An Atheist Gospel?

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In October 2008, an advertising campaign was launched in London to encourage the spread of atheism. A slogan reading: 'There's probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life,' featured on the sides of London buses advertising the message of a new atheist gospel. What, I think, is interesting about this slogan, whether or not one agrees with its basic assertion, is the way the idea of God, or rather, the idea of there being no God, is linked to the question of human happiness.

Christianity itself, of course, came into the world not just as a general or even a new message about God but, essentially, as a 'gospel,' literally a piece of 'good news.' The 'good news' of Christianity, where it was accepted and lived out, was designed to bring joy into the world.

So, it is surely somewhat ironic that the new atheist, or at least agnostic, slogan is still, in a curious way, a very distant but distinct echo of that original Christian promise of joy which the gospel made to those who would accept it. In other words, the new slogan itself links belief in its message with freedom from worry and care and the promise of enjoying life, just as the original proclamation of the gospel also linked its message with the promise of human happiness and joy.

Which is the more realistic message? Which is the more profound? In answer to this question, it might certainly be tempting to point gleefully to all the sins committed in the name of religion throughout the ages, and conclude that religious belief is obviously no guarantee of human happiness, since it has often led, not to happiness, but to the intensification of human suffering. But the contrary belief, namely, that, if you remove religion from life, human happiness is within your grasp (which is the tacit assumption of the atheist or agnostic slogan) is itself by no means self-evidently true.

If we look just at the history of the last century, we'll see that some of the worst crimes ever committed in the history of the human race, were committed by people who included in their pol-

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itics and policies the eradication of religion from human affairs. One only has to think of the policies of the Nazis, with their attempted destruction of Judaism, or of Stalin, with his attempted destruction of the Russian Orthodox Church, or, later, of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, with their attempted abolition of all religion and the creation of a completely new start in their country. One only has to bear these facts of life from the twentieth century in mind to realise that the equation: 'the abolition of religion equals the rise of a happy human society enjoying life to the full,' is just too crassly at odds with reality to be taken seriously.

When asked about the most important commandments of the Jewish Law, Jesus didn't begin with the here and now, with the immediately visible and tangible, with ourselves, in other words, but he began with God: 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' And then: 'You must love your neighbour as yourself.'

Yet people often ask nowadays: 'Why *not* begin with human beings? Let God look after himself.' A strong trend in modern culture (though it is found much earlier too) argues that heaven is, literally, 'just for the birds,'[1] whereas the earth is where human beings should be concentrating their attention and energies. The characteristic claim of Christianity is, however, that God and man cannot be put asunder in this way. And the deepest reason for this claim is that we believe God has created us in his own image. It is not within out gift or power to create a new image for ourselves, even if we wanted to. That is why, firstly, what we do to one another has a significance beyond our own intentions; and, secondly, what we fundamentally are, what the world fundamentally is, is not something over which we can exercise any ultimate control, but only something we can receive and acknowledge as the handiwork of God.

1. This trend could appeal, whether in harmony with the poet's intentions or not is a moot point, to, for example, the nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine's famous couplet from *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen:* 'Den Himmel überlassen wir/Den Engeln und den Spatzen' ['We'll leave heaven to the angels and the sparrows']. In the last century, the modern French poet, Jacques Prévert, opened the poem 'Pater Noster' with the words: 'Notre Père qui êtes aux cieux/Restez-y' ['Our Father who art in Heaven, stay there']. Cloud-cuckoo-lands have also, of course, been ridiculed before the rise of the modern world.