

THE POMPOUS ATHEIST

Atheist, P. P. McGuinness, opened his November 2007 *Quadrant* Editorial with these remarks:

“Just as religious faith is, while perfectly defensible in itself, useless as a guide to the physical make-up of the universe or the biological descent of man, so too its pretensions to be useful as a guide to social policy must be questioned. While few mainstream religious figures these days claim that the relationship between the earth and the sun, or the geological history of the earth have any standing as explanations, rather than as poetical stories in which God plays a leading role, it is all too common to find the religious making judgments on social and economic policy which purport to be based on reality but in fact are purely an expression of emotion and sentiment without any direct relationship to the actual workings of the world....”

Belief in God is as varied as the religions to which believers adhere. What, then, are we to understand by his use of the expression “religious faith”? It does not assist thought to lump together adherents of the various religions as if they were but species of the same genus; as if the self sacrifice of the nuns of Mother Teresa was only a more acceptable expression of what drives the Muslim suicide bomber. The term “faith” is not necessarily univocal: in one case at least it is analogous. That is, the word signifies a character in its subjects where the *dissimilarities* are greater than the similarities. What the Protestant means by “faith”, what the Mormon means, the Jehovah’s Witness, the Muslim, the Hindu, differs in each case. But whatever these meanings they differ fundamentally from what the Catholic Church means by the word. For the tenets of every religion save Catholicism are contrived by men, and the faith educed in their believers is a human thing. But the tenets of Catholicism were laid down by Almighty God, and the faith educed in Catholic believers is not something of man at all. It is something of God.¹

It will be said that this assertion is arrogant. But if the reader studies the Catholic Church’s teachings he will see it is consistent with the Church’s position. For the Catholic Church claims to have been founded by God—Jesus Christ, the God-man. It claims that its enlivening spirit is God—the Holy Spirit. It claims that its end is God—union with him in heaven. It says it is infallible (that it cannot err in faith or morals), consistent with the claim to a Divine, rather than human, provenance. The Church manifests, moreover, the signs of something above the human, notably, its temporal endurance far beyond that of any human institution, and this despite suffering from time to time the burden of evil men in its positions of power. Kingdoms come and go: the Catholic Church endures. Tyrants lay it waste, but, like its Founder, the Church rises again.

¹ The author has elaborated on this topic in the article *Catholic Faith* which may be found on the web at http://www.superflumina.org/catholic_faith.html

For argument's sake, however, let us accept McGuinness's lumping together of the various beliefs which have God for their object in the amorphous package "religious faith".

He asserts that religious faith is "perfectly defensible in itself", yet "useless as a guide to the make up of the universe or of the biological descent of man". This is so much nonsense. If religious faith is useless as a guide in natural questions, it is certainly not perfectly defensible in itself. His judgement reflects the silly assertion that something false in itself may be "true for you": it is subjectivism. McGuinness is a lapsed Catholic and this indulgence in contradiction smacks of the irrationality of Modernism, the heresy which has done so much to destroy the faith of Catholics.² Modernism asserts that different "truths" can contradict each other. The Modernist buzzword "stories" appears in his text, as does that heresy's assertion that religion is nothing but "emotion and sentiment".

His next error is the claim that religious faith is useless as a guide to the make-up of the universe. On the contrary, any faith in God, whether based on sacred scripture or not, has a clear explanation for the make-up of the universe. It was created by God according to forms established by him; the mechanics of the thing are secondary. What McGuinness means is that religious faith does not reflect the *atheistic* world view of its make-up, the view favoured by him and by the vast majority of scientists.

His fourth error is the assertion that religious faith is useless as a guide to the biological ascent of man. On the contrary, religious faith, whatever its colour, provides a very useful guide towards the alleged "biological ascent of man"—one of intellectual reservation. And with reason. For the assertion that there has been such an "ascent" is rooted in an hypothesis which has more of myth and fable to it than any that atheists claim is contained in sacred scripture.

McGuinness has done us a service in aiming the popgun of his ire at "religious faith". For there is another faith, irreligious and pernicious, widespread in the world with millions of adherents. Its high priest is the natural scientist.

As he sits in front of his computer, the scientist will tacitly concede the machine's fourfold causality: the matter from which it is made—its *material* cause; the intricate formality according to which the matter is designed and constructed—its *formal* cause; the inevitability of a maker, or makers—its *efficient* cause; and, the reason it was brought into existence, an instrument to aid men in their considerations and works—its *final* cause. Yet when he turns to his proper subject, the elements of the natural world, he will deny the existence of any but the *material* cause and pretend that factors which are not causes at all, time and chance, are sufficient to make up for any lacunae in logic. If he has doubts about the rationality of this position, he finds consolation in the huge numbers of its supporters; for how could such a body of

² The end of Modernism, as Pope Pius X made plain in his encyclical condemning it, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, 8.9.1907, is atheism (cf. n. 39).

opinion be wrong? The doctrine to which he adheres, Darwinian evolutionary theory, is grounded not in reason but in an idea, the idea that matter alone can explain everything. What drives him, and the huge numbers that support him, is not reason but faith in this idea.

The theory's most comprehensive scientific critic, New Zealand molecular biologist, Dr Michael Denton, concluded a long analysis of its defects twenty years ago in this way:

"Neither of the two fundamental axioms of Darwin's macroevolutionary theory—the concept of the continuity of nature, that is the idea of a functional continuum of all life forms linking all species together and ultimately leading back to a primeval cell, and the belief that all the adaptive design of life has resulted from a blind random process—have been validated by one single empirical discovery or scientific advance since 1859. Despite more than a century of intensive effort on the part of evolutionary biologists, the major objections raised by Darwin's critics such as Agassiz, Pictet, Bronn and Richard Owen have not been met..."³

Dr Denton rejected the evolutionists' claims to objectivity, insisting that it has always been the anti-evolutionists in the scientific community who have stuck to the facts and a strictly empirical approach⁴. He drew this telling conclusion:

"Ultimately, the Darwinian theory of evolution is no more nor less than the great cosmogenic myth of the twentieth century..."⁵

The atheist lives in a world of his own contriving, his mind closed to the crucial issues of reality. He did not bring himself into existence: he does not keep himself in existence: he knows not how long he will live. He did not specify the nature that he enjoys so freely: he cannot say why it is that he has come into existence as man rather than as monkey, donkey, cockroach or worm. All the natural benefits he enjoys have been given him, as indeed, is the very air he breathes. Yet he conducts himself with the self assurance of God himself!

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When that fine man, Fr John Casey SJ, Rector from 1949 to 1955 of St Ignatius College, Riverview⁶, offered to remit all tuition and boarding fees that Padraic McGuinness might complete his secondary education there, he was alive to the boy's great talents. He knew they could be used for good or for ill and he wanted, so far as in him lay, to ensure they were used for good. This issue, *the good* and its use or misuse, is at the heart of McGuinness's problems about God.

In an editorial he penned for the July 2007 issue of *Quadrant*, McGuinness responded tongue-in-cheek to a letter in the April 2007 edition in similar vein

³ *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, London, 1985, p. 345. Dr Denton's conclusion is not diminished by his (atheistic) view that in this Darwinism corresponds to what he regards as the religious myths of previous ages.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 353-4

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 358

⁶ Cf. *The Australian Dictionary of Jesuit Biography, 1848-1998*, David Strong SJ, Halstead Press (Sydney), 1999, pp. 49-50.

penned by former editor, Peter Coleman, in which “God” addressed the atheist. Given the violence of the response, Coleman may have regretted his initiative. *Inter alia*, McGuinness had this to say (to “God”):

“Either you or evolution has... endowed us with a profound capacity for evil as well as good, and we are all prone to both... Whence came this [Original] Sin? It is simply absurd to accuse Adam and... Eve of having sinned so grievously at the beginning of time that all humanity was somehow damned forever until... a bloody and obscene sacrifice... gave a let out for a few of them... If you... created Hell... then you are by any merely human standard of judgement as evil as the Hell you created, as the people you create who end up in that Hell, and you are responsible for the extremes of evil that are manifest in our world...”

This is not so much an expression of atheism as a mocking rant against God and his revelation. The merest tradesman blaspheming over his work, or the Mason taking his tragi-comic oaths, does as much, if not so comprehensively—but with the same futility. If God created man, all the denials in the world will not undo that creation. If the first man, Adam, sinned against God and was penalised, and the effects of that penalty are to be visited upon his offspring until the end of time, McGuinness’s railing against the reality will not undo it. (It is a mis-statement of God’s revelation, incidentally, to aver that all humanity was “damned forever”. From the very moment of Adam’s disobedience God promised a solution, a Redeemer who would restore mankind to friendship with him.) Again, if the price of man’s redemption was that God’s Son, become man, should suffer “a bloody and obscene sacrifice”, McGuinness’s complaints about this achieve nothing. And so on. The most grievous (and mindless) element of it is his accusation that God is somehow responsible for the evil men do, and for the hell they create for themselves. This is childish. If I give a man a gift, am I responsible for his abuse of it? That violent and criminal talent, Marlowe, put the issue well in the mouth of his Mephistopheles:

“Hell hath no limits nor is circumscrib’d
In one self place; for where we are is Hell,
And where Hell is, there must we ever be...”⁷

No room in McGuinness’s diatribe for the beneficence of God towards his creation! No room for his love for the creature he made in his own image and likeness, man. No room for the self sacrifice of the martyr dying for his friends, manifested pre-eminently in the Divine paradigm, Jesus Christ. All the sacrifices for the Catholic faith by great martyrs like Sir Thomas More and John Cardinal Fisher (at the hands of the tyrant Henry Tudor) or Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein (in Hitler’s gas chambers) were in vain. No scope here for the majesty of the teachings of the Man who changed the world as no one else has ever done. No acknowledgement of the debt its author owes to generations of faithful followers of Christ in constructing the greatest civilisation the world has ever known. No shadow of the respect due by a man for his forbears and their beliefs.

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⁷ *Doctor Faustus* (1604) act 2, sc. 1

Atheism is the rejection of the existence of God as a conclusion of the mind reflecting on reality perceived by the senses. It is fundamentally a philosophical rather than a theological issue; an unwillingness to face reality.

Nothing comes from nothing. I am not the source of the gifts I possess; they are given me. I may not know by what or by whom they were given but one thing is certain: I did not give them to myself. Now, the atheist admits the gift—not as gift but as *thing*; as *reality*—but denies the source; denies the giver.

More does not come from less. If I find myself possessed of the highest of the gifts given to the creatures of the world—intellect, will and all that goes with them: not just a beast determined by brute nature, but a person with the facility to work out my own destiny—why am I not justified in concluding that the giver, IT, must be a being which has, too, at least virtually, the same attributes as I have received? that this IT, too, must have intellect and will? *Nemo dat quod non habet*: if I am a person, surely the IT must be a person too. In other words, this IT cannot be an ‘it’ at all. IT must be SOMEONE!⁸

Now atheists the world over reject these arguments because they have managed, so they say, to discredit their major premises. Something *can* come from nothing. More *can* come from less. It has been proved—by Charles Darwin!

The issue is a philosophical one. It was not natural scientist, Charles Darwin, but the philosopher, Herbert Spencer, who first propounded the theory. But Spencer’s theory, because it was rooted in subjectivism, was unsound.⁹ The theory denies any but a material causality, which is impossible. Every thing that exists has not just one, but four causes.¹⁰ The failure in logic of the Spencerian/Darwinian position is the reason for the appearance in recent time of so many works addressing the evidence for order and design in nature, that is, evidence of *final* and *formal* causality.¹¹

With all due respect to him, the secular scientist is dishonest. As E.F. Schumacher related many years ago, the scientist *says* he is interested only in phenomena, in facts, but should some fact come along which falls outside the *a priori* setting of his atheism, he turns his back on it.¹² Schumacher cited, inter alia, the instance of Therese Neumann of Konnersreuth. For 35 years she lived, observed by all, on no other food or drink than the daily reception of the Blessed Eucharist. Yet scientists ignored the phenomenon. “If the documentary evidence and eye-witness accounts relating to [her] cannot be accepted as reliable evidence,” Schumacher wrote with justice, “then all evidence is unreliable, nobody can ever be believed, and human

⁸ This is precisely how the French poet, Paul Claudel, was affected when the reality of God came to him in an inspiration from on high in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, on Christmas Day, 1886: “Et voici que vous êtes Quelqu’un tout à coup!”

⁹ Spencer is said, on his deathbed, to have rejected everything he had written.

¹⁰ St Thomas Aquinas sets out the proofs for this in his commentary on the second book of Aristotle’s *Physics*. The section is reproduced in an appendix to the author’s article entitled *Decoding David Attenborough* which may be found on the web at http://www.superflumina.org/decoding_DA.html

¹¹ Among them, Dr Denton’s later work, *Nature’s Destiny*, The Free Press, New York, 1998

¹² *A Guide for the Perplexed*, London, 1977; my copy, Abacus, 1986, pp. 106 et seq.

knowledge is impossible.”¹³ The atheist cannot explain such things. He cannot explain the incorrupt body of St Marie Bernard Soubirous in the church of the Visitation nuns at Nevers in France. He must label such things as the products of hysteria, or fraud. Moreover, he *dare not* investigate them closely for fear his faith may be destroyed.

The atheist contrasts himself with the religious believer: his position, he asserts, is founded on facts, not on stories or myths. But facts are not at all the atheist’s starting point. He begins, like Karl Marx, with a thesis—an idea—then tries to accommodate the facts to suit his idea.¹⁴ In this he follows the *modus operandi* of all subjectivists.

McGuinness says he respects the philosophers and theologians. “[T]he best of them,” he says in his July 2007 editorial, “have manifested intellects which only a fool would sneer at... but that does not make them right. It makes them noble and worthy of respect, but not of belief.” But the philosophers and theologians do not demand *belief* for their arguments; they ask the exercise of reason. It is clear from his glib dismissal of St Thomas Aquinas that McGuinness has never read his works, or if he has, that he has never understood them. Had he done so he could never claim that St Thomas argues from faith. He does not, save where faith is a necessary premise. St Thomas is the most ruthless of realists. He is also, *pace* McGuinness, the most rigorous of logicians. Had McGuinness understood him he would know that St Thomas teaches that while all creation is contingent, God is the one necessary being; that while all creation is dependent, God its creator is self sufficient. He would know that St Thomas teaches that every act a man commits is utterly dependent on God’s cooperation, *that Padraic Pearse McGuinness cannot put a pen to paper unless God does it with him*. He would have realised the fatuousness of Mikhail Bakunin’s throw away line about abolishing God.

Atheist Thomas Merton related how, in February 1937 he stumbled upon this central truth of Catholic philosophy in a book he had purchased under a misapprehension at Scribner’s in New York, Etienne Gilson’s *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. Too late, he realised it had a Catholic *Imprimatur*.

“They should have warned me that it was a Catholic book! Then I would never have bought it. As it was, I was tempted to throw the thing out of the window... to get rid of it as something dangerous and unclean...

But he kept it, and he read it.

“The one big concept I got out of its pages was to revolutionize my whole life. It is contained in one of those dry compounds that the scholastic philosophers were so prone to use: the word *aseitas*...

“*Aseitas* simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist. There can only be one such Being: that is, God. And to say that God exists *a*

¹³ Ibid, pp. 109-110

¹⁴ Cf. Paul Johnson’s study on Karl Marx in his *Intellectuals* (London, 2000). The subjectivist’s preoccupation with his idea provides the name for what follows: “ideology”.

se, of and by reason of Himself, is merely to say that God is Being Itself. *Ego sum qui sum.*"¹⁵

The quote here is from *Exodus* where God speaks to Moses. In this passage, the Catholic Church teaches, God defines himself.

"Moses said: 'I shall go to the children of Israel and say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you. If they should ask me: What is his name? What shall I tell them?'

"God said to Moses: 'I am who am. This is what you shall say to [them]: HE WHO IS has sent me to you.'"¹⁶

This man, Padraic McGuinness, exists now. Seventy five years ago he did not. In forty years time he shall have ceased to do so (at least as far as his body goes). He is *contingent*: he *has* existence, and he can lose it. He is *dependent*: he does not keep himself in existence; another does that for him. In these two characteristics he shares the lot of every creature in the universe, for each of them is a compound *entis et essentiae*, of essence and existence, of *what* it is, and *that* it is.

But why may there not exist—as a possibility—a being which is not compound, but simple? whose essence *is* existence? a being that is not contingent, but *necessary*? not dependent, but *self-sufficient*? a being that encompasses within itself *actually* all the potentiality of every contingent and dependent thing in the universe?

Why exclude the possibility of such a being just because no one has ever observed it? Why should we allow our intellects to be fettered by the materialist imperative? We are surrounded by realities that are not observable, but no less real for that. We may see a *just* action performed, but no one has ever seen *justice*. A judge may exercise *mercy* in passing sentence on an offender, but the thing, *mercy*, does not fall under the senses: it is known only through its effects. We may observe a loving mother, but the thing, *love*, has never been seen. The reason is that *justice*, *mercy* and *love* are not material things. Yet who will deny that these *immaterial* things are not real? We can see that a man is alive, we observe in him the effects of life: but no one has ever seen the reality that keeps him alive, his soul. It is not material, yet it is real. Indeed, the soul of a man is the greater part of his reality. Remove it and what is left but a material shell which quickly resolves into its elements. Why is it impossible, then, that there exists such a BEING just because it does not fall under our senses?

However imprecisely he may understand, or express, it the religious believer has a logical answer to the conundrum of his existence. He accepts with humility what reality teaches him, that he is an effect of intrinsic and extrinsic causes. In contrast, the believer in the secular faith of atheism has no logical answer to that question. He denies he is an effect of any cause and, in doing so, he denies reality¹⁷.

¹⁵ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, 1948; my copy a 1961 reprint of the edited version, *Elected Silence*, (London, 1949), p. 115

¹⁶ *Exodus* 3: 13-14, my emphasis.

¹⁷ He concedes he is comprised of matter: he could hardly do otherwise! But the *material* is the least of all the causes for it does no more than provide the substrate of the effect.

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Fr John Casey SJ was Rector of St Aloysius College, Milsons Point, when I did my final year of secondary schooling there in 1961. He brought many young men into the *Jesuits* and other religious orders. His short closing address to the members of our Leaving Certificate class was memorable. "Most men, when they come to their death beds," he told us, "mourn the lives they have led."

From 1967 John Casey was Rector of the Jesuit Scholasticate at Campion College in Melbourne. There he first encountered that attitude of lawlessness, "the spirit of Vatican II", inspired by the Modernist heresy which has done such damage to the *Society of Jesus* ever since. There is justice in McGuinness's criticism in his July editorial of the current state of the *Society* as degenerate. The great Australian Jesuits of our youth, men like Tom Costelloe, Patrick Tracey, Desmond Durnin, Tom Barden, Frank Wallace, Gerald Jones, Gerry Drumm and John Casey, men of faith, have all died and few with their character remain. But McGuinness is oblivious of the fact that the *Society* is degenerate for precisely the same reason that he is atheist.

For the inclination to atheism is the core of the heresy of Modernism. If great numbers of the current members of the *Society of Jesus* have lost the vigour of the priests who went before them, it is because they do not believe, as the great Jesuits of the past believed, that Jesus Christ is God—King of kings and Lord of lords—for whom a man would willingly give his whole life and not count the cost; fight and not heed the wounds; toil and not seek for rest; labour and seek no other reward than that of knowing that he did His holy will.

The modern Jesuit is infected with the poison of Karl Rahner, or that of Teilhard de Chardin, or of any other of the raft of semi-heretics whose teachings are permitted to flourish in the Church. He has lost the sense of awe of God which the Church expresses in that Gift of the Holy Spirit called *Fear* which is like the respect and reverence a boy owes his father. He consecrates bread into Christ's body, wine into His blood and, having distributed these to the faithful, thinks it appropriate to encourage them to laugh and joke about trivialities *when Almighty God Himself has attended on them*.

The conversion of the atheist to God is, in the end, not so much a matter of reasoning, something of the intellect, as of the will, the *domina voluntas*, mistress of the soul. On this subject, Thomas Merton, again, has something valuable to say:

"[A]lthough the will cannot force the intellect to see an object other than it is, it can turn it away from the object altogether, and prevent it from considering that thing at all."¹⁸

This problem of the will is the chief obstacle in any argument. It looms whenever one tries to persuade his hearer of profound issues such as the inevitability of the

¹⁸ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, 1948. Published in Great Britain, with certain excisions and editing by Evelyn Waugh, as *Elected Silence*, London (Burns & Oates), 1949, (My copy, *Elected Silence*, 1969 reprint) at pp. 150-1.

existence of God. The hearer appears to take in what you are saying but nothing penetrates, for he has already passed judgement; he has set his will against permitting his intellect to consider what is put. In such a case, argument is useless for the will can be moved only by love. This is why people like Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Padre Pio (St Pio of Pietriercina) achieved so much. It is why atheists like Padraic McGuinness, if they are to be converted from their folly, will be so in the end only by the prayers of the humble nuns in their enclosures, or of those who cared for them in the past and now, through their meritorious lives on earth, have earned the right to intercede for them after death, like Fr John Casey SJ.¹⁹

Michael Baker
November 2007

¹⁹ John Casey died on 30th January 1985. A week or so later I spoke to the Dominican, Fr Gregory Butler, at the Marist Chapel in Sydney after Mass. He had mentioned him in his sermon. “We can ill afford,” he said to me, “to lose men of such calibre.”