

# THE NEW INTOLERANCE

26 April 2012 Melanie Phillips

To judge from what we are reading and hearing almost every day at the moment, it would seem Britain is in the throes of a war of religion. A war, that is, between religion and atheism. Professor Richard Dawkins, the Savonarola of atheism, regularly hurls his thunderbolts at believers. Christianity, says the church, is under siege. Christians are being prevented from wearing the crucifix at work, being barred from adoption panels. Even Delia Smith has now brought her rolling pin to the fight to defend the faith.

At the heart of this great argument lies the assumption on the part of the anti-religion camp that this is a battle between reason and obscurantism, between rationality on the one hand and knuckle-dragging ignorance and prejudice on the other. And of course, that anti-religion camp is on the side of reason, and thus of intelligence, science, progress and freedom; whereas religious believers would undo the Enlightenment and take us all back to the dark ages of credulity, superstition and the shackling of the mind.

This assumption is based on a further given: that in the West this is the age of reason. And we think this, in large measure, because we have put religion, or faith, in a box labelled in very large letters, "Un-reason". Faith and reason, religion and science are supposedly inimical to each other. There is no overlap. They knock each other out.

So it follows that people who are intelligent can have no religious faith; those who are religious are either imbeciles or insane. Not only that, religious people are narrow, dogmatic, intolerant and unpleasant. Those with no religious faith are broad-minded, open, liberal and thoroughly splendid people whom you'd be delighted to meet at a dinner party. Little casts a chill over a fashionable table more than the disclosure that a guest believes in God.

I have a rather different take on this great division of our age. My view is that while we may be in a post-biblical — and post-moral — age, we have not disposed of belief. Far from it. We have just changed what we believe in. Our society may have junked the Judaeo-Christian foundations of the West for secularism. But this has given rise to a set of other religions. Secular religions. Anti-religion religions.

These are also based on a set of dogmas. They proselytise. They involve faith. But unlike the Judaeo-Christian thinking they usurp, these secular anti-religions suspend truth and reason. What's more, I would say that it was the Judaic foundations of the West which, far from denying reason, gave the world both reason and science in the first place.

God has been pronounced dead, and in his place have come man-made ideologies — in which people worship not a divine presence but an idea.

These ideas, which brook no dissent, give rise inescapably to intolerance and indeed to tyranny. Indeed, they are far more tyrannical in their effect than the God of the Hebrew Bible who gets such a bad press for being so authoritarian. In fact, he has a truly terrible time getting his way. His people are always complaining, refusing to do what he tells them, blaming him for everything and always, always arguing with him. But ideologies which represent the will of man bend everything to the governing idea, which cannot be gainsaid. There can be no argument with them.

Rather than being rational, I suggest these are irrational; not tolerant at all, but deeply illiberal; not open to other ideas, but as dogmatic as any medieval pope. Indeed, these atheistic ideologies are reminiscent not just of religion but of medieval persecutions, witch-hunts and inquisitions.

Let me illustrate all this with an anecdote. After a debate in which he took part some time ago, I pressed Richard Dawkins on his belief that the origin of all matter was most likely to have been an entirely spontaneous event — which meant he therefore surely believed that something could be created out of nothing. Since this ran counter to the scientific principle of verifiable evidence which he tells us should govern all our thinking, this itself seemed to be precisely the kind of irrationality which he scorns.

In reply, he acknowledged that I had a point but said that the alternative explanation — God — was more incredible. But then he remarked that he was not necessarily averse to the idea that life on Earth had been created by a governing intelligence — provided, however, that such an intelligence had arrived on Earth from another planet. Leaving aside the question of how

that extra-terrestrial intelligence had itself been created in the first place, I put it to him that he appeared to be saying that "little green men" provided a more plausible explanation for the origin of life on Earth than God. Strangely, he didn't react to this well at all.

However, Dawkins is not the first scientist to have suggested this. It is a theory which was put forward by no less than Professor Francis Crick, one of the discoverers of DNA.

A committed atheist, Francis Crick found it impossible to believe that DNA could have been the product of evolution. In 1973, Crick and the chemist Leslie Orgel published a paper in the journal *Icarus* suggesting that life may have arrived on Earth through "directed panspermia". According to this theory, micro-organisms were supposed to have travelled in the head of an unmanned spaceship sent to Earth by a higher civilisation which had developed elsewhere some billions of years ago. The spaceship was unmanned so that its range would be as great as possible. Life started here when these organisms were dropped into the primitive ocean and began to multiply. Subsequently, Crick abandoned this theory and returned to the idea of the spontaneous origin of life from purely natural mechanisms.

How can someone so committed to reason be so irrational as to entertain such a fantasy?

The answer, at its deepest level, lies in the very fact that they have repudiated the religion they scorn as irrational. Religion, or more precisely the religion of the Bible, and more precisely still the Judaism at its core, is the real crucible of reason. Those who reject the religion of the Bible are rejecting reason itself.

So why do I make this counter-intuitive suggestion that Judaism gave rise to rationality?

The popular belief is that the roots of reason and science lie in ancient Greece. Now undoubtedly Greece contributed much to modernity and to the development of Western thought down the ages. Nevertheless, in certain crucial respects Greek thinking was inimical to a rational view of the universe. The Greeks, who transformed heavenly bodies into gods, explained the natural world by abstract general principles.

By contrast, science grew from the novel idea that the universe was rational; and that belief was given to us by Genesis, which set out the revolutionary proposition that the Universe had a rational Creator. Without such a purposeful intelligence behind it, the universe could not have been rational; and so there would have been no place for reason in the world because there would have been no truths or natural laws for reason to uncover. Science could only proceed on the basis that the universe was rational and coherent and thus nature behaved in accordance with unchanging laws.

The other vital factor was the Bible's linear concept of time. This meant history was progressive; every event was significant; experience could be built upon. Progress was thus made possible by learning more about the laws of the universe and how it worked.

It is atheism, in fact, that is innately hostile to reason. Instead of worshipping God, man worshipped man. To be more precise, man's ideas became the articles of faith. But instead of wrestling with God, man's ideas brook no dissent, no argument. That's because they are not actually ways of making sense of the world, of asking the great questions of why am I here, what is the purpose to my life, how should I behave in ways that give my life meaning. The ideas that man worships are instead ideas he invents to gain power over his fellow human beings. They are ways not of explaining the world but of controlling the world. Therefore they cannot be resisted or argued against. There cannot be any alternative set of propositions. There cannot be any debate. They are a doctrinal belief system of power.

Indeed, atheism has given us through such ideologies a faith which repels reason. Ideologies such as environmentalism, or the belief in the innate harmony of the natural world; scientism, or the belief that everything in the universe has a scientific explanation; moral relativism, or the belief that everyone's value system is equal to everyone else's; multiculturalism, or the belief that no culture can take precedence over any other; egalitarianism, or the belief that everyone is entitled to identical outcomes regardless of their behaviour. These all repel reason because, instead of looking at evidence to reach a conclusion, they start with the governing idea and force the evidence to fit it.

All these ideologies are secular, undermining some aspect of Judaeo-Christian belief or ethics. But here's the strange thing: they all display characteristics not just of Christian religious belief — a body of doctrine, a belief that their story is the sole pathway to virtue, an instinct to

evangelise — they also share a feature common to the religious fanaticism of previous centuries (and past and present Islam): millenarianism.

Millenarianism is a religious belief in the perfection of mankind and life on earth, often associated with an apocalypse. It is a doctrine of collective and total salvation, and it leads inescapably to a totalitarian mindset. Because it is an unchallengeable doctrine of perfecting the world, any dissenter must be evil and so must be destroyed.

It is generally assumed that the Enlightenment put an end to that kind of religious fanaticism which gave rise to the terrible religious persecutions in the medieval world. In fact, the Enlightenment merely served to secularise millenarian fantasies. This was embodied in the core idea, no less, of the Enlightenment itself: that reason would bring about perfection on Earth, and that "progress" was the process by which utopia would be attained.

In the 18th century the Enlightenment thinker Condorcet wrote: "No bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human race. The perfectibility of man is absolutely infinite..." In the 19th century Herbert Spencer, the apostle of Social Darwinism, similarly believed that life would get better all the time. He wrote: "Progress is not an accident but a necessity. Surely must evil and immorality disappear; surely must man become perfect." It was reason that would redeem religious superstition and bring about the kingdom of man on Earth.

Just as Lenin believed, whatever fosters the revolution is therefore good; whatever hinders it is bad. In the millenarian and totalitarian mind, there is never any middle ground; and truth and reason are turned upside down to fit.

Unlike Soviet Communism, the mass movements of today are not so much political as cultural: anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, environmentalism, scientism, egalitarianism, anti-racism, libertinism and multiculturalism. These are all not merely quasi-religious movements — evangelical, dogmatic, fanatical and with enforcement mechanisms ranging from demonisation to expulsion in order to stamp out any heresies. They are also millenarian and even apocalyptic in their visions of the perfect society and what needs to be swept aside in order to attain it.

They name the crimes committed by humanity — oppression of third world peoples, despoliation of the natural world, bigotry, war — and offer redemption and salvation by returning to the true faith. Dissenters are heretics forming diabolical conspiracies against the one revealed truth. Since it is believed that the decision to invade Iraq, Israel's military operations, opposition to man-made global warming and the persistence of religious faith cannot possibly have any reasonable basis because they all deny the absolute and unchallengeable truths of anti-imperialism, environmentalism and scientific materialism, the only explanation for them must lie in conspiracies by the neocons, the Jews, Big Oil and the creationists, whose various hidden hands are detected in every development.

In today's society the left-wing intelligentsia, the environmentalists and the Darwinists are the modern equivalent of the Gnostics, the priestly millenarian caste whose higher knowledge of perfect truths puts them on to a superior plane from the rest of humanity: us lesser mortals who have to be exhorted to change our ways in order to be saved from blood-curdling apocalyptic scenarios — war and social disorder, floods, famine and pestilence, genocidal slaughter perpetrated (only) by religious fanatics but never by atheists (the many millions who perished under Stalin or Mao are brushed aside).

The environmentalists, for example, possess through their scientific credentials sole access to the truth that the planet is being destroyed. They preach that the Earth has been sinned against by capitalism, consumerism, the West, science, technology, mankind. Only when these are purged and materialism in all its aspects rejected will the Earth be saved and the innate harmony of the world restored.

In a similar vein, Richard Dawkins asserts from his position as chief Gnostic of the natural sciences that all must comply with his pronouncements on pain of being excommunicated from the realm of rationality. By redeeming its original sin of religious belief mankind can create an unbelievers' paradise, an anti-Eden, with no war, bigotry, persecution, tyranny, violence — indeed, no ills apparently of any kind. Gehinnom replaced by John Lennon heaven. Imagine!

And the religion that gives us John Lennon heaven is materialism — which has led atheist scientists to morph from science into scientism.

"Scientism" is the belief that there is a material explanation for everything in the Universe and beyond. Of course, there are — and always have been — many scientists who are also religious believers and see no conflict in these two parallel spheres of science and religion. Indeed, they think that each informs and deepens the other. By contrast, scientism holds that there is no place for religious faith at all because everything has an empirical explanation. Thus Oxford chemistry professor Peter Atkins has claimed: "There is no reason to suppose that science cannot deal with every aspect of existence."

But there are clearly many aspects of existence which lie beyond the province of science — love, appreciation of beauty, belief in right and wrong. Only dogmatism gives rise to the belief that there is no such thing as understanding aesthetic phenomena. Nevertheless, such dogmatism is precisely what is on display amongst scientists for whom science defines the world.

Since they don't accept that there can possibly be any questions science can't answer, the fact that it cannot answer such questions only proves that they should not be asked at all. The fact that science can't answer questions of ultimate purpose proves that there is no such thing as any ultimate purpose. The fact that science cannot prove the existence of God merely proves that God does not exist.

Yet as the theoretical particle physicist Stephen Barr observed, "materialism" is not actually science at all but a school of philosophy defined by the belief that nothing exists except matter. And this was also a "passionately held ideology" — with a purpose.

"Its adherents", he said, "see science as having a mission that goes beyond the mere investigation of nature or the discovery of physical laws. That mission is to free mankind from superstition in all its forms, and especially in the form of religious belief."

In other words, the "materialism explains everything" school had less to do with explaining the world — the true aim of science — and more to do with changing the world.

This goes right back to the 16th century and the father of science, Francis Bacon, who thought the point of scientific inquiry was not the advancement of knowledge but to bring about utopia. Then scroll down to the 19th century when Auguste Comte propounded the doctrine of "positivism", in which science would supplant Christianity in Europe in an attempt to liberate humanity by reason from the "arbitrary" wishes of an absolute Being to whom men were deemed to be slaves.

Comte openly presented positivism as a religion with scientists becoming the new clergy. And as the priesthood of humanity, positivists would allow no deviation from the one received truth. They alone would decide what was to be thought; there would be no freedom of thought or conscience in the form of any dissent.

But here's the thing. Comte wanted reason to replace religion. But he also thought that knowledge had to be based upon experience. And since experience is subjective, his thinking inevitably detached the mind from objectivity — and thus eventually from science.

As a result, so-called "rational" positivism plunged headfirst into deepest irrationality as Comte eulogised fetishism, or the worship of objects which were invested with spiritual qualities.

In a similar way, "directed panspermia" — or "little green men" planting the first seeds of life on Earth — also shows how, by fetishising material explanations, scientific atheism leads directly into irrationality and absurdity.

Scientism, materialism, environmentalism and all the other secular ideologies claim to be based on unchallengeable truths. In fact, they all manipulate, twist and distort the evidence to support and "prove" their governing idea. False beliefs are thus presented as axiomatically true. Moreover, because they proclaim the exclusive truth they have to maintain at all costs the integrity of the lie. So all dissent has to be resisted through coercive means. Knowledge is thus forced to give way to power. Reason is replaced by bullying, intimidation and the suppression of debate.

In the 20th century, the political totalitarianism of both Communism and fascism echoed the pre-modern despotism of the church in declaring themselves the arbiters of a totalising worldview which would crush all dissent. With both Communism and fascism defeated, however, the West has fallen victim to a third variation on the theme: not religious or political but cultural totalitarianism.

If religious totalitarianism was rule by the church and political totalitarianism was rule by the "general will", cultural totalitarianism is rule by the subjective individual. With morality privatised so that everyone becomes his or her own moral authority, the laws and traditions of the West rooted in Christianity and the Hebrew Bible have come under explicit attack. With no purpose or order in the world, it's everyone for himself. Moral and cultural relativism are the order of the day. Any attempt to prioritise any culture or lifestyle over any other is illegitimate. Subjective individualism is the one revealed truth, the old order of Western civilisation has to be destroyed and any dissent is to be stamped out.

Medieval Christianity — like contemporary Islamism — stamped out dissent by killing or conversion; Western liberals do it by social and professional ostracism and legal discrimination. It is a kind of secular Inquisition. And the grand inquisitors are to be found within the intelligentsia — the universities, the media, the law and the political and professional classes — who not only have systematically undermined the foundations of Western society but are heavily engaged in attempting to suppress any challenge or protest.

It is hard to overstate the influence of these left-wing doctrines on our culture. They form the unchallengeable orthodoxy within academia, from which base-camp they have set forth on their "long march through the institutions" which they have colonised with stunning success. They have managed, furthermore, to shift the centre of political gravity so that anyone who does not share these values is defined as extreme.

For the Left believes that its secular, materialistic, individualistic and utilitarian values represent not a point of view but virtue itself. No decent person can therefore oppose them. Anyone who does so is automatically "right-wing". In fact, such opponents may have no ideological position. But the Left cannot acknowledge such a possibility. In Manichean fashion it divides the world into two opposing and exclusive camps, good and evil; and so it creates as the sole alternative to itself a demonic political camp, to which everyone who challenges it is automatically consigned. Since anything that is not the Left is therefore "the Right", and since "the Right" is by definition evil, to challenge any left-wing shibboleth is to be labelled "right-wing" and put oneself totally beyond the moral pale.

So there can be no dissent or argument at all. Only one world-view is to be permitted and all other views are to be suppressed or destroyed. And because all that is evil is "right-wing" and all that is "right-wing" is evil, anyone who supports Israel or the Americans in Iraq, is sceptical of anthropogenic global warming, opposes multiculturalism or utilitarianism, supports capitalism or is a believing Christian is not only evil but also "right-wing".

In a follow-up to our "little green men" conversation, Richard Dawkins once again provided an example of what I'm talking about. In a lecture to the American Atheists' Association, which was mainly an attack upon a Christian professor of mathematics who is one of his fiercest critics, he also claimed — falsely — that I had selectively quoted him in order to misrepresent what he had said. In fact, since he was ascribing to me something that someone else altogether had written, it was he who had misquoted me. Nevertheless, the point of this anecdote is that, intent as he was on dramatising to the American Atheists' Association the full depth of my iniquity, he displayed on screen just three words to sum up what both I and the maths professor had done. Those words were "Lying for Jesus".

In other words, just as the Left assume that all evil people are "right-wing" and all "right-wing" people are evil, so Dawkins appears to think that everyone who opposes scientism and evangelical atheism is an evil Christian. Since I am actually a Jew, I'm not sure quite where that places me on the spectrum of infamy.

Dawkins's star may now be on the wane, since his extremism has begun to grate even among his erstwhile fans. But the witch-hunting of dissenters from the revealed truths of secular ideology continues to escalate.

For the millenarian, the high-minded belief in creating a perfect world requires the imperfect world to be purified by the true believers. From the French Revolutionary Committee of Public Safety to Iran's moral police, from Stalin's purges of dissidents to British and American "hate crime" laws, utopians of every stripe have instigated coercive or tyrannical regimes to save the world by ridding it of its perceived corruption.

The symmetry today is as obvious as it is striking. At a time when radical Islam is attempting to purify the world by conquering it for Islam and thus create the kingdom of God on earth, the

West is also trying to purify the world in order to create a secular utopia in which war will become a thing of the past, prejudice, hatred and selfishness will be eradicated from the human heart, reason will replace superstition, humanity will live in harmony with the earth and all division will yield to the brotherhood of man.

The result is actually a culture in which injustice is rampant and morality has been negated. With "discrimination" now the supreme crime and the very idea of a hierarchy of cultures, beliefs or lifestyles deemed to be discriminatory, self-designated "victim groups" can do no wrong while the majority culture can do no right. Any objective evidence of harm that may be done by such "victim" groups has been swept away. All that matters is that they must not be made to feel bad about themselves, nor be put at any disadvantage even if this results from their own actions.

Activities previously marginalised or considered transgressive are privileged. Those considered to embody normative values are actively discriminated against. In the cause of non-judgmentalism, only those who are in favour of moral judgments based on the ethical codes of the Bible are to be judged and condemned. In the cause of anti-discrimination, only those who believe in a level playing-field are to be discriminated against. In the cause of freedom, those who seek to limit its absolute and anarchic expression in order to prevent harm to others are to be denied the freedom to do so.

But there is a further curiosity — that in doing this, the secular, post-religious West is not merely adopting a quasi-religious posture but a specifically Christian one. The governing story of Christianity is of sin, guilt and redemption. And, remarkably, that is precisely the pattern lying behind the utopian agendas of Western secular progressives.

For the Left, the West is guilty of the exploitation of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. Britain has to do penance for the sins of imperialism and racism. Israel has to do penance for the sins of colonialism and racism. America has to do penance for the sins of imperialism, slavery and racism.

For the environmentalists, the West is guilty of the sins of consumerism and greed, acquisition, and luxury which have given it far more than it needs. So these things must be taken away and the West must return to a simpler, austere, pre-industrial way of life.

And because of its sins, the West is being punished through the wars and terrorism being waged against it. The West "had it coming to it" on account of its manifold iniquities. So America is responsible for Islamic terrorism that murders American innocents. Israel is responsible for Palestinian terrorism that murders Israeli innocents. And Britain is responsible for the radicalisation of British Muslims and the 7/7 London bus and Tube attacks in which dozens of British innocents were murdered, because it has backed America and Israel and is guilty of "Islamophobia".

As a result of all this sin, guilt and punishment the Western progressive soul yearns for expiation and redemption. By electing Barack Obama as president of the United States, Americans wanted to redeem their country's original sins of slavery and racism. Through the demonisation of Israel, Christian Europe wants to redeem its original sin of anti-Semitism. By campaigning against carbon emissions, environmentalists want to redeem the original sin of human existence.

As for the scientific materialists, the sin to be redeemed is not by man against God but by God against man. Their governing story is that uncorrupted man fell from the Garden of Reason when he partook of the forbidden fruit of religion — which now has to be purged from the world to create the kingdom of man on earth.

And for all these millenarians and apocalypticists and utopians, religious and secular, the target is the West. As Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit write in their book *Occidentalism*, the West is seen as a threat "not because it offers an alternative system of values but because its promises of material comfort, individual freedom and dignity of unexceptional lives deflate all utopian pretensions. The anti-heroic, anti-utopian nature of Western liberalism is the greatest enemy of religious radicals, priest-kings and collective seekers after purity and heroic salvation."

That's why the West is squarely in the sights of all who want to create utopia and are determined to remove all the obstacles it places in its way. For environmentalists, that obstacle is industrialisation. For scientific materialists, it's religion. For transnational progressives, it's

the nation. For anti-imperialists, it's American exceptionalism. For the Western intelligentsia, it's Israel. And for the Islamic world, it's the entire un-Islamic world.

I hope I've shown how these false faiths of ideology have not only sought to replace biblical religion but have used the characteristics of religious extremism to do so. The curiosity is that in their warped way they are all types of belief, types of faith. Moreover, in a society that prides itself on rationality there is a huge growth in paganism, the occult, parapsychology and the like. Of course it brings to mind the famous quote attributed (not necessarily correctly) to G.K. Chesterton: "When a man stops believing in God, he doesn't believe in nothing, he'll believe in anything."

Whoever actually said that, it's clearly true. So the great question is this: why do people continue to believe, even when they scorn organised religion as irrational or irrelevant?

Religious people would say that this shows the existence of God. Richard Dawkins would say it's a "meme", a kind of thought-gene which transmits itself from one generation to another. But memes don't exist — another example of the retreat into fantasy which atheists call being rational.

The obvious answer is that people have a profound need for something to exist outside themselves, something that gives a purpose to life. And when they deny the belief that there is something beyond this world, you could say that they seek that purpose within this world in secular ideologies.

Except that doesn't quite answer the question. Because one might assume that the reason they turn away from organised religion is because they reject any non-materialist beliefs as irrational mumbo-jumbo. Yet as I have tried to show, so much of what they do believe is irrational mumbo-jumbo. So there has to be some other explanation.

To help solve the conundrum, let's turn the question on its head. Rather than ask what causes people to believe, let's ask instead what causes militant atheists to hate religious belief so much. Why does it matter so much to them that people have religious faith? Why don't they just dismiss them as cranks and just leave it at that? Why does it matter so much, as the geneticist Richard Lewontin candidly admitted, that scientists will come up with crazy propositions in order to prevent "the divine foot in the door"?

One clue, I think, lay in the slogan on the side of the bus hired by atheists back in 2009 to spread the non-believing word. That slogan read: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." In other words, nasty religion puts constraints on your behaviour and makes you miserable. In order to enjoy life you just have to shake off religion and lose those constraints and then you will be happy.

I think this fatuous slogan gets to the heart of why people have turned away from biblical religion — not because it is irrational but because it puts constraints on their behaviour. This is the source of the hatred — that biblical religion is seen as a restraint on the ability to behave exactly as you want. What such people don't realise is that true freedom only exists within constraints; and far from expanding freedom, unconstrained libertinism leads straight to abuses of power. As we can see from the ideological false faiths that are filling the vacuum.

Which leads me to my conclusion. The only way out of this, the slow throttling of freedom of thought by secular ideologies and the corresponding erosion of morality and order, is to return to the true faith of biblical religion. To which people say: this is impossible in a world governed by reason. But as I hope I have shown, it's not reason at all. People currently believe all kinds of rubbish. If they are prepared to believe a dozen impossible things before breakfast, there's surely no reason why they can't believe the one allegedly impossible thing for which there exist centuries of scholarly exegesis and an impressive measure of supporting evidence. All that's needed is for God to have some rather better PR — for rabbis and priests to start marketing their brands in more imaginative and attractive ways. Ways which don't duck the mystery at the heart of existence which the false faiths of ideology, no less than organised religion itself, are patently quite unable to explain.

This is the text of a Standpoint lecture delivered on March 13 at the Spanish and Portuguese Jew's Congregation, Lauderdale Road Synagogue, London. These arguments are expanded in "The World Turned Upside Down: The Global Battle over God, Truth and Power" by Melanie Phillips (Encounter Books).