

Atheism, Scientism And The Lingering Of The Numinous

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The fire at Cathédrale Notre-Dame during Easter week and the outpouring of emotion from believers and non-believers alike at the near-loss of this cultural touchstone underscore the profound debt our world owes to Christianity. Even while atheists and radicals decry and mock Christian believers, the world nevertheless leans on ideas, ethical codes, and political traditions which grow directly from the Christian faith. The eminent Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye was once asked by a student from Communist China about the cultural importance of the Bible. Frye pointed out that China was under the sway of an ideology propounded by a 19th Century Jewish thinker, Karl Marx, and that Marx's spiritual father was Hegel, whose spiritual father was Martin Luther. Frye's point was that, ultimately, even the most radical and revolutionary of the West's political ideologies derive from the Bible. In William Blake's redolent phrase, "The Old and the New Testament are the Great Code of Art."

This quiescent cultural legacy erupted with surprising speed and force as the fire raged through and threatened to consume Notre-Dame and then, almost miraculously, was halted. French philosopher Bernard Henri Levy wrote, "Notre-Dame, in burning, reminds us of the fragility of our history and heritage, of the precariousness of what we have built and of the finite nature of our millennial Europe, homeland of the arts." The English journalist Douglas Murray commented, "In some ways the future of civilization in Europe will be decided by our attitude towards the great churches and other cultural buildings of our heritage standing in our midst." Asked if he was a Catholic, the writer Michel Houellebecq, whose novels portray a decadent society obsessed with money, power and sex, declared, "I am Catholic in the sense that I show the horror of a world without God."

Western culture developed through the mingling of Judeo-Christianity, Greek philosophy and Roman law. Yet for the past 50 years, western nations have seen the retreat of Christianity from the public square and the general loss of religious faith among its citizenry. The conflagration at the Cathédrale leads us to ponder what we risk losing in a fully secular, post-Christian world. How did we arrive at this historical juncture, when the spiritual truths and ancient verities upon which our civilization has been built have crumbled before the tribunal of reason and science?

As the light bulbs are lit, the candles dim

The 18th century European Enlightenment has left an abiding legacy of contempt for religion. For that era's philosophes, religion was a repository of superstition, nonsense and cant. "*Ecrasez l'infame*" – crush the infamous – said Voltaire, who thought clerics were a scourge whose only purpose was to promulgate human unhappiness and keep the masses in line. Henceforward, freed from the magical thinking of priests, shamans, and mystics, from what German philosopher Immanuel Kant called man's "self-incurred tutelage", the modern citizen would be able to create a new society, one in which reason alone would reign. In keeping with the worship of their new God, the French Revolutionaries designated Notre-Dame a "Temple of Reason."

The Enlightenment understanding has become deeply entrenched in our hyper-scientific age. Post-enlightenment progressivism regards natural science as the logical outgrowth of reason and the paradigm of knowledge. There is a pervasive, if frequently inchoate view that any form of human understanding that either does not or cannot conform to the norms of scientific inquiry is suspect.

At its extreme, this view asserts that truth is a category reserved for the natural sciences alone. Such an abridged understanding crowds out history, poetry, aesthetics, literature, music, philosophy (whose branches include not only metaphysics but logic itself) religion or any other form of insight or inquiry that fails to conform to the scientific paradigm. Scientists typically ignore and, failing that, sneer at such fields, characterizing them as rabbit-holes of nonsense.

No field has been more scornfully treated by science than religion. Our era's science eschews metaphysical concepts such as good and evil, life after death and, famously, the question of God's existence. Such questions, we are told, are leftovers from benighted times. In the eschatology of the scientific worldview, utopia emerges only after religion has been defeated once and for all, and scientific rationality sits unchallenged on the throne. There is a stark Manicheanism at work. Science and religion are lethal adversaries engaged in zero-sum warfare. The American atheist Sam Harris pithily summarizes this view in his essay, *Science Must Destroy Religion*.

What is frequently lost in this debate is that the physical sciences grew out of a specifically Judeo-Christian orientation to the natural world. It held that the world was an

ordered *cosmos* rather than a *chaos*. The *cosmos* was consistent, predictable and lawful – i.e., rational – not given to the whims of impulsive and capricious deities – the view of essentially every previous religion. Crucially, the world was comprehensible to human intelligence. It led to the tentative, cautious hope that humanity, by applying its God-given intellect, could come to know the world.

We are right to be suspicious of the effortlessness with which so many contemporary scientists dispose of God. Einstein himself famously quipped that, “Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind.” What he meant was that science rests upon certain metaphysical assumptions which scientists would do well to ponder, while religion is made much fuller, richer, and more credible if its adherents engage in and support scientific inquiry. Science ultimately rests on the metaphysical assumption that the universe is rational, however elusive this may seem. However deeply buried it may be.

Virtually no-one doubts that science has greatly advanced the human condition, and we are rightly grateful for its many achievements. Yet science is incapable of providing solace for the religious impulse or the human longing to seek connection with a transcendent, wider whole and greater truth. Despite virtually the entire culture’s campaign to snuff it out, the yearning for the numinous lingers in the human soul, deeply buried perhaps but seemingly indestructible.

Scientism: the final authority on all intellectual questions

The atheism of our scientific age, however, denies the existence of God by appealing to science. For good measure, it further insists that only dim-witted, unlettered and uneducated people can entertain a belief in God. In the best Enlightenment spirit, our age is rife with scientists and their political cheerleaders who are ready, willing and able to usher in a new age of happiness, prosperity and peace. To drive home the point, scientists have flooded the market with books disparaging religion.

Given the status we afford science, it is unsurprising that so many are eager to claim its mantle. But whatever our views on God, why should we suppose that the question of God’s existence is a scientific one? And why should we think that holding an advanced degree in the natural sciences makes one competent to pontificate on the question in the first place? The vast overreach is partly due to an excessive belief in the scope and abilities of science. It has been termed “scientism”, which is the unwarranted application of scientific

methodologies to non-scientific questions. A method for pursuing the study of the natural world – science – has been broadened and elevated into a pinnacle source of authority regarding value judgments, ethical questions and public policies, and has even been widely conflated with knowledge itself. Scientism reduces all knowledge to only that which can be measured or quantified. From here it is a small leap to the dogma that the only true knowledge is scientific. In brief, scientism sees science as the final authority on all intellectual questions. It is the failure to acknowledge science's logical limitations.

Lost amidst scientism's raging denunciation of all things smacking of religion is that the physical sciences grew out of the specifically Judeo-Christian idea that the world is an ordered cosmos rather than a chaos. Without this assumption – or faith – there's little point to science at all.

Clearly, not all questions are scientific ones. Probably not even the majority. We have, for example, endless questions dealing with the human spirit and therefore considerations lying outside the experimental purview of science. Likewise, we struggle with questions of morality and ethics, queries which simply don't admit to scientific answers. Similarly, vast swathes of ordinary life are not merely outside the scope of science, they're areas where scientific methods are unnecessary and irrelevant. Most of the significant questions we face in our life – *Should I go to university or pursue a trade? Should I get married to this person, or at all? What are the risks and benefits of accepting this job?* – demand practical judgement, perspicacity and discernment rather than scientific precision. The scientific thinker, however, always attempts to create the appearance of a scientific question, and employs the methodologies of science to provide an ersatz exactitude and illusion of rigour. As Aristotle famously advises in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "Our account of this science will be adequate if it achieves such clarity as the subject-matter allows; for the same degree of precision is not to be expected in all discussions."

Still, no matter how acutely we may be gripped by the practical questions of our day-to-day lives, the human experience eventually turns back to the "one big question", or set of questions: being, purpose, where did we come from, what comes after.

It has doubtless been this way forever and in all cultures. Our age is unusual in many respects, not least because a form of inquiry made possible by the culture's dominant religion has turned on its father, so to speak, and attempted to grind him into dust.

As dogmatic as the religious beliefs it denounces

But there are dissenting voices to scientism among scientists themselves. “Continued insistence on the universal competence of science will serve only to undermine the credibility of science as a whole,” writes Austin L. Hughes, Carolina Distinguished Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of South Carolina, in his essay ***The Folly of Scientism***. “One longs for a new Enlightenment to puncture the pretensions of this latest superstition.” In like fashion, the mathematician and scientist David Berlinski has taken to task the so-called “New Atheists” – the likes of the late Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett.

Berlinski is a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute’s Center for Science and Culture in Seattle. In his book, *The Devil’s Delusion*, Berlinski suggests that, “Confident assertions of scientists in their labs that God does not exist have nothing to do with science, and even less to do with God’s existence.” Berlinski sees the scientific atheists as united by a simple (and simple-minded) message: “Because scientific theories are true, religious beliefs must be false.” Besides failing a basic test of logic (again, logic being a branch of philosophy, not science), this fundamentally misconstrues science and its limitations and is therefore a species of scientism. As Berlinski notes, “If science is opposed to religion, then it is not because of anything contained in the premises or the conclusions of the great scientific theories.” He goes on:

In all this, two influential ideas are at work. The first is that there is something answering to the name of science. The second is that something answering to the name of science offers sophisticated men and women a coherent vision of the universe. The second claim is false if the first claim is. And the first claim *is* false. *Nothing* answers to the name of science...Like *democracy* or *justice*, *science* is a word exhausted by its examples.

What Berlinski means by the expression “nothing answers to science” is that there is no single, uncontested, unifying definition of science, but rather endless debate, dispute and argumentation about the concept. All of us have some vague grasp of the notion. A standard definition of science might be something like, “inductive reasoning to form and empirically test hypotheses about the natural world.” Yet some theoretical physics – string theory, for example – is pure mathematics which is not even in principle testable against experience. Ultimately, Berlinski defines science as “organized and refined common sense.” This is probably as good a definition as we can hope for, albeit one which is unlikely to

settle the question of God's existence. In its modesty and its nod to ordinary people, it's also bound to annoy contemporary science-worshippers.

To use "science" as a cudgel to beat against the existence of God is to fundamentally misunderstand science. Science simply does not address the great and abiding questions of life, death, love and meaning, even if it acts otherwise. As early 20th century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously noted, "Even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched." The attempted answers that prominent scientists have provided to the yearnings of the human soul are remarkable in their shallowness, not least because they typically tend towards pointlessness and nothingness. Science is powerless to answer the Socratic questions of how we ought to live and how we are to live with others. Nor can it answer for the tragic element of life. As Berlinski comments, "A man asking why his days are short and full of suffering is not disposed to turn to quantum field theory for relief."

These are the very questions that religious traditions attempt to answer, assuring us, as Berlinski puts it, "that there is a principle of charity at work in the cosmos and that all will be well." While Berlinski readily concedes that he does not know if any of this is true, he does say that "the scientific community does not know that it is false." Even Sigmund Freud, a militant atheist, understood that religion answered the human need for transcendent meaning and purpose. Hostile as he was to religion, he nevertheless conceded that the notion of a benevolently omnipotent God provided comfort by answering the existential anxieties of masses of people. As the British psychiatrist Anthony Daniels sardonically observes, "[Freud] was perfectly prepared to believe in entities every bit as metaphysical as God, provided he had invented them himself."

Scientific claims are too frequently pronounced with an unbreachable self-assurance that's more characteristic of religious dogma than disinterested scientific inquiry. Scientists often heap scorn on those who happen not to share their views, insisting the matter is "settled" or that there is a "scientific consensus". For example, Barry Ninham, professor of applied mathematics at the Australian National University, long ago pronounced that, "Unless you are an active scientist you can never really understand science. Leave it to professionals." This is rather like saying that unless you hold a degree in theology, you can't read the Bible. Ninham's mere arrogance becomes downright outrageous if he meant not merely that modern scientific disciplines are so specialized and technical that their terminology,

formulae and discussions are beyond the understanding of non-scientists, but that most people are too stupid even to understand the process and methods of science.

The smug self-assurance of such proclamations should alert us that something is amiss. It is salutary to keep in mind that, by definition, science is never “settled.” Even Newtonian physics, transformational in its day, had to give way before Einstein’s theory of relativity, which itself induced decades of challenge, experimentation and refinement. But instead of being humbling, that process appears to have had the opposite effect on generations of scientists.

Even some atheists find something “God-like” at play

In his recent book, *Mind and Cosmos*, the philosopher Thomas Nagel challenges the standard assumptions of the scientific consensus. For Nagel, the modern scientific desideratum – a quantified understanding of the world, expressed in mathematical formulae — can never bring anything beyond a partial understanding of nature. For it omits mind and consciousness. Nagel points out that current models of physical science leave no conceptual place for cognition, desiring, valuing, appreciating or all those other subjective mental activities that define our lives. He maintains we can only arrive at a reasonably comprehensive view of nature if we find a way of putting mind and consciousness at the centre of our understanding of the natural order. In order to do so, we will need to revive the discredited idea of teleology in nature. We need to ascribe a purposiveness to the natural world.

Darwin’s theory of evolution is a further article of faith in the modern scientific worldview. Among its tenets is that any challenge to Darwin can only arise from some combination of religious mania and scientific illiteracy. To embrace Darwin, however, is also to accept a host of embedded ideas, such as the view that life somehow spontaneously evolved out of a primordial stew. One does not need to be a scriptural fundamentalist to find fault with this explanation. The renowned astrophysicist Fred Hoyle, among others, was highly sceptical of this account. Hoyle was sternly anti-religious and an avowed atheist. He had no desire to foster a belief in God. He nevertheless thought that the spontaneous emergence of life on Earth was as likely as a tornado sweeping through a junkyard and, out of the debris, spontaneously assembling a Boeing 747. The eminent Australian philosopher David Stove considered Darwin’s theory “A ridiculous slander on Human beings.”

Neither Hoyle nor Nagel believes in God. Nevertheless, both were compelled by disinterested reason and the strength of the evidence to concede the inadequacy of the modern scientific view of a material world comprised of purposeless particles. Nagel, having rejected some of the bizarre consequences of materialism, was forced to ponder the ancient idea of teleology. So while God might not exist, something suspiciously God-like appears to be at play in the universe.

Science continues to advance to previously unimagined feats of technical brilliance. Recently, scientists were able to provide imagery of a black hole, a phenomenon whose gravity is so intense that even light itself cannot escape. Yet we are still confronted by our inability to answer fundamental questions like, “*What’s inside?*” or, “*What lies beyond?*”? As the pioneering scientist J.S. Haldane remarked, “The universe is not only queerer than we suppose; it is queerer than we *can* suppose.”

It does seem significant that Notre-Dame burned during Easter week, for the hopeful message of the Easter celebration is that out of death comes eternal life. Perhaps in the rebuilding of the great cathedral we can, like its creators, think about ways of reconciling science and religion, reason and faith, and so pursue those transcendent and numinous truths which are so sublimely assembled in the stone and stained glass of Notre-Dame.

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