

To: Karen Armstrong
cc British Humanist Association

From: Geoff Heath
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10 September 2009.

Dear Karen Armstrong,

A response to your book:

‘The Case for God. What Religion Really Means.’

When you were a guest on the BBC Radio 4 ‘Start the Week’ programme discussing your book I heard you state: ‘*God is not a fact*’. I decided that it would be interesting to read your book because, as a humanist, I too think that God is not a ‘fact’. I assumed that you may not think about the ‘non-fact God’ in the same way that I think of the ‘non - fact God’ ! Having finished your book I think that my assumption was justified. It’s one of those books which I read with sustained interest and which I regret having finished. You will gather that I enjoyed it.

Just a few facts about myself. I was brought up as a Methodist – somewhat evangelical - and after teacher training followed by a few years of teaching I went into the Methodist Ministry. During the training for that ministry I started to study philosophical theology and my thinking began to change quite dramatically. The theologians I was reading included: Bultmann, Tillich, Van Buren, John Macquarrie, Joseph Fletcher. Robinson’s ‘*Honest to God*’ had just been published !! Challenging, mind and life-changing ideas. With hindsight ‘existential tsunami’ was about right.

I slowly came to the view that I could no longer believe in the God asserted in my understanding of the Christian tradition for three main reasons:

- 1 I increasingly came to have serious and sustained intellectual and ethical doubts about the credibility of God’s existence.
- 2 I came to an existential position in which I concluded that I did not need to believe in this God on emotional grounds. I could live without a need for God.
- 3 My experience of training for the Methodist Ministry, and a few years in that Ministry, led me to the view that organised religion was a serious problem, not only for myself but also for others – some of whom were actually in the church as well as outside it.

During that time I undertook psychotherapy training (Clinical Theology with Dr Frank Lake at Nottingham). After I had left the Ministry I studied psychology and taught in

Higher Education where I eventually became a Principal Lecturer in Counselling and Human Relations at the University of Derby.

I have always felt that trying to become clear about my beliefs and values was an important project for me. Eventually I published a book (2003): '*Believing in Nothing and Something: An Approach to Humanist Beliefs and Values*'. I enclose a copy.

I also publish papers on my website: www.bowlandpress.com

For about 15 years I have had almost weekly discussions with my friend who was Head of Religious Studies at the University of Derby. Hence I have maintained an interest in various approaches to theology and philosophy as well as pursuing my own reading and writing in aspects of psychology, neurobiology, the philosophy of science and what I would term 'applied philosophy'. I have given sessions at the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby.

So that, briefly, is my background.

As I said, I read your book with considerable enjoyment. I learned a great deal from your discussion of the possible origins of various religions and the development of religious thought. However, my main enjoyment was reading the second section: 'The Modern God'. I have been interested in the multi-stranded Enlightenment for many years and I still feel the need to know more about the significant impacts which these strands had, and continue to have, on Western thought. Some years ago I read Tarnas (1996): '*The Passion of the Western Mind*'. A book which I found fascinating. He also addresses the impact of these strands of thought.

It hadn't occurred to me with such clarity until I read your book that the kind of atheist which one might become is related to the kind of God whose existence one has come to deny. It had also not so clearly occurred to me that the ways in which Christian thinkers began to ally themselves with aspects of Enlightenment science – via the work of Newton, Galileo *et al* – that Christianity was in a sense, and with hindsight, setting itself up for other scientists to seek to 'disprove God's existence' by various means. God's dis/provability was up for grabs. I take your points about the rise of Deism being an attempt to incorporate the 'lawful' nature of the observed universe with a 'lawful' if somewhat distant and impersonal God. In this context Stenger's (2007) book: '*God the Failed Hypothesis. How science shows that God does not exist*' is both interesting and relevant.

Darwin opened up very different and even more challenging discoveries and seems to have been a scientific step too far for some religious people. So we now have Creationist and Intelligent Design responses allied to increasingly fundamentalist groups which are, in part, reactions against scientific discoveries and Biblical criticism. Evolution certainly makes theological teleology difficult to sustain. As I say, your book helped me to understand these processes much more clearly.

I also appreciated your distinction between *logos* and *mythos* but of course they are intertwined. I do not assume that we are inherently rational beings – except by dint of sustained and occasional effort. Our brains are not inherently rational (McGilchrist 2009). I assume that our beliefs/meanings and general living are fluid, confused, often incoherent and anything but certain. Sciences are not and cannot be confident sources of meaning or ethical security although scientific discoveries, explanations, descriptions and discussions can certainly have a considerable impact on the ways in which we construct meaning and morals – at least for those who take the trouble to engage with developing scientific thought.

There was much to enjoy in your book and I will not bother to summarise the many aspects of my enjoyment. A small but important point. I really appreciated the fact that you included the dates of the people to whom you referred. I have difficulty with relating names to chronologies so this was very helpful.

As I read your book I wondered what sort of God you would eventually come to present ‘the case’ for given your assertion that ‘God is not a fact’. There were indications throughout the book but it was, naturally, in ‘Death of God?’ and ‘Epilogue’ where your ‘case’ is made. It was here that I began to have serious problems with your version of ‘God is not a fact’.

I will try to be brief.

You use a number of terms which I find not only complex but also mystifying. However my main problems are with: *truth* and *transcendence*. Abstract nouns are notoriously problematic but I shall use these two terms to frame my discussion.

Truth.

I did not find it easy to arrive at a summary of your position on ‘Truth’ but I concluded that your quotation from Caputo might serve as such a summary. I therefore start this section with the quotation from him and, in important respects, this quotation will provide the context for my further comments which arise from other quotations from your book.

You quote Caputo with seeming approval (p301):

‘religious truth is truth without knowledge’.

I think that the assertion: *‘religious truth is truth without knowledge’* is an oxymoron dressed up in pseudo theological language. I don’t think that the statement should even be granted the status of paradox – I simply don’t know what it might mean. It seems that some theologians want to have their cake and eat it. They are afraid of following the logical conclusion of their espousal of anonymous knowing and God’s ineffability. From my point of view they do not take the depth of epistemological problems with sufficient seriousness. Perhaps they have vested interests in maintaining a (sort of)

believing/theological stance – not least because their sense of identity, authority, academic status and jobs depend on it.

I also sense that a sceptical approach to an aspect of Enlightenment notion of ‘Truth’ is central to your own theological position, not least because of your seemingly paradoxical espousal of the benefits of ‘not knowing’ and apophatic approaches to theology. I need to say that I share your scepticism about any simplistic version of Enlightenment aspiration to ‘Truth’. You are also clear that you disagree with notions of ‘Truth’ which seem to be adopted in a wide range of religions which actually assert that they ‘have the Truth’ and that others who disagree are, to varying degrees, damned or in serious error. Different ‘Truths’ result in numerous dogmatisms, different exclusions and various punishments.

With this in mind I make some more detailed comments on ‘Truth’.

I agree with your quotation from Vattimo (p 300): *‘When someone wants to tell me the absolute truth it is because he wants to put me under his control’*. I really appreciated that quotation. My sense is that religions generally are premised on needs for their respective hierarchies to exercise power and control in terms of beliefs, rituals, morals, meanings and behaviour. They deliberately, consistently and sometimes oppressively exert existential control.

I also agree with your notion of ‘multiple discourses’. Indeed I call myself a *multi-perspectival realist with constructivist tendencies* – that’s on a good day ! By this I mean that I accept that there is a ‘reality’ but that our perceptions of ‘it’ (but reality could be plural) arise from our complex and changing symbolic constructions. Inevitably we construct reality via our phenomenal and empirically based perceptions. Often I’m just thoughtfully confused !! However, I assume that your notion of ‘multiple discourses’ does make notions of ‘truth’ complex, to say the least, and perhaps necessarily embedded in perspectives. This recalls Nietzsche’s famous dictum: *Facts are precisely what there are not – only perspectives*.

I agree with some of your criticisms of Dawkins and Hitchens although I enjoyed their books. I would include E O Wilson in this list. In his book *‘Consilience’* (1998) he says: *‘When we have unified enough certain knowledge, we will understand who we are and why we are here’*. (p 5). I enjoyed his book too, but he seems blissfully unaware of the enormous epistemological problems of the position which he is espousing in relation to his assumption about the exclusive – imperialistic - significance of scientific ways of knowing. I think that all these writers are naïve epistemologists. I don’t think that Dan Dennett (2006) can be so easily dismissed. As a philosopher he is not a naïve epistemologist. I suggest that his work needs to be critiqued in a rigorous way rather than briefly dismissed.

I agree with your own emphasis on the importance of ‘not knowing’. I assume that careful uncertainty is an appropriate stance for all epistemologies – indeed for normal living.

However, you seem to want to avoid the philosophical consequences of your own position by not exploring in sufficient detail, for me, either the epistemological or existential consequences of ‘not knowing’.

You state (p 211) that: *‘A scientist will first form a theory and then seek to prove it experimentally; religion works the other way round, and its insights come from practical experience. Where science is concerned with facts, religious truth is symbolic and its symbols vary according to context; they will change as society changes and the reasons for these changes must be understood’.*

These statements create a number of serious problems for me. It is a common misperception that science deals with ‘facts’. The progress which the various sciences make is by doubting received ‘facts’ and from time to time changing the paradigms within which these ‘facts’ are located. (Kuhn’s (1962) notion of ‘paradigm shifts’ and Popper’s notion of ‘falsification’). Sciences deal with varying degrees of probability rather than ‘proof’. (Rosenblum and Kuttner (2007)). It is also the case that science deals with complex aspects of experience – albeit experience carefully constructed via theories, experiment, technologies, ‘empirical’ perception and rigorous peer critique. Few scientists assume that they are arriving at ‘truth’. There is a current search for cosmic constants with a view to developing a ‘Theory of Everything’ but many doubt whether this is possible. (Barrow 2008). Sciences proceed, not from a position of certainty (proof), but from a radical and sustained attitude of doubt.

This leads me to problems which I have with your notion: *‘religious truth is symbolic and its symbols vary according to context’.*

How can symbols be ‘true’? How can ‘true’ symbols vary according to context and remain ‘true’? How can symbolic ‘truth’ change in relation to social changes and remain mysteriously ‘true’? How can we understand the reasons for these changes when we do not understand how the human mind forms various and changing constructions of reality and ‘truth’? Rose (2005) has an interesting observation: *‘ultimately what we know is not the world but our perception of it’.* This quotation is in a relevant chapter titled: ‘What we know, what we might know and what we can’t know’. (pp 187 - 220).

I note that Cornwell (2008), in his critique of Dawkins’ ideas, adopts a view about symbols similar to your own. I also find his views puzzling. He says (p44): *‘Symbols might be said to be strong or weak, rather than true or false, in so far as they participate in that which they attempt to make intelligible’.*

I do not have a problem with symbols *per se* because I assume that our linguistic, scientific and artistic representations are necessarily symbolic. My concerns with Cornwell’s ideas and also your own is that I fail to appreciate how symbols about abstractions such as God can be claimed, *a priori*, to relate to that which is inherently abstract and unknowable. The chapter in Rose, quoted above, is very relevant to this issue. I can accept that symbols (metanarratives) can be, and are, *existentially valid* but that sense of validity does not make them *true*.

Epistemological consequences do not necessarily flow from existential significance.

Your frequent use of 'truth' emphasises, for me, that I do not understand how you are using the term. Your assumptions seem to me to be deeply implicit and not at all clearly articulated or justified. Your use of the term 'truth' seems to me to be very 'mysterious'. I do not wish to be wilfully obtuse but I not know how your use of 'symbols' relates in any necessary way to your use of the term 'truth'.

In this context, I do not understand why you say (p 310): *Instead of arguing that an ancient mythos is factual, perhaps it would be better to study the original meaning of the ancient cosmologies and apply them analogically to our own situation.*

I suggest two serious problems. First, we can never know what the *original* meanings of these cosmologies were, if indeed there were any homogeneous meanings. Second, we therefore cannot now know how they might, or might not, apply analogically to our own multifaceted Modern/post-modern situation – whatever that might be.

I thought that your statement (p267): *'A modern theology must look unflinchingly into the heart of a great darkness and be prepared, perhaps, to enter into the cloud of unknowing'* was very interesting. However, I was also puzzled by your insertion of 'perhaps'. *Epistemological unknowing* is where we're at. There's no 'perhaps' about it. I like your idea of 'apophatic reticence' – but I'm not sure how seriously you take it.

I admit that I struggled with Taylor's (1987) book, but as you mentioned him I think that in this context two quotations from his book might indicate, in part, why I make the comments above: *'The unending play of surfaces discloses the ineradicable duplicity of knowledge, shiftiness of truth, an undecidability of value . . . God is death and death is absolute master'*. (pp 16 and 23).

It seems to me that Taylor is saying: *'Any version of theological, epistemological and existential realism is not on. We die – and that's final. God is dead – and that's final too'*. If that's the case, then my solution is relatively simple: Give up theology and adopt a humanistic stance. To my surprise Taylor calls himself an a/theologian. I suspect that Humpty Dumpty would be pleased.

This leads me to other related problems which I have with the abstract noun 'truth'.

I fail to understand what you might mean by 'truth' which on the one hand you appear to locate in 'not knowing', but on the other hand about which you seem to assume that there is some 'content' - albeit the practical/ethical content which arises from the practice of religion. I therefore had some problems with your following statement: *Religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle. Without such practice, it is impossible to understand the truth of its doctrines.* (p 305). (My emphasis).

The sentence which I have emphasised seems to mean: As long as the practice is 'right' then it will evidence the truth of doctrines from which the practice arises. You seem to be asserting a strangely mysterious reciprocal relationship between 'practice' on the one hand and 'true doctrines' on the other. I do not understand this.

Why might a person undergo spiritual exercises if there is no initial understanding of the religion's doctrines and at least a sense that these doctrines are worth the effort of 'spiritual exercises'? Is it not the case that you yourself found that religious disciplines were seriously counter-productive? So – how can one know *a priori* which religious disciplines are beneficial and which detrimental to the human experience? Is it not by being at least moderately convinced about the 'truth' or validity of the stated doctrines? Which of a multitude of truth doctrines are validated by religious practice? We both realise that many and various are the doctrines which are asserted to underpin many and various religious practices. It's a minefield. Life's a bit short to go through the gamut of religious disciplines in order to decide which happen to be 'true'. That may be a humorous comment but it is not trivially humorous. In my own case, it was as I became increasingly unconvinced by 'the doctrines' that I also began to become increasingly unwilling to go through the religious disciplines. In my case both doctrines and practices came to seem empty. I could no longer carry on either believing or practising with any sense of integrity. They ceased to be valid sources of meaning for me.

Why should I be invited to adopt religious practices based on a version of God who is inherently unknowable?

Of course, both developmentally and in adult life we learn a great deal by practice because agency is our only way of living embodied existences. However, I simply do not see how religious 'agency' (practices) can be recommended as a way to the 'truth' of its doctrines. Agency, which is our source of knowledge of the external world, should not be assumed to be the source of metaphysical/theological truth. Added to which are the contexts of our learning by agency: cultural transmission and individual interpretation of experience. I have recently read Eagleton (2009) and he has an interesting comment on the relationships between acting and knowing. '*It is our acting*', Wittgenstein remarks in 'On Certainty' *that lies at the bottom of our language games*. *Know-how precedes knowing. All our theorizing is based, however remotely, on our practical forms of life*'. (p 130).

And then you say: '*The ideal society should be based on charity rather than truth*' (p 300). What has become of 'the truth of its doctrines'? I wonder about the epistemological/existential source of this form of categorical ethical imperative. I think that charity – which needs careful definition – is a 'good idea' and it would be nice if there was more of 'it' about, but you seem to reify the idea in an almost Platonic, metaphysical or theological way. I cannot see the clear arguments for the epistemological basis of your ethical stance. It seems that you shift from uncertainties about 'knowledge epistemology' to a sort of confidence about 'ethical epistemology'. I'm not convinced that your shift is justified. Nor do I think that it is appropriate to shift from praxis to inferences about metaphysical/theological origins or meanings of the praxis. It

is tempting but invalid. What we 'do' in terms of, for example, justice is in relation to what seems to us as unjust: a process of 'reasoned justification'. (Sen 2009 p 4). Neither 'God' nor 'justice' is grounded in any Platonic, theological or metaphysical 'reality'. I think that at this point, and later, you espouse an implicit metaphysical teleology without clear explanation of that teleology. I repeat: abstract nouns are not real. They are certainly problematic.

You seem to agree with Cornwell (2008 p 81) where he says: *'The message of Christianity, then, is not about legal obligations, but about the obligation to exercise compassion, respect, and love, irrespective of race or creed'*. Well, that is one interpretation. It is also a fact of history and of the present that there are other much less compassionate interpretations of what 'the message' of Jesus was. I also have a serious problem with the idea that compassion, respect and love can be subject to 'obligation'.

It also seems to me that what I am calling your reification of 'charity' actually solves no problems. As I look around at various religions' versions of charity there seems to be only partial consensus – indeed there are serious conflicts about the notion. I recall that torture has been used by various religious people because it was 'for the good of the tortured person – to save his/her eternal soul'. It will not surprise you to know that I cannot see torture as a charitable act – and of course you yourself make various points about the cruelties perpetrated by religions. You also point out that Dawkins and Hitchens *et al* also make valid points about the cruel behaviours of some religious believers.

There are current theological diktats which have similar inhumane consequences. I think that there is convincing evidence that Bush and Blair invaded Iraq and Afghanistan on spurious and shifting grounds which, in some guises, sound disturbingly similar to: *We are doing it for their benefit*. I was never convinced. You do not need to be reminded that they are both committed Christians – the latter a recent convert to Roman Catholicism.

A few more thoughts on 'truth'.

I have thought that the notion of 'truth' can have a number of meanings, none of which is the 'correct' (truthful) meaning.

Truth as: correspondence, consensus, convergence, construction, completeness, coordination. In addition to these, which tend to operate in a scientific context, there is legal truth, personal truth and a sense of personal integrity. The word 'truth' is, I think, frequently used loosely and carelessly. It often seems to be used as a rather spurious attempt to validate the speaker's beliefs.

Davidson (2000 pp 66-67) makes a statement with which I strongly agree: *'Truth as correspondence with reality maybe an idea we are better off without . . . truths do not come with a 'mark' . . . which distinguishes them from falsehoods. The best we can do is test, experiment, compare, and keep an open mind. But no matter how long and well we and coming generations keep at it, we and they will be left with fallible beliefs. We know*

many things, and we will learn more; what we will never know for certain is which of the things we believe are true. Since it is neither visible as a target, nor recognizable when achieved, there is no point in calling truth a goal. Truth is not a value, so the 'pursuit of truth' is an empty enterprise unless it means only that it is often a worthwhile exercise to increase our confidence in our beliefs, by collecting further evidence or checking our calculations. ('Truth rehabilitated' in 'R B Random (ed) (2000) 'Rorty and his critics').

As indicated above, what I have failed to understand, and find deeply puzzling, is your quoted notion: *'religious truth is truth without knowledge'*. If there is no knowledge how can one possibly assert the 'truth' of that 'no knowledge' ? If one of my students had made such a statement in an essay a long tutorial would have ensued !!

But as many philosophers, neurobiologists and psychologists have emphasised, neurological and cultural constructed representations always intervene between our perception/language and whatever we think reality might be. Kant had things to say about the distinction between phenomena and noumena and the gulf between them.

I have just finished reading, with great enjoyment, John Barrow's recent book (2008): *'New Theories of Everything'*. This fundamental symbol/reality problem is one of the central themes of his book as it is in swathes of philosophical thought. Aspects of philosophy are also addressed in Rosenblum and Kuttner's book (2007): *'Quantum Enigma. Physics encounters consciousness'*. Mentioning this book reminds me that those who wish to espouse a theological version of 'reality' necessarily need to engage with current scientific thinking as well as engaging with historical scientific references to impacts which scientific thinking has had on Christian and other theological thought. My sense is that current scientific explorations and discoveries create very serious problems for theologians and their various notions of 'God'.

You will see that the problems I have with your use of 'truth' and 'transcendence' are linked problems. There is, for me, no metaphysical realm of human or other 'Being' which validates either the sense of 'truth' or 'transcendence'. There is, for me, no metaphysical/reality duality whereby the former provides epistemological validity for our understanding of the latter. I am neither an explicit nor crypto Platonist. I suspect that you might be a crypto Platonist !! Nor am I a crypto Cartesian. And since Wittgenstein I think that we cannot escape into the fantasy that language validates our constructions of reality.

My own summary response to your arguments around these issues is this:

If God is so unknown, unknowable, and ineffable and if God is so open to massively diverse, contradictory and sometimes blatantly inhumane interpretations from my value base, then perhaps it might be more honest to give up the idea of God and 'simply' try to get on with being human. 'Simply' must be one of life's great understatements !!! If theology needs to fall back on an apophatic approach and, as you quote Turner (p 143): *'This reduction of talk to silence is what is called 'theology''* then I suggest that instead of pretending that theology is worth discussing we simply adopt Ockham's razor and talk about being human. Let's be silent about theology and get on with living. That's quite a

project to be going on with without introducing diverse and conflicting theological myths.

Transcendence.

I also had problems with your use of ‘transcendence’ but I have not devoted as much time to this term as on ‘truth’ because in a sense I see your view of transcendence as derived from your views on truth. I have thought for some time that in an important, and perhaps unavoidable sense, our language necessarily provides us with a phenomenal sense of transcendence. It seems to us that language is both different from reality but that it ‘really’ corresponds to reality. In other words we have tendencies to be crypto Cartesians. Sen’s (2009) discussion of ‘Justice’ criticises transcendent notions in ways which I think are relevant to your somewhat transcendental notions of truth, charity and compassion.

I am of the view that our language can never totally correspond with the ‘reality’ with which we assume it is allied and to which we assume it relates. (Wittgenstein *et al*). I shall not spend much space on issues relating to ‘transcendence’ because I do not want to extend my response to your book in great length. Just a brief ‘transcendent’ comment.

You say (p 308) ‘. . . backed up by ritual and compassionate, self-emptying practice, it still introduces them to the transcendence that gives meaning to their lives’. I have emphasised ‘the transcendence’ because it seems that you are, implicitly, introducing what seems to me like a fairly traditional notion of a metaphysical and theological/human duality for which I do not think there is either epistemological or existential justification. Your use of the definite article suggests reification which puzzles me. However, I appreciate that ‘it’ (belief in transcendence) is indeed a source of existential comfort for many – but is not *epistemologically valid* on that account. I also recognise the seductive affects of transcendence as a version of our seeming experience of the ‘duality’ of subjective/objective or mind/reality. Descartes again. This form of duality falls within Lyotard’s (1984 p xxiv) warning about the need to ‘adopt an attitude of incredulity towards metanarratives’. I think that his warning should be taken very seriously. Metanarratives are not *epistemologically valid*. They may, of course, be existentially significant. They are the frameworks within which we create our meanings. They are significant. They are not therefore ‘true’.

‘Kenosis’ – self-emptying practice – is, I think, an idea of St Paul’s rather than being a synoptic Gospel concept.

Finally, I had difficulties with your ideas on p 316.

You had said earlier, in criticism of the nihilists (p294): ‘*They do not appear to consider the effect of such nihilism on people who do not have privileged lives and absorbing work*’. Well, yes, I agree that a careless adoption of nihilism can appear bleak and uncaring. But it can also have the effect of stimulating actions/policies/social structures which try to take the vagaries of the human condition and our fellow human beings seriously and to work to mitigate the effects of tragedy, starvation, suffering and so on.

But then you yourself say in the penultimate sentence of your book (p316): *'You would then live at the peak of your capacity, activate parts of the psyche that normally lie dormant, and become fully enlightened human beings'*. I have three responses to your view.

One is that it seems to fall into the same trap of which you accused the comfortable nihilists in that it seems to avoid the enormous problems arising both by natural occurrences and social/religious/political oppression and cruelty. For example, starving people with AIDS in societies dominated by a Roman Catholic diktat of 'no contraception' and 'no abortion', with predictable and correspondingly high maternal and infant mortality coupled with deep poverty, seem unlikely to feel like 'fully enlightened human beings' or feel that they have access to the possibility of becoming 'fully enlightened human beings'. This inhumane and bizarre view was clearly articulated by the new Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster in the Channel 4 programme: 'Revelations' (16 August 2009).

The second is that this quotation from your book seems to assume a deep, unexplained and, I think, unjustified *essentialist existential teleology* in relation to the 'nature' of the human condition. It seems to assume that there is a 'fully enlightened' condition which is the inbuilt potential of all human beings. It seems to assume a universal and essential form of a generic human nature. I do not agree. I do not have evidence about the universal essential 'being-ness' of all people. There is abundant evidence that we are a biological species. We reproduce. However, 'human nature' is yet another of what I deem lazy concepts. (See my own book (2003) and my two papers * *'Beliefs and Identity'* (2005) and *'Human nature (s), irrationality and the 'common good'* (2009)).

The third is: I have no idea what a 'fully enlightened human being' would look like or behave like. I have a number of excellent friends – intelligent, emotionally literate, caring, reliable, empathic. If I suggested to them that were 'fully enlightened human beings' I suspect that they would suggest that I change my tablets !! They struggle, as I do, with the complexities and vagaries of the human condition. If ever I claimed to be a 'fully enlightened human being' they would *enforce* tablet change !! I have a suspicion that your notion of enlightenment might constitute a form of Utopia – in which case I suggest that Gray's (2007) book might be an antidote.

In other words, I sense (fear) that your final thoughts are not so far from the God of some traditional theological thinking – and it is, still, this God in whom I have chosen not to believe. (* See my paper: *'Giving up God. Losses and Gains. An Existential audit'* (2007)).

I say 'still' because I had a rather wry thought some months ago. It was: *Perhaps I have given up believing in the 'wrong' God !!!* Having read your interesting book, I conclude

* www.bowlandpress.com click on Seminar papers).

that I'm still OK with my 'giving up God'. I do not think that you have made 'The Case for God'. Indeed I think that it is impossible to make such a case for some of the reasons which you discuss in your book. If God 'is' then that is-ness is ineffable and I don't see any point in believing in ineffable is-ness. However, I do think that you have provided serious criticism of widespread religious tendencies to 'reify' God, and hence I can see why you said: 'God is not a fact'. Kant would, I think, agree.

I can easily understand that, for some people: *'The point of religion was to live intensely and richly here and now. Religious people are ambitious. They want their lives overflowing with significance'* (p 315). It still is a major religious aspiration and, of course, religious people are not alone in those ambitions and aspirations for significance. I simply do not see how those religious aspirations and needs for significance actually validate religious believing in whichever of its numerous, conflicting and diverse manifestations. That religions are invented to give human beings significance I do not doubt. But the need for significance does not necessarily validate the belief system which is invented to enhance or 'validate' that desire for significance. Indeed, excessive validation of one's own belief system as a source of meaning/identity can, and does, have seriously detrimental consequences for those who do not espouse that particular source of beliefs and meaning. (See Sen's (2006) fascinating discussion of the disastrous consequences of asserting a singular and exclusive personal, cultural or religious identity).

I repeat that epistemological consequences do not flow from our needs for existential significance.

I conclude, therefore, that from my point of view the case for God is not made. It may be that I have come to disbelieve in the 'wrong' kind of Western Enlightenment God, but that's where I am at this time. I am a humanist and I assume that being human is all that there is in terms of sources of meaning. *We invent our meanings*. Meanings are not inherent in the cosmos or anywhere else. Meanings are not 'there' to be discovered. There's neither 'metaphysical transcendence' nor 'metaphysical truth' – in whatever ways these are wrapped up in 'God speak' – otherwise known as theology. There is no solution to the human condition. We simply have to try to make the best of it in our various and confused ways.

In April 2009 I took part in a debate at the University of Derby's Islamic Society on the topic: *Does God Exist?* Having read your book I have a sneaking suspicion that I was criticising the 'wrong' kind of God ! It goes without saying that I did not get much support for my views. Their God certainly is 'a fact'. My paper is available on www.bowlandpress.com Seminar papers.

I also do not think that you have established what 'religion really means' to quote the subtitle of your book. I am not convinced that religion really means anything essential.

Religion is yet another of these tantalising abstract nouns which believers purport to be substantive, but which are not. They are all constructed in relation to people's needs for

existential significance. I suggest that religions are human artefacts. They are symptoms of our constant search for meaning.

They are metanarratives. At which point I repeat Lyotard's (1984) famous and timely warning to '*adopt an attitude of incredulity towards metanarratives*'. I think he was right in issuing that warning. But I can well appreciate that religious metanarratives, as well as others, serve as sources of meaning for the various believers – some of whom unfortunately confuse their 'beliefs' with 'certain knowledge'. The scientism of Dawkins and others is also a metanarrative – and Lyotard's dictum applies. On the seductions and delusions of certainty I suspect that we would agree. Our certainties are our deceivers.

I'm wondering what to make of your final sentence: the Buddha's statement (p 316) that he is '*one who is awake*'. I suppose there's something to be said for being awake – but I'm not sure what to say !

Many thanks for a very interesting read. There are not many books which I read so quickly and with such enjoyment. You made me think – hence this response.

I conclude with a quotation from Peter Porter. My philosophical friend went to hear Porter read his own poetry and came back with this beauty:

'Do you believe in God?'

'Would you rephrase that question please?' (Porter 2001 p76)

My friend and I still chuckle at that. Perhaps the Buddha would also chuckle - when he was awake.

Best wishes.

Geoff Heath
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