

He continues *'This is perhaps a utopia But it is not an incoherent dream....man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by chance. Neither his destiny nor his duty have been written down. The kingdom above or the darkness below: it is for him to choose'<sup>iv</sup>.*

There are a number of curiosities about such hymnic passages in otherwise very respectable books about science. Perhaps the most obvious is that one frequently finds statements which flatly contradict what has come in previous chapters: Suddenly as the clothes come off, a closet Lamarkian emerges from the avowed Darwinian.

But what marks nearly all of such accounts is more than a 'whiff of utopianism'. Utopian extrapolations are made from limited evidence to evoke hope on the part of the reader. Whether they acknowledge it or not (and they do not) ultimately this sort of thinking<sup>v</sup> has its progenitor in the celestial vision of our reading from the book of *Revelation*: Where peace and justice reign; when power will be exercised to the good of all, to the freedom and self-determination of all people and for the healing of the nations. The difference being that this celestial state comes in a vision brought about by another sort of agency altogether.

The fundamental problem with secular versions of that vision in which the enterprise of science becomes part of the journey, becomes the yellow brick road, is that it flounders on its understanding of the human condition, for it embodies, what might be described as a 'tinkering' view of the human condition: That we are basically good and decent but something has gone a bit wrong, if only we just had the right systems, if we could just educate everyone etc. Scientifically inspired utopianism frequently over-estimates human rational capacities and ignores almost all of the evidence relating to moral progress within our species. It is in fact the novelists, the poets, the dramatists who more frequently capture in tragic literature - our nature; indeed, ironically, who express a view of human nature more consistent with the biological view. For they speak of the essential paradox, that as human beings we are both limitless, having a wonderful capacity for self-determination, yet also bound, limited by our finiteness – by our bodies, the societies of which we are a part and our histories. This double-ness to our condition is captured acutely by the early Eighteenth century poet Alexander Pope

*Created half to rise, and half to fall  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all  
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurld  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!<sup>vi</sup>*

So, we live longer and in each generation kill more people than before; we construct new international agreements yet find the resurgence of torture, slavery and other forms of abuse.

Whether we choose to use the traditional Christian language of sin or not, it remains the case that human freedom is frequently exercised in ways which deface and destroy much that is of great value to human life.

Yet very few of us indeed (atheists included) are anything but skin-deep in our pessimism or cynicism. Even those who insist on the random and meaningless character of the universe continue to treat it as if it made sense, furthermore as if human life made moral sense and we yearn however inconsistently for meaning, order

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and vision: hunger after a unifying pattern. Human beings do not live by bread alone, rather we do need imagination and vision: It is an unavoidable part of human existence, one might almost say, an instinct. Similarly a capacity for wonder is a hallmark of our species. Far from being immune to the numinous, to the experience of awe, the writings of scientists are liberally peppered with testament to this: Awe at nature, awe in the face of mathematics, music, the cosmos. We can, of course, seek to cauterise this experience cutting ourselves off from the world of poetry, our own childhood and the depths of what it means to be a human being. Similarly we can of course choose to believe that there is no such thing as moral law or purpose; that the aspiration to goodness is an illusion. As Professor Pascal Boyer puts it in a recent article in *Nature*: 'Disbelief is generally the result of deliberate, effortful work against our natural cognitive dispositions'<sup>iii</sup>, and indeed, there is a growing school of thought, scientific thought, that argues, from a strictly empirical point of view, that Religious thought and behaviour form part of our natural human capacity. In short that we have evolved to be religious; it is a natural instinct.

If that is so, and I suspect that there *are* certain innate predispositions to religious experience and behaviour, then there will simply be no winner in the 'tribal battle' approach to Science and Religion, which at present generates such emotion and dogmatism on both sides. What is called for then is a touch of mutual humility and prudent generosity that acknowledges that religious traditions frequently embody and express the dilemmas of what it means to be human with authenticity and give powerful voice to the possibilities for the good; but also that religious thinkers, if they are to maintain intellectual integrity must pay serious attention and address the truth claims that science makes and wrestle with the questions it poses, rather than trying to assert squatters' rights in the name of God over particular pieces of turf in what is the complex landscape of truth. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example, the work of Auguste Comte and the late nineteenth/early twentieth century positivists and the popularizing writings of Sir James Frazer, especially, *The Golden Bough*. For further discussion of this and related points - John Gray *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, 2007, Allen Lane; or his article, 'The Atheist Delusion' in the Review section of *The Guardian*, p 4, Saturday March 15 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Michael Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto* translated from the French, 2007, Arcade Publishing.  
'Religion Bound to Believe?' Pascal Boyer, *Nature* vol 455/23 October 2008 p 1038-1039.

<sup>iii</sup> Among the better examples are Alistair and Johanna McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, 2007, SPCK, and John Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel: An Angelic Riposte to "The God Delusion"*, 2007, Profile Publishing.

<sup>iv</sup> Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, 1970, Collins, p 166- 167. Monod frames his political vision within a socialist framework. Other scientific writers have expressed similar utopian ideas but with different political resonances.

<sup>v</sup> Ironically this is an example of what Dawkins would refer to as a 'meme', a concept (if it merits the word) described by John Gray as '...just the latest in a succession of ill-judged Darwinian metaphors' (Gray 2008 p5).

<sup>vi</sup> From Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, Epistle II: Of the Nature and State of Man, With Respect to Himself as an Individual, 1733-34.

<sup>vii</sup> Pascal Boyer, 'Religion Bound to Believe?' *Nature* vol 455/23, October 2008 p 1038-1039.