

**TU QUOQUE, ARCHBISHOP**  
**Brendan Larvor**

*Brendan Larvor finds that the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent arguments about religious education are a curate's egg.*

On 8 March 2004, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, gave an address at 10 Downing Street called 'Belief, unbelief and religious education'. In it he considers the future of religious education in schools, with particular reference to the suggestion that atheism might be taught in RE along with the principal world religions. Atheism cannot be taught, he claims, because it has no content of its own, and in any case the current type of religious education is defective because it treats each faith as a finished system of doctrines and festivals rather than as a living tradition. Politely and with his characteristic erudition, he squeezes humanism out of the picture, until he is able to conclude that the main job of religious education is to show how religious faith is able to stand up to the challenges of modern life. His argument touches on some very deep themes, including the nature of rationality itself. First, though, he argues that atheism is parasitic on religious faith because it is defined by that which it denies. This seems to be at the bottom of his attempt to exclude humanism from religious education. A mere nay-saying, he suggests, cannot have the intellectual, personal and educational interest of a living faith.

To illustrate this view, the Archbishop offers a mixed bag of modern atheists, including rationalists like Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx, romantics such as Shelley and Blake, and those twentieth-century linguistic philosophers who deny the intelligibility of religious statements. Of these rather antique atheisms (and Philip Pullman), he says:

All these modern phenomena are reactive, in the sense that we cannot understand them except in the context of a specific set of arguments or conflicts.

This observation is at least part of the truth about all intellectual and cultural currents, including religions. In the case of atheism, however, the 'specific arguments and conflicts' are not all, or even principally, about religion. Russell, Marx, Shelley and Blake were not arguing against or in conflict with Christianity only, as even a cursory glance at their works will demonstrate. None of these thinkers was merely reacting to religion; each found his atheism within some larger positive view. The twentieth-century linguistic philosophy that the Archbishop mentions originated in a crisis in the relation between nineteenth-century post-Kantian philosophy and natural science, a crisis in which the intelligibility of religion was a side-issue.

On the other hand, contemporary religious movements are all reactions to modernity (specifically, modern science and moral sensibility) of one sort or another. Either they go for a fundamentalism that makes sense only as a bulwark against contemporary ethical thinking (think of the religious right in the USA, or the Taliban, or the Rev. Ian Paisley) or they retreat onto safe ground and insist that religion has never said anything about the physical universe and didn't really mean the stuff about women obeying their husbands and homosexuality being an abomination. This, though, amounts to misrepresenting the history of religion in order to accommodate it to the present.

Historically, Christianity did have a line on the age of the universe and did mean the stuff about wives and homosexuals. A third option is to keep pace with modern ethical sensibility, but pretend that such changes are driven by evolving theological insight rather than external pressure. (I remember watching on television the General Synod debate on women priests. Both sides used rhetoric and wore clothes recognisable from feminist struggles elsewhere in the British establishment ten or twenty years earlier, but everyone present persisted in the fiction that this was theology, not politics.) Science and religion, the Archbishop insists, are not in the same business. Insofar as this is true, it is because natural science forced religion to abandon what had been part of its terrain. In any case, his

creationist co-religionists seem to think that science and religion do address some common questions. Either way, religion finds itself reacting to scientific developments. Turning to ethics, if we look where the churches direct their energy today, they seem to spend most of their public effort reacting to a world with which they are endlessly out of step. The Anglican Church is in turmoil over women priests and gay bishops as it struggles with questions that the rest of us settled years ago. Atheists may have reacted against religion, but religious believers do plenty of reacting too. If atheism is too reactive to be suitable for RE classes, then so are all the major faiths.

The Archbishop further complains that the variety of atheisms is too diverse to be taken seriously in religious education:

It is difficult to see them as a system; they share the denial of a transcendent agency but little else.

*Indeed. Here again, atheists can reply 'tu quoque' (you're another).* Sea of Faith Christians share pews with biblical literalists, but that's about all. David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham who once described the Resurrection as 'a conjuring trick with bones', is a quite different sort of Christian from those who insist on the literal truth of the gospel stories. These are not only two different beliefs, they are two quite different sorts of belief, yet they both count as Christianity. Perhaps the Archbishop would reply that this only shows the healthy diversity of Christianity — but then his own argument suggests that atheism has a healthy diversity of its own. If atheism is too diverse and unsystematic to be suitable for RE classes, then so is Christianity.

A little later, the Archbishop collects these thoughts together:

As an 'ism', atheism does not present a single face. Needless to say, this does not settle the validity of atheistic arguments; but if we are to think about them sensibly, we need to be clear that they necessarily

begin from various aspects of religious doctrine and are determined by what they set out to refute. To speak as though 'atheism' were a belief system alongside varieties of religious belief is simply a category mistake.

What is the argument here? From the fact that there are many atheisms it does not follow that these atheisms are wholly defined by what they deny. Quite the reverse; the variety of atheisms arises partly from the fact that atheists have other interests besides refuting theism. Certainly Russell, Marx, Shelley, Blake and the linguistic philosophers had far wider concerns. To pretend that their extraordinary intellectual achievements were nothing more than so many wilfully diverse attacks on religion, is to abstract these atheisms from their proper contexts, which is just what the Archbishop insists we ought not to do (and in another version of this argument he seems to recognise this). There is, however, another argument.

Suppose we accept, for the sake of argument, that atheism is defined by the faith it denies. So what? Consider anti-racism. Anti-racism *is* defined by what it sets out to refute. It would be extraordinary to leave it out of a discussion of attitudes to race on the grounds that it is reactive and responds differently to different forms of racism. To speak of anti-racism as if it were yet another kind of racism would be a category mistake too, but this is hardly a reason to leave it out of the picture, though no doubt racists would be more comfortable that way. So even if we were to grant the Archbishop his reading of atheism, his argument would not supply the conclusion he wishes.

Later in his talk, he falls into the fallacy of guilt by association:

The attempt to 'teach atheism' as a system is a deeply confused aspiration; the history of museums of atheism and courses in 'scientific atheism' in the old Soviet Union should be a warning about this.

Here again we may reply *tu quoque*. When Christians point to the Soviet Union, atheists can point with equal if not greater justice to the centuries of grisly efforts to enforce conformity with Anglicanism in England and other forms of Christianity elsewhere. The joint lesson of the gulags and the wars of religion is not about atheism specifically but about any attempt to teach an official truth by which people should live. In any case, no-one is suggesting that atheism be taught in the way that faith-schools teach religion. It could not be done, not quite for the Archbishop's reasons, but rather because British atheists and humanists do not have authority figures who could supply definitive doctrine to the curriculum. The pre-democratic hierarchies of the major churches have no equivalent in contemporary British atheism. Perhaps the head of an established church has more to learn from the Soviet experience than humanists who have to struggle for official recognition.

Let me move on to the argument about the nature of rationality, where I agree with the Archbishop's main point, but not with the corollary he draws from it. Rationality, says the Archbishop, is not exhausted by scientific method, that is by the use of neutral procedures to test and establish theses. We can also do humane scholarship; we can examine human practices from the inside using literary fiction and sympathetic imagination, among other approaches. Praying, he suggests, is one of those things people just do, without needing a reason to do it, much as they 'sing, swear, tell jokes, bury their dead, do pure mathematics or write plays'. The Archbishop has a point here. It is unlikely that ethics, art, sport or humour would make much sense to an enquirer situated entirely outside these practices, so if we want to examine them seriously, we have to engage with them sympathetically, as it were from the inside. Once this point is granted, there is no reason not to extend the same approach to the study of religion. I do have some reservations about the way he makes this point. As a matter of rhetoric, his list is excessively benign — people seem to engage in nepotism, violence and the scapegoating of vulnerable and marginal people in times of social stress without

needing scientifically-established reasons to do it, in addition to praying, singing, etc. Also, he sidesteps the objection that Christianity says something about what the world is like, and is therefore open to objective evaluation. The fact that people come to religion as part of a personal effort to live well is irrelevant. To pick up one of his examples: we may not need a scientifically respectable reason for doing pure mathematics, but we had better make sure that the mathematics we do is scientifically respectable.

These reservations aside, I wish to grant the basic claim that the practices by which we give order and direction to our lives are better understood through humane scholarship than by some approach modelled on the natural sciences. Reading Rumi, Donne, Suzuki, Dostoevsky, Camus or Pullman (to take the Archbishop's list of authors) will indeed grant more insight into the human significance of religion than an objective study of doctrines and festivals. The Archbishop suggests that religious education should use biography, autobiography and the arts to explore the way people struggle with their faiths and sometimes convert from one to another. It is on this basis that he reaches for his conclusion:

That religious education should include serious examination of what loss of faith involves and what are the elements of belief that provoke doubt and conflict is surely axiomatic. But it is in showing how religious beliefs sustain themselves in such circumstances that we best educate students in a critical understanding of their own faith and a critical understanding of faith in general.

In other words, the main business of religious education is to show by examples how faith can survive criticism. As he explains earlier in his talk, atheistic arguments are included principally as a means of clarifying and fortifying faith. The possibility that their conclusions might be true is not to be seriously entertained. Humanism is simply absent from this vision, as are students with no faith.

My objection to this conclusion is simple: atheists and humanists are people too. Our efforts to give meaning and direction to our lives are no less interesting and morally serious

than those of believers, and these efforts are also well represented in the arts, so there would be no shortage of teaching materials if we wish to explore them in schools. The absence of humanism (and more nihilistic kinds of atheism too) from the Archbishop's educational model is ungrounded (since I have shown above that his criticisms of atheism tell equally well against Christianity). The Archbishop wants religious education to include consideration of conversion experiences into faith and from faith to faith; further, he concedes that it should explore the loss of faith. It is simply arbitrary not to include the fourth possibility: conversion from one sort of atheism to another (think of the atheist who discovers humanism, or the humanist who lapses into nihilism; or the Marxist who abandons Marx for Nietzsche). When we remove this arbitrary restriction, an exciting possibility beckons: the exploration, using humane scholarship and the arts, of all human efforts to give shape and direction to life, of all human efforts to orient oneself with respect to the world, whether they be religious or not. As the Archbishop insists, the value and interest of such efforts is to be found in their inner struggles and tensions rather than in static bodies of doctrine. But this is true of all human striving after meaning, not just the religious subset. In short, the natural conclusion to the Archbishop's reflections on the nature of reason and the shortcomings of current RE — the conclusion that he might have reached had he not been an Archbishop — is that religious education should be replaced by philosophy.

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## References

The two talks by the Archbishop referred to are:

'Belief, unbelief and religious education.' [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons\\_speeches/040308a.html](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/040308a.html)

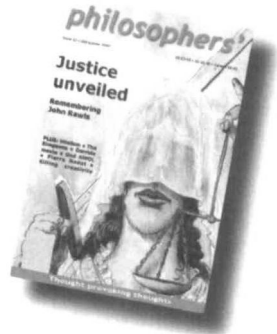
'Analysing Atheism; Unbelief and the world of Faiths.' [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons\\_speeches/040329.html](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/040329.html)

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