

Chapter 1

Atheism and its consequences

In this first chapter, I want to set the scene of contemporary society in the West generally, but especially in the UK, and sketch out briefly the foundational change in society which has led to the rise of political correctness.

Some years ago the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, described Britain as a place where a ‘tacit atheism’ has come to dominate people’s thinking. In the census of 2001, 70% of the population of England and Wales described themselves as Christians. By 2011 that figure had fallen to 59%. That is still quite a high proportion of the population. Nevertheless, Lord Carey’s comment is true. When it comes to everyday life most people do not see God to be relevant. Sentimentally, there may be an attachment to a ‘Christian’ ethic, by which most people mean the so-called ‘golden rule’ of ‘doing to others what you would have them do to you’ based on Jesus’ words in Matthew 7.12. However, what they mean by that is generally a moral neutrality which is very different from what Christ intended¹. But when it comes to daily life, in practice, belief in God is not taken seriously.

The Bible would describe this move towards tacit atheism as ‘forgetting God’. Although those who peddle ideas of the non-existence or irrelevance of God like to give the impression

that they are very modern, *avant-garde* and daringly radical in their outlook, actually fallen human nature's tendency to atheism was being addressed by the writers of the Bible over three thousand years ago. It does not take God by surprise.

Nothing new

There is nothing new about atheism. King David famously said in his Psalms that it is the fool who says in his heart 'There is no God' (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). He was writing around a thousand years before Christ. And interestingly, some five hundred years before David, Moses explained one of the primary reasons for 'forgetting God'. He warned the people of Israel about this. He told them that once they entered the Promised Land they would become prosperous. The land God was giving them to live in was such a fertile place that their labour would produce much more than they needed and they would become well-off. Then they would be tempted towards tacit atheism. Prosperity gives us the illusion of human independence. With plenty of resources, the Israelites would be seduced into thinking that they no longer needed God. Listen to Moses' warning in his farewell message to his people recorded in Deuteronomy 8:11-18:

¹¹Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹²Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ¹⁵He led you

through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. ¹⁷You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' ¹⁸But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

Much has changed in Western society over the last half-century or so. For a start, generally speaking, we have become far more wealthy than, say, many of our grandparents were. The increase in wealth has also gone hand-in-hand with the rise of wonderful technology and medicine. So it is, just as Moses warned, that people feel that they no longer need God. They can stand on their own two feet, thank you very much. All their needs for life are addressed. Modern people have a house and a car and money in the bank. If they are ill, there is the NHS. If they are unhappy or need cheering up, there is always the TV or the internet. 'What do I need God for?' they ask themselves – forgetting that it is God who gave them life in the first place, the resources of the earth, and the ability to work and think and become prosperous.

This connection between atheism and material prosperity has been traced by academics. For example, in her book *Holding Up A Mirror: How Civilizations Decline*, Anne Glynn-Jones explains the findings of the Russian-American thinker Pitirim Sorokin. Sorokin classified societies according to their 'cultural mentality' – that is, the way they think about

the world. He said that these can be 'ideational' (reality is spiritual), 'sensate' (reality is material), or 'idealistic' (a synthesis of the two). He suggested that major civilizations evolve from an ideational, to an idealistic, and eventually to a sensate mentality. The 'sensate' way of thinking is basically that of the materialist, the atheist. Each of these phases of cultural development not only seeks to describe the nature of reality, but also stipulates the nature of human needs and goals to be satisfied. Sorokin interpreted the contemporary Western civilisation as a sensate civilisation dedicated to technological progress, and prophesied its fall into decadence.

To put his theory of the decline of civilizations simply, Sorokin said that society requires a moral framework in order to function in a stable way. The authority of morality has always been derived from a sense of the divine or the supernatural. It is religious in essence. However, here a dynamic begins to come into play. The proper functioning of a stable society produces economic prosperity. But as this grows, it tends to influence people to think that the material world is all that really matters. From here, society feels that it does not need religion or a sense of the divine. This undermines the authority of moral standards, and so leads eventually to the destruction of the very social stability which caused the society to prosper in the first place. Sorokin's work sought to trace this trajectory in the rise and fall of civilizations such as those of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, as well as others. So he too would not be surprised at the denial of God in the prosperous contemporary West.

As we shall see, it is from this tacit atheism and its corresponding impact on ideas of morality that the whole confusion over fairness and the rise of political correctness has flowed.

The secular experiment

So, given the affluence in which we live, it is not surprising that the UK has been involved in a grand social experiment to see what life is like when we ignore God. This may or may not have been embarked on deliberately, but nevertheless it is a fair description of what has been happening. We have become a secular society. The vast majority of people have been persuaded that God either does not exist or counts for nothing in their lives.

Since approximately the 1960s, God has been marginalised. We have decided that we do not need him. So, we have turned the UK into a gigantic nationwide laboratory to see what happens to life when God is sidelined. Now, after half a century or so, the results are coming in.

Once again it is fascinating to find that the Bible anticipates where all this would lead. The state of the UK and the direction it is taking seem almost inevitable to Bible-believing Christians. What we see happening around us is precisely what the apostle Paul said would happen when people suppress the truth about God. Here are his words in Romans 1:

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

²⁸Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them.

The outline of the logic of these verses is as follows. Paul argues that God's wrath is justifiably revealed because people

trample on and deny the truth about the one true God. They replace him in their lives by various idols (verses 18–23). Then in verses 24–32 he specifies the consequences of this in terms of the moral disintegration of human society.

We are told in verse 18 that ‘The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.’ It all begins with fallen humanity suppressing the truth about God. Our failure is only secondarily moral. Primarily, it is spiritual. It stems from ‘godlessness’; in other words, living without God. This is precisely what pertains in our society today. We have forgotten God. We have rejected him. We deny his existence.

Why is God revealing his wrath? The answer is because the knowledge of God is evident through the design of creation (verse 20), and through the moral sense written into us by which we judge everything including each other (verse 32).

Instead of acknowledging what is blindingly obvious, that human beings and our world are so beautifully and wonderfully made that there must be a Designer, we prefer to take the mathematically nonsensical view that it all came about by myriads of chance collisions of fundamental particles which originated out of absolutely nothing.

When it comes to moral judgements, those of a liberal outlook criticise those on the right and *vice versa*. Having to live with a huge national debt, we all deplore what bankers and politicians have done. We feel a righteous indignation. Instead of recognising that there must be a moral law-giver of whose standards we are aware (and we assume that those whom we are criticising must be aware of them too), we prefer

to believe (illogically) that there is no Judge to whom we are answerable. Deep down we know that there are absolutes of right and wrong independent of ourselves: otherwise, what would be the point of criticising others? But we deny the idea even though we know it is true.

Despite such evidences of God confronting us daily, people suppress the truth (verse 18) and exchange the truth of God for a lie (verse 25).

God-forsaken?

Romans 1 tells us that ‘the wrath of God is being revealed’. That is in the present tense. How, in the present, does God express his wrath against us when we suppress the truth about him?

It is rarely through apocalyptic catastrophes. Instead, the apostle Paul tells us that God gives us over to the fruit of godlessness. He abandons us to the consequences. There is a threefold repetition of the phrase ‘God gave them over.’ In verse 24 we read ‘Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.’ In verse 26 we find ‘Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.’ In verse 28 Paul writes, ‘Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done’.

The apostle emphasizes two particular results of being God-forsaken. It leads to foolishness and decadence. And in our land of tacit atheism we see precisely those things.

Decadence and foolishness

For me, this is another large piece of contemporary evidence for the truth of Christianity. Many secular humanists in the past argued that God was irrelevant and that it would be perfectly possible to have a godless society which was decent, moral and upright.

If the experiment of 'life without God' in which we have been engaged since the 1960s had resulted in a decent, upright society with no rise in family breakdown, sexual perversion, drunkenness and violence on our streets at night, etc., then Romans 1 would have been wrong and the Christian faith called into question. But that has not been the result at all. In fact, the contrary has been the case. We have simply seen Romans 1 come to life before our eyes. Family breakdown, drug abuse, street violence, drunkenness, sexually transmitted diseases, the prisons overflowing and the justice system not able to cope; these things and many more are common. But I do not want to major on that here.

Paul sees foolishness as the initial result of atheism. Without God, we fall into stupidity. Verses 21–23 tell us, 'For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.' Whether it is primitive tribes worshipping 'sacred' stones in some faraway forest or contemporary Westerners living for their careers or their latest sexual encounter or the buzz they get from new technology, we all fall into making something that is less than ourselves the thing we live for. This indicates that something has gone

very wrong with the way we are thinking. It signals that we are living a life that does not make sense.

Ultimate Questions

Let me just try to spell this out this foolishness for a moment. The three great questions about life, which all the philosophers have toiled over, are the questions of origins (where we came from), morality (how we should live) and knowledge (truth and how we can know it). The answers to the last two depend on the answer to the first one. But the atheist has no answers – or, at least, no rational and sensible answers to these questions.

Origins

If we ask ‘Where did the universe come from?’ the atheist has four possible responses. *First*, it has always existed. This option is now seen as a non-starter (forgive the humour), largely as a result of the discoveries of modern science, which point very definitely to the universe having some kind of beginning. *Second*, it came from absolutely nothing. We can immediately dismiss this as nonsense. Something cannot possibly come from nothing. If we think that, we might as well throw away our brains. *Third*, it came from a kind of ‘nothing’ but which is actually a certain package of energy and physical laws. But if you take that route you have not solved the problem because then you must not ask where that package came from. You have simply pushed the question a step back. *Fourth*, the only response left to the atheist is that you are not allowed to ask the question. In other words, they have no reasonable answer. In the area of origins we are left with foolishness.

Morality

If the basis of everything is mere time, chance and energy

the moral realm has no ultimate reality. It is a purely human construct. So it is up to you how you want to live. For some people morality is individual – ‘be true to yourself’. For others it must be social – whatever the majority thinks is right – though of course the masses can be swayed by the media. There is no answer to how you should live. What people thought fifty years ago on many issues is now considered wrong. Morality becomes relativized. So we ask, for example, why the West thinks it has the right to impose its values on other cultures? Nearer to home, we ask: why shouldn’t gay couples be allowed to marry if they want to? If someone wants to commit suicide, why shouldn’t they be allowed to do it? Starting from an atheistic position, there are no definite answers to moral questions. It follows that there are no universal values. It actually means (though our society would not like to admit this) that ideas such as equality, justice and human rights which ought to apply to everyone have no foundation. Logically, even acts of evil such as genocide or a government telling deliberate lies can no longer be called ‘evil’ in any absolute sense. The whole basis of what we call civilized society is swept away. This is foolishness.

Truth

The victors always write the history! Someone who is labelled a terrorist by one group is called a freedom fighter by another. What is the truth? It depends where you are standing. If there is no absolute law, or law-maker, then there is no way of deciding. It all becomes simply a matter of opinion. More than that, Christians believe that God made human beings in his own image and gave us minds capable of knowing reality, parallel to the way he does. But without God, knowledge and language are merely human constructs. They can only represent what is going on in our minds subjectively. There

is no guarantee that what is going on in our minds actually relates to objective reality. If that is the case, what is truth? We can never be sure we know the truth. But of course, none of us live in total uncertainty. We live as if we know what is true. Once again, we are brought back to a contradiction.

Hence we see that atheism leaves us with foolishness. Thus we have a professed atheist like Alain de Botton publishing his book *Religion for Atheists*, which is in fact simply an exercise in lamenting all the elements of civilized living which no longer make sense and go by the board in a godless world. He even bemoans the moral 'freedom' which atheists have fought to gain. 'We have grown sick of being left to do as we please,' he says (page 77). 'Our deepest wish may be that someone should come along and save us from ourselves' (page 72).

With no basis for right and wrong, and no certainty about truth and error, everything in life becomes a matter of opinion. This is known as relativism. You see it one way, I see it in another, but there is no correct or incorrect way. Here we find the open door through which political correctness enters. It is against that background that the idea of saying that what someone else is doing is 'wrong' or that we have a 'better' way of doing things is deemed offensive and unacceptable. This is the logic which has led us into a world ruled by political correctness. Feminists see things one way, chauvinists another. People of one religion have one view on suicide bombing, whereas people of another religion or no religion have another view. There is no right answer. In fact, it is arrogant to believe that you have the right answer. That, broadly speaking, is how the tacit atheism of the Western world has brought us to where we are.

Repudiating atheism

Obviously there is a huge amount that could be said concerning why atheism is wrong. In particular, we have already noted from Romans 1 the witness to God in creation and in the inbuilt sense of right and wrong in the human conscience. But let me just say three things.

Practically

We can see the ‘foolishness’ which tacit atheism brings beginning to work out in our own land. Without God, there are no answers to the great questions of existence. The highest purpose we can have is to make personal choice, self-fulfilment and ‘enjoying ourselves’ our ‘trinitarian’ deity. But in so doing we are turned into fools, says Romans 1. Think of the plain evidence which all the research shows for the benefits of traditional marriage and family life to the whole of society. Think of the explosion of sexually transmitted diseases; and of street crime by fatherless boys, which is verging on becoming unmanageable. Yet can our society say, ‘Hey, we have got this wrong. We had better get back to promoting the family and sexual fidelity’? Of course not, because it would offend the great god of ‘personal choice’. Thus we carry on in our foolishness.

Theoretically

We need to note that in stating the conclusion that, for example, ‘There is no such thing as truth’ you are stating a contradiction, because you are claiming that it is true that there is no such thing as truth. This in itself should be enough to ring alarm bells with us. This kind of stance is inviting us to believe a contradiction. No one can live consistently with the implications of atheism. The great atheist Friedrich Nietzsche said, ‘What is truth... truths are illusions about which one has

forgotten that this is what they are.’ But in saying that he was stating what he thought was true; and true for everyone! This is foolishness. And no one lives like that in the real world. As we have already indicated, people, even atheists, live as if they can know the truth. For example, they live knowing the truth about how much money there is in their bank account, and they want there to be no errors or misleading information concerning their balance. Or again, since we are beginning to think about political correctness, what is the great characteristic of so many politically correct people? They take the moral high ground and decry others. They tell us to take down Christmas decorations in our cities because they might offend the Muslims – even when many reasonable Muslims say they are not at all offended. But nevertheless political correctness insists because it knows better! But we are taught that all viewpoints are equally valid – especially moral and religious ones. So why do we have to take down Christmas decorations which speak of the birth of Jesus? This shows total inconsistency. And it leads us to think that if this is where we end up starting from the basic premise of atheism, then it seems to indicate that the basic premise itself is wrong.

Personally

We have been engaged in the great experiment of seeing what life is like without God – which has led us at present to the enormous influence of political correctness. But back in 1994 the novelist Douglas Coupland, famous for his iconic book *Generation X*, wrote another book with the title *Life After God*. It caused quite a stir. Here is someone who was living in the light of tacit atheism, and struggling to explain what he felt. Interestingly, he concludes the book in this way:

Now – here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray

that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me to be kind, as I am no longer capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

If he means what he appears to say, that is quite a devastating admission. Coupland is saying is that he needs God personally. He needs God in order to make him really human and to enable him to love others. It is only belief in God which can guarantee true humanity. Tacit atheism and the political correctness which flows from it are making us increasingly into a lost and disorientated society.

¹ Christ intended the ‘golden rule’ to be a summary of ‘the Law and the Prophets’. It tells us how to treat each other given the framework of, for example, the Ten Commandments. But as modern society has rejected God’s commandments, the ‘golden rule’ has degenerated into simply doing our best to please others and make no moral judgements.

