

New Atheism

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Viv Bridges* at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 29th May 2011

Acts ch.17, vv.22-31, 1 Peter ch.3, vv.13-22 and John, ch.14, vv.15-21.

It's very evident from prehistoric remains and from the earliest manuscripts that, from the very beginning, human beings have worshipped something outside themselves - perhaps the spirits of the dead, or the elements, or supernatural beings that helped explain the world around and within. This seems to have been true of all known civilizations wherever and whenever they flourished and St Paul discovered that this was true for the Athenians. In our translation (NRSV) Paul is recorded as calling the Athenians 'very religious'. In other translations Paul calls them 'as superstitious as possible'. This is probably better because, as well as the altars to the usual Greek gods and goddesses, Paul found an altar to 'the unknown god'. It was as if the Athenians weren't totally satisfied with their gods – they had a sense that there was something more and they were superstitious enough to want to make sure they covered every possibility. Paul of course made the most of this, identifying that 'unknown god' as our God, creator of the universe, Father of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the ages, then, human beings have searched for and worshipped something outside of themselves, and time and time again religious beliefs have been the cause of terrible division. Often they have been the motivation for terrible violence and cruelty. Most of this conflict has been about *which* god we should worship, but today we have a something slightly different; division between those who believe there is a God and those who believe there isn't. Of course this is not 'new', but it is new in the amount of power and energy being put into the battle by some atheists, and part of the reason for this is the increasing influence that scientific thought has in our world. It is mainly scientists who are engaging in this conflict, not about 'your God or my God?' but 'God or NO God?' (or so it seems).

There has been quite a bit in the papers recently about Stephen Hawking, and we are all aware of the determination of Richard Dawkins to convince us all that God does not exist. Such atheists have been called 'the NEW Atheists', and to us, of course, their arguments seem nonsense. But in his Epistle, Peter urges us 'Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you'. So if we can, we should try to understand different views. A huge amount has been written countering the New Atheist views, and, of course, the arguments on both sides are extremely complicated. It would take 5 days, weeks, even, to try to get to grips with them, let alone 5 minutes, but I'm going to risk a few comments.

The first thing to say is that, although many atheists are scientists, there are as many, if not more, scientists for whom greater understanding of the universe and the way it works increases their wonder and their faith in God. In a very small way, I'm one of them – I read physics at Oxford and taught it for some time. Also, there are many scientists who, although they are atheists, are very ready to point out the flaws in New Atheist arguments.

We ourselves can see such flaws in the methods sometimes used by New Atheists. Some of you will have seen the television programmes presented by Richard Dawkins a few years ago. In it he picked out a few extremist so-called 'Christian' groups to 'prove' that all Christians were basically nutcases. No true scientific method carefully picks out the evidence that proves a theory and ignores all the other evidence that disproves it! In the Church Times recently, Andrew Brown pointed to some of Hawking's replies to the thousands of comments made on the web in response to his recent statements about the afterlife. Brown said that, if a Bishop had made similar replies, he would have been lampooned as woolly-minded. (Brown described Hawking's opinions as 'veering enthusiastically between incoherence and banality'.)

John C Lennox published a book recently called 'God and Stephen Hawking' in response to Hawking's latest book 'The Grand Design' (& I'm grateful to Tim Bravington for giving me a copy). Lennox points to Hawking's assertion that Creation was spontaneous, the result of physical laws – specifically the law of gravity. Hawking uses the phrase 'all that was necessary was to light the blue touch paper' to set the universe going. Well, of course, we ask 'where did the blue touch paper come from? and 'who lit it'? Lennox also points out that gravity is non-existent without matter, and the LAWS of physics' can no more create the universe than they can create a Jet Engine – even though the jet engine obeys those laws.

Hawking addresses the question 'WHY are the laws of physics as they are?' by proposing what he calls 'M THEORY'. This is an excruciatingly complicated, very abstract theory. A number of physicists describe it as simply a 'mathematical construct' which is impossible to test experimentally. Tim Radford wrote a review of Hawking's book, and in one passage he identifies the difference between ideas such as M theory which are basically speculative, and physics theories that can be accepted because of evidence, even if we don't understand them. Lennox quotes Radford's words ...

"In this very brief history of modern cosmological physics, the laws of quantum and relativistic physics represent things to be wondered at, but widely accepted – just like biblical miracles. M theory invokes something different, a prime mover, a begetter, a creative force that is everywhere and nowhere. This force cannot be identified by instruments or examined by comprehensible mathematical prediction, and yet it contains all possibilities. It incorporates omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence, and it's a big mystery. Remind you of Anybody?"

It seems, then, that I am not the only person to believe that this theory – or something like it (some 'THEORY OF EVERYTHING') has become a god for Hawking and those who think as he does. They believe in its existence just as blindly as they accuse others of believing in Jesus Christ. It is something to be worshipped, to devote one's life to. So perhaps the arguments today are not, after all, about 'God or no God?', but still about 'your God or my god?'. And it seems to me that Hawking's god is just as 'man-made' as any of those idols carved out of wood and stone worshipped by the Athenians. However, the Athenians were prepared to acknowledge that there might be something outside their own beliefs, their own knowledge, whereas those atheists refuse

to allow the existence of anything outside of their 'god of science'. You may have seen that Hawking repeated his comment recently that 'philosophy is dead'. What an extraordinarily arrogant statement this is! And more than this, Lennox points out that Hawking stated this at the start of 'The Grand Design' but then went on to engage in philosophy' throughout it.

But of course, the new atheists are not the only people who fall into the temptation of arrogance. Anyone with deep beliefs is tempted to think that they know all the answers, and to ridicule those who disagree with them, and even to try to destroy them. As Christians we want people to believe in Jesus Christ, but force has never, and will never achieve this, and rational, scientific argument doesn't really work either. 'Conversion' usually takes some movement in the heart and in the soul, and then 'the head' may follow. But, as Christians, we must acknowledge that we can never fully describe or know God. He is infinitely greater than our understanding. We *do* know, however, what makes what we believe so different from what Hawking and his followers believe. The difference is LOVE.

Love answers the questions that scientific 'Theories of Everything' cannot answer. It explains 'why we were created' - God created us because he loves, and wants creation to love him in return. The fact that God loves his creation enough to give it free will explains so much of the suffering and pain in the world, and God's love for us explains the presence of love in the world. Scientists have sought, but failed, to find 'rational' explanations for 'love'. *True* love is consistently IRrational - it is UNselfish - not a bit like those 'selfish genes' of Richard Dawkins.

But that love presents us with a huge challenge. It challenges us to *be* and to *act* in a very different way from those who don't believe in the true God. We are bidden to always love other people self-less-ly whatever a person believes or doesn't believe. We are not asked to accept their beliefs, or condone their actions. On the contrary, we may be called on to speak out against them. But we must hold the *person* in love, just as Jesus Christ commands us, and we must 'answer' for our faith with the gentleness and reverence that Peter instructs in his epistle. God, in his infinite wisdom (which goes much further than science or philosophy) has enough love for Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins! And God may even have a place for them in that afterlife that Hawking has just declared does not exist, as long as they have, in their way, loved and been loved enough.

So, in the end, it doesn't really matter if we don't understand a word about gravity, or M theory. It doesn't really matter if, when it comes to philosophy or the theological theories of the Trinity, or atonement, or even the Resurrection, we feel as I felt last week in Dorset - walking along Ballard Down in thick fog unable to see anything! What *really* matters is that we know in the depth of our being that GOD IS LOVE; that he created us in love, that he loves us unconditionally; and that the only true 'witness' to our belief is that we should love him and love one another unconditionally.

Amen