

The Decline of Religion is a Delusion

by **Conrad Black** (April 2015)

Having spent a very enjoyable two hours in conversation with Dr. John Lennox, professor of mathematics at Oxford University and one of the most rational and persuasive advocates of a Christian theistic view of the world, it has come back to me what a shabby level of mockery and sophistical evasion many of the militant atheists are reduced to, in comparison even with the famous skeptics of earlier times. People like Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell and Sigmund Freud, wrote and spoke well, and were more able than is rigorously admissible now to cloak themselves in the inexorable march of science and reason. Their witty if gratuitous disparagements of Christianity were much more effective than the coarse blunderbuss of my late quasi-friendly and frequent adversary, Christopher Hitchens.

I met Dr. Lennox in the context of my televised conversations for the Vision Channel television program *Zoomer*, and I naturally looked at a number of the many debates Dr. Lennox has had around Britain and the United States with prominent militant atheists, including Richard Dawkins, Peter Singer and the inevitable Hitchens. Dr. Lennox is one of the world's most eminent mathematicians and he is on the side of those men of science and reason such as Sir Isaac Newton, whose reaction to discoveries of the intellectual and natural wonders of the universe is to be more convinced than they had been before of the existence of a divine intelligence that had created such an intricate and complex mechanism as the universe we are steadily coming to know better.

The current militant atheists: those well-known and learned professionals who not only strongly dispute the existence of God, but are hyperactive on the international speaking and debating circuits evangelizing random audiences both to the non-existence of God – hardly a novel contention nor one any of them puts forth with much originality – but to the evil and destructiveness of religion itself. Richard Dawkins has often said that “the very idea that we get a moral compass from religion is horrible.”

Yet neither he, nor his fellow vocal atheistic militants, such as Singer, Stephen Hawking, Jonathan Glover and Richard Rorty, all formidable academics, can dispute that without some notion of a divine intelligence and its influence on the culture of the world through the various religions (though the principal religions are not interchangeably benign or

influential) there would be no serious ethical conceptions. Communities untouched by religious influences have been unalloyed barbarism, whatever the ethical shortcomings of some of those who carried the evangelizing mission among them. Without God, “good” and “evil” are just pallid formulations of like and dislike. As Professor Lennox reminded me, Dostoyevsky, scarcely a naive and superstitiously credulous adherent to ecclesiastical flimflam, said “without God, everything is permissible.”

This is a large part of the core of the atheist problem, and it is complicated by the vulnerabilities of some of its peppier advocates. Singer sees nothing wrong with bestiality and considers the life of a human child to be less valuable than that of a pig or chimpanzee. It is rather frivolous to raise Hitchens in this company; he was a dissolute controversialist who was a fine writer in his prime, had some enjoyable human qualities and fought to a brave death from cancer, but was a nihilistic gadfly who spent himself prematurely in an unceasing frenzy to *épater les bourgeois*. He entertained, until he became unbearably repetitive, but no one with an IQ in triple figures was shocked by him. Dawkins almost raves about the extremes that “faith” can drive people to, but was struck dumb like Zachariah in the temple when Lennox pointed out, in a very lengthy debate at the University of Alabama in 2009, that atheism is a faith – clearly one that Dawkins holds and tries to propagate with considerable fervour. In general, something a person believes and can’t prove is supported by some measure of faith.

The articulate spokesmen for God’s existence accept that they cannot prove their case, though Aquinas, Cardinal Newman, and others make a good balance of probabilities argument (accepting a broad definition of God as a higher creative intelligence). The atheists purport to disprove the theistic case, but they have never got past their inability to dispute that spiritual forces and perceptions exist or that unexplained developments that are in fact miraculous sometimes occur, and they are reduced to imputing falsely to believers the view that anything they can’t explain is in the “gap”: God’s secret work. Of course no serious person espouses anything of the kind and much more frequent is the swift recourse of atheistic scientists to the worm-eaten chestnut that there is a finite amount of knowledge in the world and that every day the lights of pioneering science are leading us closer to a plenitude of knowledge.

In fact, that is not our experience: All great scientific discoveries demonstrate man’s genius, but also reveal that the extent of the unknown was greater than had been realized. Freud’s discovery that man could not control his subconscious; the discovery of the potential of the atom including for human self-destruction; Galileo, Copernicus and Kepler’s discovery that the world revolved around the sun; all expanded the vastness of the unknown still to be explored.

Nor can the atheists ever grapple plausibly with the limits of anything, or with the infinite. They rail against “creation” – but something was created somehow at some point to get us all started. They claim evolution debunks Christianity (though all educated Christians, including Darwin, acknowledge evolution) – but evolution began somewhere. When taxed with the extent of the universe and what is beyond it, most atheists now immerse themselves in diaphanous piffle about a multiverse – but the possible existence of other universes has nothing to do with whether God exists.

There is also in this glorification of the apostolic and enlightening role of science more than a trace of a schismatic priesthood: the ecclesiastics won't lead the world to its meaning but the scientists will. Apart from replicating the worst traits of the dogmatic theologians, it reminds us of the tendency of people to fill an official absence of God with the elevation of man in His place. This was the practice of leading pre-Christian Romans, eventually elevating themselves to the status of gods and compelling public celebration of it. This trait was evident in Robespierre's celebration of “The Supreme Being” whose agent he claimed to be, in the Communist pursuit of “the new man” at a cost of the lives of tens of millions of innocents, and in the pagan festivals exalting Adolf Hitler staged by Josef Goebbels and Albert Speer.

The two sides of this argument are asymmetrical. The atheists can sow doubt well, and spruce up their arguments with Hitchensesque flourishes such as the physical mockery of some prominent clergymen and the disparagement of the religious leadership credentials of Henry VIII and Borgia popes and some of the bouffant-coiffed, mellifluous and light-fingered televangelists. They rant against the evils of superstition and can still render a fairly stirring paean to the illimitable liberty and potential of the human mind.

Religious practice can certainly be targeted as a pursuit of the hopeful, the faith-based and the uncertain. But they badly overreach when they attack the intellectual underpinnings of Judeo-Christianity, from the ancient Judaic scholars and the Apostles to Augustine to Aquinas to Newman; deny the existence of any spiritual phenomena at all; debunk the good works and cultural creativity and conservation of the major religion; and deny that the general religious message of trying conscientiously to distinguish right from wrong as a matter of duty and social desirability is the supreme criterion of civilization. The theists defend their basic position fairly easily and only get into heavy weather when they over-invest in the literal truth of all the scriptures – though the evidence for veracity of the New Testament is stronger than the skeptics admit, including of Christ's citations of God himself: “And God said ...”

It is in the nature of the world that we don't know, but the decline of Christianity is much more of a delusion than God is and even more wishful, and the serious defenders of a divine intelligence such as the delightful John Lennox almost always win the argument, as he did with Dawkins and the rest. There is a long way between these two poles, and agnosticism is a much more rigorous position than the belligerence of the proselytizing atheists, but that is not a stance that stirs serious people to militancy. They have been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

First published in the [National Post](#).

Postscript in response to my critics:

The important part of this exchange is the light it sheds on the contemporary atheist mind and the state of our society, where such belligerent enemies of important traditions in our civilization have arisen and seized control of almost all the media and academia. It became overwhelmingly fashionable in the last 50 years to debunk religiosity as stupid, irrelevant and wilfully ignorant. The particular bugbear was to portray the principal denomination, the Roman Catholic Church, as a coterie of septuagenarian celibates and closet queens scolding the world about their sex lives, as that institution staggered on creaking limbs and with failing sight to its long-appointed extinction, a hollow primitive fraud and retardant to the march of knowledge. These are familiar and even understandable opinions, but it is not easily understandable how people holding them got a stranglehold on the commanding heights of information and education.

The pertinent facts are that spiritual forces are abroad in the world and have widely been identified, even in such statements as Bismarck, whom Pope Pius IX described as "Attila in a helmet," saying that "All a statesman can do is listen for God's footfall and touch the hem of his garment as He passes." Darwin referred to "the Creator" in the second edition of *On the Origin of Species* Richard M Nixon: *A Life in Full*, [Flight of the Eagle: The Grand Strategies That Brought America from Colonial Dependence to World Leadership](#) and