

# Contents

*Introduction* . . . . . 9

## **PART 1: A Personal Journey through Atheism**

1. The Generation Who Were Too Clever to Believe . . . . . 17
2. A Loss of Confidence . . . . . 31
3. The Seeds of Atheism . . . . . 41
4. The Last Battleships . . . . . 53
5. Britain's Pseudo-Religion and the Cult  
of Winston Churchill . . . . . 63
6. Homo Sovieticus . . . . . 81
7. Rediscovering Faith . . . . . 99
8. The Decline of Christianity . . . . . 115

## **PART 2: Addressing the Three Failed Arguments of Atheism**

9. "Are Conflicts Fought in the Name of Religion  
Conflicts about Religion?" . . . . . 127
10. "Is It Possible to Determine What Is Right  
and What Is Wrong without God?" . . . . . 141
11. "Are Atheist States Not Actually Atheist?" . . . . . 153

## **PART 3: The League of the Militant Godless**

12. Fake Miracles and Grotesque Relics . . . . . 165
  13. Provoking a Bloody War with the Church . . . . . 179
  14. The Great Debate . . . . . 193
- Epilogue* . . . . . 215
- Acknowledgments* . . . . . 220
- Index* . . . . . 221

# Introduction

*“Thine adversaries roar in the midst  
of thy congregations.”*

(THE 74TH PSALM)

Only one thing comforts me when I look back at the carnival of adolescent petulance, ingratitude, cruelty, and insensitivity that was my Godless period. I was at least not doing it to fit in with the spirit of the age. I held all my radical positions when they were not yet fashionable, and it was necessary to be quite determined, or perhaps just arrogant, to hold them. I got myself disliked and disapproved of by the very kinds of people who nowadays would be orthodox supporters of “diversity” and secularism, precisely because they are orthodox.

I did what everyone else of my generation was not yet doing. Alas, I still am doing what everyone else in my generation is not yet doing. When I am in church in England now, I notice that it is people of around my age (I was born in 1951) who are mostly absent. There are plenty who are older than seventy or younger than forty, but very few in between. In the United States, I

suspect that a great defection of the same kind is now under way in the college generation and that those now in college, or having recently left it, are more hostile — or perhaps worse, indifferent — to religion than any previous American generation. One orthodoxy is giving way to another, as happened in Britain. To explain this, I will have to explain the curious thing that happened to the Christian religion in my country.

In explaining this, I will describe influences I believe have operated on my brother, Christopher, much as they have affected me. It is not for me to say how similar our experiences may have been. We are separate people who, like many siblings, have lived entirely different lives. But since it is obvious that this book arises out of my attempt to debate religion with him, it would be absurd to pretend that much of what I say here is not intended to counter or undermine arguments he has presented in his own book on this subject.

My book, like all such books, is aimed mainly at myself. All polemical authors seek to persuade themselves above all. I hope the book may also be of some value to others, perhaps to believers whose friends or family members have left Christianity or are leaving it now or are enchanted by the arguments of the anti-religious intellects of our age. What I hope to do in the pages that follow is to explain first of all how I, gently brought up in a loving home and diligently instructed by conscientious teachers, should have come to reject so completely what they said. I had some good reasons for refusing some of it. My mistake was to dispense with it all, indiscriminately. I hope to show that one of the things I was schooled in was not, in fact, religion, but a strange and vulnerable counterfeit of it — a counterfeit that can be detected and rejected while yet leaving the genuine

truths of Christianity undamaged. That counterfeit still circulates, in several forms, especially in the United States.

I want to explain how I became convinced, by reason and experience, of the necessity and rightness of a form of Christianity that is modest, accommodating, and thoughtful — but ultimately uncompromising about its vital truth. I hope very much that by doing so, I can at least cause those who consider themselves to be atheists to hesitate over their choice. I also hope to provide Christian readers with insights they can use, the better to understand their unbelieving friends and so perhaps to sow some small seeds of doubt in the minds of those friends.

I then intend to address the fundamental failures of three atheistic arguments. Namely, that conflicts fought in the name of religion are always about religion; that it is ultimately possible to know with confidence what is right and what is wrong without acknowledging the existence of God; and that atheist states are not actually atheist. Beyond this, I harbor no ambitions to mount a comprehensive rebuttal of the arguments of such prominent atheists as Professor Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, or my brother, Christopher.

I am, of course, concerned especially about Christopher. His passion against God, about which he used to say much less, grew more virulent and confident during the years while I was making my gradual, hesitant way back to the altar-rail. As he has become more certain about the non-existence of God, I have become more certain that we cannot know such a thing in the way that we know anything else, and so must choose whether to believe or not. I think it is better by far to believe. I do not seek to thunder as he does, or to answer fury with fury or

scorn with scorn. I do not loathe atheists, as Christopher claims to loathe believers. I am not angered by the failure of atheists to see what appears obvious to me. I understand that they see differently. I do think that they have reasons for their belief, as I have reasons for mine, which are the real foundations of this argument. It is my belief that passions as strong as his are more likely to be countered by the unexpected force of poetry, which can ambush the human heart at any time. I am grateful, even so, for the opportunity to challenge his certainties.

It is also my view that, as with all atheists, Christopher is his own chief opponent. As long as he can convince himself, nobody else will persuade him. As I hope I shall make clear, his arguments are to some extent internally coherent and are a sort of explanation — if not the best explanation — of the world and the universe. Although he often assumes that moral truths are self-evident, attributes purpose to the universe, and swerves dangerously round the problem of conscience — which surely cannot *be* conscience if he is right — he is astonishingly unable to grasp that these assumptions are problems for his argument. This inability closes his mind to a great part of the debate and so makes his atheist faith insuperable for as long as he himself chooses to accept it.

The difficulties of the anti-theists begin when they try to engage with anyone who does not agree with them, when their reaction is often a frustrated rage that the rest of us are so stupid. But what if that is not the problem? Their refusal to accept that others might be as intelligent as they, yet disagree, leads them into many snares.

I tend to sympathize with them. I too have been angry with opponents who required me to re-examine opinions I

## INTRODUCTION

had embraced more through passion than through reason. I too have felt the unsettling lurch beneath my feet as the solid ground of my belief has shifted. I do not know whether they have also experienced what often follows — namely, a long self-deceiving attempt to ignore or belittle truths that would upset a position in which I had long been comfortable; in some ways even worse, it was a position held by almost everyone I knew, liked, or respected — people who would be shocked and perhaps hostile, mocking, or contemptuous if I gave in to my own reason. But I suspect that they have experienced this form of doubt, and I suspect that the hot and stinging techniques of their argument, the occasional profanity and the persistent impatience and scorn, are as useful to them as they once were to me in fending it off.

And yet in the end, while it may have convinced others, my own use of such techniques did not convince me.

# The Generation Who Were Too Clever to Believe

*“Down with it, down with it,  
even to the ground.”*

(THE 137TH PSALM)

I set fire to my Bible on the playing fields of my Cambridge boarding school one bright, windy spring afternoon in 1967. I was fifteen years old. The book did not, as I had hoped, blaze fiercely and swiftly. Only after much blowing and encouragement did I manage to get it to ignite at all, and I was left with a disagreeable, half-charred mess. Most of my small invited audience drifted away long before I had finished, disappointed by the anticlimax and the pettiness of the thing. Thunder did not mutter. It would be many years before I would feel a slight shiver of unease about my act of desecration. Did I then have any idea of the forces I was trifling with?

I was engaged at the time in a full, perfect, and complete rebellion against everything I had been brought up to believe. Since I had been raised to be an English gentleman, this was quite an involved process. It included behaving more or less

like a juvenile delinquent, trying to look like a walking mountain range, using as much foul language as I could find excuse for, mocking the weak (such as a wheelchair-bound boy in my class who provided a specially shameful target for this impulse), insulting my elders, and eventually breaking the law. I haughtily scorned those adults who, out of alarm, concern, love, or duty, sought to warn or restrain me. Nobody can say I did not take my new anti-beliefs to their logical conclusions — hence the decision to finish the job and outrage my religious upbringing by incinerating Holy Writ.

In truth, it was not much of a Bible as Bibles go. It was bound in shiny pale blue boards with twiddly writing on the cover, and it was illustrated with soppy pictures of Christ looking — in C. S. Lewis’s potent sneer at stained-glass sentimentality — “like a consumptive girl.” Even so, it was the real thing, the proper 1611 Authorized Version, reasonably thumbed by my wide-eyed childish self in scores of Scripture classes, a gift from my parents and until that moment treated with proper reverence and some tenderness. But this was my Year Zero. All that had to go, especially if it had any sentimental associations. We were all free now, and the Bible was one of the things we had to be free of.

At that moment I knew — absolutely knew — that it was the enemy’s book, the keystone of the arch I wished to bring down. I knew that there was no God, that the Old Testament was a gruesome series of atrocity stories and fairy tales, while the gospels were a laughable invention used to defraud the simple. And I joyfully and clearly understood the implications of all that, just as W. Somerset Maugham’s hero, Philip Carey, understands

the meaning of his atheism in the autobiographical novel *Of Human Bondage*, only more so:

Not knowing that he felt as he did on account of the subtle workings of his inmost nature, he ascribed the certainty he had reached to his own cleverness. He was unduly pleased with himself. With youth's lack of sympathy for an attitude other than its own he despised not a little Weeks and Hayward [fellow students] because they were content with the vague emotion which they called God and would not take the further step which to himself seemed so obvious.

He was free from degrading fears and free from prejudice. He could go his way without the intolerable dread of hell-fire. Suddenly he realised that he had lost also that burden of responsibility which made every action of his life a matter of urgent consequence. He could breathe more freely in a lighter air. He was responsible only to himself for the things he did. Freedom! He was his own master at last. From old habit, unconsciously, he thanked God that he no longer believed in Him.

I smugly congratulated myself (as Philip Carey does in this interesting passage) on being able to be virtuous without hope of reward or fear of punishment. I know now that proper virtue is easier to lose, and harder to find, than I thought it was then. I rather think I imagined this was a tremendously original thing to do and a shrewd blow at the dull believers who needed to be scared or bribed into goodness. This is one of the principal joys of the newly fledged atheist, and a continuing joy for many rather experienced non-believers. In this, I was like

Arthur Koestler's peasant who over long years perfects an ingenious invention — a two-wheeled vehicle with a saddle, pedals, and a chain — and then rides it proudly into the city to register the patent, only to discover thousands of people already riding mass-produced bicycles.

But my excitement was undimmed. There were no more external, absolute rules. The supposed foundation of every ordinance, regulation, law, and maxim — from “don't talk after lights-out” and “give way to pedestrians on the crosswalk,” to “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” “Thou shalt do no murder,” “Honor thy father and thy mother,” and “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” — was a fake. Praying was a comical folly, hymns were so much wailing at an empty heaven, churches were absurd buildings in urgent need of conversion into something more useful, or of demolition. Anyone could write a portentous book and call it Scripture.

Enlightened self-interest was the evolutionary foundation of good behavior. I did not have to do anything that I did not want to do, ever again. I would therefore be “happy,” because I was freed from those things whereof my conscience was afraid. My conscience was in any case not to be relied on where my desires were stronger or my fears greater than its promptings. I could behave as I wished, without fear of eternal consequences and (if I was cunning and could get away with it) without fear of earthly ones either. And I could claim to be virtuous too. Unlike Philip Carey, I did immediately recognize that some of the virtues could now be dispensed with, and several of the supposed sins might turn out to be expedient if not actually delightful. I acted accordingly for several important and irrecoverable years.

## A Braggart Sinner

That is pretty much as far as my personal confessions will go. My sins are unoriginal. The full details would be tedious for most people, unwelcome to my family (who have enough to put up with anyway), and upsetting for those directly affected by my very worst behavior. Let us just say that they include some political brawling with the police, some unhinged dabbling with illegal drugs (less damaging than I deserved), an arrest — richly merited by my past behavior but actually wrongful — for being in possession of an offensive weapon — very nearly killing someone else (and incidentally myself) through criminal irresponsibility while riding a motorcycle, and numberless acts of minor or major betrayal, ingratitude, disloyalty, dishonor, failure to keep promises and meet obligations, oath-breaking, cowardice, spite, or pure selfishness. I believe that nothing I could now do or say could possibly atone for them.

And then there were the things I thought and wrote and said, the high, jeering tone of my conversation, the cruel revolutionary rubbish I promoted, sometimes all too successfully, with such conviction that I persuaded some others to swallow the same poison. I have more or less recovered. I am not sure they all did. Once you have convinced a fellow-creature of the rightness of a cause, he takes his own direction and lives his own life. It is quite likely that even if you change your mind, he will not change his. Yet you remain at least partly responsible for what he does. Those who write where many read, and speak where many listen, had best be careful what they say. Someone is bound to take them seriously, and it really is no good pretending that you didn't know this.

I should be careful here. Confession can easily turn into showing off one's wickedness. There is a clever H. G. Wells short story about the end of the world called "A Vision of Judgement," in which a grisly tyrant is ordered to own up to his sins at the throne of God. He does so, "white and terrible and proud and strangely noble," much like Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*. He turns his confession into a great sonorous boast: "No evil was there but I practiced it, no cruelty wherewith I did not stain my soul . . . and so I stand before you meet for your nethermost Hell! Out of your greatness daring no lies, daring no pleas, but telling the truth of my iniquities before all mankind." The braggart sinner's unexpected punishment is to have the true story told, of all his embarrassing private follies, until everyone present is laughing at him and he runs to hide his shame in the Almighty's sleeve. There he finds, crouching next to him, the incendiary prophet who used to denounce him in life, likewise shown up by the recording angel as a laughable fraud, enjoying his outcast status rather too much.

I would add, for those who mistakenly think that religious persons imagine they are better than the rest, that my misbehavior did not stop when I crept stealthily into the pew behind the pillar at the back of the church, where I have skulked for the last twenty-five years. It merely lost its organized, deliberate character. I do not claim to be "saved" by my own declarations or by my attendance at the Lord's Supper. That is up to other authorities, which know my inward heart, to decide.

I talk about my own life at more length than I would normally think right, because I need to explain that I have passed through the same atheist revelation that most self-confident members of my British generation have experienced. We were

sure that we, and our civilization, had grown out of the nursery myths of God, angels, and heaven. We had modern medicine, penicillin, jet engines, the welfare state, the United Nations, and “science,” which explained everything that needed to be explained. People still died, it was true, but generally off-stage and drugged into a painless passivity. We could not imagine ourselves ever doing so. The “pains of death” had been abolished, along with most of the pains of life.

I was convinced that a grown-up person had no need of Santa Claus fantasies or pies in the sky. I knew all the standard arguments (who does not?) about how Christianity had stolen its myths and feast days from pagan faiths, and was another in a long line of fairy stories about gods who die and rise again. Since all the great faiths disagreed, they couldn’t all be right. Jesus was curiously similar to Mithras, or was it Horus? Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, easy as pie, not in the sky, and made still more facile by the way such youthful epiphanies are applauded by many teachers and other influential adults, and endorsed by the general culture of my country, which views God as a nuisance and religion as an embarrassment or worse.

### The Dismissal of Faith by the Intelligent and Educated

The fury and almost physical disgust of the Bloomsbury novelist Virginia Woolf at T. S. Eliot’s conversion to Christianity is an open expression of the private feelings of the educated British middle class, normally left unspoken but conveyed by body language or facial expression when the subject of religion cannot be avoided. Mrs. Woolf wrote to her sister in 1928, in terms that

perfectly epitomize the enlightened English person's scorn for faith and those who hold it:

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.

Look at these bilious, ill-tempered words: "Shameful, distressing, obscene, dead to us all." There has always seemed to me to be something frantic and enraged about this passage, concealing its real emotion — which I suspect is fear that Eliot, as well as being a greater talent than her, may also be right.

This widely accepted dismissal of faith by the intelligent and educated seemed then to be definitive proof that the thing was a fake, mainly because I wanted such proof. This blatant truth, that we hold opinions because we wish to, and reject them because we wish to, is so obvious that it is too seldom mentioned. I had reasons for wanting that proof. There were, after all, plenty of Christian intellectuals available if I had desired reassurance that faith and intelligence were compatible. But I dismissed them as obvious dupes, who spoke as they did because it was their professional paid duty to do so.

I had spotted the dry, disillusioned, and apparently disinterested atheism of so many intellectuals, artists, and leaders of our age. I liked their crooked smiles, their knowing worldliness, and their air of finding human credulity amusing. I envied their

confidence that we lived in a place where there was no darkness, where death was the end, the dead were gone, and there would be no judgment. It did not then cross my mind that they, like religious apologists, might have any personal reasons for holding to this disbelief. It certainly did not cross my mind that I had any low motives for it. Unlike Christians, atheists have a high opinion of their own virtue.

### Vanity Seeks Company

When reciting the Apostles' Creed, I had inwardly misinterpreted the expression "the Quick and the Dead" — in my childish ignorance, I had hoped that I might be one of those quick enough to escape the Judgment. I should add here that, while I grew to understand the real meaning fairly swiftly, the phrase never blossomed fully into life until I heard a doctor matter-of-factly describe the moment when our first child stirred in the womb as "the quickening." But that was in another time entirely, and a long way distant.

I had, like so many other young men and women of my age, been encouraged by parents and teachers (made soft by their own hard childhoods) to believe that I was clever, and so better than my fellows. Such vanity seeks company. If I could become one of them — the clever, dry ones — I could escape from the sports-mad, simple-minded, conventionally dull, commonplace people among whom I seemed to have been abandoned for much of the year.

This again is a confession of a serious failing. I was the child (there is one in every class, every Scout troop, every museum trip) who didn't particularly want to join in with the games or

the songs. I really did think of myself in this way, and sometimes still do. As one of the free-thinking and enlightened unbelievers, I would not be condemned to normal life in a suburb or a suit. My life would be an adventure. (So it proved, as it turned out, though different from the adventures I had imagined.) I envied them. I wanted to be one of them. It seemed to me to be the height of being truly grown-up, to be liberated from these tedious, apparently trivial rules and all the duties that went with them.

### The Deadly Chill of Ancient Chants and Texts

There were other things too. During a short spell at a cathedral choir school (not as a choirboy, since I sing like a donkey) I had experienced the intense beauty of the ancient Anglican chants, spiraling up into chilly stone vaults at Evensong. This sunset ceremony is the very heart of English Christianity. The prehistoric, mysterious poetry of the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis, perhaps a melancholy evening hymn, and the cold, ancient laments and curses of the Psalms, as the unique slow dusk of England gathers outside and inside the echoing, haunted, impossibly old building are extraordinarily potent. If you welcome them, they have an astonishing power to reassure and comfort. If you suspect or mistrust them, they will alarm and repel you like a strong and unwanted magic, something to flee from before it takes hold.

Like hundreds of thousands of English middle-class children, I had attempted to survive sermons by leafing through the technical and administrative bits at the very front and very

back of the little red prayer book in the pew. I had wrestled with “The Table to Find Easter,” with its cabalistic Golden Numbers, and thought it too much like mathematics to be interesting. I had peered at “The Table of Kindred and Affinity” and wondered innocently what fear lay behind these unyielding prohibitions, most of which were also largely unnecessary. What kind of world had required a long list of the people you weren’t allowed to marry? Despite the Freudians, I already realized that I couldn’t marry my mother even if I wished to, which I must confess I did not. However far I looked ahead, I could not picture myself marrying my deceased wife’s father’s mother.

I had enjoyed the “Forms of Prayer to Be Used at Sea,” especially the one to be said “Before a Fight at Sea against Any Enemy.”

Stir up thy strength, O Lord, and come and help us. . . . Take the cause into thine own hand, and judge between us and our enemies.

You could almost hear them being said in strong West Country voices, as the rigging creaked and the slow-matches smoldered and the ship turned toward the foe.

But above all I had discovered — and strongly feared and disliked — the ancient catechism that I had (wrongly) imagined I would one day have to learn by heart and repeat to a bishop — a figure I had seen from a distance, medieval in his miter, his outline clouded by incense. I was actively angry and resentful at the catechism’s insistence on rules I had no intention of obeying. By the time I was around twelve, I had a sense, when I encountered this text, of a very old and withered hand reaching out from a

dusty tomb-like cavity and seeking to pull me down into its hole forever.

The dark purity of the seventeenth-century language was also disturbing. It was the voice of the dead, speaking as if they were still alive and as if the world had not changed since they died — when I thought I knew that the world was wholly alterable and that the rules changed with the times. Now I am comforted greatly by this voice, welcoming the intervention of my forebears in our lives and their insistent reminder that we do not in fact change at all, that as I am now, so once were they, and as they are now, so shall I be. These, as the sentimental but moving old poem has it, are the prayers your father's father knew, and his father before him. Then I came to fear and dislike this voice so much that I rejoiced to see it being silenced by pestilential modernizers. The words I found myself particularly loathing formed part of the answer to the question: "What is thy duty towards God?" They run: "To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters: to order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters . . . to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me."

This passage well expresses the thing that the confident, ambitious young person dislikes about religion: its call for submission — submission! — to established authority, and its disturbing implication that others can and will decide what I must be and do.

## Our Greatest Fear

Behind the fear of submission lies a whole other set of things that my generation did not wish to acknowledge, the thing we

feared perhaps most of all, of following our parents into conformity and suburban living, becoming parents ourselves, mowing lawns, polishing shoes, washing the car. This fear is succinctly described in A. S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden*, a 1978 novel looking back on the early 1950s. A character sneers, "Poor dear Jenny scares him not with severity but with suburbia, the dread of our generation, the teacup, the diaper, the pelmet, the flowery stair-carpet, the click of the latch of the diminutive garden-gate."

It was unimaginable that we, the superior and liberated generation, should be trapped in this banality. The very word "suburb" evoked a mixture of apprehension and scorn. Why did we fear this fate so much? Perhaps it was because they brought us up too kindly, convinced in the post-war age that we should not endure the privation, danger, and strict discipline that they had had to put up with, so we turned arrogant. I certainly did.

Perhaps it was because in the "long 1960s" — which began with TV and rock and roll in the late 1950s, reached their zenith in the great year of self-righteousness in 1968, and continue to this very moment — we sensed that the world had left them behind. They were bewildered and alien in their own land, feeling themselves still to be in their prime, but regarded as impossibly old by us, and increasingly feeling old themselves. They had won the war, but — as we shall see — that war and those who had won it had been discredited. To become like them, to dress like them, speak like them, eat what they ate, and enjoy the music and art they liked was to join the defeated, and to be defeated.

To this day I can remember my feelings of mingled dismay and loss of control over my own life as I purchased the piles of equipment necessary for the care of our first child. It was

mostly in hideously colored plastic, for in those servantless days in England, parenthood was deeply unfashionable and mainly indulged in by the poor, which meant modish, well-designed baby equipment did not exist. I felt (correctly as it turned out) that I was being called by irresistible force into a state of life I had not chosen and would never have voluntarily accepted.

I have often thought that the strange popularity of abortion among people who ought to know better has much to do with this sensation of lost control, of being pulled downward into a world of servitude, into becoming our own parents. It is not the doomed baby that the unwilling parents hate (and generally it is the father who is liberated from his responsibilities through abortion and who exerts pressure for it). It is the life they might have to live if the baby is born. Others may have expected and even enjoyed this transformation of themselves into mature and responsible beings. My generation, perhaps because we pitied our mothers and fathers, believed that we could escape it. In fact, we believed that we would be more mature, and more responsible, if we refused to enter into that state of life, unto which it should have pleased God to call us. The oddest thing about this process is that we encountered so little resistance. We had, I think, expected and even hoped to be met with hard, uncompromising argument and rebuke. But authority melted away at a touch and mysteriously indulged us as recompense for our insults and rebellion. It was as if a rebel army had reached the limits of the enemy capital and found the forts and batteries abandoned and the defending soldiers fleeing away. Now I know why it was so easy. Then I thought, wrongly, that our victory was our own doing.