



# **The Twilight of Atheism**

“The empires of the future will be the  
empires of the mind”

Churchill

## Definition:

Atheism – the explicit denial of all spiritual powers and supernatural beings, or the demand for the elimination of the transcendent as an illusion

## Myth:

Atheism is the natural, logical default spiritual position for humankind

Medieval world view

**2 responses:**

- **Reform the Church**
- **Reject the Church**

**God**



**Pope /  
Church**



**Kings**



**Nobles**



**People**

# Philosophical Underpinnings

The only way to know anything is empirically or rationally. If something cannot be known by observation (empirically) or logic (rationally) there was **no reason to accept it or believe it.**

David Hume – philosopher (1711-1776)

**This leaves God in a bit of a fix!**

# Philosophical Underpinnings

**When we run over our libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, “Does it concern any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?” No. “Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?” No’.**

**His conclusion?**

**‘Commit it to the flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.’**

David Hume, ‘A Treatise of Human Nature’,

## The Rise of a Secular Priesthood

- **Feuerbach (1804):** God as an invention (projection)
- **Marx (1818):** God as an opiate
- **Freud (1856):** God as wish-fulfilment

## **The Shaping of a Godless Imagination: 19<sup>th</sup> C. Poetry**

**Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown  
grey from thy breath...**

**Sleep shall we sleep after all? For the world is not sweet in the  
end;**

**For the old faiths loosen and fall, the new years ruin and rend.**

**Fate is a sea without shore, and the soul is a rock that abides;**

**But her ears are vexed with the roar and her face with the foam  
of the tides.**

**O lips that the live blood faints in, the leavings of racks and  
rods!**

**O ghastly glories of saints, dead limbs of gibbeted Gods!**

**Though all men abase them before you in spirit, and all knees  
bend,**

**I kneel not neither adore you, but standing look to the end.**

## **The Sea of Faith**

**Was once, too, at the full and round earth's  
shore**

**Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.**

**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**

**Matthew Arnold (1822-88)**

## **The Rise of a Scientific Worldview**

**Paley (1743-1805) vs Darwin (1809-1892):  
Intelligent Designer vs Evolutionary Theory**

**Is there really a battle?**

**Does Darwinism demand Atheism?**

**A survey of the religious views of scientists, undertaken in 1916, showed that 40% of scientists had some form of personal religious beliefs. At the time this was regarded as shocking, even scandalous...**

**The survey was repeated in 1996, and showed no significant reduction in the proportion of scientists holding such beliefs at the opposite end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**

# The Death of God

## Nietzsche (1844-1900)

**“God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown”**

**“How much must collapse now that faith has been undermined... for example the totality of our European morality”**

# Opium of the People: *Nihilism or Faith?*

**Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz**

**“A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death – the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders, we are not going to be judged”**

# The Resurgence of Religion

the UK census (2001) showed that the number of self-declared Atheists was under 11,000, compared to 37M Christians in the UK and 360,000 "Jedi Knights".



# Resurgence of Spirituality

- **Stalled intellectual case against God**  
(atheism itself is a faith)

- **Suffering of the world**

“If any worldview is rendered incredible by the suffering and pain of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is the petty dogma of the nineteenth century, which declared that humanity was divine. It requires an act of blind faith that ignores the moral wasteland of the twentieth century to agree with the shallow judgment of Swinburne:

“Glory to man in the highest!  
For man is the master of things”

# Resurgence of Spirituality

## Suffering of the world

**“The twentieth century gave rise to one of the greatest and most distressing paradoxes of human history: that the greatest intolerance and violence of that century were practiced by those who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence”**

# Resurgence of Spirituality

## The Marxist – Leninist heritage

- 1917:** Revolution - socialism demanded the death of God
- 1922:** Lenin wrote that “the protracted use of brutality” was the only way to promote Atheism
- 1937:** religion seemed to be persisting and began to be forcibly repressed. ‘The League of the Militant Godless’ set up by Stalin (embarrassed to discover 33% of urban Russian and 66% of rural Russians still practicing believers
- 1954:** following Stalin’s death (1953) Communist Party ordered that core curriculum should be ‘saturated in Atheism’
- 1998:** fall of Communism. Self-described status of Russians regarding religious matters: 46 % atheists, 45 % Orthodox Christians, 2% Muslim, 0.2% Catholic, 0.1% Jewish, 1% other faiths. 6% said they could not answer.

# Resurgence of Spirituality

## Suffering of the world

**1997 – Black Book of Communism published in Paris**

**85-100 million people murdered between  
1917-1988**

# Resurgence of Spirituality

- **Starvation of the imagination**

**Can a world reduced to the knowable, controllable and predictable be ultimately satisfying?**

**What about love? Beauty? Wonder?**

# Resurgence of Spirituality

## And the Buddha wore Prada

“What we’re talking about here, of course, is an attempt to fill the yawning crevasse in modern life called soul. The rootlessness, the desire for meaning, the disillusionment with consumer culture...

Times 7:5:06

# Resurgence of Spirituality

## Pentecostals

In 1900 there were no Pentecostals in the world

In 1901 there were 2 Pentecostals in the world

In 1906 a Pentecostal movement was born

By 2000 there are (estimated) 500 million Pentecostal /  
charismatic Christians in the world

# Resurgence of Spirituality

- **Spirituality reborn**

It is a melancholy truth that most of us are wrong most of the time about the way that the world is going. We watch it, we hear about it, we experience it, and usually we don't know what it means. Of all the smug and foolish delusions that were part of conventional wisdom when I was young in the middle of the twentieth century, two stand out in memory.

One was the idea that nationalism was a 19<sup>th</sup> century concept on its last legs.

The other was that religion, as a force in worldly affairs, was slowly but inevitably fading away...

Journalist: Robert Fulford – National Post 2001

the UK census (2001) showed that the  
number of self-declared  
Atheists was under 11,000  
compared to 37M Christians in the UK  
and 360,000 "Jedi Knights".

Belief in God or gods



Atheism



?

## Conclusion:

far from being 'the way things are' or 'the default position for human spirituality' atheism has been shown to be a temporary blip in the story of (Western) humankind.

