

### *Sermon: Aggressive Secularism*

First, let me wish you all a Happy New Year. Apart from normal friendliness, there are good theological grounds for doing this. For the New Testament word for *happy* actually means *blessed*. And you may remember that Aristotle said that only the good can be happy. So to wish you a Happy New Year is a little sermon in itself.

It is going to be a difficult year because of the deepening recession. And we are constantly warned that there is a high risk of terrorist attacks. You notice how the Bible is always up to date, as when it speaks of perilous times, *wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes in divers places*. But I should like to draw your attention to a threat which is even worse; and certainly one which is increasing in ferocity. I mean the widespread attacks on Christianity in Britain today. It is an appalling fact that there are highly influential individuals and groups who wish to see the Christian faith abolished. I am aware that this is an extremely serious allegation to make and so I had better give you some examples.

Polly Toynbee wrote just before Christmas: *As more faith trouble brews, it becomes ever more important not to ban religions, but to keep religion out of all functions of the state*. That is a clear call for the marginalization of Christianity. For the truth is that state and church have been closely connected in this country for more than 1000 years. It is the way we do things here. But Polly Toynbee sees nothing wrong with the atheists being active in public life. As if they were somehow neutral and without their own sectional interests. Of course Polly Toynbee has form on the God issue. Twenty years ago she wrote two pages in *The Guardian* blaming God for the death of her friend Jill Tweedie. This was a remarkable triumph of doublethink on Ms Toynbee's part, because she had already told us that she doesn't believe in God.

I read a book review by Joan Bakewell, every agnostic man's piece of incipient geriatric crumpet. The book was about convents and nuns. And Joan Bakewell remarked that these were declining and added, *And not before time*. Apart from the fact that this is not everywhere true, Ms Bakewell's animus against the faith is vicious.

The writer Philip Pullman has had a go at C.S. Lewis, author of the *Narnia* stories such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. C.S. Lewis was a Christian theologian and his children's stories are allegories of the Christian faith. Pullman is a sort of atheistic pagan with his own sinister spiritual fantasies in what I find to be his repulsive *Dark Materials* novels. Pullman hates Christianity but what he actually does about this is to launch a personal attack on C.S. Lewis whom he calls *racist, misogynistic and reactionary*. I guess Lewis would have accepted the accusation that he was a reactionary – and he would have gone on to identify just what he was reacting against: the sort of unwholesome stuff churned out by the likes of Pullman.

And so we come to Matthew Parris who has reviewed a book by Damian Thompson on the fringe religions such as Scientology and Satanism. Parris ends his review by wondering why Thompson didn't include Christianity in his list of dubious religions.

The intellectual standard of so many criticisms of Christian faith are extraordinarily low. Richard Dawkins, the high priest of the selfish gene, argues astonishingly in his pot-boiler *The God Delusion* that if God exists we ought to be able to detect him with our scientific instruments. Which is a category mistake: as if I should look for the laws of genetic mutation in the pages of *Pilgrim's Progress*. But there are more facile examples of atheistic argument even than Dawkins'. The atheists claim to be Enlightenment men, putting their trust only in reason. Typically, they look back to David Hume. Well, I flatter them. I doubt many have read Hume and if they have they certainly don't grasp the consequences of Hume's views.

Hume was a Positivist. He declared that knowledge comes to us only by either our senses or the language of mathematics. He famously said that everything except these were *sophistry and illusion*. But.... the declaration that all knowledge is derived from the senses or from maths *is not itself a proposition derived from the senses or maths*. So, on Hume's own grounds, his own philosophy must also be sophistry and illusion.

Hume in fact, all unknowingly, held an absolute presupposition about the foundations of knowledge. Nothing wrong with that. But he ought to have admitted it. There is no such thing as free-floating rationality. All rationality is based on some fundamental presupposition. I prefer the fundamental presuppositions of Augustine and Aquinas to those of the latter day followers of Positivism.

Another stick used to beat Christianity is Darwinism. *The Times* only last week said no one should teach intelligent design and that Darwinism is all we need to understand human origins and development. Really? But in order to *develop*, a thing first has to *be*. And there is nothing in Darwinism to say how intelligent – or even rudimentary – life developed out of inanimate matter. There is something else about Darwinism which interests me. G.K. Chesterton said that evolutionists must not imagine that survival of the fittest means survival of the best.

Picture a six-foot-four Adonis, bronzed and honed to exquisite fitness with a massive aerobic capacity and muscles like Popeye the sailorman. Compare this specimen with a dwarf-like, wheezy figure, short-sighted, suffering chronic ill-health. Obviously, you would prefer the six-foot-four Adonis – except that you've just preferred the lifeguard in *Baywatch* to Franz Schubert.

Now we are getting near to the truth about the atheists and secularists. Their attachment to Darwinism has nothing to do with its explanatory power concerning the creation of the universe. It throws no light on that subject at all. No, the atheists and secularists favour the doctrine of evolution for ideological reasons. It fits with their progressive prejudices. Starting with Darwin's first followers, such as Herbert Spencer, secularists have always tried to make a link between *physical* evolution and *moral* evolution. But it is a missing link. Because, despite the progressive ideology of the secularists, we are not getting better all the time. Look around at what's going on the world over and the plain truth is that humankind remains as mired in Original Sin as ever.

I have mentioned a number of individual secularists, but we should not ignore the fierce institutional hatred of Christianity issuing from central government and local councils. Everywhere there is institutional prejudice against Christian faith and practice. Government policies discriminate financially

and socially against marriage and the traditional family. Instead of protesting against these policies, it is depressing to see so many church leaders obsessed with low energy light bulbs and telling the government how to run the economy – having first conspicuously ruined the church's own finances . And the pressure building pro-abortion, embryo research and euthanasia is unrelenting. For these things too are seen as part of social Darwinism and progressivism. Everything so progressed and modern with no time for the primitive superstitions of the Neanderthal religious.

But the secular aggression has no intellectual credentials or philosophical coherence. Those who attack us are not the intellectual SAS, the elite, the brightest and best from the world of the mind. They are only agitprop progressives, people who have generally neglected even to examine the claims of the Christian faith. We are not being overwhelmed by superior minds but by intellectual barbarians.

Christianity still has the best tunes. We have the best words too. These are the words of the Gospels and the Creeds and the dark materials shall not prevail against us