

## WHY BELIEVE?

### LECTURE ONE: CHALLENGES TO BELIEF

#### INTRODUCTION

#### THE END OF THE MEDIEVAL WORLDVIEW

**Gutenberg** and the invention of printing press in mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.

The possibility of reading in one's own language, especially the Bible, leads to the opportunity to think for oneself.

**The Reformation** in early 16<sup>th</sup> century brings the realisation that religion divides. Whose authority is to be trusted in religious matters?

**The rise of science** leads to new ways of interpreting reality and an increasing sense of the possibility of shaping society in scientific ways.

**The renaissance** in the 17<sup>th</sup> century brings a new focus on the dignity of human nature and new political visions no longer dependent on the Church.

**The Enlightenment** in the 18<sup>th</sup> century brings a sense of endless progress in personal and social life. The Churches are often seen as obstacles in the march to progress. There is a movement to Deism rather than Theism

**The French Revolution** of 1789 brings about a revolt not only against the authority of the monarchy but of the Church too. Liberty, equality and freedom are now understood as qualities separate from the Christian view of the human person.

All these moments in history have the cumulative effect of undermining the medieval understanding of the world and our place in the scheme of things. Whereas before it was almost impossible to understand oneself except within a Christian world, now it was inevitable for human beings to ask the question as to why we should believe.

## KEY THINKERS IN THE 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

LUDWIG FEUERBACH

1804-1872

He began as a student of theology, moved on to philosophy and ended as a convinced atheist.

**God was my first thought, Reason was my second, and man my third and last thought.**

**Not to babble and rave, but to learn. Not to believe but to think.**

His most famous book, **The Essence of Christianity**, was published in 1841.

**Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge.**

**Anthropology is the mystery of theology.**

**The first object of man is man.**

The attributes of God are nothing other than the attributes of human beings.

God is intellectual being: Spirit. God is the projection of human understanding. God is the objectified universal nature of human intelligence.

God is morally perfect being. God is the projection of the human will. God is human moral nature made absolute.

God is love. God is the projection of the human heart. God is not love, but love is God.

For Feuerbach the true secret of religion is atheism. Religion is the relation of man to himself. Human beings are the beginning and the end of religion. Religion should be seen as both true and false.

Religion is true insofar as it tells humanity about humanity. Religion is false because it treats human nature apart from its own nature.

The consequences of the falsehood of religion are that we are alienated and impoverished. So a return to true humanism would inevitably lead to atheism.

What man wishes to be he makes his God.

Faith has been replaced by unbelief, the Bible by reason, religion and the Church by politics, heaven by earth, prayer by work, hell by material wretchedness, the Christian by man.

### Critique

Has God been defended at the expense of humanity?

Has religion been promoted at the expense of progress?

Has the hereafter been exulted at the price of the here and now?

Has Christianity been spread at the cost of humanity?

Have we made God in our own image through anthropocentric language?

In misunderstanding the nature of God have we misunderstood human nature too?

And yet, while Feuerbach raises significant questions about the nature of Christian belief, does he succeed in proving that the idea of God is simply human projection?

Has his prophecy of the decline and disappearance of Christianity been fulfilled?

Whatever the truth of the psychological claims of Feuerbach, he does not succeed in disproving the existence of God independent of human psychology. He makes strong claims but is unable ultimately to verify his claims.

Therefore the question of God remains open.

### **KARL MARX**            **1818-1883**

Marx was hugely influenced by Feuerbach's claims that religion is basically a form of human projection, but took it even further in terms of the social and political structures of life. For him, atheism is a necessary step in humanity's struggle to overcome economic and social alienation.

**Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again.**

The notion of materialism is fundamental to Marx and Marxism. Every aspect of human life and thought is determined by social and economic factors. Our ideas and values are determined by the material realities of life.

The idea of God is a human attempt to cope with the harshness of material life and the pain and alienation caused by social and economic deprivation. Religion comes into being on account of sorrow and injustice which arise through the social conditions of the individual. Changing the social conditions will bring about a fundamental change in the way that human beings interpret reality.

**The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.**

**Human beings look for a superhuman being in the fantasy reality of heaven and find there nothing but their own reflection.**

So religion is a human creation. Its origins are socioeconomic, not religious or intellectual. Once economic alienation is eliminated, religion will simply cease to exist. Marx however recognises that religion has been historically necessary as a form of spiritual comfort for those suffering from alienation.

**Religious distress is at the same time an expression of real distress and a protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.**

**The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.**

Marx believed that the historical function has been to offer a divine justification for the political and economic status quo. It has allowed the vast majority of people to suffer

deprivation from the ruling classes and economic powers. When we change the economic conditions then religion will naturally and rightly disappear.

### **Critique**

Is there need for us to recognise the validity of many of Marx's criticisms of religion, and particularly Christianity?

Has not Christianity focussed too much on an afterlife, eternal life with God, and failed to recognise that faith must make a difference to how we live on earth?

Have not the Church authorities often been seen to be on the side of the rich and the powerful, and often closed its eyes to economic and social injustices?

And yet, despite the real and significant criticisms of Christianity, might we not argue that Marx underestimated the role that faith might have in creating better social and economic conditions, particularly with the focus on the common good?

It can be argued that Marx's communist vision, attractive though it is in many ways, is just as utopian an ideal as that offered by Christianity.

It can also be said that communism, at least as practiced, failed to lead to an overcoming of alienation and hugely contributed to the terrible suffering of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We can also point out that in no case where communism has been the ruling ideology of a nation, did Christianity naturally disappear as Marx predicted.

A final criticism can be made of Marx's analysis of religion. His justification of atheism is itself a hypothesis which he fails to prove. The non-existence of God is presumed rather than proved.

Therefore the question of God remains open.

### **FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**

**1844-1900**

Much like Feuerbach, Nietzsche grew up within a Christian context. His father and grandfather had both been Lutheran pastors. Yet he went through a crisis of faith and believed

that from a cultural view, belief in God was no longer sustainable. He did not form a project to kill God but found God dead in the soul of his contemporaries.

As a philosopher he is most famous for his claim that God is dead. This does not mean that God ever existed for Nietzsche, but rather that belief in the Christian God has now itself become unbelievable. God is now disappearing from western culture.

Nietzsche imagines the news of the death of God being proclaimed to a disbelieving crowd in the marketplace by a madman.

**The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Where is God? I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers...Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.**

**I have come too early, my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars, and yet they have done it themselves.**

What are the implications of this development? God will be eliminated from the world. Morality can no longer be defined with reference to God, but solely to human needs and aspirations. Morality and philosophy are only beliefs that we create to enable us to cope with a meaningless world. In the absence of God there are no absolute truths or values. There are only interpretations.

Since there is no meaning in the world, we are free to impose whatever meaning we choose upon it. We are free to choose how to interpret the world and how we want to live in it.

This view leads to Nietzsche's other significant viewpoint. Human beings have to rise above themselves and become equal to the gods. We should focus on the will to power and turn away from the vapid weakness encouraged by Christianity.

I teach you the Superman...You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes and even now man is more of an ape than any ape...Behold, I teach you the Superman.

This then is the nihilistic belief, that there is no truth at all.

Life is will to power. This world is the will to power, and nothing more. And you yourselves are also this will to power, and nothing besides.

### Critique

There is no doubt that Nietzsche's nihilism has had an enormous influence in the way that human beings have understood themselves in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is often argued that his writings opened the door for totalitarian dictators like Hitler to flourish through the will to power and the abandonment of any objective morality.

We can see too that nihilism has led to a loss of meaning in western culture and even the loss of the possibility of finding meaning outside of one's own will to power.

There is too a prophetic element to Nietzsche's idea of the death of God, in that contemporary western culture can largely be defined through the death of God in contemporary beliefs and values.

We see therefore that a nihilistic approach to human life is possible. There is no rationally conclusive argument against the possibility of nihilism. By the same token, nihilism itself remains unprovable. It is not at all certain that life is fundamentally meaningless.

Finally, even if it is true that the idea of God has died for many people, Nietzsche does not succeed in disproving the existence of God.

Therefore the question of God remains open.

For Freud, it is natural for human beings not to believe in God. It is therefore religion that requires an explanation and not atheism. In his writings on religion he recognised that he was strongly influenced by Feuerbach. He develops Feuerbach's position on religion as a form of projection and wish-fulfillment.

**Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.**

**It would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an afterlife; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be.**

So religion is an illusion. But Freud is not arguing that illusions are deliberate deceptions. They are rather ideas that arise from within the human unconscious, as it seeks to fulfil its deepest yearnings and longings.

**Religion is an attempt to get control over the sensory world, in which we are placed, by means of the wish-world, which we have developed inside us as a result of biological and psychological necessities. But it cannot achieve its end. Its doctrines carry with them the stamp of the times in which they originated, the ignorant childhood days of the human race.**

**Religious ideas have arisen from the same needs as have all the other achievements of civilisation, from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushing superior force of nature.**

**Religious beliefs are illusions; fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind...The terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection through love which was provided by the father...Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fears of the danger of life.**

For Freud, therefore, the origins of religion and the persistence of religions are based simply on psychological factors. We create gods who are a source of both comfort and fear for us. But religion is doomed to failure because it has no objective reality other than as expressing our deepest hopes and fears.

## **Critique**

There is no doubt that religious belief can be a form of wish-fulfilment, an immature response to the struggles and hardships of human life.

Freud does succeed in highlighting defective forms of religion and defective images of God.

But Freud's placing of all religious experience as a result of psychological factors is itself a hypothesis that he fails to prove. It is a hypothesis rejected by many other psychologists, especially Jung.

While we can readily grant the influence of psychological and unconscious factors in religious belief, no conclusions can be drawn from that for the question of the existence or non-existence of God.

Therefore the question of God remains open.

## **CHARLES DARWIN                      1809-1882**

Charles Darwin stands as one of the great figures of natural science. His theory of evolution has caused many to call into question traditional understandings of Christian belief. As such he is a good representative of what is often seen as the battle between religion and science.

It is useful to see some central aspects of contemporary largely uninformed views about the relationship between religious belief and the sciences.

First, there is a belief that the natural sciences liberate us today from superstitious and unjustifiable beliefs about creation and nature.

Second, there is a general view that the sciences conclusively prove all their theories, while religion tends to fall into myth and irrationality.

Third, there is a pervasive notion that the theory of evolution has made belief in God impossible, thus making atheism necessary on scientific grounds.

But are religious beliefs and the sciences as clearly incompatible as many would argue?

There is no doubt that the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution in **Origin of the Species** caused a great crisis of faith in western culture. If the world has evolved randomly through processes such as natural selection and the adaptation of species with the survival of the fittest, then it might appear to go against the traditional Christian belief that the world was created with design and purpose by a loving God. And if the theory of evolution is true does it not call into question our human belief that we are the highpoint of creation, all the rest being created for our benefit?

Yet while the theory of evolution does present challenges to our understanding of faith and nature, does it necessarily lead to atheism? Darwin himself never publicly advocated atheism as the most adequate response to his theory.

**The mystery of the beginnings of all things is insoluble to us; and I for one must be content to remain an agnostic.**

One can see that the theory of evolution conflicts with the accounts of creation to be found in the Bible. But that is surely only a threat to those who take a fundamentalist literal approach to the Bible. Might it not be the case that the theory of evolution and the biblical accounts of creation are both attempts to express the truth, though in different forms of expression? There are many Christian believers who are quite content to accept the theory of evolution as largely correct, and still to see that as the way God's plan of creation unfolds in time.

### **Critique**

In terms of the theory of evolution it must be acknowledged that there is no single theory. There are many approaches to reality built around the concept of evolution. Despite its high scientific plausibility evolution remains a theory.

It needs to be highlighted that there are unanswered questions surrounding evolution. Most of the evidence used to support it is indirect and speculative. There is no evidence yet found to

support evolution through the appearance of transitional species. Nor has the development of complex organs such as the eye been fully accounted for.

It needs also to be noted that the Darwinian theory of evolution does not necessarily lead to atheism. To suggest such is go beyond the competency of the natural sciences and to stray into territory where the scientific method cannot properly be applied.

Certainly no conclusions about the existence of God can be reached through the theory of evolution.

Therefore the question of God remains open.

## **CONCLUSION**

The powerful criticisms of religious belief initiated by Feuerbach and taken further by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, along with the scientific challenges raised by Darwin among many others need to be listened to and taken seriously. But we can confidently state that none of them succeed in disproving the existence of God. Their atheism therefore is based on assumptions that have not been substantiated. The question of God remains open. And in the coming lectures we will attempt to look more deeply at the question of God and to find out if there are good reasons to believe.