

# THE NEW ATHEISTS

THE TWILIGHT OF REASON & THE WAR ON RELIGION



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## Chapter 7

# KITSCH, TERROR AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

The term ‘postmodernism’ refers to a loose-knit movement of ideas which extends from popular culture, art and architecture across the academic spectrum of the arts and humanities, including theology and philosophy. It is a world-view which asserts that there is no world-view, paradoxically laying claim to the universal truth that there is no universal truth. The concept was first made popular by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979 in his book, *The Postmodern Condition*,<sup>1</sup> although in its earliest usage in the late 1940s it referred to a trend in architecture. Postmodernity as an era rather than a concept emerged in the aftermath of European imperialism and in the crisis of confidence in Enlightenment values which followed the Second World War.

While European thinkers contemplated the disintegration of reason, civilisation and modernity in the trenches of the First World War and the gas chambers of the Holocaust, new voices emerged to challenge the dominance of the Western man of reason. Questions of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural particularity, identity and difference, embodiment and desire, the environment and animal rights, have surged in to occupy the vacuum left by the collapse of the project of modernity with its ruling elite of white Western heterosexual men. The rise in communications technology and what Lyotard saw as the commodification of knowledge have given these different perspectives

and discourses wide circulation, so that knowledge is no longer controlled by an educated minority. The language of universal human rights has attempted to spread some kind of ethical canopy over this babel or Pentecost (which?) of competing discourses and narratives. Postmodernism's celebration of particularity, relativism and contextuality over universality, rationality and truth, can provide a window of opportunity for the emergence of new ethical visions, but it can also serve the purposes of radical individualism and extreme forms of nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

### Postmodernism and identity politics

Under the banner of postmodernism, with its dissolution of universal truths, identity politics comes to the fore. Postmodernism creates a forum in which individuals and minority groups can claim rights to self-expression and self-determination rooted in particular identities and cultural narratives which are not accountable to the judgement of outsiders. In the case of Western individualism, postmodernism privileges the here and now over the bonds of tradition, history and community. It allows for an experimental lifestyle through the expression of multiple identities – a sort of metropolitan fancy-dress parade where we act out fictional identities because there is no such thing as the 'I' based on the idea of a gendered, communal, historical self with a fixed identity.

In its most extreme manifestations, the postmodern self is a voracious consumer, who requires a cultural *habitus* capable of constantly feeding his or her desire for novelty, innovation and change, and who demands a proliferating range of individual rights to satisfy his or her infinitely varied appetites. Switch on the television and you will see such individuals filling the spaces of low and high culture, from *Big Brother* to the late-night arts shows.

But the tolerance which makes us tolerate every kind of narcissistic excess is not really tolerance at all. The ostensible diversity which proliferates under the banner of postmodernism is a banal and barren sameness, masked by a surface gloss of corporate images, brand names, fashions and lifestyles. Postmodernism

cannot accommodate genuine, meaningful difference. When post-modern culture encounters the truly different, it must either force it to conform to its own valueless values, or label it as extremist, violent and dangerous. While the intellectual community is distracted from any real political engagement by its apparently insatiable appetite for postmodern discourses of alterity<<<Is this a real word?>>> and difference (or *différance*, to use a Derridean term), democracy withers and freedoms are slowly corroded by a political system which has acquired excessive power through its cynical exploitation of the general public's insecurity and susceptibility to fear. This social melt-down is happening in an era when only a minority of people have any interest in or commitment to religious values. It cannot therefore be blamed on religious influences. It is the consequence of a secularism which has cast aside its Christian heritage but has found nothing to put in its place except a proliferation of vacuous choices which masquerade as freedom.

Religious extremism and nationalism flourish in the long shadows cast by our Western charades of freedom, multiculturalism and diversity, for outsiders see better than we do ourselves what it costs to maintain our illusory postmodern freedoms. The assault on religion by a clique of Western polemicists risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy in its labelling of religion as violent and extremist, for it is stoking the fires of resentment at a time of global volatility when, for many of the world's people, religious faith holds out the only possibility of living a meaningful and dignified life. Only a small minority of the world's people has access to the wealth needed to live out the postmodern consumerist lifestyle. Poverty provides a potent breeding ground for anti-Western hostility, while within Western cultures themselves, there are many who are appalled by what they see as a loss of traditional values and increasing social chaos. Where can such people turn to for different values, for more enduring visions, for a transcendent sense of truth which will allow them to rise above the postmodern abyss? The answer – to God, and to all the fervent causes associated with 'him', including nationalism, homophobia, fundamentalism and patriarchy.

### Religious extremism in a postmodern context

In recent decades we have seen the widespread resurgence of religion in some of its most extreme forms – from the Christian fundamentalists of the American Bible belt and their Zionist counterparts, to the jihadists of Islamist uprisings and the Hindu nationalists of India's BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). Even Buddhists – stereotypically portrayed by Westerners as peace-loving pluralists – have embraced militant nationalism in Sri Lanka, and a Japanese Buddhist sect known as Aum Shinrikyo was responsible for the nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Wherever we look, it seems that religiously inspired extremists are rising up against the West's hard-won values of tolerance, democracy and freedom. Far from religion disappearing, it has become in its various manifestations a significant threat to modernity. Hence, the belief that it would eventually vanish under the weight of its own deceptions has given way to a more militant crusade against religion – a 'rationalist jihad', to quote Polly Toynbee (see Chapter 4) – waged by the new atheists and their supporters.

But ignorance is no response to ignorance, and atheist intolerance sets itself on a collision course with religious intolerance. If we are to maintain a more open and constructive debate, we have to begin by trying to understand why so many of our species – 'mammals' like us, to use a word favoured by Hitchens – are resorting to such desperate forms of self-expression and violent assertions of anti-modernist values.

Malise Ruthven, a scholar of Islam, argues that postmodernity poses a particular challenge to those who seek religious certainty, because of its relativising of all truth claims. While modernity and progress were meant to spell the end of religion by ushering in a new era of secularisation, postmodernism has once again opened up public spaces for religious expression, but only by refusing to privilege any one truthful story about the world:

By saying, in effect, 'Your story is as good as mine, or his, or

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hers', post-modernism allows religious voices to have their say while denying their right to silence others, as religions have tended to do throughout history.<sup>2</sup>

In traditional societies, dominant concepts of truth are rarely challenged, and social and religious conformity avoids the need for complex negotiations with others of different beliefs and practices. However, in the pluralist cultures of postmodernity, religious believers have to negotiate boundaries and make compromises, and this can produce feelings of alienation and a loss of identity. For this reason, Ruthven sees fundamentalisms as 'distinctly modern phenomena':

like the New Religious Movements that have sprouted in some of the most industrialized parts of the world (notably South-East Asia and North America) they feed on contemporary alienation or anomie by offering solutions to contemporary dilemmas, buttressing the loss of identities sustained by many people (especially young people) at times of rapid social change, high social and geographic mobility, and other stress-inducing factors.<sup>3</sup>

Some of these themes of identity, alienation and postmodernism also feature in Mark Juergensmeyer's study of religious violence, *Terror in the Mind of God*.<sup>4</sup> In an extensive series of interviews with perpetrators of religious violence, and by studying contexts in which religion has been a significant factor in political and nationalist conflicts, Juergensmeyer analyses the justifications offered for different acts of religiously inspired violence. He argues that these are not the work of lonely fanatics or mad psychopaths. Rather, they are a radical form of protest against the present order which usually enjoys at least the tacit support of wider groups. He refers to 'postmodern religious rebels' and 'guerrilla nationalists' who 'have dreamed of revolutionary changes that would establish a godly social order in the rubble of what the citizens of most secular societies have regarded as modern, egalitarian democracies.'<sup>5</sup>

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Juergensmeyer argues that the late-twentieth-century eruption of religious violence can be seen as a reaction to the anti-religious sentiment which has been a feature of Western societies since the Enlightenment. The manifest failures of the Enlightenment project have created an environment in which religious extremism flourishes by proclaiming 'the death of secularism'. Religious extremists

have dismissed the efforts of secular culture and its forms of nationalism to replace religion. They have challenged the notion that secular society and the modern nation-state can provide the moral fiber that unites national communities or the ideological strength to sustain states buffeted by ethical, economic, and military failures. Their message has been easy to believe and has been widely received because the failures of the secular state have been so apparent.<sup>6</sup>

Yet none of this offers a satisfactory explanation as to why religion provides a focal point for the gathering together of explosive forces of nationalism, resistance and violent revolution. Juergensmeyer argues that, when religion becomes a justification for violence, it is because religious extremists are motivated by a sense of cosmic war between good and evil. He suggests that religious visions of 'personal wholeness and social redemption',<sup>7</sup> although often expressed in non-violent forms, can also legitimate confrontational violence against systems and structures perceived to be unjust, decadent or immoral, so that religious activists become motivated by 'a spiritual conviction so strong that they are willing to kill and to be killed for moral reasons.'<sup>8</sup>

#### **Secular kitsch, religious wrath and postmodern ambiguity**

The upsurge of religious violence is in part an explosive confrontation between the postmodern West and its religious 'others', fermented in a climate of political instability, economic inequality, and social disintegration. There is a widespread loss of confidence in political structures and ethical values among postmodern

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secularists and religious extremists, and in both cases questions of identity and self-expression acquire exaggerated significance. Religious violence and anarchy are rooted in identity politics as surely as the ironic parodies and performances of the postmodern Western subject. <<<Unclear.>>> The clashing perspectives of Western secular individualism and religious extremism collided in the 9/11 attack on America, and the dust has yet to clear in order for us to see the full historical significance of that event. On that day, postmodern kitsch was blasted into reality by fundamentalist wrath. With brilliant cunning and ruthless rationality, bin Laden and his suicidal supporters targeted the ultimate symbols of Western global domination – the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. If it is true that their third, failed target was the White House, then it is hard to imagine a more symbolically eloquent act of violent protest against Western values. We can rest assured that, if Islamist militants win the so-called war on terror and rewrite the history books, Osama bin Laden will become the greatest hero of the twenty-first century and possibly of the coming millennium. That is unlikely, however, and it remains to be seen what history will make of the two self-appointed commanders-in-chief of the war against terror – George W. Bush and Tony Blair.

None of this is to deny the positive aspects of postmodernity, and its potential to nurture flourishing societies capable of accommodating diversity and difference. Nobody who lives in a great multi-cultural city such as London should deny our human capacity to live side by side with those whose values may be very different from our own, and rare eruptions of violence should not blind us to the small daily acts of kindness, acceptance and good will which are the far more pervasive and unremarkable reality. Most of us do not fear terrorist attacks every time we board an aeroplane or travel on the underground. Many of us experience our lives as richly enhanced by the challenge of living and learning alongside those of different cultures, races and faiths to our own. The equality which we enjoy today across boundaries of race, religion, sexuality and gender owes more to postmodernity than to the Enlightenment for, as I suggested in the first few chapters, the



Enlightenment did little to challenge Western hierarchies of power and domination.

The enemies of these fragile postmodern freedoms are not confined to religious fundamentalists, for they also include secular and scientific fundamentalists who lay claim to a truth which tolerates no dissent and no diversity. Like religious fundamentalists, militant atheists are threatened by the ideological free-for-all of the postmodern marketplace, which opens up public spaces for a competing plurality of cultures, traditions and truth claims. In their vehement defence of secular rational modernity, they too manifest all the insecurities of a universal ideology under threat from cultural relativism and intellectual and ethical diversity. Like the liberal religious apologists they so despise, they put a rationalising gloss on some of the more sinister aspects of their own tradition and its followers. The fact that the theory of evolution might itself validate the use of violence in the struggle for survival of different cultures, the fact that it has been used to justify the extermination of racial and economic groups and the elimination of disabled and mentally ill human beings, the fact that it is a random and amoral biological process which offers no basis for a social vision based on humanitarian values – these are all dismissed in favour of a mythology of the improving power of evolutionary science which gripped the late Victorian imagination and remains alive and well in the new atheism.

### **What role for religion?**

In the face of all these contradictions and debates, a question remains as to what role religion might occupy in this postmodern era, given that the alternatives of scientific atheism, religious fundamentalism or a return to traditional Christian values are probably all equally unattractive to the majority of the West's citizens. The need to live and let live presents two particular challenges: the first is to find a way for the followers of different traditions, religious and secular, to cohabit in peace. This means negotiating a delicate balancing act between allowing space for a

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diversity of beliefs and cultures, while upholding the vision of human rights which is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although this document is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions, it is the only ethical vision which has broad consensus among the world's cultures and nations. No universal ethos will ever iron out all the contradictions and incompatibilities in what counts as the good life for different cultures and individuals, but the modern idea of human rights is the only shared language we have that is capable of resisting the torture and tyranny which go hand in hand with the darker aspects of modernity and its political structures. To abandon the struggle for human rights because it is too demanding – intellectually as well as ethically – is to clear the way for the abuses which proliferate under the guise of the war on terror no less than under those regimes which it claims to oppose. But none of this *per se* will tackle the question of religion and spirituality. So the second challenge is, how can we find a more positive role for religious traditions within liberal democratic societies?

In secular societies, the religious impulse often finds expression in the New Age spiritualities which proliferate in the climate of postmodernity, offering a psychic brew of ancient and Eastern religions (particularly of the Celtic and mystical varieties), homeopathic remedies, nature cults and neo-pagan devotions. If there is one common theme uniting all of these, beyond the spiritual hunger they represent, it is hostility to any form of institutionalised religion. Even Sam Harris, doyen of American militant atheism, makes the surely heretical claim, in the light of the movement's non-credo, that there is 'a sacred dimension to our existence'<sup>9</sup> so that 'The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science), or it can be experienced free of concepts (this is mysticism).'<sup>10</sup>

It is an illusion to believe that there can be a mysticism which is free of concepts. Scholars of mysticism argue persuasively that, even if there is some dimension of human consciousness which transcends conceptualised thinking, as soon as we attempt to communicate anything of this experience, we must do so in the

language and concepts which religions make available to us.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, however, if we accept that there was a quasi-religious or spiritual dimension to twentieth-century ideologies such as Nazism, then we should be wary of seeking spiritual forms of expression which are free of the restraints of reason and conceptualisation. Harris himself says of Stalin and Mao:

although these tyrants paid lip service to rationality, communism was little more than a political religion. At the heart of its apparatus of repression and terror lurked a rigid ideology, to which generations of men and women were sacrificed. Even though their beliefs did not reach beyond this world, they were both cultic and irrational.<sup>12</sup>

If one asks what transforms a political tyranny into a religion, then perhaps one has to look for signs of a transcendent vision, a mystical or utopian dimension, which breaks free of the restraints of a strictly materialist rationality and of the restraining influences of any historical religious tradition.

Psychoanalysis reveals the dark and violent desires which shape the human psyche, and the new atheists are right when they remind us how often religion taps into these desires to produce extremes of sado-masochistic behaviour and malevolent fantasies of hell and punishment.<sup>13</sup> When Freud referred to the 'soft voice of reason', he meant the constant struggle of the human subject to rise above these unconscious desires and instincts to function as a responsible moral agent in society. Postmodernism has the potential to unleash new forms of religious irrationality which are always likely to be accompanied by expressions of violence or psychosis. As John Gray suggests, 'Along with evangelical revivals, there is likely to be a profusion of designer religions, mixing science and science fiction, racketeering and psychobabble, which will spread like internet viruses.'<sup>14</sup>

If we take such threats seriously, then we may need to re-evaluate the role of traditional religions as an endeavour to control our psychological impulses towards violence and fear more than as an attempt to exploit them. Indeed, if religion were as uniformly

ignorant and wicked as militant atheists suggest, it is hard to see how humanity has survived at all, let alone progressed, for it would imply that for most of our history we have been prey to the darkest possible forces of violence, corruption and fear, cunningly manipulated by religious authorities to keep us servile and ignorant.

The teachings and practices of the world's enduring religious traditions have often been abused, but overall they have enabled human beings to refine and develop their primal religious impulses by channelling their energies and controlling their more irrational tendencies. They all contain guidance for ways of disciplining and nurturing our inner worlds in order to orientate these towards the glimmers of goodness, compassion and hope that flicker within us all, despite the sometimes overwhelming psychological tyranny of violence and fear. Every religious tradition is home to millennia of wisdom and reflection on the human condition and its contradictory and competing desires, torn as we are between life and death or, to use Freud's language, *eros* and *thanatos*.

Let's consider, for example, the most notorious area of religious control, namely, that of sex. Hitchens declares that 'the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and the sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse.'<sup>15</sup> I am not interested in defending the sorry track record of Christianity in particular, in its ongoing attempt to police the sex lives of its followers according to particularly narrow criteria of monogamous heterosexuality. But it is more than 40 years since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and during that time Britain has become an increasingly secularised society in which relatively few people allow religious considerations to regulate their sex lives. Even those of us who remain within religious traditions such as the Roman Catholic Church usually exercise a fairly high degree of autonomy when deciding how to live in terms of sexual and reproductive matters. I always tell my students, it is a mistake to think that the pronouncements of religious authority figures are reflective of the practices of religious followers, because sometimes

the opposite is the case. Vigorous papal attempts to control contraception and abortion since the 1960s have to be understood in the context of women's liberation and a new generation of Catholic adults who simply do not invite priestly scrutiny of our sex lives and child-bearing capacities.

But it is also true that the increasing secularisation of British culture has not resulted in a healthier sexual environment. Britain has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe, abortion rates continue to rise in spite of the ready availability of contraception, and there is evidence of widespread depression and social alienation among our ostensibly sexually liberated and thoroughly secularised youth. Casting the net wider, more vulnerable human beings, including children, are being trafficked, enslaved and exploited for sexual purposes than ever before, owing to the combined forces of poverty, communications technology and unbridled sexual appetites which have created a global culture of sexual predation. The liberal myth that sex would all be good clean fun if only religion would get off our backs has been exploded both by the Aids pandemic and by the proliferation of sex-related crimes and abuses in our modern secular society. That some of these are perpetrated by priests and other religious authority figures is scandalous, but this does not change the fact that the relationship between sex, oppression and violence continues to flourish long after the decline of religion.

The undercurrents that tug at human consciousness are made up of powerful eddies which we do not fully understand, and sex is often caught up in the whirlpools of violence. The world's religions may not have produced great expertise in their understanding of human sexuality but, if we restrict our focus to Christianity, we can argue that it has attempted to negotiate a difficult path between acknowledging the dangerous potential of sex, while also affirming the capacity of sex to express love and creativity as well as violence and destructiveness. This must be understood in the context of a larger social vision which aspires to transform human society from relationships of exploitation, domination and oppression, to relationships of mutual respect,

equality and freedom in which the dignity of the human made in the image of God can find expression. However often this Christian vision has failed, we should take seriously the arguments of those who suggest that we owe our present Western values to the maturing of this religious tradition, beyond its institutions and structures perhaps, but not beyond its visions and hopes.

### **Faith in a postmodern world**

As I suggested in the last chapter, far from encouraging violence and injustice, the long Christian project of combining revelation and reason in the service of human redemption may have been indispensable to the development of Western liberal values. Christianity's doctrines and theological insights have moderated the dangerous extremes of our religious instincts in the service of a vision which seeks to balance the freedoms of the individual with the common good. In the twentieth century, the casting off of this moderating influence by previously Christian societies in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany did not produce greater levels of freedom but barbaric cruelties on a scale which would have been unthinkable to our Christian forebears. Whatever atrocities may have been perpetrated by the followers of Christ, none can rival the systematic extermination of millions of human beings in the service of these post-Christian ideologies. Nazism was fuelled by a strong quasi-mystical cult rooted in fantasies of blood, race and soil and free from the restraints of reason and ethical reflection. Spirituality without religion and mysticism without concepts to order its insights are not necessarily avenues to peace. They may simply draw us more deeply into the darkness.

Few cultures have developed such profound antagonism towards their own historical traditions as Western secular societies have towards Christianity. This has been a movement which has gained momentum during the last 200 years, but it may well have peaked with the rise of postmodernism. Some Christian post-modernists such as Alasdair MacIntyre, John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas argue that the only way in which Western society can

rediscover its values is to reclaim its Christian heritage.<sup>16</sup> In a post-modern world, they argue that the universalising project of modernity has to yield before an acceptance of tradition, community and history as the narratives wherein our values and visions acquire truthfulness and meaning. This appeal to community-based traditions and values is sometimes referred to as 'communitarianism', and its influence extends considerably beyond that of Christian postmodernism to describe a range of political and ethical ideas.

Whether or not these postmodern Christians will succeed in articulating a radically new form of Christianity relevant to the questions of the post-Christian West remains to be seen. They tend to be eurocentric male thinkers who gloss over the manifest failures of Christianity through history, and who tend to overlook the many conflicting traditions which make up Christianity. They offer little by way of engagement with other postmodern Christian voices, particularly those of feminists and post-colonialists, who pose a more radical and far-reaching challenge to traditional forms of Christianity. Christian communitarians also underestimate the power of conservatism to dominate the religious landscape. In the present political climate, if the Western nations do rediscover their Christian heritage, it is likely to be through a combination of American evangelicalism and ultra-conservative Catholicism. As a practising Roman Catholic, I thank God for the gift of modernity and the insights of secularism. I would not want to live in a theocracy governed from Rome or Canterbury – far less from Washington – nor would I want the homophobes and misogynists who form a noisy and growing constituency in the Christian Church to triumph over secular liberal values. Those of us who care for the integrity of religious faith have a corresponding duty to resist religion's power. One way of doing that might be to value and nurture the positive aspects of secular postmodernity, even as we recognise and resist its nihilistic and relativistic excesses.

This means speaking out against the ongoing injustices perpetrated by Christian churches, and it means cultivating a spirit of

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resistance to the ethical abuses which proliferate when Christians value unity more highly than integrity. In a fractured world such as ours, the idea that gun-toting fundamentalist housewives who hate Muslims and gays with equal fervour belong within the same world-view as Christians working tirelessly for peace and reconciliation among the world's religions and peoples is not viable. Militant atheists make much of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has never excommunicated a single person for membership of the Nazi party, and the Catholic Church is still sheltering some of its priests and nuns who took part in the Rwandan genocide. These are scandals which people within the Church ought to speak out against, forming alliances with secularists and atheists who share our concerns rather than with co-religionists, when fundamental issues of justice, freedom and human dignity are at stake. The great threats facing our world today are not homosexuality and abortion but war and other forms of violence, economic injustice and environmental degradation.

But no matter how much we struggle against injustice and oppression, we will never eliminate the causes and effects of suffering in our world, for they are woven into the human condition. In the last chapter, I considered Gray's warning that visions of utopian transformation tend to mutate into dystopian nightmares, multiplying the injustices which they set out to eradicate. With that in mind, I want to end this chapter by briefly considering the challenge which suffering poses to faith, and the different responses which this has evoked amidst the fading hopes of a postmodern world.

#### **Suffering, mystery and God**

Postmodernism flourishes in the shadows of a nihilism which it often denies. The hidden face of postmodern culture is a form of despair, for our multi-cultural jamboree conceals an abyss of meanings and values. In the twentieth century, faith in God became an impossibility for many people, not because science and reason had provided answers to the mystery of life, but because the



scale of humanity's suffering and capacity for violence had outstripped any possibility of believing in a just and loving God. If postmodernism challenges the thoroughly modern scientific faith of the new atheists, it also provides a nurturing habitat for other more profound forms of atheism.

The challenge of reconciling faith with the reality of suffering has preoccupied religious thinkers since the time of the Buddha and the author of the Book of Job. The Buddha taught that the material world, including the self, is an illusion, and suffering is caused by our attachment to this illusory world. To be free of suffering, we must be free of attachment. The author of Job called attention to the mystery of God revealed in creation, and to the impossibility of the human mind being able to understand that mystery. These represent two quite different ways of responding to the challenge and mystery of suffering, which reflect something of the differences which run through Eastern and Western cosmologies and religions.

Theological attempts to reconcile faith in a good and all-powerful God with the reality of suffering and evil are known as theodicy. Christian theodicy has tended to be informed by two main arguments. The first argues that suffering is the price we pay for freedom. A God who intervened to prevent us from doing evil and causing suffering to ourselves and others would be a God who violated human free will. Second, it is argued that suffering teaches us the meaning of altruism and patience. When faced with the sufferings of others, we are moved to compassion, and when called to cope with our own suffering, we learn endurance and courage. These are the forms of theodicy associated with the philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne, and I tend to agree with Dawkins that there is something 'grotesque' about them.<sup>17</sup>

For a start, they seem to ask us to believe in a God whose respect for freedom works in favour of the powerful and against the vulnerable. Why should Hitler's freedom be more worthy of God's respect than the lives of millions of men, women and children whose freedom was utterly violated by Hitler's abuse of power? Why should a woman's freedom to walk safely down a

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street at night be less important to God than the freedom of the man who rapes her? Why should a drunk driver's freedom be more important to God than the child he mows down and kills? As for suffering as an opportunity for personal growth and compassion, most of us experience compassion and kindness in many situations where there is no visible suffering, and there are other situations where people experience extremes of suffering which evoke very little by way of human kindness. Torture chambers and prison cells are not noted for their ability to inspire compassion among witnesses to suffering. Those who kill themselves in suicidal despair are evidence that suffering is not always ennobling – it can and often does overwhelm the human spirit. In the end, most attempts to resolve the question of suffering flounder on the shores of insensitivity or ignorance. The darkness is sometimes too great, the suffering and futility too intense.

Atheisms forged in the crucible of human suffering are quite different both from standard Christian theodicies and from the new atheism with its hubristic confidence in the power of science. From the perspective of the new atheists, suffering is not a mystery, it is only a problem waiting to be solved. But science will never banish the ashes of Auschwitz by the light of understanding, for these will continue to cast a pall over the earth for as long as there are humans more aware than scientists like Dawkins of their significance. Science will never provide an answer to the question 'why?' which Job asks, and which every human being must surely ask when we contemplate the sometimes unbearable reality of belonging to a species afflicted with the capacity, not only to experience pain, but to imagine suffering as well, so that our memories and imaginations are haunted with the spectres of past and future agonies. The new atheism is a puritanical brand of godless Protestantism, full of moral bombast and preachy rhetoric, but intellectually limited and culturally parochial in its lack of engagement with the kind of existentialist questions which haunt the texts of modern European literature and philosophy, rooted as they often are in the dark loam of a century of unthinkable evil and misery.

### Nietzsche and the death of God

Perhaps the greatest and darkest genius among modern atheists is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) who, on the cusp of the twentieth century, proclaimed the death of God, and whose nihilistic madness looms over us still today as the ultimate gesture of defiance of the divine.<sup>18</sup> Like the new atheists, Nietzsche saw Christianity as a vast corrupting influence on human history and aspirations. If ‘man’ could shake off the mantle of meekness which Christianity had spread over him, he would unleash within himself the *ubermensch*, the Superman, in whom the full greatness of the human spirit would at last be manifest, as it had been in the ancient Greek gods. But Nietzsche also recognised that there was madness in letting go of the idea of God, for it constitutes an experiment in meaninglessness beyond anything that has been tried before. Humans would become the murderers of God, and in so doing they would cut themselves off from all compass-points and plunge themselves into an unimaginable and terrifying darkness. These are the two faces of Nietzschean atheism – the hubristic triumph of the Superman, and the futile fantasies of the nihilist.

Nietzsche became the favoured philosopher of Hitler and Nazism, and some would argue that the spirit of his philosophy, with its emphasis on unbounded human power, trails this possibility in its wake. But more recently, Nietzsche has been rehabilitated by postmodernists, who believe that his ideas invite a more nuanced and thoughtful engagement. His insistence that we must interrogate all truths, all apparent realities about the world which find their affirmation in the language we use, constitutes an extreme form of scepticism which, paradoxically, has the ring of truth about it for many who study him. Theologians as well as philosophers and cultural theorists recognise in his critique of religion and in his challenging of established truths, values and meanings a profound unmasking of the deceptions which allow power and ideology to masquerade as truth, often in the name of

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God. That is why Nietzsche, along with Marx and Freud, has been called one of the 'masters of suspicion'. These three thinkers invite us to question what society presents to us as normal, natural and true. They ask us to explore the hidden dynamics of power, exploitation and deception which posture under the guises of morality, religion and language, and to probe the hidden underbelly of our ways of speaking and relating in order to discover the oppressions that lurk there, but also the moments of insight by which we might rupture the established order so as to recognise different ways of being and relating.

Recognition of the role played by language in the construction of meaning brings with it the realisation that all our talk of divine revelation and inspiration can only be shown to be true in terms of its coherence and relevance in the context of human lives. Whether or not God exists above and beyond human experience, as humans it only makes sense to say that God 'exists' insofar as we embody that existence within the fabric of our own lives and within the language by which we give meaning to the world.

#### Stories of God

The second form of atheism I want to consider is not really atheism at all, for it constitutes a form of tortured defiance against every attempt to justify, explain or defend God, which paradoxically must position itself before the utter darkness of God's apparent betrayal of the world. It is motivated by the spirit of Job, but without the resolution of the biblical ending. It is perhaps most famously expressed by the character Ivan in Dostoyevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. After a harrowing description of the many ways in which human beings inflict torture and cruelty on one another, Ivan concludes that there is no possible harmony in this world or the next which would allow a mother to forgive the torturer of her child:

too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back

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my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.<sup>19</sup>

Christopher Hitchens claims that he and his fellow atheists 'find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books.'<sup>20</sup> He conveniently overlooks the fact that Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky devoted many of their literary endeavours to addressing the profound human dilemmas and divine mysteries expressed in those same holy books. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hitchens' reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* focuses exclusively on Ivan, so that he fails to acknowledge that Dostoyevsky's story is slanted not towards the convincing power of Ivan's atheism, but towards the redemptive compassion of Alyosha's faith. According to Hitchens, 'Dostoyevsky in his *Brothers Karamozov* was extremely critical of religion'.<sup>21</sup> He was, but he was an infinitely wiser critic than the new atheists.<sup>22</sup>

While the Book of Job calls attention away from the human to God as a response to suffering, existentialists such as Dostoyevsky and Albert Camus shift our gaze from God to the human. They confront us with the absurdity and pathos of the human condition in a world in which our freedom brings only torment and misery, a world in which God seems impotent in the face of our human capacity for evil.

But never have divine impotence and human evil encountered one another so profoundly as in the Holocaust, and it is Jewish survivors who have produced some of the greatest writings on suffering and the absence of God. In Eli Wiesel's short memoir, *Night*, he describes his experience when, at the age of 16, he was taken from his small Hasidic community and transported to Auschwitz:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never

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shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.<sup>23</sup>

In the memories of Wiesel's tortured youth, we have moved far beyond the vulgar atheism of scientific rationalism, and we have also moved beyond the theodicies of theologians and philosophers like Swinburne. That is because we have moved beyond God as a scientific conundrum or a philosophical concept or a theological proposition, to God as a character in literature and story-telling.

Great literature does not seek to persuade us or to convert us. Rather, it draws us into the heart of the inescapable mystery of the human condition, and it lays before us the losses and opportunities inherent in that condition in the face of joy and suffering, love and violence, desire and denial. When it invokes the name of God, it does so because there is something deep within us which asks a fundamental question of God when we contemplate our own humanity. What we make of that question lends itself to perhaps an infinite variety of responses, for there are many different ways of inhabiting the shadowy worlds of unknowing, in this era in which dogmatism, certainty and absolutism are the trademark of every kind of fundamentalism and extremism, whether atheist or religious.

Wiesel's writing is inspired by a Hasidic legend which goes as follows:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

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Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say 'Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer,' and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, 'I do not know how to light a fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.' It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: 'I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.' And it was sufficient.

God made man because he loves stories.<sup>24</sup>

Theology may well be dead in the water for everyone but theologians, but God's story is alive and well. In cinema, popular culture, art, music and literature – even in the popularity of the new atheism – the story of God is an implicit theme running through the imaginative life of Western culture as pervasively today as it ever has.

This idea of a God who loves stories, the idea that we are living characters in God's story, brings me to the last chapter of this book. I want to shift our focus now to questions of creation and creativity, imagination and story-telling, as perhaps a more fruitful way of reflecting on what it means to speak of God, than debates about rationality, science and religion. So, let me conclude by turning to stories which may not begin with 'once upon a time' and which may not end 'happily ever after'.

## Chapter 8

# CREATIVITY AND THE STORY OF GOD

In a postmodern age, the power of narrative and story-telling to shape our lives has replaced appeals to universal reason and truth. Each of us is part of a living story about the world, for we are born into communities and traditions whose histories, values and meanings tell us who we are. Together, these many different narratives make up the human story. Religious traditions are the most enduring of these narratives, each with its own claims to truth and its own understanding of the ultimate purpose of the cosmos and our place within it. The Enlightenment is a narrative which can be interpreted in continuity or conflict with the Christian narrative which it has gradually replaced in Western society. The new atheism is a particular version of the Enlightenment narrative which, as John Gray and Mary Midgley argue, has the same myth-making function as religious stories, in seeking to offer an overarching vision of the meaning and purpose of life. To be human is to be a story-telling creature. 'God made man because he loves stories.'

This is not to suggest that our stories about the world are fictions with no basis in truth. For example, to say that Christianity is a story about God is not necessarily to say that God does not exist except as a character in a human story. It is, however, to say that the truthfulness of Christian beliefs about the nature and revelation of God can only be evaluated by considering their coherence in the context of the Christian faith and its traditions, and the same is true of any religion.<sup>1</sup> As Dawkins and others rightly point out, we can never 'prove' the existence of God



through appealing to external facts and objective evidence. We can only evaluate the credibility of any narrative of meaning by considering its arguments and beliefs in the context of the people who inhabit that narrative and the ways in which they have shaped their world through philosophy, doctrine and ethics, but also through art and literature, music and poetry, devotion and prayer.

Midgley argues that scientific rationalism has severed the connection between science and poetry, so that it offers too reductive an understanding of what it means to be human.<sup>2</sup> She argues that the atomistic philosophy which emerged with a scientific worldview in the seventeenth century has led to an over-emphasis on individualistic, competitive and exploitative models of life, over and against more organic and co-operative models. Faced with the urgency of the environmental crisis as well as the many other challenges confronting us at the beginning of the new millennium, we need to move beyond what she calls the 'omnicompetence' of science in its attempts to explain the world, and to rediscover the power of the imagination to generate meaning and shape our visions of who we are.

### The new atheism and the arts

In a televised debate, Richard Dawkins declares that he would miss nothing about religion if it were to be eradicated altogether. Referring to the role of religion in inspiring great art, he suggests that

the *B Minor Mass*, the *Matthew Passion*, these happen to be on a religious theme, but they might as well not be. They're beautiful music on a great poetic theme, but we could still go on enjoying them without believing in any of that supernatural rubbish.<sup>3</sup>

He tells of how, when he was on the British radio programme, *Desert Island Discs*, the presenter Sue Lawley expressed surprise that he chose a piece of music from *St Matthew's Passion*. He explains how an atheist can enjoy religious music, by using an analogy from

literature: 'You might as well say how can you enjoy *Wuthering Heights*, when you know that Cathy and Heathcliffé never really existed. It's fiction. It's good fiction. It's moving fiction. But it's still fiction.'<sup>4</sup>

Is it really as simple as that? Our capacity to enjoy *Wuthering Heights*, as with any other great work of literature, is not dependent upon our belief that Cathy and Heathcliffé actually existed, but it is dependent upon the capacity of their characters to communicate something truthful about the human condition. The obsessive passions which Emily Brontë explores in her novel speak to us because we recognise their truth in ourselves. Cathy and Heathcliffé are fictional characters but they are also truthful, and that is why *Wuthering Heights* is good and moving fiction. The same can be said of all literature, poetry and music which transcend their time and place to communicate across cultural and historical boundaries. If religious music, art and literature have this transcendent capacity, they are not simply referring to 'supernatural rubbish'. We might not share Bach's Christian faith, but can we really appreciate his music without having at least some sense of what it means to praise the glory of God or to evoke the passion of Christ? If we regard the beliefs which inspired him as just so much 'supernatural rubbish', and if we remain mired in an adamant materialism which refuses any glimpse of transcendence, how can we allow ourselves to be transported by music, art or literature?

After citing the example of *Wuthering Heights* in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins goes on to suggest that religion had little to do with the great achievements of Christian art such as the Sistine Chapel or Raphael's *Annunciation*. He claims that, even if Raphael and Michelangelo were Christians,

the fact is almost incidental. Its enormous wealth had made the Church the dominant patron of the arts. If history had worked out differently, and Michelangelo had been commissioned to paint a ceiling for a giant Museum of Science, mightn't he have produced something at least as inspirational

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as the Sistine Chapel? How sad that we shall never hear Beethoven's *Mesozoic Symphony*, or Mozart's opera, *The Expanding Universe*. And what a shame that we are deprived of Haydn's *Evolution Oratorio* – but that does not stop us from enjoying his *Creation*.<sup>5</sup>

Setting aside Dawkins' misguided understanding of how artistic patronage works and his rubbishing of the motives of Christian artists (throughout *The God Delusion*, Dawkins privileges insult over argument when seeking to express disagreement), why should there not in the fullness of time be a work of scientifically inspired genius to match the genius of Beethoven or Mozart? Given that science has enjoyed increasing economic and intellectual power for the past century and a half, shouldn't we be experiencing something of this flowering of art in the name of science? Where is it?

We may struggle to find artistic or musical examples of scientific atheists at work, but literature is a more fertile source. I have already referred to the novelist Martin Amis who has apparently joined the new atheists in their anti-religious polemics, but I want to consider Ian McEwan as offering perhaps the best example of what we might call new atheist literature. McEwan appeared on Dawkins' television series, *The Root of All Evil?*, and Hitchens' book, *God Is Not Great*, is dedicated to him. Hitchens says of McEwan that his 'body of fiction shows an extraordinary ability to elucidate the numinous without conceding anything to the supernatural.'<sup>6</sup> McEwan's novel *Saturday* is about the dilemmas facing a liberal scientific rationalist in the months leading up to the Iraq war, and it offers a literary exploration of many of the ideas which preoccupy the new atheists.

*Saturday* focuses on a day in the life of surgeon Henry Perowne and his family. The blurb on the dust-jacket gives a good sense of Perowne's life: 'Henry Perowne is a contented man – a successful neurosurgeon, the devoted husband of Rosalind, a newspaper lawyer, and proud father of two grown-up children, one a promising poet, the other a talented blues musician.' Not quite an Aga

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saga then, but a homely story of English domesticity in Blairite Britain, which risks being smashed apart by the combined forces of religiously inspired violence and individual insanity.

The Saturday of the book's title is not just any Saturday – it is Saturday, 15 February 2003, the day of massive anti-war demonstrations in London. McEwan puts Perowne through his paces in an increasingly frenetic day, as every possible issue has to be confronted and dealt with in 24 hours. The hapless Henry wakes up to what he initially thinks is a terrorist hijacking in the skies over London, gets caught up in the war demonstrations, crashes his car, reflects on the intricacies of brain surgery, contemplates middle age in a breathless game of squash, visits his mother who has senile dementia and therefore offers a pause for reflection on old age and madness, frets about his teenage son, discovers that his unmarried daughter is pregnant, saves his family from a murderous attack, and performs brain surgery on their attacker before snuggling up in bed with his wife at the end of the day:

He fits himself around her, her silk pyjamas, her scent, her warmth, her beloved form, and draws closer to her. Blindly, he kisses her nape. There's always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there's only this. And at last, faintly, falling: this day's over.<sup>7</sup>

It is a moving ending. Bourgeois England is secure, at least for the time being, behind its solid front door. Perowne is shown to be a moderate man, a man capable of a quiet act of altruism without any religious justification. His reward is not resurrection and eternal life, but the warm body of a beautiful and clever woman. What man could want for more? Early in the book, the author quotes Darwin: 'There is grandeur in this view of life'.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this fragrant nesting down is all we can aspire to, at the end of the day – for those of us who can afford silk pyjamas and scent.

*Saturday* is a much more intelligent book than either *The God Delusion* or *God Is Not Great*, but it covers all the same ideas and arguments. Perowne is reading *The Origin of Species*. His garden is his 'own corner'<sup>9</sup> of London, and it is a shrine to the

Enlightenment and its achievements:

an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting.<sup>10</sup>

The tediously long passages on neurosurgery are not just McEwan showing off. They are making the point that we are highly complex animals whose behaviour and emotions are dominated by chemicals in our brains. The book suggests that we should look no further than this to explain the range of human emotions from love and altruism to violence and fury.

Perowne is a fictional character, but he brings to mind Terry Eagleton's description of Dawkins, if we substitute London's Fitzrovia for North Oxford. Eagleton says of Dawkins that his opinions are those of

a readily identifiable kind of English middle-class liberal rationalist. Reading Dawkins, who occasionally writes as though 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness' is a mighty funny way to describe a Grecian urn, one can be reasonably certain that he would not be Europe's greatest enthusiast for Foucault, psychoanalysis, agitprop, Dadaism, anarchism or separatist feminism. All of these phenomena, one imagines, would be as distasteful to his brisk, bloodless rationality as the virgin birth ... His God-hating, then, is by no means simply the view of a scientist admirably cleansed of prejudice. It belongs to a specific cultural context. One would not expect to muster many votes for either anarchism or the virgin birth in North Oxford.<sup>11</sup>

Dawkins himself refers to theorists such as Foucault, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva as 'icons of haute francophonyism.'<sup>12</sup>

*Saturday* has the potential to be a deeply ironic novel, which might have invited reflection on the idea that, after the death of all religious visions, we are left with 'the British gods'<sup>13</sup> watching over the middle-class family slumbering beneath threatening skies

emptied of angels but not of aeroplanes. It could also have been a profoundly unsettling existentialist novel about the challenge of living in a world without gods or promises of salvation, in the shadow of our own mortality. But its author fails to communicate that sense of paradox which is the hallmark of the best existentialist writers. His central character is too complacent in his knowledge, too secure in his environment. Perowne is a man of certainty and, like McEwan himself, he resists the ambiguity of religious doubt. He is not a man in the grip of absurdity and pathos. Although we are told that he is 'Baffled and fearful'<sup>14</sup> about the times he lives in, he comes across as a rather dull and unadventurous Englishman who experiences no existential dread about his place in the universe and no real thirst for knowledge beyond the closed horizons of his own scientific world. He is, in other words, quite a good character study of the new atheist temperament, at least in some of its more famous incarnations.

*Saturday* is threaded through with biblical motifs and images, with references to angels and gods, but these never leave the printed page and take flight because of the book's unyieldingly materialistic perspective. It is an intelligently designed novel which provides a vehicle for the author's pet beliefs, and that is why it lacks the spark of creative genius. In most of McEwan's novels, one senses that he plots his stories and designs his characters with meticulous care, so that it is hard to believe that he is ever taken by surprise or caught off guard by the worlds he has brought into being. There is something a little robotic about the way his characters think and behave, because at no time do they quite break free of the author's intentions. (I would exempt *Atonement* from this criticism, but this is not the place for an extended discussion of McEwan's writing.)

Shortly after reading *Saturday*, I read Zadie Smith's romping novel *On Beauty*, which is loosely based on E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*. Smith's characters surge into life, and one has the sense that they are not compliant enough to serve the demands of a tidy and coherent plot. Her book is a bitter-sweet comedy about love and loss, about knowledge and values and meaning. Unlike McEwan's representation of orderly family life, Smith celebrates the love that

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is to be found in the midst of chaos and disorder. She offers no tidy ending of domestic bliss, however uneasy. Instead, she leaves us where much great fiction leaves us – with the ending unknown, but with an intimation of the subtle hope of beauty and love in the face of the inevitability of death and decay.

I am edging towards the suggestion that divine creativity might be more like Zadie Smith's kind of creativity than Ian McEwan's. Something risky, experimental, not quite in control of its material, capable of giving rise to characters who leap off the page and subvert the author's intentions. God as a creative genius rather than an intelligent designer. The author of life as a black postcolonial woman, perhaps, rather than as a white establishment Englishman. But we'll come back to these suggestions later.

#### **'The long day's journey of the Saturday'**

I don't know if McEwan is familiar with George Steiner's book on literature and transcendence, *Real Presences*, but I suspect that the novel's title is taken from Steiner's exploration of the significance of Saturday for the times we live in. I want to quote Steiner at length, as he ushers in the closing reflections of this book. Here is what he writes:

There is one particular day in Western history about which neither historical record nor myth nor Scripture make report. It is a Saturday. And it has become the longest of days. We know of that Good Friday which Christianity holds to have been that of the Cross. But the non-Christian, the atheist, knows of it as well ... We know, ineluctably, of the pain, of the failure of love, of the solitude which are our history and private fate. We know too about Sunday. To the Christian, that day signifies an intimation, both assured and precarious, both evident and beyond comprehension, of resurrection, of a justice and a love that have conquered death. If we are non-Christians or non-believers, we know of that Sunday in precisely analogous terms ... The lineaments

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of that Sunday carry the name of hope (there is no word less deconstructible).

But ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other ... The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and of hope, of the flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man. Without them, how could we be patient?<sup>15</sup>

There are profound resonances between Steiner's reflections and McEwan's novel. However, if McEwan has read *Real Presences*, his allegiance to the new atheism shows that he has ignored Steiner's argument, for Steiner insists that 'a wager on transcendence'<sup>16</sup> is the necessary condition for all forms of artistic expression. This means that 'It is a theology, explicit or suppressed, masked or avowed, substantive or imaged, which underwrites the presumption of creativity, of signification in our encounters with text, with music, with art.'<sup>17</sup> Art in its broadest form is, according to Steiner, an encounter with the freedom of the other, and the possibility of that encounter is a willingness to position ourselves before God. After the twentieth century, 'one of the cruellest, most wasteful of hope in human record', the artistic endeavour is a form of 'shadow-boxing' in the absence of God, a 'negative theism, a peculiarly vivid sense of God's absence or, to be precise, of His recession.'<sup>18</sup>

The dramatic climax of McEwan's book focuses on Daisy's recitation of one of the most famous of all poems about the loss of faith: Matthew Arnold's 'On Dover Beach'. Here, we read of the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the Sea of Faith, which leaves us

as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.



In a world torn apart by ignorant armies, what glimmers of salvation are to be found in the arts?

### **Art, freedom and humanity**

Art has no power to change the world, for great art exerts a different kind of power – not the power of violence and revolution, but the potent vulnerability of imagination and memory, of mourning and of hope. Art is powerless in itself, and yet it stands as an obstacle in the path of every destructive and oppressive force. That is why every tyrant and ideologue has sought to silence or to control the artistic imagination. This battle against art witnesses to the nature of the relationship between art and freedom, for it suggests that there is an inseparable link between the spirit of freedom and the creative impulse. Those who would destroy human freedom must first destroy the art which expresses that freedom in its most perfect form.

Art is a form of expression in which the quest for truth breaks free of the struggle for domination. It opens up spaces for the exploration of truth in a different idiom, in which many visions and voices can co-exist. The Czech writer Milan Kundera makes the point that the word ‘history’ changes its meaning in different contexts, so that the history of art is not the same as the history of science. ‘The history of science has the nature of progress’, but art is different: ‘Applied to art, the notion of history has nothing to do with progress; it does not imply improvement, amelioration, an ascent; it resembles a journey undertaken to explore unknown lands and chart them.’<sup>19</sup>

In these imaginary journeys to unknown lands, we exist not in competition but in creative co-operation with one another. We can all be seekers after truth along the pathways of art. Of course, art alone will not feed the hungry nor visit those in prison nor clothe the naked, but it may answer to a much deeper need than our basic physical needs. It may be of the very essence of our humanity that we hunger for beauty as much as we hunger for food, and those who seek to do good in the world must be

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providers of beauty as well as of food to those in need.

There is an extract from a diary in London's Imperial War museum, written by Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin DSO, one of the first British soldiers to enter Bergen-Belsen, the Nazi death camp:

It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived – though it may have no connection – that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick.

I wish so much that I could discover who did it. It was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick.

At last someone had done something to make them individuals again; they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance.

That lipstick started to give them back their humanity. From Bergen-Belsen to Beijing to Bosnia to Beirut to Baghdad, creativity has marked out the space of our humanity in the midst of the worst forms of destruction, violence and oppression. As long as we can still create beauty, we are free, and as long as we are still free, we are human.

This suggests that the Christian privileging of reason as the essential characteristic which separates out the human from all other creatures is too narrow, for creativity is a more fundamental human attribute than rationality. A child rejoices in splashing paint on paper and moulding clay into shapes, long before he or she learns to reason. Even when Christian theologians talk about the creativity of God, they tend to talk in terms of rationality rather than art.<sup>20</sup> I am suggesting that we might shift the whole idea of creation and of the human made in the image of God away

from the tyranny of reason, and locate it instead in the freedom of art.

### The dreaming ape

Studies of cave paintings in sites such as Altamira and Lascaux suggest that it was the capacity for art which first marked us out as a unique species, and that this creative spark was kindled into being through the awakening of a religious imagination.<sup>21</sup> It was when we began to ask questions about life beyond the material horizons of our own existence, when we acquired the capacity to dream of other possibilities and to think symbolically, that we became *homo sapiens*. This lends added weight to the argument by some neuroscientists that we are 'hard-wired' for religion.<sup>22</sup> The human brain may be such that it has a genetic capacity for transcendence.

We are *homo creativus*, and the primal expression of our humanity takes place at the level of creativity. It is creativity which constitutes the difference between a human and an animal, between a prison and a zoo. What are the implications of this for the Christian understanding of what it means to be human made in the image of God?

Nowhere in this book have I attempted to offer arguments for the existence of God in terms familiar to systematic theologians or philosophical rationalists. I do not find those arguments particularly interesting or persuasive. Christian theology has been hamstrung by its preoccupation with rationality, at the expense of other ways of speaking intelligently about God. A great work of art or music is not rational in the way that a philosophical argument or a scientific experiment is rational, but it is charged with meaning and capable of communicating a potent sense of transcendence and truth. Steiner argues that this cannot help but open our minds to eternity and to God, even if that is an absent, unknowable God more like the character in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* than the all too knowable and assured God of religious fundamentalisms.

Christian authorities have always had an ambivalent attitude

towards the power of the arts to communicate the truth of the Christian story, from the iconoclastic controversies of the early Church through the Reformation and beyond. The artistic imagination has eluded the control of theology and doctrine with their rationalising and authoritarian tendencies, and it still lays before us a more visceral and compelling account of the story of Christ than those theological tomes gathering dust in libraries which cater to a bygone era.

While the men of God have glowered disapprovingly on human sexuality, Christian art and music have given expression to a potent eroticism in their celebration of human and divine love. While the men of God have written the maternal feminine face of God out of the texts of theology, she smiles and weeps and sings and laughs with us in the face of a million Madonnas. While the men of God have refused the imaginative capacity of wisdom to romp playfully amidst the creative endeavours of the human species, we have always discovered in the caves of our minds the whispers and seductions of a different God, luring us into forbidden fantasies of desire and dread, enticing our spirits into sublime manifestations of hope and transformation.

David Lewis-Williams, in his study of cave art, speaks of a 'creative explosion' in the Upper Palaeolithic period some 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, which connects the caves of France, South Africa and Australia, and which suggests a species-wide transformation in the evolutionary process.<sup>23</sup> This is a short time-scale in evolutionary terms, but it is still difficult for us to imagine in terms of human experience. Maybe though, the religious awakening which flashed through a whole species also happens in each individual consciousness when we experience an awakening to God. Here is how St Augustine describes that experience:

Behold, you were within and I was outside, and I was seeking you there. I, deformed, was pursuing you in the beautifully formed things that you made. You were with me, but I was not with you. Those things held me far away from you, things that would not exist if they were not in you. You called

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and clamored and shattered my deafness; you flashed and gleamed and banished my blindness; you were fragrant and I drew in breath and now pant for you. I tasted and now I hunger and thirst for you; you touched me and I have been set ablaze with longing for your peace.<sup>24</sup>

To be human is to be a species which has been set ablaze with longing. It is to be a creature endowed with consciousness, capable of turning from an exterior world of material forms to an interior world wherein we discover God in the form of a hunger and thirst that nothing can satisfy. It is this longing, this 'peculiarly vivid sense of God's absence', to use Steiner's words, which is the source of our own creative capacity. Faced with a world of 'beautifully formed things', we too have become creators of beauty, co-creators with God invited to participate in the ongoing creativity of making the world anew.

#### **Intelligent designer or creative genius?**

While cosmology invites reflection on human consciousness and therefore on God, intelligent design theorists argue that evidence of God can be found in the order of creation which defies some aspects of the theory of evolution. Evolutionary theorists such as Dawkins argue that the randomness of the evolutionary process, the fact that it is a process of trial and error which is often wasteful and futile, is evidence against an intelligent designer. Yet I want to come back to my earlier suggestion that we might think of God not as an intelligent designer but as a creative genius, in which case there may be considerably more freedom and more trial and error woven into the universe than we normally recognise.

Creativity is not the same as design. Design implies a process of planning which is purposeful and controlled. It is not an end in itself but a means to an end. The plot and characters of *Saturday* are driven by the author's desire to make a point, subtle and incisive no doubt, but it is as much a book about McEwan as it is about Henry Perowne. Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* has something of

creative genius in its energy and vitality, in its failure to control the plot, and in the sense that the characters have acquired a life beyond the author's intentions. The book is too long, and there are many superfluous passages where one senses that the young author has been carried away by the joy of writing. It leaves us up in the air at the end, wondering about possible outcomes, and yet with a vivid sense that we 'know' Kiki and Howard and their unruly family. We care about them. We want it all to end well for them.

When we talk about God's creation, we need to understand ourselves as characters in a work of creative genius rather than as a unique kind of godlike being in an intelligently designed universe. Design seeks to eliminate risk, because it is concerned with efficiency, function and purpose. Creativity is measured by the risk it is willing to take, for the greater the creative endeavour, the greater the risk of failure. That is why there is ultimately no great creative work which does not involve suffering. All art expresses sorrow and beauty, loss and desire, tragedy and hope. All art stands under threat of its own destruction, of imploding under the weight of meaning it is asked to bear. In Christian art, the weaving together of nativity and crucifixion, the cross which casts its shadow over the crib, the mother of sorrows who hovers over the virgin's joy, all speak to us of the inseparability of suffering and hope in the story of God's creative love for humankind.

But Christianity invites us to go further still, for it tells us that we are endowed with a freedom beyond any created freedom, for we have within us the infinite freedom of God. I suggested that characters in a great work of fiction acquire a freedom beyond the author's intention. The writing process involves a mysterious moment when the characters begin to tell their own story, and there is a sense in which the story takes over, and the author follows where it leads. But however vivid the characters in a story might become, they are still the product of the author's mind and, if the author died before the story was finished, the story would not write its own ending.

Yet Christianity suggests a creative process in which God does what no human author can do, for God steps inside the story and

becomes one of the characters. When the plot gets out of hand and violence threatens to unravel the whole creative endeavour, the creator takes the most radical possible risk in becoming totally identified with the work of creation. Christian theologians have continued to project images of virile masculinity onto God in the language of omnipotence and omniscience, but at the heart of the Christian faith is a different story about God – a God of vulnerability, love and compassion, who surrenders all claims to divine power by becoming the child in Mary’s womb and the tortured man on the cross. This is a story in which the characters are given a freedom which no fictional character ever had, for they have the freedom to kill the author of the story in which they find themselves. That is why the incarnation and death of Christ ushers in a whole new way of understanding the relationship between human freedom and divine creativity, but Christianity may have been premature in thinking it knows how the story will end.

In the earliest versions of Mark’s Gospel, believed to be the earliest of all the Gospel accounts of Christ’s life, there is no account of the resurrection. Even the Bible, then, is indeterminate as to the ending of its own story. The Christian story is not yet finished, and it offers many possible endings. It might, as Paul Davies suggests, find its story dissolved into a sense of mysticism associated with quantum physics and the mystery of consciousness. It might find itself radically transformed through its encounters with other religions, and through the questions and challenges that feminists and non-Westerners pose to its traditional values and beliefs. Nietzsche offers another possible ending. We can murder God and become the authors of our own story, the Superman strutting the world’s stage. This is the omnipotent, omniscient subject which the new atheism also claims to offer, with its faith in the power of science and reason to enable us to know and control the world.

### **Beyond the death of God**

As creatures no longer conscious of being created, would we ourselves still be *homo creativus*, a creative ape? Might this mark

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another flashpoint in human evolution, another stage in the human story beyond God? Maybe there would in time be a *Mesozoic Symphony* or an *Evolution Oratorio*, or maybe there would be a different species altogether, a species no longer able to make music at all. This would be a rational species, a species capable of feats of science and technology beyond any we can yet imagine, a species which might indeed have pushed against 'the limits of understanding' and discovered 'that there are no limits'.<sup>25</sup> But would we still make music and art, poetry and sculpture, shaping our innermost mystery in the language of beauty and prayer? To quote Steiner again:

where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable ... It is only when the question of the existence or non-existence of God will have lost all actuality, it is only when, as logical positivism teaches, it will have been recognized and felt to be strictly nonsensical, that we shall inhabit a scientific-secular world. Educated opinion has, to a greater or lesser degree, entered upon this new freedom. For it, emptiness is precisely and only that.<sup>26</sup>

For new atheists such as Dawkins, the emptiness is only a temporary gap in knowledge that will eventually be filled by science. To attempt to sculpt alternative, God-shaped meanings within that emptiness is to behave irrationally and to invite moral condemnation. But for most people in the world, the emptiness points beyond itself to something more mysterious, something that science will never explain. We are those who choose to remain in the mystery of the unfinished story, inhabitants of the 'immensity of waiting' which is Saturday.

For some, that waiting is a time of promise. There is sorrow but not futility in life. Love is stronger than death, and God does not abandon us to the sealed tomb and the eternal abyss. We are invited to look beyond the torture of Friday's cross, beyond the silence of Saturday's tomb, to the newness of life in the garden of



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Sunday. For others, Sunday will never compensate for Friday's horror. The story must end in desolation, for we cannot and will not forgive God. These are the questions which shape the forms of literary atheism which I considered in the last chapter, but they are, as Steiner suggests, quite different from the hubristic confidence of scientific rationalism. They are 'shadow-boxing' with God, a form of wrestling with God's absence which acknowledges that we must resist any explanation which would cover over that absence and render it meaningless. The abyss, like hope, bears the shape of God's absence.

Religious and atheist fundamentalisms refuse God's perceptible absence. For the religious fundamentalist, the certainty of God's presence crowds out every question and every doubt with the weight of an unbearable force. Because there is no freedom in such a God, there can be no freedom in the human either. The creativity of faith which is discovered in freedom is thus overwhelmed by destructive violence which feeds on the mind's captivity to the tyranny of a God made in the image of human power. But the new atheism also resists the creativity of freedom which is discovered in the haunting absence of God. In narrowing down the meaning of human life to the most reductive materialist criteria, it refuses any meaningful space to the diversity and plurality of stories by which humankind has shaped its meanings around the eloquent absence which surrounds us.

Contrary to the claims of atheists such as Dawkins and Dennett, faith goes hand in hand with a willingness to question, to challenge and to sift out genuine mystery from mystification, whether in the realm of science or art. At its most profound, faith is not an answer to life's questions but a willingness to inhabit the darkness of knowing that there are some things we cannot know. I always tell students beginning a degree in theology and religious studies, that if they graduate thinking that they know the answers, they have been badly taught. If they graduate with some understanding of the right questions to ask, they have been well taught.

Far from being a form of docile compliance in the face of divine omnipotence and priestly power, faith has the capacity to

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become a continuous confrontation between the human and the divine, in which we ourselves play judge and jury to God. In an extraordinary series of written responses to questions posed by an Italian journalist, Pope John Paul II acknowledged the questions which authors such as Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Camus posed with regard to the possible futility of faith. Here is what he went on to write:

God created man as rational and free, thereby placing Himself under man's judgment. *The history of salvation is also the history of man's continual judgment of God.* Not only of man's questions and doubts but of his actual judgment of God.

He goes on to situate this judgement in the context of 'the scandal of the cross':

Could it have been different? Could God have *justified Himself* before human history, so full of suffering, without placing Christ's Cross at the center of that history? Obviously, one response could be that God does not need to justify Himself to man. It is enough that He is omnipotent ... But God, who besides being Omnipotence is Wisdom and – to repeat once again – Love, desires to justify Himself to mankind ... God is not someone who remains only outside of the world, content to be in Himself all-knowing and omnipotent. *His wisdom and omnipotence are placed, by free choice, at the service of creation.* If suffering is present in the history of humanity, one understands why His omnipotence was manifested *in the omnipotence of humiliation on the Cross.* The scandal of the Cross remains the key to the interpretation of the great mystery of suffering, which is so much a part of the history of mankind.<sup>27</sup>

The Pope's words are unlikely to persuade those who are not already willing to entertain the possible truthfulness of the Christian story, but they surely cannot be dismissed as the rantings of a religious bigot committed to blind faith. They suggest a nuanced, attentive groping towards truth, by a man who was a

philosopher as well as a pope, and who had experienced first-hand some of the greatest horrors of the twentieth century, first under Nazism and then under communism.

The creative imagination is the true home of faith. It occupies that furthest extreme where words creep to the very fringes of silence, and life tiptoes along the edges of death. In the darkest recesses of the imagination's cave, the human spirit shapes its questions about otherness, death and love in the delicate traceries of art, the haunted longings of music, the poetic shaping of silence.

Artistic and scientific knowledge, religion and rationality, are not competitors for the same space in the spectrum of human wisdom. Science cannot provide the answers to every human question, for scientific knowledge does not encompass all the ways of knowing that human consciousness is capable of. Art and beauty, creativity and imagination, provide a connecting narrative between the endeavours of science and the endeavours of religion. They invite us into conversations without violence, dialogue without closure.

### **The no-thinglyness of God**

A. C. Grayling is a dedicated follower of the new atheism. I quoted Grayling's play, *On Religion*, in the Introduction, and I want to return to that now – to the idea that 'kindness, that's the big one, not love.'

In an interview prior to his co-writing of the play, Grayling said, 'I assumed we were going to slaughter the religious folk.' Then he admits, 'I quickly learned that good theatre needs to give both sides of the argument the best shot and trust the audience to make up their own minds.'<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that a self-confessed rationalist assumes that 'slaughter' is an appropriate way for a philosopher to deal with intellectual arguments, while giving both sides of the argument is the prerogative of the dramatist. It is an unintentional admission by Grayling of the extent to which the modern attack on religion by atheists has abandoned any pretence at reasoned argument and debate in going for the jugular every time.

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There is a lesson to be learned from this. When Grayling was working on the play, he consulted religious as well as secular thinkers. As a result, the play offers a thought-provoking and by no means conclusive reflection on the relationship between scientific atheism, represented by a female Dawkins-figure called Grace, and liberal theology as represented by Grace's son, Tom. A sermon preached by Tom suggests the clear influence of theological consultants on the shaping of the script:

For most religions the other is the god. But I think that we've got to stop thinking about God as a proper name, for a *thing*, as if the word God refers to some sort of object in the universe ... God cannot be the creator of everything and something on the list of things being created ... I mean the great story of what God is like in the Bible, it seems to me is the story of the Golden Calf and Moses going up the mountain. So you get the mountain, you get Moses going up the mountain – *this is the great story of religion I think* – Moses travels up the mountain. The higher he gets up the mountain, it gets cloudier and cloudier, so the nearer to God, the nearer to this other he gets less and less able to see less able to know his way about, okay, down below, okay, what's happening down below is that all of them are making God into this thing, a Golden Calf ... So you've got this contrast, by the journey to the real divine which involves lostness, y'know, doubt, not being able to see, not being able to grasp this, this, this, y'know, this notion of God, no-thinglyness. And yet, at the bottom of the mountain there's this sort of real *thing* and they all bow down to it. But it's a con. And the whole story is saying that God isn't like any thing we expect. That's why it pisses me off when the atheists keep on trying to tell me what sort of God I believe in ... Because they want me to believe in a thing called God. But I don't. I don't believe God is a thing. I just believe in God.<sup>29</sup> <<<Is this passage accurately quoted?>>>

In this stumbling, hesitant monologue, there is a richer theology than one might discover by wading through any number of theo-

logical tomes. All theological language, all mysticism and prayer, all art, music and literature, are ways of trying – and failing – to express the ‘no-thinglyness’ of God.

Grayling’s play shows us that, when we move beyond the sphere of polemics and conflict, we discover a space of encounter and engagement where both sides can speak and be heard. The imperative of art – of all art, including theatre – is not to defeat other ways of knowing but to explore the unknown, to spread the net of understanding a little wider. In this time when both religious and atheist extremists are seeking to close off these spaces of encounter, discovery and exploration with their conflicting versions of truth, we urgently need to rediscover the forgotten art of conversation, the quiet and courteous voice of wisdom, and the value of kindness in our dealings with one another.

There is a song which tells us, ‘What the world needs now, is love sweet love’, but perhaps Grayling’s character, Ruth, is correct when she speaks of the dangerous power of love: ‘I’m less sure about love these days, less sure that it’s the most important thing because it’s just too much sometimes. Just too unmanageable.’<sup>30</sup> What the world needs now is not love but kindness, for there is a humility and modesty in kindness. It allows us to live and let live, not in an attitude of indifference but in an attitude of attentive concern for the needs of the other, and by an ethos which seeks to do no harm.

Arnold’s poetic epitaph to religion can be a form of prayer, which invites atheists and believers alike to attend to the soft voice of reason, as we stand on the shore and listen fearfully to the long roar of an incoming tide bringing with it who knows what fearful flotsam and debris on its mighty wave? But as we stand waiting through this long Saturday, let us not forget the miracle and the mystery that we are here at all. Paul Davies writes:

We, who are children of the universe – animated stardust – can nevertheless reflect on the nature of that same universe, even to the extent of glimpsing the rules on which it runs. How we have become linked into this cosmic dimension is a

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mystery. Yet the linkage cannot be denied ...We are truly meant to be here.<sup>31</sup>

I began with a poem by Elizabeth Jennings, who writes of 'dust with a living mind'. Beyond the confrontations of science and religion, the Catholic poet and the agnostic cosmologist remind us that we are motes of dust charged with mystery, and in contemplating that mystery we discover the hope of our 'proud, torn destinies'.