

What scares the new atheists

The vocal fervour of today's missionary atheism conceals a panic that religion is not only refusing to decline - but in fact flourishing

In 1929, the Thinker's Library, a series established by the Rationalist Press Association to advance secular thinking and counter the influence of religion in Britain, published an English translation of the German biologist Ernst Haeckel's 1899 book *The Riddle of the Universe*. Celebrated as "the German Darwin", Haeckel was one of the most influential public intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; *The Riddle of the Universe* sold half a million copies in Germany alone, and was translated into dozens of other languages. Hostile to Jewish and Christian traditions, Haeckel devised his own "religion of science" called Monism, which incorporated an anthropology that divided the human species into a hierarchy of racial groups. Though he died in 1919, before the Nazi Party had been founded, his ideas, and widespread influence in Germany, unquestionably helped to create an intellectual climate in which policies of racial slavery and genocide were able to claim a basis in science.

The Thinker's Library also featured works by Julian Huxley, grandson of TH Huxley, the Victorian biologist who was known as "Darwin's bulldog" for his fierce defence of evolutionary theory. A proponent of "evolutionary humanism", which he described as "religion without revelation", Julian Huxley shared some of Haeckel's views, including advocacy of eugenics. In 1931, Huxley wrote that there was "a certain amount of evidence that the negro is an earlier product of human evolution than the Mongolian or the European, and as such might be expected to have advanced less, both in body and mind". Statements of this kind were then commonplace: there were many in the secular intelligentsia - including HG Wells, also a contributor to the Thinker's Library - who looked forward to a time when "backward" peoples would be remade in a western mould or else vanish from the world.

But by the late 1930s, these views were becoming suspect: already in 1935, Huxley admitted that the concept of race was "hardly definable in scientific terms". While he never renounced eugenics, little was heard from him on the subject after the second world war. The science that pronounced western people superior was bogus - but what shifted Huxley's views wasn't any scientific revelation: it was the rise of Nazism, which revealed what had been done under the aegis of Haeckel-style racism.

It has often been observed that Christianity follows changing moral fashions, all the while believing that it stands apart from the world. The same might be said, with more justice, of the prevalent version of atheism. If an earlier generation of unbelievers shared the racial prejudices of their time and elevated them to the status of scientific truths, evangelical

atheists do the same with the liberal values to which western societies subscribe today - while looking with contempt upon “backward” cultures that have not abandoned religion. The racial theories promoted by atheists in the past have been consigned to the memory hole - and today’s most influential atheists would no more endorse racist biology than they would be seen following the guidance of an astrologer. But they have not renounced the conviction that human values must be based in science; now it is liberal values which receive that accolade. There are disputes, sometimes bitter, over how to define and interpret those values, but their supremacy is hardly ever questioned. For 21st century atheist missionaries, being liberal and scientific in outlook are one and the same.

It’s a reassuringly simple equation. In fact there are no reliable connections - whether in logic or history - between atheism, science and liberal values. When organised as a movement and backed by the power of the state, atheist ideologies have been an integral part of despotic regimes that also claimed to be based in science, such as the former Soviet Union. Many rival moralities and political systems - most of them, to date, illiberal - have attempted to assert a basis in science. All have been fraudulent and ephemeral. Yet the attempt continues in atheist movements today, which claim that liberal values can be scientifically validated and are therefore humanly universal.

Fortunately, this type of atheism isn’t the only one that has ever existed. There have been many modern atheisms, some of them more cogent and more intellectually liberating than the type that makes so much noise today. Campaigning atheism is a missionary enterprise, aiming to convert humankind to a particular version of unbelief; but not all atheists have been interested in propagating a new gospel, and some have been friendly to traditional faiths.

Evangelical atheists today view liberal values as part of an emerging global civilisation; but not all atheists, even when they have been committed liberals, have shared this comforting conviction. Atheism comes in many irreducibly different forms, among which the variety being promoted at the present time looks strikingly banal and parochial.

In itself, atheism is an entirely negative position. In pagan Rome, “atheist” (from the Greek *atheos*) meant anyone who refused to worship the established pantheon of deities. The term was applied to Christians, who not only refused to worship the gods of the pantheon but demanded exclusive worship of their own god. Many non-western religions contain no conception of a creator-god - Buddhism and Taoism, in some of their forms, are atheist religions of this kind - and many religions have had no interest in proselytising. In modern western contexts, however, atheism and rejection of monotheism are practically interchangeable. Roughly speaking, an atheist is anyone who has no use for the concept of God - the idea of a divine mind, which has created humankind and embodies in a perfect form the values that human beings cherish and strive to realise. Many who are atheists in this sense (including myself) regard the evangelical atheism that has emerged over the past few decades with bemusement. Why make a fuss over an idea that has no sense for you? There are untold multitudes who have no interest in waging war on beliefs that mean nothing to them. Throughout history, many have been happy to live their lives without bothering about ultimate questions. This sort of atheism is one of the perennial responses to the experience of being human.

As an organised movement, atheism is never non-committal in this way. It always goes with an alternative belief-system - typically, a set of ideas that serves to show the modern west is the high point of human development. In Europe from the late 19th century until the second world war, this was a version of evolutionary theory that marked out western peoples as being the most highly evolved. Around the time Haeckel was promoting his racial theories, a different theory of western superiority was developed by Marx. While condemning liberal societies and prophesying their doom, Marx viewed them as the high point of human development to date. (This is why he praised British colonialism in India as an essentially progressive development.) If Marx had serious reservations about Darwinism - and he did - it was because Darwin's theory did not frame evolution as a progressive process.

The predominant varieties of atheist thinking, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, aimed to show that the secular west is the model for a universal civilisation. The missionary atheism of the present time is a replay of this theme; but the west is in retreat today, and beneath the fervour with which this atheism assaults religion there is an unmistakable mood of fear and anxiety. To a significant extent, the new atheism is the expression of a liberal moral panic.

Sam Harris, the American neuroscientist and author of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (2004) and *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Moral Values* (2010), who was arguably the first of the "new atheists", illustrates this point. Following many earlier atheist ideologues, he wants a "scientific morality"; but whereas earlier exponents of this sort of atheism used science to prop up values everyone would now agree were illiberal, Harris takes for granted that what he calls a "science of good and evil" cannot be other than liberal in content. (Not everyone will agree with Harris's account of liberal values, which appears to sanction the practice of torture: "Given what many believe are the exigencies of our war on terrorism," he wrote in 2004, "the practice of torture, in certain circumstances, would seem to be not only permissible but necessary.")

Harris's militancy in asserting these values seems to be largely a reaction to Islamist terrorism. For secular liberals of his generation, the shock of the 11 September attacks went beyond the atrocious loss of life they entailed. The effect of the attacks was to place a question mark over the belief that their values were spreading - slowly, and at times fitfully, but in the long run irresistibly - throughout the world. As society became ever more reliant on science, they had assumed, religion would inexorably decline. No doubt the process would be bumpy, and pockets of irrationality would linger on the margins of modern life; but religion would dwindle away as a factor in human conflict. The road would be long and winding. But the grand march of secular reason would continue, with more and more societies joining the modern west in marginalising religion. Someday, religious belief would be no more important than personal hobbies or ethnic cuisines.

Today, it's clear that no grand march is under way. The rise of violent jihadism is only the most obvious example of a rejection of secular life. Jihadist thinking comes in numerous varieties, mixing strands from 20th century ideologies, such as Nazism and Leninism, with elements deriving from the 18th century Wahhabist Islamic fundamentalist movement. What all Islamist movements have in common is a categorical rejection of any secular realm. But the ongoing reversal in secularisation is not a peculiarly Islamic phenomenon.

The resurgence of religion is a worldwide development. Russian Orthodoxy is stronger than it has been for over a century, while China is the scene of a reawakening of its indigenous faiths and of underground movements that could make it the largest Christian country in the world by the end of this century. Despite tentative shifts in opinion that have been hailed as evidence it is becoming less pious, the US remains massively and pervasively religious - it's inconceivable that a professed unbeliever could become president, for example.

For secular thinkers, the continuing vitality of religion calls into question the belief that history underpins their values. To be sure, there is disagreement as to the nature of these values. But pretty well all secular thinkers now take for granted that modern societies must in the end converge on some version of liberalism. Never well founded, this assumption is today clearly unreasonable. So, not for the first time, secular thinkers look to science for a foundation for their values.

It's probably just as well that the current generation of atheists seems to know so little of the longer history of atheist movements. When they assert that science can bridge fact and value, they overlook the many incompatible value-systems that have been defended in this way. There is no more reason to think science can determine human values today than there was at the time of Haeckel or Huxley. None of the divergent values that atheists have from time to time promoted has any essential connection with atheism, or with science. How could any increase in scientific knowledge validate values such as human equality and personal autonomy? The source of these values is not science. In fact, as the most widely-read atheist thinker of all time argued, these quintessential liberal values have their origins in monotheism.

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The new atheists rarely mention Friedrich Nietzsche, and when they do it is usually to dismiss him. This can't be because Nietzsche's ideas are said to have inspired the Nazi cult of racial inequality - an unlikely tale, given that the Nazis claimed their racism was based in science. The reason Nietzsche has been excluded from the mainstream of contemporary atheist thinking is that he exposed the problem atheism has with morality. It's not that atheists can't be moral - the subject of so many mawkish debates. The question is which morality an atheist should serve.

It's a familiar question in continental Europe, where a number of thinkers have explored the prospects of a "difficult atheism" that doesn't take liberal values for granted. It can't be said that anything much has come from this effort. Georges Bataille's postmodern project of "atheology" didn't produce the godless religion he originally intended, or any coherent type of moral thinking. But at least Bataille, and other thinkers like him, understood that when monotheism has been left behind morality can't go on as before. Among other things, the universal claims of liberal morality become highly questionable.

It's impossible to read much contemporary polemic against religion without the impression that for the "new atheists" the world would be a better place if Jewish and Christian monotheism had never existed. If only the world wasn't plagued by these troublesome God-botherers, they are always lamenting, liberal values would be so much more secure. Awkwardly for these atheists, Nietzsche understood that modern liberalism was a secular

incarnation of these religious traditions. As a classical scholar, he recognised that a mystical Greek faith in reason had shaped the cultural matrix from which modern liberalism emerged. Some ancient Stoics defended the ideal of a cosmopolitan society; but this was based in the belief that humans share in the Logos, an immortal principle of rationality that was later absorbed into the conception of God with which we are familiar. Nietzsche was clear that the chief sources of liberalism were in Jewish and Christian theism: that is why he was so bitterly hostile to these religions. He was an atheist in large part because he rejected liberal values.

To be sure, evangelical unbelievers adamantly deny that liberalism needs any support from theism. If they are philosophers, they will wheel out their rusty intellectual equipment and assert that those who think liberalism relies on ideas and beliefs inherited from religion are guilty of a genetic fallacy. Canonical liberal thinkers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant may have been steeped in theism; but ideas are not falsified because they originate in errors. The far-reaching claims these thinkers have made for liberal values can be detached from their theistic beginnings; a liberal morality that applies to all human beings can be formulated without any mention of religion. Or so we are continually being told. The trouble is that it's hard to make any sense of the idea of a universal morality without invoking an understanding of what it is to be human that has been borrowed from theism. The belief that the human species is a moral agent struggling to realise its inherent possibilities - the narrative of redemption that sustains secular humanists everywhere - is a hollowed-out version of a theistic myth. The idea that the human species is striving to achieve any purpose or goal - a universal state of freedom or justice, say - presupposes a pre-Darwinian, teleological way of thinking that has no place in science. Empirically speaking, there is no such collective human agent, only different human beings with conflicting goals and values. If you think of morality in scientific terms, as part of the behaviour of the human animal, you find that humans don't live according to iterations of a single universal code. Instead, they have fashioned many ways of life. A plurality of moralities is as natural for the human animal as the variety of languages.

At this point, the dread spectre of relativism tends to be raised. Doesn't talk of plural moralities mean there can be no truth in ethics? Well, anyone who wants their values secured by something beyond the capricious human world had better join an old-fashioned religion. If you set aside any view of humankind that is borrowed from monotheism, you have to deal with human beings as you find them, with their perpetually warring values.

This isn't the relativism celebrated by postmodernists, which holds that human values are merely cultural constructions. Humans are like other animals in having a definite nature, which shapes their experiences whether they like it or not. No one benefits from being tortured or persecuted on account of their religion or sexuality. Being chronically poor is rarely, if ever, a positive experience. Being at risk of violent death is bad for human beings whatever their culture. Such truisms could be multiplied. Universal human values can be understood as something like moral facts, marking out goods and evils that are generically human. Using these universal values, it may be possible to define a minimum standard of civilised life that every society should meet; but this minimum won't be the liberal values of the present time turned into universal principles.

Universal values don't add up to a universal morality. Such values are very often conflicting, and different societies resolve these conflicts in divergent ways. The Ottoman empire,

during some of its history, was a haven of toleration for religious communities who were persecuted in Europe; but this pluralism did not extend to enabling individuals to move from one community to another, or to form new communities of choice, as would be required by a liberal ideal of personal autonomy. The Hapsburg empire was based on rejecting the liberal principle of national self-determination; but - possibly for that very reason - it was more protective of minorities than most of the states that succeeded it. Protecting universal values without honouring what are now seen as core liberal ideals, these archaic imperial regimes were more civilised than a great many states that exist today.

For many, regimes of this kind are imperfect examples of what all human beings secretly want - a world in which no one is unfree. The conviction that tyranny and persecution are aberrations in human affairs is at the heart of the liberal philosophy that prevails today. But this conviction is supported by faith more than evidence. Throughout history there have been large numbers who have been happy to relinquish their freedom as long as those they hate - gay people, Jews, immigrants and other minorities, for example - are deprived of freedom as well. Many have been ready to support tyranny and oppression. Billions of human beings have been hostile to liberal values, and there is no reason for thinking matters will be any different in future.

An older generation of liberal thinkers accepted this fact. As the late Stuart Hampshire put it:

“It is not only possible, but, on present evidence, probable that most conceptions of the good, and most ways of life, which are typical of commercial, liberal, industrialised societies will often seem altogether hateful to substantial minorities within these societies and even more hateful to most of the populations within traditional societies ... As a liberal by philosophical conviction, I think I ought to expect to be hated, and to be found superficial and contemptible, by a large part of mankind.”

Today this a forbidden thought. How could all of humankind not want to be as we imagine ourselves to be? To suggest that large numbers hate and despise values such as toleration and personal autonomy is, for many people nowadays, an intolerable slur on the species. This is, in fact, the quintessential illusion of the ruling liberalism: the belief that all human beings are born freedom-loving and peaceful and become anything else only as a result of oppressive conditioning. But there is no hidden liberal struggling to escape from within the killers of the Islamic State and Boko Haram, any more than there was in the torturers who served the Pol Pot regime. To be sure, these are extreme cases. But in the larger sweep of history, faith-based violence and persecution, secular and religious, are hardly uncommon - and they have been widely supported. It is peaceful coexistence and the practice of toleration that are exceptional.

Considering the alternatives that are on offer, liberal societies are well worth defending. But there is no reason for thinking these societies are the beginning of a species-wide secular civilisation of the kind of which evangelical atheists dream.

In ancient Greece and Rome, religion was not separate from the rest of human activity. Christianity was less tolerant than these pagan societies, but without it the secular societies of modern times would hardly have been possible. By adopting the distinction between

what is owed to Caesar and what to God, Paul and Augustine - who turned the teaching of Jesus into a universal creed - opened the way for societies in which religion was no longer coextensive with life. Secular regimes come in many shapes, some liberal, others tyrannical. Some aim for a separation of church and state as in the US and France, while others - such as the Atatürkist regime that until recently ruled in Turkey - assert state control over religion. Whatever its form, a secular state is no guarantee of a secular culture. Britain has an established church, but despite that fact - or more likely because of it - religion has a smaller role in politics than in America and is less publicly divisive than it is in France.

There is no sign anywhere of religion fading away, but by no means all atheists have thought the disappearance of religion possible or desirable. Some of the most prominent - including the early 19th-century poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, the Austro-Hungarian philosopher and novelist Fritz Mauthner (who published a four-volume history of atheism in the early 1920s) and Sigmund Freud, to name a few - were all atheists who accepted the human value of religion. One thing these atheists had in common was a refreshing indifference to questions of belief. Mauthner - who is remembered today chiefly because of a dismissive one-line mention in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* - suggested that belief and unbelief were both expressions of a superstitious faith in language. For him, "humanity" was an apparition which melts away along with the departing Deity. Atheism was an experiment in living without taking human concepts as realities. Intriguingly, Mauthner saw parallels between this radical atheism and the tradition of negative theology in which nothing can be affirmed of God, and described the heretical medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart as being an atheist in this sense.

Above all, these unevangelical atheists accepted that religion is definitively human. Though not all human beings may attach great importance to them, every society contains practices that are recognisably religious. Why should religion be universal in this way? For atheist missionaries this is a decidedly awkward question. Invariably they claim to be followers of Darwin. Yet they never ask what evolutionary function this species-wide phenomenon serves. There is an irresolvable contradiction between viewing religion naturalistically - as a human adaptation to living in the world - and condemning it as a tissue of error and illusion. What if the upshot of scientific inquiry is that a need for illusion is built into the human mind? If religions are natural for humans and give value to their lives, why spend your life trying to persuade others to give them up?

The answer that will be given is that religion is implicated in many human evils. Of course this is true. Among other things, Christianity brought with it a type of sexual repression unknown in pagan times. Other religions have their own distinctive flaws. But the fault is not with religion, any more than science is to blame for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or medicine and psychology for the refinement of techniques of torture. The fault is in the intractable human animal. Like religion at its worst, contemporary atheism feeds the fantasy that human life can be remade by a conversion experience - in this case, conversion to unbelief.

Evangelical atheists at the present time are missionaries for their own values. If an earlier generation promoted the racial prejudices of their time as scientific truths, ours aims to give the illusions of contemporary liberalism a similar basis in science. It's possible to envision different varieties of atheism developing - atheisms more like those of Freud, which didn't replace God with a flattering image of humanity. But atheisms of this kind are unlikely to be

popular. More than anything else, our unbelievers seek relief from the panic that grips them when they realise their values are rejected by much of humankind. What today's freethinkers want is freedom from doubt, and the prevailing version of atheism is well suited to give it to them.

John Gray's latest book is [The Soul of the Marionette: a short inquiry into human freedom](#) is published this week by Allen Lane/Penguin Books.

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Guardian Live: John Gray and Will Self will debate 'Is free will an illusion?' on Wednesday 18 March 2015, 7pm-8.30pm, at Islington Assembly Hall , London, N1 2UD.

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