



What's Happening to Atheism

by Alister McGrath

*Professor of Historical Theology, Oxford University, and
President of the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics*



Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, and President of the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics (www.theOCCA.org). He was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1953. A former atheist, he converted to Christianity while studying chemistry at Oxford University. His many books deal with various aspects of apologetics, especially in relation to the natural sciences. He is now beginning a major research project on developing new apologetic methods based on an appreciation of the natural world.

New Year's Eve, 1999. The next day would be the year 2000—the new millennium! The world was swept by rumors of what would happen. The Y2K virus would cause global computer networks to crash. Airlines would be stranded in mid-air, with nowhere to land. Religious sects predictably proclaimed the end of the world. The British were told that the hottest party in town was seeing in the new year at the Millennium Dome.

With such colorful prognostications around, less media attention was given to another prediction about the new millennium. For some secular pundits, a new era would dawn, in which religion would evaporate as a significant force in human culture. Globalization would lead to secularization. Humanity would leave behind its religious ideas as children abandon their innocent and naïve belief in Santa Claus. It was time to grow up. As Richard Dawkins put it, "Humanity can leave the crybaby phase, and finally come of age."

It's not the first time we've heard this. For more than a century, leading sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists have declared that the next generation would live to see the dawn of a new era in which, to borrow a neat phrase from Freud, the "infantile illusions" of religion would be outgrown.

Now that the hype about the year 2000 is behind us, perhaps we can take a more sober look at those predictions. Neither computer networks nor airliners crashed. The world did not end. The Millennium Dome was an embarrassment of monumental proportions. Yet religion shows few signs of diminishing globally, even if its fortunes in western Europe are mixed. (Interestingly, studies indicate that western Europe is the only region to buck the trend of a worldwide surge in interest in spirituality.) The implosion of the Soviet Union, with its atheist (anti)religious establishment, led to the resurgence of Christianity in Russia, and Islam in former Soviet Central Asia. Radical Islam, having been suppressed under the secularist policies of Saddam Hussein, is now emerging as a major political force in western-occupied Iraq. And instead of spreading the secular Gospel of the west to the rest of the world, globalization has brought the religious passions of Asia and Africa to the west.

Past and more recent confident predictions of a secular future now seem curiously ill-judged. In 1965, the Harvard theologian Harvey Cox published *The Secular City*. It became a best-seller. Its message was simple: secularism was here to stay; God was dead. Its basic ideas are now regarded as somewhat unrealistic and utopian by most observers—including Cox himself. In his *Fire*

from *Heaven*, written 30 years later, Cox argues that it is no longer secularism that holds the future for Christianity, but Pentecostalism—“a spiritual hurricane that has already touched half a billion people, and an alternative vision of the human future whose impact may only be at its earliest stages today.” Pentecostalism, a form of Christianity placing emphasis on direct experience of God, now numbers something like 600 million adherents, mostly in the great urban sprawls of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It has long since displaced Marxism as the friend and comforter of the poor in these regions. And it’s on its way here.

Atheism, once seen as western culture’s hot date with the future, has waned both in influence and appeal. In part, this reflects the postmodern cultural mood, which is intensely suspicious of totalizing worldviews (whether Christian or atheist), and has a new fascination with spirituality. Celebrity preoccupation with the kabbalah or New Age spirituality is easily dismissed as superficial—yet it is a telling sign of our times. It reflects a deep-seated conviction that there has to be more to life than what we see around us—that human nature is not fulfilled until its spiritual side is satisfied. The Harry Potter publishing phenomenon is a sure-fire sign that rationalism—here reflected in the spiritual or magical incomprehension of the “muggles”—is seen as dull and plodding, missing out on something deep and significant.

But the failure of atheism also reflects a much deeper concern about the movement itself. It was easy for atheism to criticize religion in the nineteenth century. Back then, the atheist mantra that religion led to oppression,

the abuse of power, and intolerance seemed highly plausible. But that was before atheism itself seized power in the twentieth century. As the baleful history of the former Soviet Union makes clear, when in power atheism was just as oppressive, corrupt, and intolerant as its religious alternatives. Little wonder that those who had been “liberated” from religion in eastern Europe and beyond rushed to regain their faiths as the Soviet empire collapsed around them. Atheism is often portrayed as the “religion of modernity”—that great shift in western cultural mood which took root in the eighteenth century. So what is its fate in our postmodern cultural situation, which has inverted many of modernity’s foundational beliefs? Is it about to enter a twilight zone?

Secularism remains an important issue in the west—witness recent controversies over Muslim headscarves in France. Yet a recent conference at Princeton University’s Department of Politics raised hard questions about its future. Far from presenting a positive worldview of its own, secularism seems increasingly reduced to controlling religion in the public arena. Is secularism now just a means of publicly policing other people’s grand visions of reality, where it was once such a vision itself? Some are openly speaking of a “post-secular era,” in which religion fills the vacuum created by the failures of secularism. Others—such as Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury—make the more modest point that the global political agenda is being set by the concerns of religious communities, mostly Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu. Secularism has not managed to confine these “untamed passions” in a

(continued on page 23)

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Whatever Happened to Atheism

(continued from page 7)

private space, nor to rival their visionary power.

This might suggest that Christianity is poised for rebirth in the west. I would urge extreme caution about drawing any such conclusion from the evidence available, especially in the United Kingdom. Church attendance figures continue to dwindle relentlessly. It remains unclear whether this represents a loss of faith, or a movement away from organized religion towards more informal expressions of faith, such as the burgeoning house churches. There is evidence that it is the latter—but it is an interpretation that brings little comfort to the Church of England.

The 2001 Census disclosed one of the most striking paradoxes which the mainline churches need to confront, painful though this will be. Seventy-one percent of the British population chose to self-define as Christian (hardly pointing to a massive move away from religion)—but less than one-tenth of these attend church. What are the churches doing to encourage and support those who wish to self-define in this way? New ways of “being church” will have to be devised to meet the needs and aspirations of those who wish to be associated with Christianity, but not with organized religion. The gulf between the traditional worship forms of the Church of England and the culture at large has never been greater. Tellingly, those churches that are at present making the greatest impact on our culture are those which have abandoned traditional forms of worship. Is there a future, one wonders, for traditional Anglicanism? And if not, what will replace it?

The British mainline churches have neither caused nor yet significantly benefited from the failure of atheism. A step away from atheism is not necessarily a step in the direction of the churches. Although the Alpha Course is proving hugely successful in introducing a new generation to basic Christian ideas, the growing interest in spirituality in the United Kingdom is partly due to cultural shifts. Atheism, thoroughly wedded to a modernist worldview, has found itself beached through the rise of postmodernism. This movement regards the traditional atheist dismissal of the transcendent as arrogant and premature, and gives cultural and intellectual legitimacy to the wistful quest for something meaningful in life.

So what can we do? There are many answers that can be given. We need to take this shift in cultural mood seriously, and get away from the “modernism good, postmodernism bad” mentality that has emerged in some quarters. Neither is good, neither is bad; they are simply cultural moods that Christian apologetics must take with the utmost seriousness. Some older evangelists seem to think we have to convert postmodern people to modernism before we can convert them to the Gospel. So let’s get real about this. The greatest challenge that we face is building on a new interest in spirituality within our culture, and seeing if we can develop pathways by which that culture can be enabled to encounter the living Christ. Who said it was going to be easy? But there is so much that we can do. The new millennium has only just begun. Maybe it will surprise us all by the directions it takes. ■■

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