

CHAPTER I

Of human bondage

‘Thy will be done.’

I. THE PERILS OF PROPHECY

That the faith of his forebears had passed the flood-tide was sensed with apprehension by the Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold, who developed the metaphor in some of the most beautifully elegiac lines in the English poetic canon:

Listen! You hear the grating roar,
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in.

 The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore,
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.¹

Coincidentally, in the very same year (1867) that Arnold was posting the decline of one millennial faith, another was born: Karl Marx, a second Messiah promising salvation to the poor and powerless, published *Das Kapital*. As did his illustrious predecessor (or more precisely his predecessor's apostles), Marx also foretold that a final apocalypse would precede

¹ Matthew Arnold, ‘Dover Beach’ in *Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1923).

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76835-1 - Objecting to God

Colin Howson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Of human bondage

mankind's rebirth into a new world. Marx's was, of course, purely terrestrial, a cooperative of mortal men and women. His apocalypse, once it had commenced, in 1917 in Russia, became one of terror, persecution and death.

But capitalism inconsiderately failed to heed Marx's prognosis and succumb to its internal contradictions. On the contrary, it still seems to be in rude health, and paradoxically at its most exuberant in one of the few countries where Marxism remains part of official dogma, thriving under the benign gaze of the Chinese Communist Party. Arnold's threnody was also at best premature. Whether he would have liked its modern manifestations or not (and I strongly suspect that the author of *Culture and Anarchy* would not), religious faith is resurgent throughout the world, not only in the areas peripheral to western culture but in its heartland: it is probably political suicide for a presidential candidate in the United States to allow any doubt that he or she is a Believer. It is also in the process of effectively immunising itself from criticism: to engage religion in critical debate is suicidal in several countries, verges on illegality in others, and has now been condemned by no less a body than the United Nations. In March 2009 the UN passed a resolution, 62/154, 'Combating the Defamation of Religion', urging member states to limit by law any expression of opinion which is not respectful to religion(s).² The resolution specifically seeks to protect Islam from criticism (paragraph 5), but officially all religions are in its scope.

Publication of this book would arguably be illegal in any country which incorporated that resolution into its law. Fortunately only Security Council resolutions are binding on member states, but UK law already seems to go quite a long way in the direction intended by the authors of 62/154, to judge by what happened to a pair of innocent hotel-proprietors recently in Britain. I quote a newspaper report of what happened after a complaint to police in the UK by a Muslim woman who, while staying at a hotel in Liverpool, engaged in a conversation with the hoteliers about their respective faiths:

It is understood that among the topics debated was whether Jesus was a minor prophet, as Islam teaches, or whether he was the Son of God, as Christianity teaches. Among the things Mr Vogelenzang, 53, is alleged to have said is that

² Article 9 of the text 'stresses the need to effectively combat defamation of all religions' (but singles out Islam for particular mention). Article 10 'Emphasises that everyone has . . . the right to freedom of expression [but] the exercise of [that] right . . . may therefore be subject to limitations as are provided for by law and are necessary for [among other things] respect for religions and beliefs.'

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76835-1 - Objecting to God

Colin Howson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

New atheism

3

Mohammed was a warlord. His wife, 54, is said to have stated that Muslim dress is a form of bondage for women. The conversation, on March 20 [2009], was reported by the woman to Merseyside Police.³

The hoteliers were duly charged with a criminal offence under the Public Order Act of 1986 and the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998. The case went to court and was summarily thrown out by the judge. The Crown Prosecution Service nevertheless insisted that it had acted in the public interest in bringing criminal charges against the hoteliers, who have since been forced to sell their once-flourishing business. In dismissing the case, the judge remarked that it was probably wise not to discuss religion in public.

2. NEW ATHEISM

Adding to the protective cordon of criminal law is a large cohort of *bien-pensants* who think that any vigorous criticism of religion is distasteful and somehow unworthy: ‘not quite cricket’, as the British colloquialism puts it. A recent focus of their displeasure⁴ has been Richard Dawkins’s best-selling book, *The God Delusion*. Though written by a distinguished scientist whose ideas have been seminal, who occupies an endowed Chair at one of the UK’s leading universities, and whose seriousness of purpose can hardly be in doubt, the book is frequently described as ‘rant’ in the journalism of the UK and North America,⁵ and Dawkins-bashing has transcended its national boundaries to become something of an international blood-sport.

But if Dawkins offends against what is regarded as good taste, his Fourth-Estate detractors need even fewer lessons in the art. In an article in the British daily newspaper *The Times* on 16 November 2009, Dawkins is referred to as a ‘fundamentalist atheist’, while in the London *Evening Standard* on 31 August 2010, a columnist called Rosamund Urwin wrote: ‘Dawkins and his ilk make no attempt to engage or debate: they simply seem to enjoy castigating and poking fun.’ Even a cursory inspection of

³ *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 September 2009. The British press has developed an obsession with age, and it is now *de rigueur* to state the age of anyone mentioned in a newspaper report.

⁴ An even more recent one is Stephen Hawking, whom Baroness Greenfield accused of displaying a ‘Taliban-like’ presumption of omniscience when he merely commented that physics no longer needs God (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 September 2010).

⁵ The scientists are naturally a different matter. The eminent evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers wrote the Foreword to *The Selfish Gene* (and generously pointed out that Dawkins corrected a mistake that he, Trivers, had made). A recent tribute to the fertility of Dawkins’s ideas comes from the distinguished physicist Leonard Susskind, in *The Cosmic Landscape* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2006), p. 344.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76835-1 - Objecting to God

Colin Howson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Of human bondage

Dawkins's activities would have shown this to be false. I have seen and heard Dawkins debate several times, and on each of those occasions he was measured and rational. Ms Urwin's sally seems to be an example of what psychoanalysts call *transference*: the imputing to others of one's own deficiencies.

One might feel entitled to expect a somewhat higher standard from academics. And one might be disappointed. The following passage appeared in a newspaper book-review by John Gray, Emeritus Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics:

Just like the monotheists they obsessively attack, Dawkins and his followers believe that consciousness makes humans categorically different from their animal kin. To be sure, these ideologues insist (they always insist) that consciousness emerged without any kind of supernatural invention. Now that consciousness has appeared among humans they – or at least the most advanced members of the species, the self-styled 'brights' as Dawkins and his followers describe themselves – can master the blind forces of evolution.⁶

It is not entirely clear what that last sentence is intended to mean. But here, for the record, is what Dawkins said about consciousness in the book that propelled him to popular fame, *The Selfish Gene*:

When we watch an animal 'searching' for food, or for a mate, or for a lost child, we can hardly help imputing to it some of the subjective feelings we ourselves experience when we search. . . . Each one of us knows, from the evidence of his own introspection, that, at least in one survival machine, this purposiveness has evolved the property we call 'consciousness'. I am not philosopher enough to discuss what this means. . . .⁷

And here is something more recent:

we don't know which animals are conscious. We don't actually, technically, even know that any other human being is conscious. We just each of us know that we ourselves are conscious. We infer on pretty good grounds that other people are conscious, and it's the same sort of grounds that lead us to infer that probably chimpanzees are conscious and probably dogs are conscious.⁸

Thus is a very distinguished thinker mocked, judged and – metaphorically – crucified by an academic for whom a lively canard trumps the truth. Dawkins may be something of a latter-day Darwin's bulldog – as Darwin's

⁶ Review of Marilynne Robinson, *Matters of the Mind*, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 21 May 2010.

⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 53.

⁸ From a recorded interview, 21 October 2009.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76835-1 - Objecting to God

Colin Howson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

New atheism

5

great Victorian defender, T. H. Huxley, called himself – but like Huxley himself he is a scientist and a tireless and gifted campaigner on behalf of an increased public understanding of science. Ironically, the main charge against him that is not entirely polemical is that his assault on religion goes well beyond what science and the standards of scientific reasoning justify: in particular, that he has not bothered to understand enough about what he is attacking. I myself think that Dawkins understands quite enough to form a reasoned and – as far as I am concerned – entirely convincing judgment. I hold no brief for him, however, and later I will argue that some of his own arguments are radically unsound, including the centrepiece-argument of *The God Delusion*.

Another cause of the widespread resistance to Dawkins's philippics is what is seen as a particularly intransigent way in which he and the 'new atheists', as they are called,⁹ state their case. Religion is still so respectably entrenched even in western liberal societies that any overtly critical assault is regarded as suspect. Many people will never be convinced however good the arguments, because arguments in themselves have only a very limited power to persuade; but it would anyway be very surprising if a belief-system that has been so dominant politically, socially and spiritually for nearly two thousand years, and still exercises a powerful hold on billions of minds, would yield either suddenly or easily. Many people – myself among them – believe that the intellectual case against God was actually made over two-and-a-half centuries ago, by the Scottish philosopher David Hume – of whom more later – in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.¹⁰ Others have made the case for themselves without Hume's assistance. But to little avail: God is showing no inclination to quit the scene. Indeed, the number of adherents of two of the three big monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, has increased roughly in step with the increase in the world's population and each of them numbers more than a billion followers, and they are still growing, Islam very rapidly. And of course there are many more religions than just these. Hinduism also numbers many millions, so does Buddhism, while if a count were taken of all those who follow one

⁹ This intellectually distinguished group includes, in addition to Dawkins himself, the particle physicist Victor Stenger, the chemist Peter Atkins, the neuroscientist Sam Harris, the philosophers Daniel Dennett and Michel Onfray, the mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi and the writer and journalist Christopher Hitchens. If I have omitted anyone of note I apologise.

¹⁰ Paul Davies notes that this remarkable work even contains the first suggestion that we might inhabit a multiverse (*The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p. 96).

or other of the active religions that currently exist it would amount to a sizable proportion of the world's population.

3. GOD OF OUR FATHERS

The anthropologist Pascal Boyer, in his book *Religion Explained*, makes a plausible case that religions arise and persist because they answer a variety of human needs, emotional and intellectual. Because the needs persist so does religion, even when it is assailed by what might seem to the scientific mind to be overwhelmingly adverse evidence. Unfortunately, the way it accommodates those needs has often come with a considerable cost, sometimes highly visible, sometimes more insidious. I know of no reliable record of the number of lives lost, to say nothing of serious physical and mental injuries also sustained, on behalf of some of the world's principal religions, but to put it at several million is probably not an overestimate.

Not all religions are inherently toxic, and there is no doubt that some of the violence perpetrated in religion's name is often mixed with more worldly causes. But by no means all of it. Though they may not all contribute in a significant way to violence and intolerance, some religions, unfortunately those with large world followings, nevertheless have a special mix of ingredients which predisposes them strongly in that direction. Foremost among them are the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The ingredients are set out in the foundational narrative those religions share: an absolutist morality based on the command of an all-powerful creator of heaven and earth, better known as God. God will tolerate no disobedience or any challenge to, or even *doubt* about, his authority. God needs no informers and secret police to inform him of even contemplated deviance,¹¹ because he knows every detail of your thoughts ('I know that thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from thee', conceded Job,¹² after being treated to a first-hand recital of God's limitless powers). Against God's verdict there is no appeal, and his punishments and rewards are so extreme that one of Europe's foremost mathematicians, Blaise Pascal, who was also a Christian mystic, claimed that only mathematical infinity could represent their magnitude.¹³ Even the New Testament, though incorporating the Sermon on the Mount, is not without hints, and sometimes

¹¹ It is entirely appropriate if this observation brings Stalin to mind. Stalin had personality traits very similar to those of the Old Testament God.

¹² 42:2.

¹³ Pascal developed a famous prudential argument for belief in God based on that 'number' which we shall look at more closely in Chapter 3.

more than hints, of the older methods of persuasion. There is gentle Jesus, the Lamb of God, threatening eternal damnation to the wicked ('Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire'¹⁴), and his apostle – and some claim dearest disciple – St John the Divine condemning the merely 'fearful and unbelieving' to Hell.¹⁵ The New Testament signally failed to temper the ferocity of the Counter-Reformation, and atheism could be punished by death even in eighteenth-century England and Scotland.

The extremity of God's enduring wrath is dramatically illustrated in the story of the Fall in Genesis: for a single act of disobedience Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden and the stigma of sin stamped on all their posterity, together with the certainty of – to hijack some famous words of the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes – a life nasty, brutish and short. The regime pictured in this piece of sacred mythopoeia is a *totalitarianism*, but a totalitarianism more thoroughgoing than any earth can offer, even Stalin's, with no detail of quotidian life or thought escaping the attention of a punitive God.¹⁶ But it is not just a fear-inspiring totalitarianism. If it were it would not have exerted the peculiar attachment that it has done and continues to do. Its grip on the human psyche is arguably as powerful as it is because, in a beautifully Orwellian turn, between the beatings (remember that mankind is inherently sinful), God professes to love his people, asking for their love and worship in return. According to Christianity, he even sacrificed his own son to mitigate the savage punishment he had meted out to the whole of humanity for the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Beaten wives, tortured prisoners, unhappy victims of systematic bullying, can all attest to the peculiar psychological efficaciousness of this sort of equivocal treatment. I said 'Orwellian' because whether George Orwell intended it or not (and it is very difficult to believe that he didn't), his chilling novel *1984* reads as an allegory of the Inquisition, with God the invisible Big Brother and O'Brien, the friend-turned-inquisitor and torturer, a latter-day Torquemada. At the end of the novel Winston Smith, a broken man, has learned to love Big Brother.¹⁷

¹⁴ Matthew 25:41.

¹⁵ Revelation 21:8. Together with 'the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolators, and all liars', these sinners will 'have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death'. The Koran employs a similar rhetoric of hatred in consigning unbelievers to the same fate.

¹⁶ A contemporary Muslim philosopher, Abdennour Bidar, has actually had the considerable courage to describe Islam as totalitarian – 'archaic, violent and totalitarian' ('La lapidation, preuve extrême de la logique de violence de l'Islam', *Le Monde*, 31 August 2010). Totalitarian *all* the Abrahamic religions are, not just Islam.

¹⁷ One of the Jewish prisoners who survived Auschwitz, rabbi Hugo Gryn, said that when he once broke down weeping he believed that God was also crying. Then, Gryn reported, 'I seemed to

This highly potent mix of foundational doctrine is stiffened with the addition of the claim of the two proselytising religions, Christianity and Islam, that they represent God's law for all mankind, giving themselves licence to convert disbelievers – and each other – and if necessary to wage holy war. Torah, Bible and Koran, and their accompanying commentaries and additions, all claim to be literally God's truth, but unfortunately they are mutually contradictory. All the ingredients are now here for a recipe for discord, intolerance and the infliction of suffering. The possibility of inviting God's displeasure becomes an issue of concern even for those whose personal loyalty is unquestioned but who are anxious not to be seen to be condoning dissent, or corrupting his Word. Theologians, employed to determine exactly what that word is, often led hazardous lives and some still do. Arius, an Alexandrian priest of the third and fourth centuries CE, achieved theological notoriety for claiming that God and Jesus were not of the same essence, but he was merely anathematised and exiled for his heresy and subsequently readmitted to the fold (at which point he dramatically died). Many centuries later, under the Inquisition, the penalty for heresy was death, after torture. It was a remedy widely copied. William Tyndale, the sixteenth-century Protestant scholar who gave us the first English translation of the New Testament, and parts of the Old, from the Greek and Hebrew originals was condemned and executed by being strangled and then burned.

You might object that no mere collection of myths or texts by itself amounts to totalitarianism. *People* make totalitarianisms. That is true, but people can easily be roused to the noblest of actions, and also to the most depraved, by 'mere' writings. A book on economics written in the second half of the nineteenth century inspired not one but several earthly totalitarianisms, more than one of which still thrives. The crucial factor which causes an otherwise inert collection of myths and texts to become potent is, of course, *belief*. The most nightmarish of fairy stories will remain fairy stories if they are not believed, as the bizarre but harmless rituals of Halloween bear witness. We are talking about active *belief*-systems, and the sacred scriptures of the three monotheisms, plus the extensive bodies of theology accompanying them, currently support the beliefs of billions of people, inspiring them in various places and times (which unfortunately

be granted a curious inner peace . . . I found God' (*Chasing Shadows* (London: Allen Lane, 2001)). Note that this occurred on the day that Jews atone to God. In making the comparison with Orwell's novel I do not in any way intend to belittle the ineffable enormity of what Gryn and others went through in the death camps.

Clear and present danger

9

include the present) to recreate God's totalitarianism on earth, under the proxy-governance of priests.

4. CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

Though often sharing the opinion of atheists and agnostics ancient and modern that those beliefs are very probably untrue and the regimes based on them repugnant, the *bien-pensants* still manage to disapprove strongly of vigorous frontal assaults on them. They may or may not be true, a typical objection runs, but what virtue is there in trying to destroy the faith of billions of people together with the inspiration those beliefs provide to do good, help the weak and sick, etc.? Why not tolerate the edifice of faith as one more, and probably the most powerful, support of public morality and social benefit? Judged in terms of its practical outcomes – for example in the extensive charity work undertaken by religious organisations – religious belief is on record as having promoted and continuing to promote a great deal of good, while in basing itself on the presumed love of God it is the least likely to promote harm. Admittedly, there is the regrettable fact that from time to time there are outbreaks of religious intolerance, with violence at the extreme, but given time, increasing education and 'globalisation' will hopefully cause them, if not to disappear entirely, at least be marginalised and contained.

It's a reassuring story. It may even be true in the long-enough run. But it is not true now, nor in the near future. Quite the contrary: we are witnessing a marked and rapidly increasing renewal of religious intolerance, sometimes very violent and always drawing its inspiration from holy scripture. Even in formerly tranquil areas of the world security services work day and night to prevent what has every appearance of being Islamic-inspired terrorism from following up the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, the Madrid and London bombings and the guerrilla attack in Mumbai, with new attempts to turn the world into a single Islamic state. Faisal Shahzad, a US citizen, condemned to life-imprisonment in October 2010 for attempting to detonate a car-bomb in Times Square, warned the court: 'Brace yourselves, the war with the Muslims has just begun', adding generously 'If I'm given 1,000 lives I will sacrifice them all for Allah.'

The same uncompromising message is conveyed on the numerous jihadist websites urging believers everywhere to enlist in the war against the enemies of Allah, with the Koran and hadiths cited in support. In the so-called 'sword verse' (9:5) of the Koran, the Prophet appears to include

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76835-1 - Objecting to God

Colin Howson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

Of human bondage

murder in his God's list of punishments of idolaters once the four 'forbidden months' are over. Sura 5:33's tone is equally menacing:

Those who wage war against God and his Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or banishment from the land: a disgrace for them in this world, and then a terrible punishment in the Hereafter, unless they repent before you overpower them – in that case bear in mind that God is forgiving and merciful.¹⁸

Such passages are frequently glossed over by modern Muslim editors, who cite the contemporary context of local wars against specific opponents. That is all very well, but the Koran is nevertheless regarded by all Muslims as the unedited word of God valid for all times and all places, and it seethes with hatred of unbelievers, expressing God's loathing in language of graphic violence.

This is not to deny the (undeniable) fact that there is a large social and political dimension to the current wave of Islamic violence. A powerful source of grievance was undoubtedly the implantation of Israel into Palestine and its subsequent support by some western countries and particularly the United States. The recent invasion of a sovereign Muslim state, Iraq, by a coalition of western countries, on what even then were clearly trumped-up charges, simply added fuel to the fire.¹⁹ Traditional Muslim societies also see themselves threatened by a secularism widely thought to be promoted by western countries, which is not only a threat to their religion as such but also to the social structures it supports and sanctifies. It hardly needs saying that those who benefit most from the distribution of offices and influence traditionally 'due' to them do not generally welcome the invasion of an alien culture threatening those privileges. Men certainly enjoy great power over women in traditional Muslim societies and the sexual privileges that go with it. But to see religion itself as causally innocent in the current wave of religious violence is simply a refusal to face reality.²⁰ Many Muslims among the world's one and a half billion see their shared religion as their ultimate loyalty, and it is the fact that it is *Muslim* territories that are being threatened, invaded and more generally desecrated by the West that is at the heart of the militancy. Osama bin Laden's dramatic communiqués are peppered with minatory quotations from the Koran, and I think that one can reasonably assume that he believes that he is conveying the will of God.

¹⁸ The highly conditional nature of God's mercy is common to all three monotheisms.

¹⁹ It was on the basis of similarly trumped-up charges that Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938, and forged Britain's and France's determination to resist any further invasion. The result was the Second World War.

²⁰ This point is made forcefully in Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2010).