

“Up a Dead End? Contemporary Attacks on Theism and the Belief in Miracles”

Graham Nicholson*

It has become popular in the literature of late to attack theistic beliefs, using as a basis of argument some version of scientific materialism. This development may be a by-product of the perceived dichotomy between scientific ideas of evolution and religious ideas of creationism, and perhaps in a wider sense a more considered aspect associated with the widespread decline in traditional religious belief. The “*death of God*” school of thought has proclaimed as a fact the uselessness of religious belief in an age of scientific and technological progress. Theistic concepts may be seen as irrational and beyond empirical or logical proof. At best they may be seen as some form of “*crutch*” for the weak, and at worst a serious and divisive diversion from the goal of working towards real scientifically-based solutions to the problems of modern times. Religious belief is now often seen as a man-made social construct, evolving from man’s attempt over many ages to explain the unexplained. The primary route to the acquisition of knowledge is said to be by empirical (material) means. As that knowledge expands, so it is thought by some that religion will gradually pass into decline and perhaps eventual extinction.

There are clearly problems with this view. Among them is the fact that religious and spiritual belief is not declining. It may be that some of the traditional religious organizations are losing followers, but this is more than balanced by the emergence of new forms of religious and spiritual belief. If anything there has been a pluralistic explosion in religious and spiritual belief and practice. Some of it is fanatical, intolerant and aggressive in nature, but much of it has quite opposite, peaceable characteristics. They demonstrate that religion and spirituality have the potential to make a constructive contribution to the global society. In the light of current trends in this regard, those of an anti-religious bent should ask themselves whether a confrontationist approach towards religion and religionists is really appropriate. Dogmatism can take many forms.

A much more appropriate and constructive approach may be for those of an atheistic or agnostic mind-set to seek positive ways in which to work with religionists in the best interests of both. An accommodation may well be possible in areas of planetary common interest without any surrender of individual beliefs. There could simply be an agreement to disagree on

matters of religious and spiritual belief, whilst acknowledging that both kinds of views offer perspectives that should be mutually respected.

But beyond that, there does seem to be room, in open and frank yet courteous discourse, to identify more precisely the nature of the objections of scientific materialists to theistic beliefs. The purpose would be to try and eliminate at least those sticking grounds that have been the cause of much of the tension in the past, but which may not need to be the cause of difference. Theistic believers are patently the inheritors of many ancient narrative legacies which, in this modern age, contain apparent assertions and assumptions that are no longer reasonably tenable and believable. Hence most people no longer accept flat earth theories or the view that the earth is at the physical centre of the universe.

Increasingly, religionists are coming to accept that life on earth evolved over extremely long periods of time, in the billions of years, and that in their view this is quite compatible with a theistic approach to the creation of the universe. Even more interesting than this, there is gathering acceptance, among some scientists and religionists at least, of the view that there is no incompatibility whatsoever between proven science and genuine religion. That is, that these two are simply different perspectives, different methodologies, different approaches if you like, to the knowledge of the one same truth.

But in this latter view, there is work to be done. So much of inherited religious teachings have to do with equating belief in the existence of a divine reality, beyond anything empirically observable in this physical world, to a belief in the existence and potential occurrence of miracles. Put in crude form, there is a widespread religious belief that a supreme Deity can and does intervene, sometimes through deeply spiritual individuals, in certain physical events to achieve scientifically unexplainable physical results. This belief is most commonly derived from the Christian Gospel narratives and the teachings of many churches, but similar miracle stories can be found in the scriptures of other world religions. Many such religionists accept these scriptural narratives as being literally factual and as a primary proof of the veracity of their beliefs. This in turn causes difficulty for scientific materialists, who generally reject the notion of the possibility of discontinuity in the operation of the natural laws, and who are unable to accept these narratives as being literally true. The disagreement serves to strongly reinforce anti-religious views.

But the question is whether such miracle beliefs are necessary for theistic belief, and whether they offer any reasonable proofs of theism. To prove that a supernatural event did in fact occur, contrary to the scientific laws of nature, would be a daunting task for anyone, even for an expert after lengthy investigation of all causal factors. And even if it could be proved, it would only be proof to those who observed the event and investigated it. In the Gospel of Matthew there is evidence that Jesus Christ was aware of this in that he did not wish to rely on miracles as proof to others of his divine mission. Thus the text states that he instructed a healed man, who was formerly blind, not to tell others of the healing. Stories of such events are a very weak form of theistic proof and no substitute for other, and arguably much more compelling, proofs of theistic belief. And such narrative stories are easily embellished and misinterpreted as they are told and retold to others. Such misinterpretation can, for example, extend to the giving of a literal meaning to events that are only or primarily of a spiritual nature. It is well recognized that much of religious scripture is expressed in metaphoric or allegorical terms seeking to explain deeper spiritual meanings.

This suggests that proof of the truth of any religious belief should be sought in other than the mere repetition of such scriptural miracle narratives. Religious believers have perhaps more than enough to do in asserting the “*miracles*” latent in the ongoing creation of the universe and the existence and operation of the natural laws that govern the operation of the universe, with all their enormous complexities, incredible design and interdependence. This is enough to create a profound sense of awe and wonder in any person of insight. And added to this, the fact that we exist as highly evolved human beings, with a present-tense consciousness that is able to perceive and investigate these wonders, is itself a cause of wonder. And yet scientific knowledge is far from complete and provides only an imperfect description of all causal factors operating in the universe and their implications. Science and the human mind have not yet proceeded very far in comprehending and explaining these wonders, all modern scientific discoveries notwithstanding. And ultimate explanations may be beyond scientific reach altogether.

In this respect, it seems likely that science does not yet full comprehend all the laws and forces that are operating in this universe. There may well be laws or forces that operate compatibly with the scientifically known laws of nature and which have yet to be scientifically discovered or their effects adequately understood. And some of those laws or forces may be more

spiritual in nature rather than merely physical, such as in the expression of genuine love. These laws and forces, once understood, may well serve to explain certain physical outcomes that might otherwise be consigned to the category of the “*miraculous*”.

And if there is in fact a supreme, all-powerful Deity, with an existence that transcends this universe, a “*first cause*” if you like, who is to say that the purposes of that Deity in this realm of existence cannot be just as well achieved within the operation of the laws of nature, and not by their ad hoc suspension. If such a Deity is responsible for designing and bringing those laws into existence and for sustaining them on an ongoing basis, then why would that Deity have a need to occasionally suspend them? Religious people who believe in such a Deity should have enough faith to accept that a particular physical result they are seeking can be achieved by an exercise of the will of such a Deity, regardless of whether there is any such accompanying suspension.

It is to be hoped that as the present debate unfolds on the relationship and alleged conflict between science and religion, that the debate will concentrate increasingly on the more difficult issues that may be said to restrain some form of reconciliation between the two. It is not a debate that should be hijacked in some “*dead end*” by assertions of the alleged relevance and importance of belief in such miracle narratives where they imply some contradiction of the scientifically proven laws of nature.

Date: 15 April 2009

*Graham Nicholson, LLB (hons), LLM, Barrister at Law, former Senior Crown Counsel for NT, writer, lecturer, Baha’i.