

## **Transcript of Prof. John Lennox's address at National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast 2013**

### **'Belief in God in 21st Century Britain'**

In his brilliant recent documentary "The Most Dangerous Man in Tudor England" broadcaster and author Melvyn Bragg described the monumental yet largely forgotten work of William Tyndale. Persecuted in England he fled to the Continent where he translated the Bible into English thus unchaining it so that even the ploughboy could understand it - the ordinary person could come to God directly through his Word without any institutional intermediaries.

Tyndale was betrayed, strangled and burnt. His last words were: "Lord open the king of England's eyes". His Bible translation was smuggled into England in bales of cotton and barrels of oil. Resistance to it was so fierce that it was publicly burned on the steps of St Paul's and yet it was not long before Tyndale's prayer was answered. Henry VIII commissioned an English Bible to be placed in every church in the realm. Tyndale's Bible prevailed to have immeasurable influence on our history, governance, culture and language.

And yet, although we no longer burn the Bible in this country, a vocal minority of influential minds mock and ridicule it. Tyndale's plough-boy risks being told that those who taught him the Christian faith were guilty of child abuse. God is a pernicious delusion. Science has shown that faith in him is irrational and should be kept firmly in the private space – until it disappears altogether.

As a result many believers feel marginalized and disenfranchised.

However, science has not buried God. The irony is that it was the Bible that saturated Europe with the idea that a rational, intelligent God created and sustains the universe and set the stage for modern science. "Men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a lawgiver" (C.S. Lewis). Far from belief in God hindering science, it was the motor that drove science.

Yet, it is insisted, we must choose between God and science. Not so. We no more have to choose between God and science as an explanation for the cosmos than we have to choose between Sir Frank Whittle and science as an explanation for the jet engine. These explanations do not compete or conflict but compliment each other – both are necessary. God is not the same kind of explanation as science is. God is the explanation of why there is a universe at all in which science can be done.

That is why there still are, as there always have been, distinguished scientists who believe in God. There is a strong link between the rational intelligibility of the universe and the rationality of God.

Some atheists would like to break that link but the attempt fails. For, the doing of science involves believing that science can be done which in turn involves trusting our human cognitive abilities. However, according to atheism, those abilities are the product of mindless, unguided natural processes. If that is the case, why should I trust anything they tell me? If you believed that your computer was the product of mindless processes would you trust it? Of course not.

Atheism's reduction of thought to the meaningless firing of synapses in the brain undermines the foundations of the very rationality that is needed to construct or understand or believe in any kind of argument whatsoever including those that are used to defend atheism. Atheism, therefore, does not simply shoot itself in the foot; it shoots itself in the brain. The ultimate irony here is that atheism would appear to be at war not only with God but also with science. It looks very much as if atheism fits Dawkins' definition of a delusion: a persistent false belief held in the teeth of strong contrary evidence!

In a Guardian interview recently the eminent physicist Stephen Hawking said: "Heaven is a fairy tale for people afraid of the dark". I am afraid I yielded to the temptation of the one-liner and replied: "by the same token, atheism is a fairy story for those afraid of the light".

Atheism rightly dismisses caricatures of God as an old man in the sky or a god of the Gaps. It crumbles, however, when faced with God the Creative Word who renders the universe intelligible. Wittgenstein was right to say: "The meaning of the world will not be found within the world."

It should by now be clear that there is no necessary conflict between science and God, the real conflict is between worldviews – atheism and theism. I meet many people in the UK who wish to discuss that conflict and weigh up the evidence on each side. The difficulty is that the playing field is not level since atheism has become so dominant in the academy and is often regarded as the default position in the media. Not only that but those who hold it often fail to see that it involves faith commitments every bit as much as Christianity or any other religion. You can see that from the way people speak of "faith schools" but fail to see that atheism is a faith/belief system that is freely taught in many educational institutions.

If teaching Christianity is bad for children, what about teaching atheism?

This imbalance has come about by a secularist re-definition of faith as a religious term that means believing where there is no evidence – that is, blind faith. But not all faith is blind. Indeed, faith is an everyday term – it means trust and always raises the question of evidence – if you want a loan, the bank will want to see evidence that it can have faith in you.

Christianity is evidence-based. St Luke, who has proved himself a brilliant historian, tells the Roman official Theophilus that he had traced everything from the beginning in order that Theophilus could be certain about what he believed. Luke also records that when St Paul spoke to the philosophers at Athens he claimed that God had provided evidence to everyone that Jesus was who he claimed to be by raising him from the dead. To that historical evidence must be added the confirmation of personal experience. For, faith in God, according to Christianity, far from being blind, is a rational, personal commitment based on evidence of many kinds.

Why should we bother with all this? After all, science is not everyone's concern. And, if we are not atheists, why don't we just muddle along with pick and mix religion – whatever gives us comfort – and not bother with the question of what is true?

The main reason is that ideas have consequences. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed out in the Spectator this month that the greatest of all atheists, Friedrich Nietzsche, understood the consequences of jettisoning God with terrifying clarity yet his latter-day successors fail to grasp it at all.

“Time and again in his later writings Nietzsche tells us that losing Christian faith will mean abandoning Christian morality. No more ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’; instead the will to power. No more ‘Thou shalt not’; instead people would live by the law of nature, the strong dominating or eliminating the weak. ‘An act of injury, violence, exploitation or destruction cannot be “unjust” as such, because life functions essentially in an injurious, violent, exploitative and destructive manner.’” (Sacks)

The moral drift of contemporary society proves Nietzsche right. We are in danger of forgetting the contribution of Christianity to the moral foundations of our society.

Melvyn Bragg again, writing last week: “It bewilders me that people who call themselves atheist - for wholly understandable reasons of not believing in a God, a Resurrection, a Virgin Birth, a Trinity - think that this gives them the right to dismiss a massive body of knowledge which has informed people for almost two thousand years, led to some of the greatest artefacts mankind has ever seen and, for better and for worse, has to be taken into account if we think at all of the past in terms of morality, history and art.”

Thankfully, not all atheists are so dismissive. Leading German thinker Juergen Habermas writes: “Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom ...the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love... To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges... we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.”

Examples of that legacy abound: Christian involvement in the foundation of universities, schools, hospitals, hospices, factory reform and the abolition of slavery. And our British Institutions. The Times, commenting on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Her Majesty’s reign, said: “More than any other event the coronation service... clearly proclaims the derivation of all power and authority from God and the Christian basis on which Government is exercised; justice administered and the state defended”

For centuries in our country God has been the ultimate moral authority. Nowadays, under the increasing pressure of postmodern moral relativism, the urgent question that will not go away – however much some may wish it – is this: if we jettison God, what is the authority behind morality?

As C.S. Lewis argued: ‘If we ask: “Why ought I to be unselfish?” and you reply, “Because it is good for society,” we may then ask, “Why should I care what’s good for society...?” and then you will have to say, “Because you ought to be unselfish” – which simply brings us back to where we started.’

Anyone who isn’t prepared to bite the self-defeating bullet of moral subjectivism faces the dilemma summarized by H.P. Owen: ‘On the one hand [objective moral] claims transcend every human person . . . On the other hand . . . it is contradictory to assert that impersonal claims are entitled to the allegiance of our wills. The only solution to this paradox is to suppose that the order of [objective moral] claims . . . is in fact rooted in the personality of God.’

If we abolish the transcendent and absolute we are driven inward to the relative and subjective. So, Girl Guides will no longer pledge allegiance to God but promise to be true to themselves. However, if there is no morality beyond personal choice, if there is no eternal base for values external to

humanity, how can moral standards be anything but limited human conventions, ultimately meaningless products of blind unguided, natural processes?

Listen to Dawkins' description of a universe without God: "In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless, indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."

But if the London bombers were simply dancing to their DNA, no one could blame them. Morality turns out to be a delusion. Indeed, Michael Ruse and EO Wilson say as much: "morality or what we think is morality is simply an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate."

Ideas have consequences and if we teach people that morality is an illusion, they will begin to believe it – many already have with the result that our institutions are awash with scandal, families are increasingly fractured, people are lonelier than ever, and trust is at an all time low. We have sown a wind and are reaping a whirlwind.

For, in the brave new world of blind physical forces, good and evil cease to exist, and so does justice. For all their moral criticism of God the New Atheists ironically deny the one thing that gives moral values stability –ultimate justice. Millions of people get no justice in this life and, according to atheism, since death is the end, they will never get justice. Their moral sense and desire for justice will prove to have been a hideous delusion. There is no hope. The terrorists who danced to the music of their DNA over the bodies of their victims get away with it.

The New Atheists say that faith in God is a childish delusion – like sucking on a dummy for baseless comfort. But what about their atheism? According to Polish Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz: "A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death – the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders, we are not going to be judged."

Reason and experience surely tell us that this is morally absurd. The Bible agrees. It teaches that death is not the end. The good news is that there is to be a final judgement at which justice will be done and done fairly. The judge's appointment has been confirmed by his resurrection from the dead. Christianity thus makes an immeasurably important positive contribution to society by upholding the values written on the consciences of all human beings whether or not they believe in God, the values on which the freedoms and flourishing of humanity depend.

This leads to a dilemma: the problem of my human guilt on the one hand, and my desire for justice on the other. I want justice – but what will justice say to me? For, my human problem is not that I don't know the moral rules – it is that I haven't the power to live that way. Here again, Christianity positively addresses that deeper question with its message of grace and hope. For Christianity is not primarily about rules and regulations. Its central message is about the possibility of relationship with God – to those that suffer it talks about a God who suffers, to those who are burdened with guilt and failure, it speaks of forgiveness, to those who are in turmoil, it offers peace and to those who struggle and despair it offers new life as a free gift that needs only to be received.

That is, of course, why Christ repudiated violence. The tragedy of those who have taken up weapons to defend Christ and his message (in my own country, for instance) is that they have not been following him but disobeying him. When tried before Pilate for inciting political violence Jesus said: "My kingdom is not of this world – otherwise my servants would have been fighting... to this end I was born and to this end I came into the world that I should bear witness to the truth". Pilate publicly declared Jesus innocent. He could see what is obvious – that truth cannot be imposed by force, especially when it is truth about forgiveness, love and peace with God.

This, be it noted, is the polar opposite of fundamentalisms both religious and secular that are fuelled by 'will to power' and disregard for human rights and values.

This does not mean that there are no problems – pain and evil cast their shadow over our lives, but in the cross of Christ we see that God has not remained a distant spectator. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us". God took part in suffering. As Archbishop Justin Welby said at Easter: "I think the cross is the great point at which the suffering and sorrow, torture, trial and sin and yuck of the world ends up on God's shoulders out of love for us."

These are big issues – God and science, faith and evidence, meaning and morality but in the Christian message that is part of our heritage we have immense resources to deal with them. But how can we do this in a pluralistic society?

According to the Bible, human beings have infinite value because they are made in the image of God. That holds whether they believe in God or not and is evidenced by the fact that in every religion, and philosophy on earth we find a version of the Golden Rule "Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself". My experience is that if we adopt that attitude then the way is open for respectful yet vigorous and honest discussion.

My university of Oxford puts great store by the Socratic tradition – follow the evidence where it leads. But people cannot assess the evidence unless they are exposed to it from all sides and not just one. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century William Tyndale gave his life to open up discussion of the biblical worldview so that people could make a rational choice. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century we need the courage to create public space for exactly the same discussion.

In his message to us this morning the Prime Minister David Cameron says: "It is encouraging that Christianity still plays such a vital role in our national life. It has had an immense historic influence in the development of our culture and national institutions and it motivates British people to wonderful acts of service and self-sacrifice. ... we are a country with a Christian heritage and we should not be afraid to say so."

No one seems to have a problem in the UK with doing atheism in public – why, then, should we be ashamed to do God?

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