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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Atheists Agonistes

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ONE of the surest ways to bring a certain type of dinner party to a halt is to speak piously about “God.” Earnest reference to sinners, apostates or blasphemers, or to the promise of salvation offered in evangelical churches, is likely to produce the same effect. Among the cosmopolites who live in secular enclaves, religion is automatically associated with darkness, superstition, irrationality and an antique or pre-modern cast of mind. It has long been assumed that religion is opposed to science, reason and human progress; and the death of gods is simply taken for granted as a deeply ingrained Darwinian article of faith.

Why, then, are the enlightened so conspicuously up in arms these days, reiterating every possible argument against the existence of God? Why are they indulging in books — Daniel Dennett’s “Breaking the Spell,” Sam Harris’s “Letter to a Christian Nation,” and Richard Dawkins’s “God Delusion” — in which authors lampoon religion or rail against the devout under the banner of a crusading atheism? Books dictated or co-written by God sell quite well among the 2.1 billion self-declared Christians and 1.3 billion self-declared Muslims of the world. What explains the current interest among secularists in absolutely, positively establishing that the author is a fraud?

The most obvious answer is that the armies of disbelief have been provoked. Articulate secularists may be merely reacting to the many recent incitements from religious zealots at home and abroad, as fanatics and infidels have their ways of keeping each other in business.

A deeper and far more unsettling answer, however, is that the popularity of the current counterattack on religion cloaks a renewed and intense anxiety within secular society that it is not the story of religion but rather the story of the Enlightenment that may be more illusory than real.

The Enlightenment story has its own version of Genesis, and the themes are well known: The world woke up from the slumber of the “dark ages,” finally got in touch with the truth and became good about 300 years ago in Northern and Western Europe.

As people opened their eyes, religion (equated with ignorance and superstition) gave way to science (equated with fact and reason). Parochialism and tribal allegiances gave way to ecumenism, cosmopolitanism and individualism. Top-down command systems gave way to the separation of church from state, of politics from science. The story provides a blueprint for how to remake and better the world in the image and interests of the West’s secular elites.

Unfortunately, as a theory of history, that story has had a predictive utility of approximately zero. At the turn of

the millennium it was pretty hard not to notice that the 20th century was probably the worst one yet, and that the big causes of all the death and destruction had rather little to do with religion. Much to everyone's surprise, that great dance on the Berlin Wall back in 1989 turned out not to be the apotheosis of the Enlightenment.

Science has not replaced religion; group loyalties have intensified, not eroded. The collapse of the cold war's balance of power has not resulted in the end of collective faiths or a rush to democracy and individualism. In Iraq, the "West is best" default (and its discourse about universal human rights) has provided a foundation for chaos.

Even some children within the enclave are retreating from the Enlightenment in their quest for a spiritual revival; one discovers perfectly rational and devout Jews or Hindus in one's own family, or living down the block. If religion is a delusion, it is a delusion with a future, which it may be hazardous for us to deny. A shared conception of the soul, the sacred and transcendental values may be a prerequisite for any viable society.

John Locke, who was almost everyone's favorite political philosopher at the time of the founding of our nation, was a very tolerant man. In his 1689 "Letter Concerning Toleration," he advocated a policy of live and let live for believers in many faiths, even heretics. But he drew the line at atheists. He wrote: "Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of God. Promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human societies, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all."

Instead of waging intellectual battles over the existence of god(s), those of us who live in secular society might profit by being slower to judge others and by trying very hard to understand how it is possible for John Locke and our many atheist friends to continue to gaze at each other in such a state of mutual misunderstanding.

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