

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Three experiences in this building have prompted this paper. 1. My sense of sitting in the philosophy forum meetings is that the most fruitful ones have a bit of grit and contention – rather than simply saying what is obvious to all. 2. About 20 years ago I gave a talk to the Greater Manchester Humanists who were kind and open enough to have me a Christian priest address their atheism flavoured humanism. We agreed about lots of issues from what we think about the problems with religion to the state of the nation. But one assertion got me into trouble. They really did not like me saying that I think humanism is a religious movement – meaningfully part of the religious landscape. Then the gloves came off. Some of them were so upset I was very nearly thrown out. 3. Seeing AC Grayling make the case for proving atheism in the big hall downstairs. I don't think he proved anything of the kind. But I do think he demonstrated a lack of self-awareness for atheists in assuming religion is some sickness of the mind and spirit which infects the traditional world faiths but has got nothing to do with them.
- 1.2 I am going to make a case. I don't think I can prove to you that atheism is a religion. That would be over ambitious. My contention is that atheism often behaves like a religion and it often makes more sense to see atheism as a religious movement than something that has nothing to do with religion. And that atheism fails to evade religion considerably less than many atheists imagine.
- 1.3 We are going to spend quite a lot of time on definitions because to consider whether atheism is a religion we need to ask two questions:
 - 1 What is atheism?
 - 2 What is religion?

2 Theism

- 2.1 We won't spend long here. Our subject is atheism. But if you want to know what atonal music is you need to know what tonal music is. If you are going to call someone a moral you better know what moral is. So, if we want to



understand atheism we need a few minutes on theism. Theism is mainly about god. And we all know what god is. Oh no we don't.

2.2 Is god good or is god a baddie? Is god a personal being at all? It generally suits atheists to see god as a bad personal being because it gives them someone specific to attack. But of course for many religions god is no more personal than the wind or rain. More of a life spirit force is an increasingly popular picture of god amongst British people asked the second question what's god like after the obvious first one, do you believe in god? Is god living or dead as Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) said. Is god eternal and outside of time – Plato? Is god one – Islam. Or how about polytheism -are we surrounded by numerous gods – Hinduism. Can theists embrace atheism – well certainly many Buddhists think so. Can god be proved like Anselm (1033 – 1109) thought? Or only known subjectively – Kierkegaard (1813 – 55). Or whilst we are talking epistemology do we think there is more mileage in apophatic theology – the approach that says trying to say what god is challenging – better try saying what god is not. Is god transcendent – above the natural world or in it – how about pantheism? Or its modern twist panentheism – the world is in god. Does god have a beard like as pictured by Leonardo di Vinci and William Blake or is she laughing at our misgender?

2.3 I am not going to bore you with the history of how human beings have talked about god. The point is there is a huge variety of theism. God is hugely contested in multiple directions. There is enormous variation and the god talk is evolving all the time. And over the last few centuries in Europe people who call themselves atheists have become an important part of this conversation

3 Atheism

3.1 Atheism too is a contested term. In relation to theism it can mean non theism, anti-theism or possibly surrogate theism. I am going to set out some of the variety with the help of a living working atheist philosopher, John Gray (1948 -) as developed in his book 'Seven Types of Atheism'. Neither religion nor



atheism has anything like an essence. They both have multiple meanings. As we go through his 7 types what interests me is the variation in how each type sits in relation to theism and to what extent we might say they are religious.

- The new atheists. Richard Dawkins (1941 -) for instance, he sees as a slightly superficial media phenomenon – more a part of the entertainment industry than serious philosophy. He says they direct their campaign against a narrow segment of religion whilst failing to understand even this small part. He says they think of religion as primitive science. As a theist I am glad that some atheists realise how annoying some contemporary atheist rhetoric can be. He accuses them of not only knowing little about religion but also little about the history and variety of atheism. He passes over them quite quickly.
- Secular humanism which is a hollowed out hand-me-down version of Christian salvation history. Which like the first type lacks self-awareness to realise what it is. He calls it a sacred relic. He says the atheists in the ancient world had no interest in the value of humanity. Historian Tom Holland sets out modern humanism's debt to Judeo Christianity talking about man in god's image in his book Dominion. And progress is simply a modern version of the Christian redemption myth.
- Faith in science. This is science as a higher form of knowledge. Science often runs into arguments about whether the universe has a purpose e.g. Darwin (1809 – 82) struggled to accept evolution as a process with or without purpose. Transhumanism is religion recycled as science. He quotes Israeli historian Yuval Harari's speculation "the human species will enhance its mental and physical capacities far beyond their natural limits. Eventually it will turn itself into God." And if the aspiration to become divine is not religious then I do not know what is.
- Atheism as modern political religion. Jacobism in France was the first but Bolshevism and Nazism amongst others have followed. They bring together Christian redemption with gnostic power of knowledge. Surely communism is a religion as much as an ideology. And a religion whose atheism is an important feature.
- God haters. Here we get to atheism as anti-theism or miso-theism. Marquis de Sade is a famous one. Imprisoned in the Bastille for whipping prostitutes



and hating god. A more thoughtful example is Dostoyevsky's Brothers Karamazov character Alyosha who gives back god his ticket in protest against divine cruelty and unfairness. I once heard a psychologist say he had never met an atheist who could not describe the god he did not believe in. So, I suppose this is atheism as a relationship with god – quite a hostile relationship.

Gray does not much care for any of these types so far. But the last two he has more time for.

- Atheism without progress. Here we drop any piety about humanity. Religion is a valuable creation of human imagination at its best conveying truth we could not grasp any other way. But values are animal needs turned into abstract categories projected into the cosmos. The big names are 19th Century Spaniard George Santayana and Joseph Conrad whose experience of the Belgian Congo made him sceptical about Victorian progress.
- And bleakest of all, The Atheism of Silence. Arthur Schopenhauer's (1788 – 1860) mystical atheism is bleak, beautiful and austere. Hegel's (1770 – 1831) purposeful history is far too Christian. Stop trying to improve this world. Just tune into the silence and enjoy the nothingness!

3.2 I am going to read you the first and final sentences of Gray's conclusion: "The god of monotheism did not die, it only left the scene to reappear as humanity." The final paragraph which is hard for both theists and atheists to hear "Contemporary atheism is a continuation of monotheism by other means. Hence the unending succession of god – surrogates, such as humanity and science, technology and the all too human visions of transhumanism. But there is no need for panic or despair. Belief and unbelief are poses the mind adopts in the face of an unimaginable reality. A godless world is as mysterious as one suffused with divinity, and the difference between the two may be less than you think."

3.3 So, the atheist philosopher John Gray sees many types of atheism most of which have a religious dimension. An atheist cannot even introduce most types of atheism without talking about religion.



4 RELIGION - definition of:

4.1 Is football a religion? Many season ticket holders at Old Trafford & Etihad think it is. What about evangelical Christianity? I think most of us would say of course it is. But most of us are not evangelical Christians. Quite a few of them refuse to accept the label religious. We'll come back to them. Two comments of my own about the R word that are relevant to definition:

- 1 "Religion" is loaded with value judgement. Generally the word has a negative connotation. Not many people want to be more religious and many people who clearly are religious don't really like being called religious. A lot of people prefer to distance themselves from it. So I don't expect atheists to thank me for suggesting they too are religious.
- 2 And it's quite a recent term in the history of the world. I suspect if you asked a Hindu 4000 years ago 'what is your religion?' they would not understand the concept. They would just say Hinduism is just our way of life and how we see things. I think it has become more meaningful in the past 500 years as we see more religious variety on the table and more people trying to walk away from religious beliefs and religious institutions. To use a clumsy shorthand as society becomes more secular we need a word for what we think we are leaving behind. So, it is often quite a modern word to accuse some people of being not very modern.

4.2 The definition of religion is contested and the main binary I think is between broader catch-all definitions of what makes a religion versus narrower more limited definitions which tend to be favoured by atheists who want to escape this label.

4.3 William James (1842 – 1910) set out the classic broad definition in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. For him religion encompasses all the fundamental visions of life including the political, ideological & philosophical. "Religion is about the feelings, acts & experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend whatever they consider divine." Gotcha say the atheists because we don't believe in divinity so surely we are exempt. You won't find any of the gods and goddesses AC Grayling (1949 -) likes to mock in our



meetings. But James thinks we need to interpret the term 'divine' very broadly to denote any object that is godlike whether it is a concrete deity or not. So, I am sure he would have no problem seeing football as a religion. But Ernest Nagel (1937 -) sits towards the middle of the spectrum. Nagel gives us a narrower space to occupy. Religion is to do with believing or following any form of god. So for him atheism is the critique & denial of all forms of theism. For me the weakness here is that we eliminate several non-theistic religions (widely accepted as such) like Buddhism.

4.4 But Paul Cliteur (1955 -) in his article about this issue reviewing the contribution of James & Nagel goes a step further in narrowing the definition of R. He is suspicious of inflationary definitions of Religion and thinks it better to reserve the R word for an orientation towards some transcendent reality. And he favours a correspondingly tight definition of atheism. Atheism is about rejecting monotheism. So not all theisms but specifically monotheism. In fact, Cliteur goes as far as to say most atheism is opposing the god of the Christian church – especially the medieval scholastic church god. So, for him atheism is not a religion. It stands outside religion and leads the fight against R.

4.5 We are not going to settle this debate about definition tonight so let me try a different tack. In *Experiencing the world's religions* Michael Molloy (1940 -) gives us 8 typical features of religion. Lets go through them and see how football, evangelical Christianity and atheism map onto this 8 fold description:

- 1 World view. A lens through which to view and approach the world. Football scores fairly low. But atheism fairly high. Atheism usually has a distinctive world view. Some of its elements would be accepted by theists but its distinctive in its emphasis – natural explanation of reality taking the epistemological high ground with rationality and empirical scientific method.
- 2 Community. The richest community I have experienced is through church. I suspect quite a bit of the evolutionary benefit of religion is social. I am



always fascinated as a church person when I go to gatherings with a lot of atheists how similar to church it feels. Sunday Assembly is a network of gatherings that celebrates life without god. Of course they claim to be non-religious but it is not obvious to me why we would call church religious but not this group. The world view might be atheist but these gatherings are creating a community around their philosophy not unlike the practice of religion. I think atheism scores quite high here.

- 3 Myths. Stories that our group likes. Favourite tales that bind our group together. Grayling loves telling jokes against the church. His hearers love them. Even when a top philosopher is lecturing educated people the power of humour does a lot of the heavy lifting in the case he makes. You might think a talk trying to prove atheism would not have time to amuse people with the stupidity of church but this was quite an important part of his act in his lecture on Proving Atheism at the Friends Meeting House. It is a common feature of religious movements that they like to celebrate the history of their group by remembering past mistreatment of their heroes. In the 16c European Reformation Protestants remember the persecution of their people under Queen Mary whilst Catholics remember their martyrs under Elizabeth. Atheists love to hear about the church silencing Galileo and Darwin. Atheism is not without its group binding myths.
- 4 Rituals. Actions that have some meaning and are often repeated every time. Some religions are bigger on this than others. A Roman Catholic mass with processions, incense, a bell ringing at the magic moment when the bread becomes the body of Christ is high ritual. So is football. On the pitch – what a player does after scoring a goal. And off the pitch when a season ticket holder starts the day with their special breakfast, drinks in a particular pub and stands up to swear at the referee when a decision goes against their team. Its highly ritualistic. What about atheists. I accept atheism scores lower on this one. But when atheists gather they are not entirely immune from ritual. I think it is easy for any human group to underestimate the extent of their ritual. Evangelical Christians often say well of course RCs have ritual but not us. But go to more than one of their meetings and you will see the same sequence of singing, guitar, supposedly spontaneous outbursts of speaking in tongues etc. I would be on firmer ground here if I were trying to show how humanists use ritual. Look at their



naming ceremonies or weddings with vows and rings exchanged. Humanism is often a concrete expression of atheism.

- 5 Ethics. All religious movements are interested in ethics. What's right and wrong and how do we behave? Yes there are some Christians and Muslims who think that only members of their religion can understand and practice good morals. But that's a minority view. Most Christians in this country recognise that atheists play an important role in the ethics of our national life. And a fair few of us would go a step further and say that there are many ethical subjects where our theism can cloud the issue. And where god is better left at the door. How far can I push this? Well I suppose it is possible for an ethical movement to be totally non-religious. But imagine a table with a range of people sat round discussing euthanasia. You've got a jew, hindu, muslim, christian, an agnostic, an atheist and a humanist rep. And they are talking about how you balance the dignity of human life with the issues raised by people suffering years of poor quality of life alongside what modern medicine can and can't do for those nearing the end of life. I think it would be pretty meaningless to divide the table into two halves: the religious versus the non-religious or the theists versus the a theists. They are all wrestling with the same thing with similar concerns. The atheist might say we don't need religion to be ethical. I agree. But I would ask why do you think you are in a special religion exempt category round that table? Retired bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway's (1933 -) book Godless Morality says p20 "better to leave God out of moral debate and find good human reasons for supporting the approach we advocate". If he is a religious leader engaging with ethics why would you call an atheist doing the same thing non-religious. Here I think football scores low but atheism scores high.
- 6 Emotional experience. The rational mind does not fully encompass the human experience. I suspect that what keeps faithful members of this philosophy forum coming back is in part things you experience here that have got nothing to do with the rational part of your brain. I suspect some of Grayling's audience were not just only intellectually convinced by his case but emotionally moved by the experience of being there. Take the practice of prayer, is that simply believers in gods and goddesses talking to those gods and goddesses or their imagined projections? The Judeo



Christian tradition sees prayer as far wider than that. Prayer can be talking to yourself. It can be talking to your community. It can be reflecting on your own life as you review your own shortcomings. Atheist Sam Harris (1967 -) in his 2014 book *Waking Up* recommends meditation for atheists, which he sees as learning to focus on the moment to still the wild wandering mind. He is perfectly happy to use terms like Spirituality and spiritual experience to describe the benefits of meditation available to atheists. Of course you can have emotional experience without religion but consider these 4 people ; a Man Utd supporter is singing her heart out “glory glory man utd”, an evangelical Christian is asking god to heal his mother, a Buddhist is sat cross legged focussing on his breathing warming up for meditation and an atheist teenager is doing mindfulness at school. You could make a case for saying the first and final are not religious but it makes more sense to me to say all 4 are engaged in religious experience at least to some extent. If we take Gray’s 7 types of atheism I suppose some are more likely to be guilty of religion than others.

- 7 Material objects given spiritual meaning. Again Roman Catholicism scores high. Now many protestant Christians would claim to have no special material objects. We don’t have rosaries or statues. Football probably scores higher than atheism. Team shirts and scarves. But I think atheism scores higher than zero. Why was ACGrayling flanked by banners proclaiming the names of atheist associations with large prominent photos of the faces . What’s the difference between sitting in a church looking at a statue of the virgin mary or sat in the Friends Meeting House looking at a photo of Alice Roberts? Two groups of people gathering in front of two visual images of two heroic women. Does it really make sense to call one of those groups religious and say the other has nothing to do with religion? And if these images add nothing material to the experience why did the organisers go to the trouble of putting these banners in place?

Now let’s remember our evangelical Christian friend. If any atheist here likes to think that your movement is something quite different from religion so you recoil when anyone uses the R word to refer to you, then you are not alone. Many evangelical Christians refuse the label religious. And if you called them religious they would try to wriggle out of it. What many would say is yes of course the RC Christianity is religious with their material



objects and rituals but not to us. We are just people who have a relationship with Jesus. Religion carries a whole range of negative connotations and so its not surprising that many movements with a religious dimension prefer to think of themselves as exempt from religion. I think for atheism as for evangelicals escaping the reality of religion is more about aspiration than actuality.

8 Sacredness, what does that mean? There was a fascinating Radio 4 Moral Maze in July 2024 on this with the usual range of contributors spanning theists and atheists. And they pretty much agreed it means to be special or set apart from plain ordinary mundane life. So I couldn't help noticing that AC Grayling was the only person in a smart 3 piece suit – not priestly vestments but good as in marking him out as the celebrity speaker. And don't forget the occasion ACG was marking - World Darwin day. Yes muslims have Ramadan and I would argue that for this movement this was a sacred day marking a sacred figure. Football, evo christianity and atheism all score high on sacredness. I think for most Christians in this country the most obviously sacred reality is the natural world. Not the supernatural. I suspect theists and atheists have quite a similar view of the sacred.

4.6 So, how did our different phenomena score on these features of Religion? I would give Roman Catholicism 8 out of 8. Evangelical Christianity 7. Football perhaps 5 and Atheism 6. I see at least 6 areas where atheism exhibits R features quite strongly. My sense is that many football fans would argue for a higher score than I award and most atheists would plead for a lower score.

4.7 It's time we talked about stamp collecting. Grayling sees the hobby of stamp collecting as an important analogy for the identity of atheists. Or at least for the negative way theists talk about atheists. At p133 of The God Argument he says 'The theist has distinctive existential beliefs'. The atheist does not share them and therefore does not begin to enter the domain of discourse in which these beliefs have their life and content...so atheism is to theism as not stamp collecting is to stamp collecting. Not stamp collecting is not a hobby and says nothing about the non stamp collector." This memorable analogy is



misleading because AC Grayling like so many atheists is like a non stamp collector who is obsessed with stamp faults. He is more like someone who collects stamps to laugh at them or pass them round his friends saying “see how stupid this stamp is”. He may aspire to be a non stamp collector but he is really an anti stamp activist. A non stamp collector is indifferent to stamps. He has a strong commitment to discrediting stamps. So, I think his argument is weak.

4.8 If atheists were indifferent about God they would hold a stronger claim to escape from the R word. But so many of them are very interested in talking about God. Not just in metaphysics but ethics. Grayling’s own definition of R comes on p21 “religion is a set of beliefs and practices focussed on a god or gods”. I am pleased he recognises that R is about both belief and practice. Atheists who stress the belief part are simply showing how they have been shaped by European Christianity which marks itself out amongst religions by emphasis on beliefs. But the part that interests me most is ‘focussed’ on a ‘god or gods’ – no a religion does not need a god but OK lets agree that most formal full blown religions focus on a god or gods. Now my question for Grayling is who says that you have to like the god? No as you say the point is that you focus on the god or gods or goddess or goddesses. You don’t have to worship them. You merely have to focus on them. A great deal of Grayling’s focus is on God’s faults. There is nothing new or original about this. Jews have been accusing god of all manner of injustice, inconsistency and inhumaneness for well over 2500 years. That does not prevent us from calling them religious and neither does it provide any meaningful impediment to calling modern atheists religious.

4.9 Picture two groups of university students as we consider how to describe them. In Grayling’s University of the Humanities are a dozen people hearing a lecture on their metaphysics course about arguments theists have used to defend belief in god. The lecturer introduces Anselm (11thc archbishop of Canterbury) and then goes through his Ontological argument and then sets out the weaknesses of this argument. And the students nod along and take



notes as they laugh at the funny bits. Now cut across to Durham University and my younger self is in a first year undergraduate lecture called the history of theology and OK this time the lecturer is a canon at the cathedral but says almost the same words and the students respond in precisely the same way. The young people in those lectures are going to go on to do the same jobs with very similar extracurricular hobbies. So how do we describe them in relation to R? Does it really make sense to call one group religious and say the other have got nothing to do with R? The Durham lot probably have a higher proportion of theists and the London lot more likely to identify as atheist. But does this make any material difference to the core activity?

4.10 Now those two groups have just had a quick break and gone onto their next session. This time the subject is ethics. The Durham lecturer in ethics says I want to teach you a big bad word “Deontological ethics”. It means you do what you are told what to do by god. It’s about divine command. But its got so many problems we really don’t bother with this approach any longer. What we are interested in is ethical arguments that make sense in terms of human reality. His tone is quite apologetic. Well, it just happens that in London they are doing the same subject. Here the lecturer laughs a bit louder at how stupid religious leaders can be. But he too introduces the same big word and then proceeds to explain why we don’t want it. In almost the same steps. Perhaps the level of atheism is higher in London but are you really going to say that whilst the Durham lectures are religious the London lectures are nothing to do with R? No one denies that a bit of R is going on at Durham but in London they are studying R but from afar – uncontaminated by its stupidity? In Durham a god or goddess might pop down any minute but in London all is illuminated by rationality alone! As Grayling says if you are focussed on god or gods you are dealing with R and to some degree you are taking part.

4.11 To return to the analogy of football if you are on the pitch kicking a football then as far as I am concerned you are at that moment a footballer. You may not like football, you might not like people calling you a footballer. But if you chase or kick the ball you are a footballer.



4.12 AC Grayling may aspire to atheism like a stamp collector who simply gets on with life wasting no time reacting against someone else's hobby. But he can't leave God alone. Whether he is trying to prove atheism or introduce atheist humanism he is playing with god. Kicking god like a football. I think this makes him highly religious. He talks a lot about R in the third person but it never seems to occur to him that it has anything to do with him.

5 Conclusion

5.1 I recognise the rise of atheism as one of the most important developments in European thought over the past 500 years. I acknowledge they have won many battles against theism. But I ask two questions of my atheist friends;

1. When you use the word Religion to describe Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism plus others but never yourselves what work is that word R doing? Is it really a meaningful boundary of distinction?
2. It is not unusual for new religious movements to claim they have left the category of R behind. The early Christian church claimed this of the Jesus movement. Protestants claimed to have made this leap in the Reformation and many sects make this claim today. What makes you think Atheists have actually achieved this? Would it not be better to say that taking humanity away from religion is your goal rather than your actual achievement?

6 Questions

As always, with the Philosophy Forum there will be many questions thrown up by the subject of the paper and the subsequent discussions. Some questions for consideration in the discussion groups are listed below but there will be others that may come up for consideration:

- 1 What is religion?
- 2 Which make more sense, narrow or broad definitions of religious?
- 3 Will human beings always be religious to some degree?
- 4 How successful has atheism been in throwing off the tentacles of religion?
- 5 Do atheists have ritual?



Reading List

John Gray '*Seven Types of Atheism*', 2018.

Richard Dawkins '*The God Delusion*', 2006.

Tom Holland '*Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*', 2019.

Yuval Harari '*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*', 2014.

William James '*Varieties of Religious Experience*', 1902.

Michael Molloy '*Experiencing the World's Religions*', 1998.

AC Grayling '*The God Argument*', 2013.

Sam Harris '*Waking up: Searching for spirituality without religion*', 2014.

Richard Holloway '*Godless Morality*' 1999.

Paul Cliteur article '*The Varieties of Atheist Experience*', issue 78, Philosophy Now magazine.

