Theism, Atheism, and Anti-Theism: A New Landscape for Theology

by Gary Keogh

It is a curious situation theology now finds itself in. The questions and debates that have characterised the discipline for millennia have been brought from the academy and thrust into the public sphere. The academic environment post-internet sees information instantaneously shared between disciplines, leading to an unprecedented accessibility of knowledge. The entire catalogue of scientific, philosophical, literary, and economic theory is available at the touch of a button. As such, we can no longer be content with conceptual partisans that keep academic disciplines separate. The sciences and humanities are no longer separated by the walls of university buildings but are sharing their resources through online databases. Academic outputs too are no longer confined to universities but shared in virtual hubs. Similarly, the distance between ideologies and value systems is being contracted more and more as time passes, with steady advancements in global communications and travel. The other side of the world is no longer on the other side of the world, but at the end of a smartphone or computer. The ease of travel and communication and an increasingly globalized economy have led to an unprecedented mixing of nationalities bringing with them their cultures and values. Interfaith discussions have therefore become more commonplace and necessary, with tensions between religious ideals becoming more visible and more public.

In this open, accessible, and highly visible setting, theology as a discipline and indeed religion qua religion have been very publicly challenged and attacked by a substantial and popular migration toward secularism, spearheaded by the celebrity academics of new atheism. The public visibility and popularity of the new atheism (with Richard Dawkins’ The God Delusion alone selling over two million copies) has brought debates on God and religion from academic quarters to a more public arena, where they now transpire on Twitter and YouTube. Although some theologians have opted not to give such movements the oxygen of publicity by actually taking them seriously, I have been arguing over the last few years that this public and popular character of new atheism must be engaged with if theology is to progress, and not fall into a perpetual regression of inward analysis irrelevant to those “outside.” Theology and everything else for that matter needs to look outward and engage with the intellectual mosaic of diverse disciplines and philosophies that the modern world has made increasingly accessible. This is a marked shift in context that has emerged in line with the public appeal of new atheism.


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Atheism itself is a curious issue for theology as there is an often overlooked common ground, namely, an interest in the “big questions” of God, meaning, and particularly in the case of the new atheists, religion. Atheists have gone through the process of identifying themselves as atheists, which is indicative of the fact that they have put thought into this self-identification. They have (or at least should have) enquired about existential questions of meaning, purpose, existence, and so on, and come to the conclusion that there is no purpose or intentionality behind existence itself: this is the crux of atheism, but one achieved through the same models of investigation utilized by theology. Moreover, if atheists have a disdain for religion, then that too is indicative that they have actually given the matter thought. As such, atheists are not disinterested parties, but rather probably care quite deeply about the same questions that theologians do, albeit coming to (perhaps) different conclusions. In this sense, atheists and theologians have quite a lot more in common than one might first think: their relationship could be akin to opposing political parties—they might have very different viewpoints, but they are both political parties and in that sense, have quite a lot in common. Consequently, I feel atheism is far from a vacuous topic for theologians and demands significant attention and serious consideration.

A Confused Polemic

There are, however, aspects of this ongoing dialogue/debate between theism and atheism that are worrying in their confusion, particularly regarding what atheism actually is. In new atheism and the wider migration towards secularism, atheism is often presented as intricately bound together with anti-theism and anti-religion: an unhelpful confusion. For instance, an anti-theist could be discerned by his or her opposition to God; this person could, however, be theistic: believing in God though feeling that he is bad or evil based on the measure of suffering in the natural world, for instance. An anti-religionist too is not necessarily an atheist. This could be an individual who is again theistic but upon reflection concludes that religion has been the cause of too much sorrow and is thus, all things considered, a bad thing. The question of religion being a positive or negative force, however, has nothing to do with atheism necessarily. It is of course true that in the contemporary world many have turned away from religion given the instances of child abuse within the Catholic Church, or because of religious conflicts in the Middle East, and so forth; but again, this has nothing to do with atheism. Conversely, there are many who are atheists but, all things considered, see religion as a positive thing, and there have been attempts to appreciate religion atheistically (Ronald Dworkin and Loyal Rue are contemporary examples). So the kind of anti-religiosity that is the most prominent feature of new atheism is not really atheistic.

The new atheists have presented strong critiques of religious belief by pointing out hypocrisy in moral issues and what they perceive as a self-declared exemption from moral criticism by religious traditions. For example, Dawkins approvingly quotes Douglas Adams on religion, “Here is an idea or a notion that you’re not allowed to say anything bad about; you’re just not.” It would indeed be quite a dangerous thing if this were actually the case: that religious traditions, or indeed any ideological or moral system, was beyond questioning and critical reflection. But some of the most substantial and important criticisms of religious traditions have come from within the tradition itself. For example, notable criticisms of the Catholic tradition in the twentieth century came from Catholic thinkers such as Hans Küng and Herbert McCabe. More recently we are witnessing ongoing debate, disagreement, and self-criticism from the Church on issues such as clericalism and Church attitudes to homosexuality and women. In any case, as I mentioned above, atheism has nothing to do with criticisms of religion per se, and with

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respect to many of the new atheists’ criticisms of religion, they would likely find significant support within various churches and theological traditions.

A New Landscape

I believe that new atheism has developed enough substance to demand due consideration from theological quarters. One of the more troubling aspects of new atheism and its endeavor to discredit religion is, as discussed above, its engagement in a confused polemic. The movement became caught up in critiquing religious traditions, or more often than not, caricatures of religious traditions greatly exaggerating the extent of biblical fundamentalism in Christianity or extremism and jihad in Islam. Such critiques of religious traditions have little if anything to do with actual atheism; moreover, the new atheists would likely find more strident criticisms of religions from within the traditions themselves. On one of Dawkins’ pet peeves for instance—the belief in Adam and Eve—St. Augustine writes “Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous . . . that they should ever hear Christians spouting . . . and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter.”5 This line would not seem too out-of-place in The God Delusion. Similarly, if conducted in earnest, the engagement between faith, reason, and science makes manifest the Anselmian definition of a theology: fides quaerens intellectum.

New atheism may not have brought anything substantial to the debate on whether God exists, but it has carved a new agenda for theology: a very public agenda that must be addressed to iron out the confusions between atheism and critical reflection on religion which, contrary to the new atheists’ suggestions, comes in strong and vivacious forms within religious traditions themselves. Discussions on the historicity of the Bible, the power and influence of the Church, the role of religion in conflicts, and philosophical debates on the nature of reality and the existence of God have been brought from the annals of academic theology to the public, online, on radio, on television, and so on. But it has been done so on the new atheists’ terms. Theology must take this new setting, though, as an opportunity as well as a challenge: an opportunity to lay waste to the confusions and myths promulgated by new atheism and presented to the public, for it is the narrative of new atheism that the public are hearing more and more. The confusions between atheism and anti-theism is a worrying one and must not be simply ignored or dismissed, for it is gaining substantial traction amongst the public. We need to respond in kind and demonstrate, in this new socio-techno landscape, the reality of theology’s intellectual traditions.