

The New Criterion

Books

June 2005

Beyond disbelief

by [David B. Hart](#)

A review of The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World, *by Alister McGrath.*

Alister McGrath

The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World.
Doubleday, 206 pages, \$23.95

In *The Daily Telegraph* not long ago, A. N. Wilson produced one of those short but seemingly interminable (and morbidly tiresome) opinion columns at which he so excels, this one in praise, putatively, of the present Archbishop of Canterbury. The panegyric, however, was somewhat overwhelmed by the comical dolorousness of the prose. No fewer than sixteen-hundred times (at least, if the impression lingering in my memory is to be believed), Wilson departed from his theme to inform us that we are living in the waning days of the Christian religion, that indeed it will not be long before the last church is closed, and that hence we may not see the likes of the good Archbishop very often again. Surely, I thought as I was reading, this is a man in whom parochialism has metastasized into a psychosis. Here we are living in an age when Christianity is spreading more rapidly and more widely than at any other point in the two millennia of its history—throughout the global South and East—and yet, because the Church languishes in the senile cultures of a small geological apophysis (with a few appertinent isles) at the western edge of continental Asia, Wilson concludes that the faith is in its death throes.

I confess, the recollection of that column kept resurfacing in my mind as I read Alister McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism*, and it may be for this reason that the principal lesson I took away from the book was that the expectation of religion's eventual demise has become positively quaint, and that it is not unlikely that it is the tribe of A. N. Wilson that is destined to die out. McGrath himself, as it happens, in the days of his youthful Marxism, believed that one day faith would wither away, along with all the other venerable structures of alienation supporting the decaying edifice of the capitalist social order. Now though, looking back from his perch as professor of historical theology at Oxford, he finds the convictions of his youth amazingly drab and implausible.

Not that, in his earlier days, he was out of step with his times. More than midway through the last century, it still seemed inevitable to many that atheism would one day triumph. The majority of mankind lived under nominally atheist rule; the occasionally convulsive but more typically incremental advance of western secularization seemed inexorable, the desacralization of the world a *fait accompli*; even in America, despite the obstinate credulity of the folk, intellectual fashion

tended in the direction of a confident liberal laicism; and only a very small number of prescient observers doubted that Islam was a spent force in the history of the world. As McGrath notes, the modern period alone has known a movement of ideological and passionate atheism, with ambitions comparable to the great evangelical creed it sought to displace, and there was a point not very far in the past when one could still honestly believe in its eventual victory.

How swiftly the fashion of the world changes. Idiot apologists for blood-steeped tyrannies like Sartre and Hobsbawm may still not be held in sufficient contempt, but the systems of butchery they so slobberingly adored have been discredited beyond revision. Pope John Paul II required only a decade to demonstrate how much more powerful is faith in God than the banalities of dialectical materialism. The forces of demography, we find, preponderantly favor the devout: rather than a bright idyll of rational humanism, secularism creates a culture of almost mystical triviality, and *homo secularis* turns out to be a creature so devoid of any sense of purpose that he can scarcely be stirred to reproduce. And what only a generation or two ago looked like imminent triumph now has about it the suspicious appearance of intellectual exhaustion.

The first half of McGrath's book—after an initial and largely pointless excursus on the scandalous behavior of the Homeric gods—recounts the history of modern dogmatic atheism, starting naturally with a series of French vignettes: La Mettrie's inane utopianism, Holbach's austere empiricism, the Marquis de Sade's genital idealism; the merry sanguinary frolics of the Jacobins and *armées révolutionnaires* and *colonnes infernales*; the consecration of the Panthéon; the promulgation of Cloots's "Cult of Reason"; and so forth. The story then shifts towards the still more irrational rationalism of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud (a pleasantly acid disdain suffusing the treatment of the last), and then towards the modern "conflict" between religion and science, as mythologized by John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White and as given apparent substance by the confrontation between evangelical Darwinism and Protestant scriptural literalism. Then a chapter is devoted to the decline of faith in nineteenth-century Britain—Godwin's asinine *Political Justice*, the callow naturalism of Keats and Shelley, George Eliot's dreary, dispiriting moralism, Swinburne's sickly, sadistic, dainty paganism, the mournful realism of Arnold and Hardy—and then another to "the death of God"—Nietzsche, Camus, embarrassingly silly "theologians" like John Robinson and Thomas Altizer, and so on.

Much of this, frankly, of the book reads like a dutiful collation of atheism's greatest hits; original argumentation is sparse, and much of it—such as McGrath's brief, tangential remarks on Richard Dawkins—tends towards the rhetorically insipid and needlessly tentative. The best moments in these pages come when McGrath allows himself the odd passage of sly *ad hominem* abuse, as in his observations on Swinburne's passion for flagellation. This is, after all, an entirely legitimate way to proceed: since Swinburne chose to proclaim himself a prophet of heathen health, sexual vitality, and spiritual exuberance, nothing could be more probative of his credibility than the discovery that the erotic license he longed to recover from the cold despotism of the "pale Galilean" consisted principally in groveling at the boots of Madame Rosalyn of Verbena Lodge with his bare hindquarters thrust in the air (and, of course, it is so very soothing to recall that behind the loping, pitilessly unvarying pulse of all that strident, sticky doggerel lurked only a frail, nervous flagellomane with a weak mouth and unruly hair).

The second half of McGrath's book attempts to describe and account for the ebbing of the atheist project, and I must say it occasionally feels somewhat diffuse and uninspired. It has its moments, but it is not daring. McGrath points out certain of the obvious causes of doctrinaire atheism's declining fortunes: the sheer imaginative sterility of the materialist perspective on reality; the historical evidence of the twentieth century, which clearly demonstrates that atheist ideology—far from bringing an end to intolerance and cruelty—is capable of incubating social evils more monstrously brutal, heartless, and violent than any hitherto imagined; the success of Christian

movements—such as Pentecostalism—that no one in possession of his senses could possibly see as tainted by association with the *ancien régime*, and the postmodern collapse of confidence in the Enlightenment project. (In this last instance, actually, McGrath goes somewhat astray: he fails to note that the intellectual fashions we call postmodern have, for the most part, followed quite naturally from certain principles intrinsic to Enlightenment rationality, and that postmodernism consequently constitutes not so much an alternative to modernity as its *reductio ad absurdum*.)

At the end, McGrath's is not as profound a book as it might have been. He skirts near but never addresses certain large questions that seem to pose themselves in the course of his narrative—why, for instance, modern atheism is the product uniquely of Christian culture; and whether, then, ideological atheism (as opposed to simple, unpretentious unbelief) is not in some sense just another Christian heresy, an exaggeration of the Gospel's ancient rebellion against the spiritual or divine "principalities and powers" that rule "this age." The one point at which McGrath lightly touches upon such matters is where he argues that magisterial Protestantism, on account of its divorce between the sacred and the secular and its parching desacralization of the natural order, is in large part to blame for the rise of modern atheism. Here McGrath's treatment of his subject proves both acute and convincing (so much so, in fact, that one is almost tempted to ask by the end why McGrath himself remains a Protestant). Too often, though, McGrath is less ambitious, and seems content simply to reiterate that atheism is uninspiring and wanting in emotional succor, and that the disagreement between belief and unbelief is simply philosophically inadjudicable (which, as it is false, is a concession that need not be made). As a result, it is hard to say whether indeed he has quite penetrated to the real sources of modern atheism's apparent retreat.

Let me (quite inappropriately) propose a simpler—if perhaps more conjectural—explanation of the present crepuscular situation of the atheist revolution.

As McGrath poignantly notes, now that the initial, delirious raptures of eighteenth and nineteenth-century atheism have long since subsided, and a sober survey of the landscape left behind by God's departure has become possible, only the most ardently self-deluding secularist could possibly fail to see how much of the moral, imaginative, creative, and speculative glory of humanity seems to have vanished from the earth. Far from draining the world of any intrinsic meaning, as many of the critics of religion are wont to claim, faith in the divine source and end of all reality had charged every moment of time with an eternal significance, with possibilities of transcendence, with a reason for moral striving and artistry and dreams of future generations. Materialism, by contrast, when its boring mechanistic reductionism takes hold of a culture, can make even the immeasurable wonders of matter seem tedious, and life seem largely pointless.

As for why this should be, it is surely not enough to say merely that atheism fails to divert our thoughts from our mortality as religion supposedly used to do; television does that much better. It seems more correct to say that religion, far from suppressing the vitality of human reason and will, opens up a dimension coterminous with rational consciousness as such. In purely theoretical terms, the question of the transcendent source of reality is an ontological—not a causal—question: not how things have come to be what they are, but how it is that things exist at all. And none of the customary post-Christian attempts to make the question of being disappear can possibly succeed: even if physics can trace all of time and space back to a single self-sufficient set of laws, that those laws exist at all must remain an imponderable problem for materialist thought (for possibility, no less than actuality, must first of all *be*); all the brave efforts of analytic philosophy to conjure the ontological question away as a fallacy of grammar have failed and always will; continental philosophy's attempts at a non-metaphysical ontology are notable chiefly for their lack of explanatory power. In the terms of Thomas Aquinas, there is simply an obvious incommensurability between the essence and the existence of things, and hence finite reality cannot account for its own being. And if this incommensurability is considered with adequate probity and clarity, it cannot fail

but lead reflection towards something like what Thomas calls the *actus essendi subsistens*—the subsistent act of being—which is one of his most beautiful names for God.

Of course, very few persons ever have an occasion to think of reality in terms so abstract. But I suspect that this recognition of the sheer fortuity of existence—the sheer impossibility of anything’s essence ever being adequate to its existence—is what a certain sort of phenomenologist would call a “primordial intuition.” Though we may not all have concepts available to us to understand it, all of us experience from time to time that kind of wonder that for Plato and Aristotle is the beginning of all philosophy, that sudden immediate knowledge that existence is something in excess of everything that is, something not intrinsic to it, something strange in its familiarity and transcendent in its immanence. This is an awareness so obvious that there may never be a theoretical language sufficiently limpid and innocent to express it properly, but in it is a wisdom basic to all reflective thought. To fail to see it requires either an irredeemably brutish mind or a willful obtuseness of the sort that only years of education can induce. And this, I venture to say, is why atheism cannot win out in the end: it requires a moral and intellectual coarseness—a blindness to the obvious—too immense for the majority of mankind.

In any event, these are claims too large to defend here, and I have strayed far from McGrath’s argument. Simply said, *The Twilight of Atheism* is a lucid and suggestive historical survey of its topic. Had McGrath advanced his own arguments more audaciously, though, and been more merciless in his treatment of the logical inadequacies of materialism, and shown more confidence in the Christian philosophical tradition’s power to reveal those inadequacies, the book would probably have been far better. If indeed the atheist revolution has begun to flag, as McGrath believes, some measure of counterrevolutionary boldness is surely appropriate to the hour. But that would entail starting from the recognition that Christian tradition has more formidable resources at its disposal than mere emotional succor.

David B. Hart's most recent book is *Atheist Delusions* (Yale).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 23 June 2005, on page 78

Copyright © 2014 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Beyond-disbelief-1081>