

NEW ATHEISM AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Chris Lynch

University of Cambridge

It's hardly a secret that the intelligentsia long ago declared religion to be absurd, outdated and dangerous. The right-thinking smart thinkers have known for generations that belief in god is a delusion, and that any belief systems which contain within them a commitment to the existence of a deity are, for this sheer fact alone, poisonous.¹ What the New Atheists brought to the table was an agitation at the apparent fact of religious resurgence. The religious voice, especially the Muslim voice within the West, has indeed got noisier. But the number of those confessing to theism has not grown dramatically.² Any glance at the latest array of literature on religion in the public sphere would have us believe that we are hopelessly imprisoned by the homophobic, woman-hating, tyrannical chains of theocracy at every turn. In reality, religious belief remains overwhelmingly on the decline.³ As a secular humanist, I happen to believe that the proposition 'There exists a god' is false. But I think it is perfectly rational and plausible to hold the converse view. I do not think that the evidence is neutral to the question of whether there exists a god, but I do think that the question isn't so obviously decided in advance of serious argument and careful consideration of the evidence.

In this essay I argue that the current debate between New Atheism and religious believers is misguided, since that debate fails to capture all of the functions and uses of meaningful religious language. The debate presupposes that religious language is used to express truth-apt claims – that is, claims that are either true or false (and not neither or both) – which purport to describe states of affairs. According to this view – I'll call it 'the truth-aptness-only' or 'TAO' view – religious claims are exhaustively truth-evaluable assertions. We can draw an analogy here with the claims put forward by scientists or historians. For example, when a chemist says 'Water is H₂O', they are putting forward a factual claim which purports to describe the way the world is. The claim 'Water is H₂O' is true if and only if water really is H₂O; the claim 'Water is H₂O' is false just in case water isn't H₂O. Likewise, when a historian utters the sentence, 'Queen Victoria died in 1901', she is making a factual statement which is rendered true or false in virtue of whether it corresponds with the way the world is. (I should note that throughout this article I'm assuming that what philosophers broadly call 'the correspondence theory of truth' is correct. There are other theories, but they are less prominent, and I think the correspondence theory is the most intuitively plausible.⁴ Moreover, even if any rival theory of truth turns out to be correct, I cannot see how that undermines anything I say in this essay.) I argue that the TAO view is false. Making truth-apt claims does not exhaust the functions that can be performed by meaningful religious language. And this is what New Atheism fails to recognise.

Mind your language: The 'New Atheists' are dogmatists

¹ As evidence of this trend, one need look no further than the subtitle of C. Hitchens *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Atlantic Books, 2007). Hitchens is one of the so-called 'Four Horsemen' of New Atheism

² A. Copson 'Religious Revival and the Failure of Politics' from <http://andrewcopson.net/2012/05/religious-revival-and-the-failure-of-politics/>

³ P. Harrow from 'Integrated Household Survey gives misleading figures on religious belief' (24/09/2010), from <https://humanism.org.uk/2010/09/24/news-661/>

⁴ Here I simply mean that most philosophers are committed to truth entailing some correspondence between the proposition and the content that proposition expresses. So on my understanding most philosophers who subscribe to a deflationist theory of truth are, provided they accept this correspondence intuition, adherents of the correspondence theory of truth.

It is true that some uses of religious language, and perhaps the vast majority, are descriptive truth-apt claims. Nonetheless, religious language can perform other roles besides the attempt to describe the way the world is in the factual, truth-apt sense I've outlined. I outline three distinct further uses of religious language that are excluded by the TAO view. First, religious language can be used poetically. Second, religious language can be used to express an aesthetic commitment. And third, religious language can be used to express a moral commitment. I am not necessarily committed to the view that these are the *only* further uses that religious language can perform. That said, I do think that these are three rather uncontroversial ways in which religious language is used – without somehow becoming mysterious or unintelligible nonsense – that are not paid sufficient attention to by the New Atheists (and, alas, by many intelligent religious believers).

I will now flesh out how religious language can be used for the three functions I have just outlined. Firstly, I have suggested that religious language can be used poetically. By this I mean to say that religious stories can function as metaphors from which valuable instruction can be derived. Let us take the example of the Parable of the Good Samaritan: a well-worn example, I concede. Many Christians seem fairly comfortable in stating that they do not literally believe that the Parable of the Good Samaritan took place. Now, if religious claims really were solely factual truth-apt claims, this would present a problem for the supposed truth or internal coherence of Christianity. Christianity would either be committed to a falsehood, or else it would be preaching that an event took place which nonetheless many of the religion's adherents do not believe happened. Thankfully, if we give up the TAO view, we are able to make far better sense of how talk of the Good Samaritan can be meaningful even if few people believe that the events captured in that Parable ever took place. We simply need to conceive of the events described by the Parable as tokenistic of a broader phenomenon: that of strangers helping the needy. In other words, we can see the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a metaphorical representation of a phenomenon with which we are confronted in our day-to-day lives. There are two important comments to make here. First, I think that the poetic interpretation of religious language makes far better sense of the Parable than the TAO view.⁵ And second, the poetic interpretation coheres with our ordinary practice of seeing the Bible as a source of everyday relevance, such that the historical truth of the events described in Biblical passages are no longer what is important. Rather, attention shifts to the deeper truth that the stories convey. These are truths that are not restricted to the spatiotemporal context of the precise event narrated in the Bible, and the rather pedantic question of whether or not such an event or sequence of events really took place as scripturally documented.⁶

I also have two other functions performed by religious language in mind: what I term the 'moral' and the 'aesthetic' functions. Arguably these can each be said to constitute proper subsets of the metaphorical use of language, but I think that each of them is sufficiently interesting to warrant discussion in their own right. They both share the insight that religious language need not always be in the business of making descriptive truth-apt claims. Instead, religious language can and often does

⁵ After all, the TAO seems to cohere more naturally with the phenomenology of those who believe in the Good Samaritan's moral message without subscribing to its historical accuracy.

⁶ It might be objected here that accepting the poetic function of religious language entails non-realism about God (and that non-realism is a route most traditional believers don't want to follow). But this is not a necessary logical entailment, and for that matter it is perfectly tenable to subscribe to both the poetic function of religious language and realism about God. See, for example, R. Aslan *No god but God* (Random House, 2006)

serve a performative function: it is used to achieve some particular goal.⁷ Philosopher J.L. Austin thought that religious language can give rise to speech-acts, by which he just meant that instantiated uses of some particular string of religious language can perform social acts and rituals.⁸ Therefore, rather than the New Atheist's presumption that religious claims describe states of affairs, we can instead take the view that religious assertions might bring states of affairs into existence.

With this speech-act-oriented backdrop from the philosophy of language, we can now make good sense of the thought that religious language isn't cognitive – it doesn't express beliefs about propositions that are assessable as true or false – but instead it can be moral or aesthetic. Religious language can express an aesthetic commitment insofar as it can convey the attempt to animate the universe with enchantment, a second realm of reality, or, less fancifully, with purpose or overarching intention. Equally, religious language can be used as a way to voice moral seriousness and accountability. Religious language is rich with vocabulary that hints at an objective basis for moral relations: words like 'sin', 'redemption', 'transgression', 'wrong' and 'right' all gesture towards there being a fact of the matter as to what actions are good and bad, and therefore to the existence of robust moral values that we can talk about without blushing.⁹

The truth wars go ideological

Dawkins never ceases to avow that he is not interested in whether beliefs are comforting, or morally beneficial, or whatever else. Instead, all he cares about is whether any given belief is true. I leave aside here the question of whether factors other than a belief's being true might provide reason for us to cherish that belief.¹⁰ What I wish to emphasise is the fundamental irony at the core of Dawkins' commitment to the search for truth. Much ink has been spilt on exposing Dawkins as being inconsistent, since if he is truly committed to proportioning one's belief to the evidence then he should be avowedly agnostic. But I think there is a much deeper, though less examined, irony. And this is that Dawkins fails to realise that a belief can be at one and the same time be both literally false and ideologically true. I will now explain what I mean by this conjunction, and precisely explain what I mean by the 'ideological truth' of any belief.

Let's take as our example the belief, held by some beliefs in Christianity and Islam, that the Earth came into existence only 4,000 years ago (or thereabouts). If this claim is taken to be a historical proposition, it is straightforwardly false. We know from the evidence of history and archaeology that there were humans long before 4,000 years ago. What's more, we know from the fossil record that life has existed on Earth for millions of years. So the belief in Young Earth Creationism is literally false. But even where religion might not be literally true, religious belief can still carry useful and insightful truths. It can carry ideological truths. For my purposes in this essay, I take an 'ideological truth' to be a truth that is symbolically conveyed or expressed by a religious belief, even where that

⁷ J. Searle 'Classification of Illocutionary Acts' from *Language in Society*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Apr., 1976), pp. 3-4

⁸ J.L. Austin *How To Do Things With Words* (Harvard University Press, Mass., Cambridge; 1976), p. 5

⁹ I draw an analogy here between the apparent weighty talk of moral objectivity we find in, for example, Abrahamic religions, and the similarly weighty talk of the robustness of truth found in S. Blackburn *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Penguin Books, 2008)

¹⁰ Briefly: I think that the fact that a belief is beneficial in motivating us to effective action and consequently pursue a goal provides sufficient, though not necessary, justification for holding that belief. So it is sufficient for an agent A to be justified in believing that *p* that belief in *p* motivates meaningful or morally valuable action. But it isn't *necessary* that this condition be met for A to be justified in believing that *p*.

religious belief isn't literally true. So in the case of Young Earth Creationism, the literal truth-status of the belief is a big 'F' for False. But it is not so easy to dismiss Young Earth Creationism's *ideological* truth-status. As a belief that captures the importance of caring for our planet, or that generates awe that our wonderful and intricately arranged universe warrants, or that reminds us of our sheer fortuity in waking up in the universe at all, I think that the belief retains some truth. It is true in part, if you like. I think that the literal/ideological truth distinction is a useful distinction, and one that reveals the extent to which the New Atheists are largely wasting their breath in denouncing the manifestly false claims made by the supposedly foolish religious believer.

I now want to consider some of the other problems that I find with New Atheism. Once again, let me stress that I have no vested interest in undermining the robustness of the argument against religion. I am a card-carrying secular humanist; I have personally rejected affiliation with any religious institution or network of beliefs. I don't know whether there exists a god, but I believe that the onus is on the believer to present good reasons that there does. And I think that the traditional arguments for the existence of god, especially the argument from design, are persuasive. I just don't think that they are sufficiently persuasive to render theism the most rational position on the question of whether a god exists or not. The source of my most intense frustration with New Atheism is that it assumes religious claims are exhausted by attempts to factually describe the world – that is, New Atheism is often unwittingly committed to what I've termed the TAO view. And I have presented reasons for thinking that the TAO view is false. I now want to present and develop two further objections that I have to New Atheism.

How to lose the argument and alienate people

Firstly, I think that New Atheism picks the low-hanging fruit. Armed with the TAO view and the scientific method, it subjects the claims of religion to scientific scrutiny and proudly exposes most, or all, of these beliefs manifestly false. Obviously water doesn't literally turn into wine, laughs Dawkins! Clearly we have better grounds to believe the otherwise-uniform laws of nature have continued to apply, than that a divinely-orchestrated miracle has occurred.¹¹ Claims of the scientific coherence of transubstantiation, of bodily resurrection, of flying horses, and whatever else is chucked into the basket that New Atheists like to label 'religious orthodoxy', are met with incredulous stares by men in white lab coats (and they are almost always *men*). I take this to be an extension of my original objection to the TAO assumption, but I do think it is intellectually lazy to dedicate hundreds of pages to those religious beliefs that are in an important sense not there to be literally believed in, anyway. An intellectually serious Catholic might well reject the thought that wine literally *is* the blood of Christ, but they can just as well scoff at the New Atheist's declaration that this revelation somehow proves religious belief to be false. What's false is the literal truth of transubstantiation; the truth that transubstantiation represents – that there is value in rituals that take us away from the commonplace and direct our attention to the sacred and the precious – is, quite plausibly, an important truth. The New Atheists' mistake, then, is to put religious commitment almost entirely in the head, when much of it belongs to the heart.¹² Once you've shown that wine isn't literally the

¹¹ On this point the New Atheists (particularly Hitchens) like to appeal to: D. Hume *Of Miracles* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1988), p. 37

¹² I apologise for the cliché, but I think that it captures the fact that the ideological truths of religious belief resonate on a far deeper level than any scientific repudiation of a given dogmatic belief ever could. I'm reminded of the *Angels and Demons* movie quote, made by a Catholic priest to atheist academic Robert

blood of Christ, you have failed to address any of the fundamental human anxieties: about death, loneliness, despair, and ultimate meaninglessness.

Secondly, I think that New Atheism's eagerness to denounce the religious as deluded, and their corresponding beliefs as absurd or dangerous, threatens to disengage a whole host of people who want to commit to precisely those sorts of humanitarian projects and moral progresses that the New Atheists in their moral high-mindedness proclaim that they are so keen to see. As I've argued above when discussing the aesthetic and moral interpretations of religious language, religious commitment provides in the best cases a conceptually coherent means to be morally serious and to escape crippling pessimism about the meaning of one's own personal existence. These drives – the first moral, the second approximately aesthetic – are the sort of drives that power innovation and that motivate people to take action to fight against injustice and even, dare I say it, irrationality. The New Atheist dismissal of religious belief as the very paradigm of injustice and irrationality – as the poison that pollutes our innate impulse towards human solidarity¹³ – effectively removes much of the enchantment and wonder we can find in the universe. I am not trying to conclude that theism is the only set of beliefs that can generate feelings of awe and splendour; of moral seriousness and a sense of obligation to make the world a better place. But it is certain that no such conclusions are entailed by atheism alone. The conclusion that there does not exist a god – so there's no transcendent law-giver to whom we are all ultimately accountable, and the universe was not designed with any purpose in mind – does not demand that we seek to improve the world around us to make it more joyous, more beautiful, and more just. Atheists can do all that, but not solely in virtue of their beliefs *qua* atheism.

I am not saying that we would not, or cannot, know right from wrong without divine insight. And I do not want to deny that for many people, the thought that this life is the one life we have acts as a powerful springboard to motivate a well-lived and virtuous life. My overarching thesis is as follows. We do not have many systems of belief which consider seriously the great questions of how we got here, how to live now that we are here, and where we are going. These questions are not asked in reality television; they aren't addressed comprehensively in any political mode of thought. In a world where religion continues to inspire moral action, to invest human lives with meaning, and on a good day to centre its entire *raison d'être* on forgiveness and accountability for one's actions, I see no overarching reason why we should force its demise. Religion might well die out in a few centuries. I suspect it will. But I despair at the thought of there being nothing of meaning and moral gravity in its place.

Once you have proved false most of the claims made by religion, as New Atheists are tremendously shrewd and well-practiced in doing, the hard work remains to be done. The challenge is then to give people a substantive, affirmative, and morally serious outlook in which they can invest. And I take it that such an outlook could borrow hallmark virtues of the New Atheists (on a good day) – inferring no more than is given by the evidence; awestruck engagement with the natural world – and unashamedly throw in the insights of millennia of attempts to understand our place in the world and how to act in it that can be garnered from human culture. And one of the greatest treasure-troves of

Langdon: 'My church feeds the needy and poor. What does your church [the "church" of scientific scepticism, the viewer infers] do?' from dir. R. Howard *Angels and Demons* (Columbia Pictures, 2009)

¹³ See, for example, prominent spokesman for New Atheism A. C. Grayling *The Choice Of Hercules: Pleasure, Duty And The Good Life In The 21st Century* (Phoenix, 2008), pp. 10-12

human culture is humanity's collective religious heritage. So I conclude that what we need is a humanist reformation. But that's to take us further afield, and it's a project for another day. The more pertinent moral I draw from the foregoing discussion is that religious claims aren't all descriptive truth-apt claims. Rather, religious language can be used perfectly meaningfully and intelligibly, even though it is not always in the business of purporting to describe the world. And on that score, at least, the New Atheists have got things wrong.