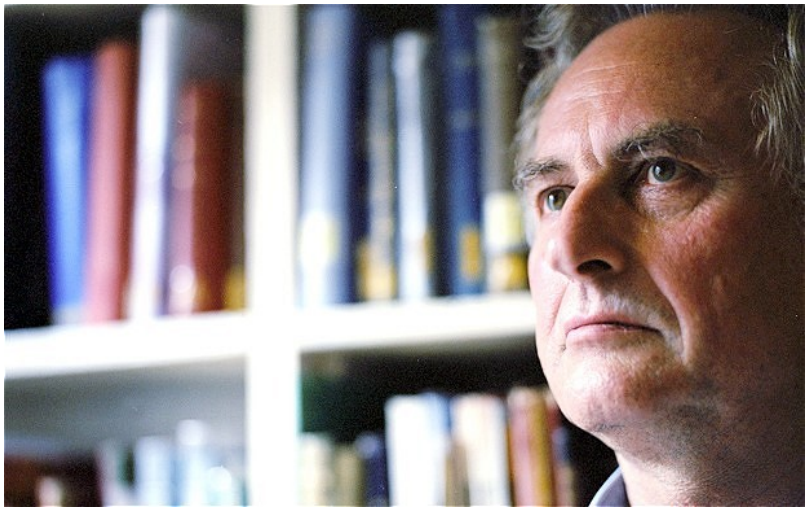
The sad business of trying to disprove God

Charles Moore reviews 'Atheists: The Origin of the Species' by Nick Spencer



You often meet them for the first time at secondary school. The typical teenage atheist is more likely a boy than a girl, stronger on science than the arts, and at the high-ish end of the academic spectrum. He tells you that he has studied the nature of matter, the universe etc, and can prove that God does not exist.

Already, you are plunged into the thick of the problem, which is one of category. The teenage thinker treats the existence of God as a scientific matter, but it isn't. Science can certainly disprove some claims that believers make about their God – or, to be more exact, it can prove that these claims are incompatible with science – but it can have nothing to say about something that lies outside its realm.

A few atheists realise this, and so, while trying to devise concepts of a good society without God, they give the subject of God's existence a wide berth. Charles Darwin followed this cautious approach. For the most part, however, they devote themselves to the wearisome and surprisingly difficult business of trying to prove a negative.

Who are atheists, and where did they come from? Nick Spencer is research director of the (excellent) "religion and society think tank" Theos, and so he views the subject with a quiet Christian scepticism. But it is not his purpose to attack atheism. Instead, he wants to tell its history as it has developed, chiefly in Europe, in the past 500 years.

He points out that atheism often starts in disputes about authority. In a thoroughly Christian society – and indeed, in some Muslim societies today – rejection of God was seen as a threat to public order. Quite recently, a British judge said that the law of England has nothing to do with Christianity. He may wish that to be true, but, historically, it isn't.

In his Commentaries on the Laws of England in the 18th century, William Blackstone argued that the oath in court was the necessary foundation for justice: "All moral evidence… all confidence in human

veracity must be weakened by irreligion, and overthrown by infidelity." An atheist was therefore not only mistaken, but failed in his duty as a citizen. Laws against the preaching of atheism resembled those against the preaching of racism today: it was thought intolerably injurious to society. What God had revealed, the state had a duty to uphold.

Gradually, "atheisms" – there was never a single form – advanced to challenge authority. Some arose from questioning Scripture ("a heap of Copie confusedly taken", wrote one brave man at the end of the 16th century). Some, often stemming from priests who had seen appalling abuses themselves, concentrated on the wickedness of church power rather than on metaphysics.

Other non-believers, usually among the grandest in society, saw themselves as bathed in the light of reason. David Hume wrote of "the deepest Stupidity, Christianity and Ignorance". Percy Bysshe Shelley linked atheism with intellectual superiority: "Let this horrid Galilean [Jesus] rule the Canaille [the rabble]… The reflecting part of the community… do not require his morality." In the current era of Richard Dawkins and the New Atheism, many atheists call themselves the "Brights", pleased to make the rest of us out as dullards.

Some atheists – Dawkins, Sigmund Freud, AJ Ayer – resemble, in essence, that clever young schoolboy. They believe they have brilliantly proved religion to be a load of hogwash. In their minds, it seems an advantage that their creed does not appeal as much to women or the poor and ignorant. Indeed, Friedrich Nietzsche saw more deeply how European society's moral order would collapse with the destruction of faith – but welcomed it. Christianity was a "slave morality", he said, celebrating weakness and preserving "too much of what should have perished". People such as Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Hitler took up such thoughts with deadly enthusiasm.

But precisely because religion, though theologically grounded, is much deeper than an intellectual theory, it tends to regenerate when attacked. The author quotes one Soviet persecutor of Christianity: "Religion is like a nail, the harder you hit, the deeper it goes in." Spencer believes that the New Atheism is an expression of anger at the curious phenomenon that all over the world, except among white Westerners, God is back.

This leads to the question: "Is atheism parasitic on religion?" There is something unsatisfactory about building your thought around an anti-faith. Some atheists – amusingly catalogued here – have noticed this, and set up Cults of Reason, secular societies and atheist chapels, trying, rather unsuccessfully, to reproduce the communal creativity of faith. Hamlet says: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Any imaginative atheist must sometimes be troubled by this thought, and worry that his ideas are so dependent on the very thing he opposes.

It is as if someone were to devote his energies to telling people that they did not really love one another. He might be right, of course, but it would be a sad business. Love, indeed, is a subject that atheists find hard to discuss interestingly. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the great philosopher, who understood religious belief throughout his life, mostly without quite sharing it, wrote: "Faith is faith in what is needed by my heart, my soul, not my speculative intelligence… Only love can believe the Resurrection."