

## **Existence and Atheism (or Amor Ergo Sum<sup>1</sup>)**

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Not so very long ago I announced that I was an atheist, or to be more specific that I did not believe in a self-identifying God who revealed Himself (Herself, Itself) <sup>2</sup> to us and was available for us. This did not commit me to any position as to the ultimate nature of things. I thought it might be time to enlarge further.

If one goes back to the religious practices of an ancient Semitic and nomadic people who eventually became the Jewish nation, we find for their religious rituals they made a tent-like sanctuary or tabernacle. It was divided into three compartments. The outer and largest was available to the people of Israel as they were then called. Then came an area for the priests and then finally there was the holiest of holies. This most sacred place did not have an image of any God or of gods. Instead the focal point was what seems to have been a kind of chest which contained the tables of the law and one or two other things and which was surmounted by the images of two angels at either end facing each other with their wings outstretched and touching. Thus the most sacred place was a space.

The whole structure was known as the Ark of the Covenant. Only the high priest once a year could enter the holiest of holies and he then sprinkled the blood of sacrificial offerings onto the floor of the space known as the mercy seat. The day on which this occurred was known as the Day of Atonement and is still celebrated by Jews, now known as Yom Kippur. The whole ritual suggested that God could not be known but he could be approached albeit with ritual care. The blood of sacrifice and Day of Atonement meant that as God was approached so mankind had to change. So unknown was God that even His name could not be spoken except on this one occasion when the high priest made his annual entrance.<sup>3</sup> In time things were written down and the sacred name became represented by four Hebrew letters rendered in the western alphabet as YHWH and known to scholars as the tetragrammaton. The interpretive translation of YHWH is I AM WHAT I AM or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.

The idea can be approached rather differently. Imagine that one is meditating in the desert. One's native village or town is just over the horizon. The sun is going down and the moon and the stars are not yet up. Supposing, too, it is a windless night and all is still and overwhelmingly quiet. Then one becomes sensitive to the very slightest whisper of the softest movement of air and to the auditory sense. In these conditions this single sound is all-consuming and as one meditates, so the idea enters ones mind: BEING, YHWH, EXISTENCE, then, 'I can exist because there is existence', and then 'I touch existence itself and therefore I exist.'<sup>4</sup>

Although the Jews insisted that no idols should ever be made, nor that the sacred name should ever be 'taken in vain' (Exodus 20:7) there is little doubt that the idea of Israel's God in the Jewish Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) owes in practice much to the tribal God who probably preceded these deeper theological understandings in a kind of cultural syncretism that influenced their thinking and practice for a very long time. So long, in fact, that the later Jewish prophets saw that although the idols of wood and stone were

abandoned, the idols of mental constructions continued to exist. They therefore became more and more concerned to consider an ultimate being of ethical dimensions and universal appeal.

Even so, some serious problems arose once the idea of God had been developed in this way. One was the problem of evil as expressed for example in Habakkuk's famous question: 'Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?' (Habakkuk 1:13). Evil in the world suggested that God was either not good or not almighty or lacked both. Theologically the implication was that either there were contradictions within God or that existence was greater than God and less penetrable. The debate has continued on over the centuries and into the era of Christianity. A later faith, Islam, had to battle with the same problems as witness a rather eccentric and out-of-line philosopher, Omar Khayyam:

'Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,  
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;  
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man  
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give – and take!' <sup>5</sup>

Over the centuries there were always people who decided that this God idea was empty of meaning and solved no problems and by the time of the French revolution God was taking a back seat in earnest. Atheism was becoming militant.

But atheism can express itself in many ways. The early Christians were condemned for being atheists because they would not believe in the gods and goddesses of the Greek and Roman world of the period; in our day it is the turn of the Christian God and any similar notion that is being attacked. In general to any form of theism there is a corresponding atheism.

In the meantime, for both the believer and the atheist there was a continuing and very real problem and that was ethics. To the Jews, ethics and belief in God were inextricably linked as indeed they are linked in Islam to this very day. But in the Roman Empire law had a kind of autonomy and this has continued in what we call the West until now. This is perhaps partly the reason why politics and law have now developed a momentum of their own to such an extent that we scarcely think that religion has anything to do with them. A huge state institution like the National Health Service can be almost fully secularised. One can go through a large hospital and see no religious symbols, no niches for the images of saints, deities or holy people; there are no sacred symbols and objects of any kind and at the beginning of important meetings no prayers will be said. At the same time an individual's religious beliefs will still be respected. There will be a small hospital chapel somewhere and in some hospitals there will be a prayer room for Muslims too. But in the end what one believes is seen as one's own affair. Basically, over large areas of modern life, God and religion are now commonly seen as irrelevant.

But there is a very important consequence of the old beliefs in God that affects ethics which is often overlooked. Ethical thinking as it influences law and politics is often seen in absolute terms. I remember getting into a debate about whether it is ever justified to kill another human being. The issue concerned an air hostess who had seen a hijacker taking up his position.

The circumstances and her quick thinking enabled her to grab a hand gun at his side and to shoot and kill him. My discussant said that the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exodus 20:13) was absolute and that she did wrong; I contended that, terrible though the decision was, she did the right thing under the circumstances. The lawyers eventually found some legal excuse for her action but legal decisions are not always so generous. Although it did not involve the national law there was an instance when a midwife was taken off the register for assisting at a birth against the regulations. The circumstances involved the private delivery of someone who wanted to give birth under water. The midwife contended that the risks to mother and child were less with her intervention; the Royal College of Midwives ruled that nevertheless she broke the rules. Thus in both secular and religious ways of thinking, a system of absolutes can be invoked that does not take account of the realities of the circumstances. I am not saying that the answer to any of the instances I have mentioned is absolute or cannot be debated. That is contrary to my main point. Some decisions will always be left with the debate unfinished. There is no final answer. But it leaves us with a question: What are the highest priorities in any decision, not what is right or wrong in any absolute terms.

We can illustrate this further and move the argument forward by another example of a terrible ethical decision that has serious theological overtones. A pair of Siamese twins was born joined at the waist and having, as a result, one heart and two heads. It was realized that either one head had to be removed or both infants would die. It is significant for our argument that higher clerics of the Catholic Church (the parents were Catholics), joined by senior members of other churches, suggested that the matter should be left to God ~ thus condemning both children to death. In the event, the heavily secularised legal system sanctioned their separation and it is also interesting that the leading surgeon was a Catholic.

In all of this a dual debate is going on. On the one hand is the notion of an absolute Godhead who has revealed his laws to us and that these are therefore inviolate; on the other that the only divine influence that can adapt to the real world of human life must therefore compromise to the limitations of the world in which we live. For many, however, the debate is already over. How can anyone believe in a God who would allow the Siamese twins to be born in the first place? And of course there is a lot more to be said of a similar nature and that has been said for some time.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, scepticism over the existence of God was reaching serious proportions. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared: 'God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed Him'. One suspects that the emphasis was intended to fall on the last phrase, for he continues, 'how shall we, the murderers of all murderers console ourselves? ..... Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed – and whoever shall be born after us, for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all history hitherto....' <sup>6</sup> It is probable too that Nietzsche was not supporting atheism in the modern accepted sense of the term but was saying that all this God talk is in the end meaningless. Nietzsche was also aware that people might try and substitute for God a kind of ethical monism; an attempt certainly made by an earlier German philosopher Schopenhauer whom Nietzsche had admired in the early part of his career; but now Nietzsche would have none of it. Man was on his own and

his only hope was to become a superman; a superman who could laugh at life with all its calamities, was strong enough to survive and even to continue with the challenge of the same sort of life into the future if that was what survival demanded of him.

Although atheism, rationalism and humanism grew apace at this time, the Church did provide its theologians who could retaliate. In any case there were thinkers who were their match; Albert Einstein was one, Carl Gustav Jung another. The atheists did not have it all their own way. Between the two great world wars there was a deep polarisation over the validity of religion, God, and the basis of ethics, law and politics. Into this stepped a young philosopher interested in logic by the name of A. J. Ayer, who suggested that there was insufficient data to argue the point. Not God, atheism or even agnosticism could be supported on the available evidence.<sup>7</sup> Ayer was a logical positivist and the problem in the end, as with logical positivism generally, was that he could not go beyond the available data and so was limited in his capacity to face a future or anything that might classify a new vision or turning point not predictable from the past. In practice, this limitation had little impact except perhaps, most importantly, in ethics. Scientific understanding had developed its own momentum and went ahead anyway.

It is always a question as to whether philosophy reflects a general trend, giving it voice and justification, or whether it precipitates that movement in the first place. Possibly both dynamics are at work, but the fact remains that since the Second World War, religion is increasingly being seen as a private affair. More and more people desert the Church or become 'nominal.' One is not supposed to ask after someone's religious beliefs in job applications; it is not a suitable subject at the dinner table and people are amazed to hear that as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, one's personal religious beliefs could affect such matters as whether one could enter Parliament. While this general move affects different aspects of the common life of mankind differently in different countries, society is increasingly run without any direct reference to it or, as we say now, it is becoming secularised, as was illustrated above in relation to the National Health Service.

Not all theologians entirely disagreed with the point that Nietzsche made; they just thought he had gone too far, or had left mankind with an aching God shaped void as Julian Huxley suggested. Their job as church leaders was to try and fill it.

One of the most important of these theologians was Paul Tillich. Tillich really took the debate into the camp of the enemy. A theologian of Einsteinian proportions, it is difficult to grasp him unless one recognises that he is stretching language to its limit. 'We have God through not having Him.' 'I think of the churchman who does not wait for God because he possesses Him bound up in an institution. I think of the Bible student who does not wait for God because he possesses Him bound up in a book. I think of the mystic who does not wait for God because he possesses Him bound up in and experience.' 'We cannot endure this waiting this having and not having at the same time.'<sup>8</sup> Tillich recovers for us something of the holiest of holies, of the old tabernacle that an ancient Semitic tribe erected, of the mercy seat where we try to come into contact with the awesome nature of YHWH and of existence. It also reflects the kind of thinking of someone like Albert Einstein.<sup>9</sup>

If it is difficult to grasp what Tillich is saying about God, it is even more difficult to try to grasp what the atheism would be that counters this. Most

atheism is aimed, as Tillich realized, at attempting to debunk a theism that is scarcely tenable in the first place. But Tillich's God is so all consuming and all mysterious that we are bound to say that the atheism that opposes it will not be the denial of some Spirit out of this world, it will be the denial of existence itself, a void in which even a plenum cannot exist. The mere fact that we can imagine this possibility is in itself evidence that we exist after all. To this point we shall return, but first we must remember that Tillich also realized that this God also had structure, this Ground of All Being enabled us to ask questions about the issues of ultimate concern. And Tillich was not just an almost mystical theologian with his head so much in the esoteric clouds of advanced theology that few could grasp; he could also write for the individual Christian on his pilgrimage and recognise that touching God would mean change, the sacrificing of what we are for something better.<sup>10</sup> Tillich thus becomes the counterpoint to Nietzsche and also to Ayer.

Despite this, we must note that Nietzsche was misunderstood. Nazi philosophers thought they had found the superman, with dire results. In effect, they had made Man into an idol of himself. Tillich understood this too. 'Others unable to stand the emptiness of scepticism, find new yokes outside the Church, new doctrinal laws under which they begin to labour; political ideologies which they propagate with religious fanaticism; scientific theories which they defend with religious dogmatism; and utopian expectations they pronounce as a condition of salvation for the world, forcing whole nations under the yoke of their creeds which are religions, even while they pretend to destroy religion.'<sup>11</sup>

How on this basis are we to deal with the problem of evil and the equally serious problem of the idea that we possess God (idolatry)? The traditional position for the former is to see God as good and man as responsible for all evil. Apart from the problem that the theory of evolution hardly supports this view, there is the more serious problem of how we are to deal with evil in our world, or even how we are to conceptualize it in the first place.

One way forward is to see man as the creator of the idea of goodness, thus reversing the old doctrine of the fall. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* had one of his characters say, 'What is strange, what is marvellous, is not whether God really exists. The marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could have entered the head of such a savage and vicious beast as man; so holy is it, so moving, so wise, and such a great honour it does to man.'<sup>12</sup> Biologists might argue that some higher species reveal the early stages of empathy in their ability to care for the young, but this does not alter the argument. Perhaps there is in mankind a new evolutionary vision in that we are now starting to generalise from affection for our own young to a realization that we must learn to love all to survive. Thus in a very human sense, we can see survival in terms of moving away from the destructive barbarism of the past to a universal sense of care and happiness. This also starts to shift the emphasis from an objective external God to an internal human creation and to see our hope as a human vision. This vision will have its major advocates and spiritual leaders of many faiths may be remembered for their contribution. Yet it is important also to remember that even the slightest expression of positive value is important and that it becomes our duty to recognise every moment when this vision is realized, however brief it might be.

We must now consider what has been happening to the law and to the political systems that support it. One way is to see them as a kind of half-way house. Many laws are pragmatic in character and assume a kind of absolutist position compromising with the real eventualities of life. Those who are sceptical of the religious position altogether often fall back on the law as their main buttress for human stability. At the same time they may accept the world as it is without any vision, a kind of soap box opera of constant intrigue and infidelity, mixed with comradeship and good neighbourliness in an endless reworking day by day, but with no real hope.

Hope might be rescued if we see our future and the vision of universal love that supports it as our creation; a creation that is true for both theism and atheism and, in the end, a vision that will replace both. This idea is put forward by the Sea of Faith Network<sup>13</sup> and by its leading thinkers like Don Cupitt.<sup>14</sup> Cupitt has pointed out the importance of language as the place in which our spiritual life, our emotions, our values and hopes find their expression. Of course it is not just words that are to be thought of here but all those non-verbal messages, modes of relating, the way we dress, make love or otherwise engage each other creatively. The idea will extend to medicine, science, art, literature and eventually to politics, law, psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy. We can now see our spiritual life in the very human act of relating to each other and by extension to the world around us.

One of the great advantages of thinking like this is that it enables us to put the past into perspective. Every moment of our lives we should seek to take from the visions and struggles of the past all the wisdom that is available for the present task. But every moment will need to be a new creation, and perhaps need a new vision and even a revolutionary rethink. For this reason, we may consider that we should try and organise life so that those most able to cope have the appropriate responsibility - the physician for drugs; the surgeon for operations and so on, as well as the psychotherapeutic professions for mental maladjustments.

This view also puts specialisation, along with the law and quasi-legal rulings like guidelines, into perspective. As with the air hostess and the hijacker, no-one can predict what will happen next. The importance of the living moment can hardly be underestimated. Despite specialist training and expert competence the realities of life might drive us to deal outside our normal range of ability. A man with little more than basic first-aid skills was confronted with a child who inhaled something that blocked his trachea. Failing to move it by usual first-aid strategies he cut open the trachea with the nearest available knife and using a primitive airway saved the child's life until he got to hospital. He was subsequently asked if he was qualified to do such operations! We need to reorder our thinking so as to consider all laws and guidelines as always open to revision. The final proof that we can do something is that we have done it. We can then support the midwife who assisted in a delivery underwater as doing her best under the circumstances.

Thus every moment can be seen as vital in its own right. Many a psychotherapist has suggested that there comes a moment in a relationship in which there is a kind of pregnant pause in which neither the therapist or the patient knows what will happen next but when both know that what follows will be significant.<sup>15</sup> In greater or lesser ways, every moment in all relationships is like that. The present is the hinge between the past and the future, when we create the world to come, with all its hopes.

Each moment also holds the possibility of every individual in a relationship being enabled to reach their full potential. Make someone subject to some law that restricts them and they will fail to achieve what they can. On the other hand, if someone does not have the support of past experience or the advice of others who have learnt before them, then they will not be able to use these benefits to their advantage. The challenge of the present moment is to combine these things together as much as possible. The story of the amateur who in desperation did a tracheotomy is one such dramatic illustration. In general terms it is the balance struck between previous experience and the immediate in which there is the courageous and creative leap of the present to the future that enables people to become fully themselves. Relationships like this are also capable of being fully inclusive in that they include the parties involved in all that they have to offer.

We need not at this point dwell too long on the vexed question as to whether the universe from beginning to end is predictable. Within our vision we can only know that every moment is a challenge in which we hope to build a better future out of the past. When Tillich talked of the 'Ground of All Being' and that 'something and not nothing exists' a sceptical philosopher might have suggested that he was simply talking of existence by another name. This might be true, but he was talking of an existence in which a creative future was possible for the human race totally outside the range of our present knowledge. As Einstein put it, 'the universe is not more mysterious than we know. It is more mysterious than we think we know.' This awesome sense of the past that we must somehow grasp, together with a future that we must then create, may be the basis of that sense of mystery that many experience, and which might therefore be a real contribution to our lives. To experience this mystery is also to accept the challenge of real decisions in a very real, scientifically based world view.

This concept of the significance of the present moment might also help us see that even apparent opposites unite for a moment in the very act of communicating, and that the more fully and deeply we communicate the more we might discover what we have in common. The act of making the most of the present has the disciplinary effect of abandoning what is comparatively useless, for out of many possibilities only a few can be used in any future decision making. But just because each decision is necessarily built out of a limited perception in each moment, we must review what we have just done to make the best attempt at the future. This also means the death of that kind of idolatry and dogmatism that makes us slaves of a useless past.

One illustration will suffice. A boy of about 14 years of age had a sexual relationship with a girl about two years younger. He claimed it was with her full consent and her original statement to the police could be easily interpreted in this way. My view and that of the Youth Offending Team was that a therapeutic approach was most appropriate. The Court inveigled him into pleading guilty of rape and he was sent to a juvenile penal institution for three months. He went but maintained his innocence to the end. My impression was that he was a resilient child but the effect was to cut him off from advice that would have helped him learn from the event and research has shown that it would almost certainly result in a devaluing of the law in his eyes.<sup>16</sup> Not only for the child but perhaps for all of us, there is a need to see that the law needs revaluing and placing in a new perspective. We need to shift away from the legal mantra of retribution to the therapeutic mantra of making a better future.

There is also the even deeper question of just what it is to aim for good, and to determine the nature of the evil to be rejected. Once we no longer accept a revealed goodness and truth, what will be the loadstone of our lives? This question is too great to be treated in full here, but it helps to see the task as fully human in a very human world and then to ask what we most want. We might not find it easy to define this but we might be able to ask the right questions if we ask what we are really looking for in the depths of our experiences with each other

At this point, I am aware that I am on the brink of another essay, one built around the present moment and all that might go into it. For now I will confine myself to one final observation, which is that the present moment is going to be very limited and that no matter how hard we try the future is going to be limited as well. What we need is a vision of how to make the best of it and what we need to avoid is the idea that we can get a perfect God, or any part of such a God, into it. We must instead live in hope, for in every moment, the tension between having and not having is finally broken, only to lead to the next moment in our lives. It is as if the space in the holy of holies is taken from that sanctuary and is now ever before us, when in every moment we confront each other with all the experience we can muster behind us and look to find and to create a better future. And so, moment by moment, we create the story of our lives and the lives of each other, and so too do we create the opportunity to change for the better. Thus we are offered the *amor ergo sum* of life - existence.

## Notes and References

*Biblical quotations are from the Authorised Version*

1. 'I am loved and therefore I am'. This was introduced to me by a colleague who related the death of his grandchild who only survived half-an-hour. The theme is that to be loved is to be. At a more philosophical level it is intended to surpass Descartes famous saying, 'cogito ergo sum' or 'I think and therefore I am'. Unlike Descartes it stems from the idea of relationship. The idea has been developed and while some have suggested that it can be taken to mean that we exist because we are loved by God, I am using it in the more human sense of loving each other. There is a book by the Dutch writer C. E. M. Boudier with this title, ISBN 9789039105245

2. I totally accept the feminist theologians' argument that God has taken on a masculine image in the course of history, albeit often unintentionally. However for the sake of brevity and to make quotations accurate I will hereafter use the capitalised singulars He, Him or His using the old convention that these capitalised pronouns can only refer to God.

3. These complex rituals are laid out in the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) mainly for our purpose in Ex 25 and Lev 16; the prohibition against idols is in Ex 20: 4-6.

4. This idea was suggested during discussions at a Sea of Faith Conference (see below). I am unable to locate its source more accurately.

5. Rubaiyat 58. Omar Khayyam was a Persian born in the later half of the 11C and died in the first quarter of the 12C. The Rubaiyat was 'discovered' by Edward Fitzgerald and his first edition was in 1859. It suffered from some critical re-appraisal and there were several subsequent editions. I have quoted from the first and numbered accordingly. There have been several publications.
6. From 'The Gay Science' by Friedrich Nietzsche; 1882; book 3; section 125
7. A J Ayer 'Language, Truth & Logic;' chap 6; 'Critique of Ethics and Theology.'
8. From 'The Shaking of the Foundations' by Paul Tillich; 1949; chapter 'Waiting.' This book has been published several times.
9. This is not the place to attempt to summarise Albert Einstein's position vis a vis religion which to some extent reflects Spinoza (he says so himself) and there are several collections of his sayings. I have used, 'Ideas & Opinions' ISBN 0285647253
10. See 'The Courage to Be' by Paul Tillich; ISBN 030008471-4
11. From 'The Shaking of the Foundations'; chapter 'The Yoke of Religion'
12. This was culled by Noel Cheer, Chair N Z branch of Sea of Faith from 'The Brothers Karamazov;' Fyodor Dostoyevsky; published 1880; book V; chap 3. Dostoyevsky is speaking through his character Ivan.
13. The Sea of Faith Network is committed to 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation.' It holds an annual conference and publishes a magazine, 'Sofia.'
14. Don Cupitt has written many books each with its own individual contribution. The idea of the importance of language is central to his thinking. Before his retirement he was university lecturer in the philosophy of religion at Cambridge.
15. I use the word patient in the sense of the old Knights of St John, 'Our lords the patients,' or 'The suffering people whom we serve.' No single term will convey the idea of meeting need on the basis of mutual respect and contribution according to ability. 'Client' always seems a little contrived and 'service user' seems too impersonal for this message.
16. This was my own case. The punch line has been kept but the story otherwise fictionalised