

THERE IS A GOD

How the World's
Most Notorious Atheist
Changed His Mind

Antony Flew
with Roy Abraham Varghese

 HarperCollins e-books

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PREFACE

“Famous Atheist Now Believes in God: One of World’s Leading Atheists Now Believes in God, More or Less, Based on Scientific Evidence.” This was the headline of a December 9, 2004, Associated Press story that went on to say: “A British philosophy professor who has been a leading champion of atheism for more than a half century has changed his mind. He now believes in God more or less based on scientific evidence, and says so on a video released Thursday.” Almost immediately, the announcement became a media event touching off reports and commentaries around the globe on radio and TV, in newspapers and on Internet sites. The story gained such momentum that AP put out two subsequent releases relating to the original announcement. The subject of the story and of much subsequent speculation was Professor Antony Flew, author of over thirty professional philosophical works that helped set the agenda for atheism for half a century. In fact, his “Theology and Falsification,” a paper first presented at a 1950 meeting of the Oxford University Socratic Club chaired by C. S. Lewis, became the

most widely reprinted philosophical publication of the last century. Now, for the first time, he gives an account of the arguments and evidence that led him to change his mind. This book, in a sense, represents the rest of the story.

I played a small part in the AP story because I had helped organize the symposium and resulting video in which Tony Flew announced what he later humorously referred to as his “conversion.” In fact, from 1985, I had helped organize several conferences at which he had made the case for atheism. So this work is personally the culmination of a journey begun two decades ago.

Curiously, the response to the AP story from Flew’s fellow atheists verged on hysteria. One atheist Web site tasked a correspondent with giving monthly updates on Flew’s falling away from the true faith. Inane insults and juvenile caricatures were common in the freethinking blogosphere. The same people who complained about the Inquisition and witches being burned at the stake were now enjoying a little heresy hunting of their own. The advocates of tolerance were not themselves very tolerant. And, apparently, religious zealots don’t have a monopoly on dogmatism, incivility, fanaticism, and paranoia.

But raging mobs cannot rewrite history. And Flew’s position in the history of atheism transcends anything that today’s atheists have on offer.

FLEW'S SIGNIFICANCE IN THE
HISTORY OF ATHEISM

It is not too much to say that within the last hundred years, no mainstream philosopher has developed the kind of systematic, comprehensive, original, and influential exposition of atheism that is to be found in Antony Flew's fifty years of antitheological writings. Prior to Flew, the major apologias for atheism were those of Enlightenment thinkers like David Hume and the nineteenth-century German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

But what about Bertrand Russell (who maintained rather implausibly that he was technically an agnostic, although he was an atheist in practice), Sir Alfred Ayer, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger, all of whom were twentieth-century atheists well before Flew began writing? In Russell's case, it is quite obvious that he did not produce anything beyond a few polemical pamphlets on his skeptical views and his disdain for organized religion. His *Religion and Science* and *Why I Am Not a Christian* were simply anthologies of articles—he produced no systematic philosophy of religion. At best, he drew attention to the problem of evil and sought to refute traditional arguments for God's existence without generating any new arguments of his own. Ayer, Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger

have this in common: their focus was on generating a specific way of engaging in philosophical discussion, an after-effect of which was the denial of God. They had their own systems of thought of which atheism was a by-product. You had to buy into their systems to buy into their atheism. The same might be said of later nihilists like Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida.

Of course, there were major philosophers of Flew's generation who were atheists; W. V. O. Quine and Gilbert Ryle are obvious instances. But none took the step of developing book-length arguments to support their personal beliefs. Why so? In many instances, professional philosophers in those days were disinclined to dirty their delicate hands by indulging in such popular, even vulgar, discussions. In other cases, the motive was prudence.

Certainly, in later years, there were atheist philosophers who critically examined and rejected the traditional arguments for God's existence. These range from Paul Edwards, Wallace Matson, Kai Nielsen, and Paul Kurtz to J. L. Mackie, Richard Gale, and Michael Martin. But their works did not change the agenda and framework of discussion the way Flew's innovative publications did.

Where does the originality of Flew's atheism lie? In "Theology and Falsification," *God and Philosophy*, and *The Presumption of Atheism*, he developed novel arguments against theism that, in some respects, laid out a road map for subse-

quent philosophy of religion. In “Theology and Falsification” he raised the question of how religious statements can make meaningful claims (his much-quoted expression “death by a thousand qualifications” captures this point memorably); in *God and Philosophy* he argued that no discussion on God’s existence can begin until the coherence of the concept of an omnipresent, omniscient spirit had been established; in *The Presumption of Atheism* he contended that the burden of proof rests with theism and that atheism should be the default position. Along the way, he of course analyzed the traditional arguments for God’s existence. But it was his reinvention of the frames of reference that changed the whole nature of the discussion.

In the context of all of the above, Flew’s recent rejection of atheism was clearly a historic event. But it is little known that, even in his atheist days, Flew had, in a sense, opened the door to a new and revitalized theism.

FLEW, LOGICAL POSITIVISM, AND THE REBIRTH OF RATIONAL THEISM

Here’s the paradox. By defending the legitimacy of discussing theological claims and challenging philosophers of religion to elucidate their assertions, Flew facilitated the rebirth of rational theism in analytic philosophy after the dark days

of logical positivism. A little background information will be of value here.

Logical positivism, as some might remember, was the philosophy introduced by a European group called the Vienna Circle in the early 1920s and popularized by A. J. Ayer in the English-speaking world with his 1936 work *Language, Truth and Logic*. According to the logical positivists, the only meaningful statements were those capable of being verified through sense experience or true simply by virtue of their form and the meaning of the words used. Thus a statement was meaningful if its truth or falsehood could be verified by empirical observation (e.g., scientific study). The statements of logic and pure mathematics were tautologies; that is, they were true by definition and were simply ways of using symbols that did not express any truth about the world. There was nothing else that could be known or coherently discussed. At the heart of logical positivism was the verification principle, the claim that the meaning of a proposition consists in its verification. The result was that the only meaningful statements were those used in science, logic, or mathematics. Statements in metaphysics, religion, aesthetics, and ethics were literally meaningless, because they could not be verified by empirical methods. They were neither valid nor invalid. Ayer said that it was just as absurd to be an atheist as to be a theist, since the statement "God exists" simply has no meaning.

Today many introductory works of philosophy associate Flew's approach in "Theology and Falsification" with Ayer's kind of logical positivist assault on religion, since both question the meaningfulness of religious statements. The problem with this picture is that it does not in any way reflect Flew's own understanding of the matter then or now. In fact, far from buttressing the positivist view of religion, Flew considered his paper as a final nail in the coffin of that particular way of doing philosophy.

In a 1990 presentation I organized on the fortieth anniversary of the publication of "Theology and Falsification," Flew stated:

As an undergraduate I had become increasingly frustrated and exasperated by philosophical debates which seemed always to revert to, and never to move forward from, the logical positivism most brilliantly expounded in . . . *Language, Truth and Logic*. . . . The intention in both these papers [the versions of "Theology and Falsification" first presented at the Socratic Club and then published in *University*] was the same. Instead of an arrogant announcement that everything which any believer might choose to say is to be ruled out of consideration a priori as allegedly constituting a violation of the supposedly sacrosanct verification principle—here curiously maintained as

a secular revelation—I preferred to offer a more restrained challenge. Let the believers speak for themselves, individually and severally.

The story is taken up in the present work, where Flew comments again on the provenance of his celebrated paper:

During my last term at the University of Oxford, the publication of A. J. Ayer's book *Language, Truth and Logic* had persuaded many members of the Socratic Club that the Ayerian heresy of logical positivism—the contention that all religious propositions are without cognitive significance—had to be refuted. The first and only paper I ever read to the Socratic Club, "Theology and Falsification," provided what I then considered to be a sufficient refutation. I believed I had achieved a total victory and there was no room for further debate.

As any history of philosophy will show, logical positivism did indeed come to grief by the 1950s because of its internal inconsistencies. In fact, Sir Alfred Ayer himself, in a contribution to an anthology I edited, stated: "Logical positivism died a long time ago. I don't think much of *Language, Truth and Logic* is true. I think it is full of mistakes. I think it was an important book in its time because

it had a kind of cathartic effect. . . . But when you get down to detail, I think it's full of mistakes which I spent the last fifty years correcting or trying to correct."¹

At any rate, the departure of logical positivism and Flew's new rules of engagement gave a fresh impetus to philosophical theism. Numerous major works of theism in the analytic tradition have since been written by Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Peter Geach, William P. Alston, George Mavrodes, Norman Kretzmann, James F. Ross, Peter Van Inwagen, Eleonore Stump, Brian Leftow, John Haldane, and many others over the last three decades. Not a few of these address issues such as the meaningfulness of assertions about God, the logical coherence of the divine attributes, and the question of whether belief in God is properly basic—precisely the issues raised by Flew in the discussion he sought to stimulate. The turn toward theism was highlighted in a *Time* magazine cover story in April 1980: "In a quiet revolution in thought and argument that hardly anyone would have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly this is happening . . . in the crisp intellectual circles of academic philosophers."²

THE "NEW ATHEISM," OR POSITIVISM REDUX

In the light of this historical progression, the sudden emergence of what has been called the "new atheism"

is of particular interest. The year of the “new atheism” was 2006 (the phrase was first used by *Wired* magazine in November 2006). From Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* to Lewis Wolpert’s *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast*, Victor Stenger’s *The Comprehensible Cosmos*, and Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith* (published in 2004, but the sequel to which, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, came out in 2006), the exponents of a look-back-in-anger, take-no-prisoners type of atheism were out in force. What was significant about these books was not their level of argument—which was modest, to put it mildly—but the level of visibility they received both as best sellers and as a “new” story discovered by the media. The “story” was helped even further by the fact that the authors were as voluble and colorful as their books were fiery.

The chief target of these books is, without question, organized religion of any kind, time, or place. Paradoxically, the books themselves read like fundamentalist sermons. The authors, for the most part, sound like hellfire-and-brimstone preachers warning us of dire retribution, even of apocalypse, if we do not repent of our wayward beliefs and associated practices. There is no room for ambiguity or subtlety. It’s black and white. Either you are with us all the way or one with the enemy. Even eminent thinkers who express some sympathy for the other side are denounced as traitors. The

evangelists themselves are courageous souls preaching their message in the face of imminent martyrdom.

But how do these works and authors fit into the larger philosophical discussion on God of the last several decades? The answer is they don't.

In the first place, they refuse to engage the real issues involved in the question of God's existence. None of them even address the central grounds for positing a divine reality (Dennett spends seven pages on the arguments for God's existence, Harris none). They fail to address the issue of the origins of the rationality embedded in the fabric of the universe, of life understood as autonomous agency, and of consciousness, conceptual thought, and the self. Dawkins talks of the origins of life and consciousness as "one-off" events triggered by an "initial stroke of luck."³ Wolpert writes: "I have purposely [!] avoided any discussion of consciousness, which still remains mostly poorly understood."⁴ About the origin of consciousness, Dennett, a die-hard physicalist, once wrote, "and then a miracle happens."⁵ Neither do any of these writers present a plausible world-view that accounts for the existence of a "law-abiding," life-supporting, and rationally accessible universe.

Second, they show no awareness of the fallacies and muddles that led to the rise and fall of logical positivism. Those who ignore the mistakes of history will have to repeat them at some point. Third, they seem entirely unaware of

the massive corpus of works in analytic philosophy of religion or the sophisticated new arguments generated within philosophical theism.

It would be fair to say that the “new atheism” is nothing less than a regression to the logical positivist philosophy that was renounced by even its most ardent proponents. In fact, the “new atheists,” it might be said, do not even rise to logical positivism. The positivists were never so naive as to suggest that God could be a scientific hypothesis—they declared the concept of God to be meaningless precisely because it was not a scientific hypothesis. Dawkins, on the other hand, holds that “the presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question.”⁶ This is the kind of comment of which we say it is not even wrong! In Appendix A, I seek to show that our immediate experience of rationality, life, consciousness, thought, and the self militate against every form of atheism, including the newest.

But two things must be said here about certain comments by Dawkins that are directly relevant to the present book. After writing that Bertrand Russell “was an exaggeratedly fair-minded atheist, over-eager to be disillusioned if logic seemed to require it,” he adds in a footnote: “We might be seeing something similar today in the over-publicized tergiversation of the philosopher Antony Flew, who announced in his old age that he had been converted

to belief in some sort of deity (triggering a frenzy of eager repetition all around the Internet). On the other hand, Russell was a great philosopher. Russell won the Nobel Prize.”⁷ The puerile petulance of the contrast with the “great philosopher” Russell and the contemptible reference to Flew’s “old age” are par for the course in Dawkins’s epistles to the enlightened. But what is interesting here is Dawkins’s choice of words, one by which he unwittingly reveals the way his mind works.

Tergiversation means “apostasy.” So Flew’s principal sin was that of apostatizing from the faith of the fathers. Dawkins himself has elsewhere confessed that his atheistic view of the universe is based on faith. When asked by the Edge Foundation, “What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it?” Dawkins replied: “I believe that all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all ‘design’ anywhere in the universe, is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection. It follows that design comes late in the universe, after a period of Darwinian evolution. Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe.”⁸ At bottom, then, Dawkins’s rejection of an ultimate Intelligence is a matter of belief without proof. And like many whose beliefs are based on blind faith, he cannot tolerate dissent or defection.

With regard to Dawkins’s approach to the rationality underlying the universe, the physicist John Barrow

observed in a discussion: “You have a problem with these ideas, Richard, because you’re not really a scientist. You’re a biologist.” Julia Vitullo-Martin notes that for Barrow biology is little more than a branch of natural history. “Biologists,” says Barrow, “have a limited, intuitive understanding of complexity. They’re stuck with an inherited conflict from the nineteenth century, and are only interested in outcomes, in what wins out over others. But outcomes tell you almost nothing about the laws that govern the universe.”⁹

Dawkins’s intellectual father seems to be Bertrand Russell. He talks about how he was “inspired . . . at the age of about sixteen”¹⁰ by Russell’s 1925 essay “What I Believe.” Russell was a determined opponent of organized religion, and this makes him a role model for Harris and Dawkins; stylistically too they emulate Russell’s penchant for sarcasm, caricature, flippancy, and exaggeration. But Russell’s rejection of God was not motivated just by intellectual factors. In *My Father, Bertrand Russell*, his daughter, Katharine Tait, writes that Russell was not open to any serious discussion of God’s existence: “I could not even talk to him about religion.” Russell was apparently turned off by the kind of religious believers he had encountered. “I would have liked to convince my father that I had found what he had been looking for, the ineffable something he had longed for all his life. I would have liked to persuade him that the search for God does not have to be vain. But it was

hopeless. He had known too many blind Christians, bleak moralists who sucked the joy from life and persecuted their opponents; he would never have been able to see the truth they were hiding.”

Tait, nevertheless, believes that Russell’s “whole life was a search for God. . . . Somewhere at the back of my father’s mind, at the bottom of his heart, in the depths of his soul, there was an empty space that had once been filled by God, and he never found anything else to put in it.” He had the “ghostlike feeling of not belonging, of having no home in this world.”¹¹ In a poignant passage, Russell once said: “Nothing can penetrate the loneliness of the human heart except the highest intensity of the sort of love the religious teachers have preached.”¹² You would be hard put to find any passage that remotely resembles this in Dawkins.

Returning to the account of Flew’s “tergiversation,” it has perhaps never occurred to Dawkins that philosophers, whether great or less well known, young or old, change their minds based on the evidence. He might be disappointed that they are “over-eager to be disillusioned if logic seemed to require it,” but then again they are guided by logic, not by fear of tergiversation.

Russell, in particular, was so fond of tergiversation that another celebrated British philosopher, C. D. Broad, once said, “As we all know, Mr. Russell produces a different system of philosophy every few years.”¹³ There have been

other instances of philosophers changing their mind on the basis of evidence. We have already observed that Ayer disavowed the positivism of his youth. Another example of one who underwent such radical change is J. N. Findlay, who argued, in Flew's 1955 book *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*,¹⁴ that God's existence can be disproved—but then reversed himself in his 1970 work *Ascent to the Absolute*. In the latter and subsequent books, Findlay argues that mind, reason, intelligence, and will culminate in God, the self-existent, to whom is owed worship and unconditional self-dedication.

Dawkins's "old age" argument (if it can be called that) is a strange variation of the ad hominem fallacy that has no place in civilized discourse. True thinkers evaluate arguments and weigh the evidence without regard to the proponent's race, sex, or age.

Another persistent theme in Dawkins's book, and in those of some of the other "new atheists," is the claim that no scientist worth his or her salt believes in God. Dawkins, for instance, explains away Einstein's statements about God as metaphorical references to nature. Einstein himself, he says, is at best an atheist (like Dawkins) and at worst a pantheist. But this bit of Einsteinian exegesis is patently dishonest. Dawkins references only quotes that show Einstein's distaste for organized and revelational religion. He deliberately leaves out not just Einstein's comments about

his belief in a “superior mind” and a “superior reasoning power” at work in the laws of nature, but also Einstein’s specific denial that he is either a pantheist or an atheist. (This deliberate distortion is rectified in this book.)

More recently, when asked on a visit to Jerusalem if he believed in the existence of God, the famous theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking is reported to have replied that he did “believe in the existence of God, but that this Divine force established the laws of nature and physics and after that does not enter to control the world.”¹⁵ Of course, many other great scientists of modern times such as Heisenberg and Planck believed in a divine Mind on rational grounds. But this too is whitewashed out of Dawkins’s account of scientific history.

Dawkins, in fact, belongs to the same peculiar club of popular science writers as Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov from a previous generation. These popularizers saw themselves not simply as scribes, but as high priests. Like Dawkins, they took on themselves the task not just of educating the public on the findings of science, but also of deciding what it is permissible for the scientific faithful to believe on matters metaphysical. But let us be clear here. Many of the greatest scientists saw a direct connection between their scientific work and their affirmation of a “superior mind,” the Mind of God. Explain it how you will, but this is a plain fact that the popularizers with their own agendas

cannot be allowed to hide. About positivism, Einstein in fact said, "I am not a positivist. Positivism states that what cannot be observed does not exist. This conception is scientifically indefensible, for it is impossible to make valid affirmations of what people 'can' or 'cannot' observe. One would have to say 'only what we observe exists,' which is obviously false."¹⁶

If they want to discourage belief in God, the popularizers must furnish arguments in support of their own atheistic views. Today's atheist evangelists hardly even try to argue their case in this regard. Instead, they train their guns on well-known abuses in the history of the major world religions. But the excesses and atrocities of organized religion have no bearing whatsoever on the existence of God, just as the threat of nuclear proliferation has no bearing on the question of whether $E = mc^2$.

So does God exist? What about the arguments of atheists old and new? And what bearing does modern science have on the matter? By a striking coincidence, at this particular moment in intellectual history when the old positivism is back in vogue, the same thinker who helped end its reign a half century ago returns to the battlefield of ideas to answer these very questions.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the announcement of my “conversion” to deism, I have been asked on numerous occasions to provide an account of the factors that led me to change my mind. In a few subsequent articles and in the new introduction to the 2005 edition of my *God and Philosophy*, I drew attention to recent works relevant to the ongoing discussion on God, but I did not elaborate further on my own views. I have now been persuaded to present here what might be called my last will and testament. In brief, as the title says, I now believe there is a God!

The subtitle, “How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind,” was not my own invention. But it is one I am happy to employ, for the invention and employment of apt yet arresting titles is for Flews something of a family tradition. My theologian father once edited a collection of essays by himself and some of his former students and gave to this polemic paperback the paradoxical and yet wholly appropriate and properly informative title *The Catholicity of Protestantism*. In the matter of form of presentation, if not of substantive doctrine, following his example, I have in my time published papers with such

titles as “Do-gooders Doing No Good?” and “Is Pascal’s Wager the Only Safe Bet?”

At the outset I should make one thing clear. When reports of my change of mind were spread by the media and the ubiquitous Internet, some commentators were quick to claim that my advanced age had something to do with my “conversion.” It has been said that fear concentrates the mind powerfully, and these critics had concluded that expectations of an impending entrance into the afterlife had triggered a deathbed conversion. Clearly these people were familiar with neither my writings on the nonexistence of an afterlife nor with my current views on the topic. For over fifty years I have not simply denied the existence of God, but also the existence of an afterlife. My Gifford Lectures published as *The Logic of Mortality* represent the culmination of this process of thought. This is one area in which I have not changed my mind. Absent special revelation, a possibility that is well represented in this book by N. T. Wright’s contribution, I do not think of myself “surviving” death. For the record, then, I want to lay to rest all those rumors that have me placing Pascalian bets.

I should point out, moreover, that this is not the first time I “changed my mind” on a fundamental issue. Among other things, readers who are familiar with my vigorous defense of free markets may be surprised to learn that I

was once a Marxist (for details, see the second chapter of this book). In addition, over two decades ago I retracted my earlier view that all human choices are determined entirely by physical causes.

Since this is a book about why I changed my mind about the existence of God, an obvious question would be what I believed before the “change” and why. The first three chapters seek to answer this question, and the last seven chapters describe my discovery of the Divine. In the preparation of the last seven chapters, I was greatly helped by discussions with Professor Richard Swinburne and Professor Brian Leftow, the former and current occupants of the Nolloth Chair at Oxford.

There are two appendices to the book. The first is an analysis of the so-called new atheism of Richard Dawkins and others by Roy Abraham Varghese. The second is an open-ended dialogue on a topic of great interest to most religious believers—the issue of whether there is any kind of divine revelation in human history, with specific attention to the claims made about Jesus of Nazareth. In the interest of furthering the dialogue, the New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, who is the present bishop of Durham, kindly provided his assessment of the body of historical fact that underlies Christian theists’ faith in Christ. In fact, I have to say here that Bishop Wright presents by far the best case for accepting Christian belief that I have ever seen.

Perhaps something should be said about my “notoriety” as an atheist, which is referenced in the subtitle. The first of my antitheological works was my 1950 paper “Theology and Falsification.” That paper was later reprinted in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955), an anthology I coedited with Alasdair MacIntyre. *New Essays* was an attempt to gauge the impact on theological topics of what was then called the “revolution in philosophy.” The next major work was *God and Philosophy*, first published in 1966 and reissued in 1975, 1984, and 2005. In his introduction to the 2005 edition, Paul Kurtz, one of the leading atheists of our age and author of the “Humanist Manifesto II,” wrote that “Prometheus Books is delighted to present what by now has become a classic in the philosophy of religion.” *God and Philosophy* was followed in 1976 by *The Presumption of Atheism*, which was published as *God, Freedom and Immortality* in the United States in 1984. Other relevant works were *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief* and *Logic and Language* (first and second series), *An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Arguments from Plato to Sartre*, *Darwinian Evolution*, and *The Logic of Mortality*.

It is paradoxical indeed that my first published argument for atheism was originally presented at a forum presided over by the greatest Christian apologist of the last century—the Socratic Club chaired by C. S. Lewis. Yet another paradox is the fact that my father was one of the

leading Methodist writers and preachers in England. Moreover, at the start of my career, I had no particular interest in becoming a professional philosopher.

Since, notoriously, all good things, if not all things without exception, must come to an end, I will end my introductory words here. I leave it to readers to decide what to make of my reasons for changing my mind on the question of God.