

DEFENDING THE FAITH TODAY (3)

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Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Harper Collins, 2007. 222 pages.

Intellectual arguments cannot by themselves lead to a saving faith. That is the gift of the Holy Spirit alone. Intellectual arguments can, however, move an atheist to reconsider his beliefs and conclude that he may have been wrong. This happened to the English philosopher Antony Flew (1923), who for more than 50 years had been among the most influential twentieth-century atheistic philosophers. In 2004, however, at a conference in New York, he announced, to the horror of militant atheists worldwide, that he “now accepted the existence of a God.”

Although renouncing his atheism, Flew has not become a Christian. His religious pilgrimage, he says, has been a pilgrimage not of faith but of reason, “an exercise in what is traditionally called natural theology.” Taught by Socrates, he simply decided to “follow the argument wherever it leads.” In his case the argument, which was based on scientific evidence, led to belief in “a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, omniscient Being” – a Being that he says is similar to “the God of Aristotle” (who in turn can be compared to the God of deism).

But although Flew does not believe in the God of the Bible, he also does not deny the possibility of either his existence or his self-revelation. The book under review contains (in an Appendix) a dialogue between Flew and New Testament scholar N. T. Wright entitled “The Self-Revelation of God in Human History.” At the conclusion of this dialogue Flew states that he is “very much impressed with Bishop Wright’s approach,” even though he has not been fully convinced. But he does admit that divine revelation is not to be ruled out, since “you cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence.” He is not sure, however. As he states elsewhere in the book, while some people claim to have made contact with the Divine Mind, he has not been able to do so – at least not yet. But he adds, “Who knows what could happen next?”

Flew and the rebirth of Christian philosophy

Flew wrote his book with co-author Roy Abraham Varghese, a well-known Christian thinker who for years has explored the relationship between faith and science. In the book’s Preface, Varghese takes pains to distinguish Flew from men like Richard Dawkins and his associates – the so-called “new atheists” of the present decade. These men, he observes, refuse to play according to the rules and therefore have no place in the history of serious modern philosophy. They say little or nothing, for example, about the formal arguments for the existence of God, don’t bother to account for the origin of a law-abiding and rationally accessible universe, and proclaim (at least Dawkins does) that it is science which must decide about the existence or non-existence of God. Their approach is sufficiently outdated and outrageous to have aroused the contempt of serious philosophers, both Christians and non-Christians. Flew belongs to that group of critics. He questioned the validity of the approach also before his “conversion.”

Varghese’s concern is to describe Flew’s prominent place in the world of twentieth-century philosophy. There have been many other atheistic philosophers in his days – such as Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell, Sir Alfred Ayer, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger (to name only the most famous). None of these, however, was specifically a philosopher of religion. Flew alone tackled the religious issue consistently and systematically, and in the process, Varghese writes, he changed the framework of the discussion. He insisted, for example, that atheism was the default position, one that needed no defence. The burden of proof rested with theism. But by thus

challenging his Christian opponents, Flew in fact facilitated the rebirth of Christian analytical philosophy to which I referred in the first installment of this series.

It was especially North American and English Christians who responded to the challenge. A leader among the former was Reformed philosopher Alvin Plantinga, who proposed that theism (belief in God) is a properly basic belief, similar to belief in the reality of other basic things such the existence of other minds, or of what you perceive around you, or of what you remember about certain events in the past. In all these cases you trust your cognitive faculties. It is true, you cannot *prove* the belief in question, but to disbelieve its truth would, generally speaking, be insanity. So it is with belief in God.

Meanwhile the American Thomist philosopher Ralph McInerny reasoned that belief in God is natural because of the order and law-abiding character of nature. This, McInerny said, makes the idea of God almost innate and thus poses a strong argument against atheism. “So, while Plantinga argued that theists did not bear the burden of proof,” Flew writes, “McInerny went still further, holding that the burden of proof must fall on atheists.” It was these reactions, then, that marked the beginning of the renaissance of Christian philosophy. That event did not remain unnoticed. In April 1966 *TIME* Magazine had printed with big red letters on a black cover the question, “Is God Dead?” But by 1980 the reversal was well enough known for the same magazine to proclaim that “God is making a comeback” – most strikingly so among Anglo-American philosophers.

The Mind of God

Flew tells us that he made his first public argument for atheism in 1950. Paradoxically, he adds, that paper was presented at the Oxford Socratic Club, chaired from 1942 to 1954 by “the redoubtable” C.S. Lewis, “the greatest Christian apologist of the last century.” Flew’s attendance at this club did not shake his atheist beliefs. That happened decades later. But he did take to heart the Socratic maxim (to which Lewis also subscribed) that one ought to be relentless in following the evidence.

The main cause of his growing disbelief in atheism, he says, was the world picture produced by modern science. He highlights three aspects of the world that he now believes point to a God, namely the fact that nature obeys laws, the existence of intelligently organized and purposeful life, and the existence of the universe itself. He pays attention to important developments in each of these three areas, such as the Big Bang theory, the discovery of the fine-tuning of the universe, and the discovery of the DNA structure in the late 1950s, as well as the outcome of subsequent DNA research.

With respect to the first point, the existence of the laws of nature, Flew observes that we see not merely regularities in nature, but that these regularities are mathematically precise, universal, and tied together. Einstein spoke of this phenomenon as “reason incarnate” and explained its existence with reference to “the Mind of God.” The same answer was given by practically all the “new physicists” of the early twentieth century.

Both Flew and Varghese stress this point. It is widely proclaimed, also by the new atheists, that real intellectuals – specifically scientists and philosophers – cannot honestly believe in the supernatural. Science and reason, they claim, have disproved God’s existence. Richard Dawkins, for example, insists that Albert Einstein, though he spoke of an Infinite Intelligence and even used the word God in describing it, was in fact an atheist. Dawkins followed Flew here, who had earlier indeed described Einstein as an atheist. Later authors, however, refuted the charge and Flew blames Dawkins for ignoring the subsequent evidence. He quotes Einstein himself as saying that although he (Einstein) did not believe in a personal God, he was neither an atheist nor a pantheist. It was necessary on rational grounds, he insisted, to postulate a supernatural, infinite Intelligence.

And indeed, Flew observes, the orderliness and law-abiding character of nature pose an insurmountable problem for atheists.

The universe needs explaining

So do recent scientific discoveries such as the theory of the Big Bang and the fine-tuning of the universe. For Flew these discoveries constituted a turning point. He used to assume, he tells us, that the universe and its laws were ultimate and fundamental, something to be accepted as “brute facts” – that is, facts that do not allow for an explanation. But that was only possible (or so he believed) if one assumed the universe to be eternal. The Big Bang theory showed that it had a beginning, which meant that an explanation of its existence was necessary after all. The discovery of the fine-tuning of the universe added to the atheists’ problems. As I have shown elsewhere,¹ many an atheist tried to avoid a theistic explanation by proposing such expedients as the existence of a *multiverse* – an infinite number of invisible parallel universes which, because of their great number, would by mere accident include one universe that was fine-tuned for life, namely our own. And some try to get rid of the problems posed by the Big Bang evidence for a beginning by suggesting that the universe exists through an infinite repetition of Big Bangs and Big Crunches. They ignore the fact that such a hypothesis, even if it could be proven, does nothing to solve the atheists’ problem, since here too the question of an ultimate cause remains.

Flew’s answer to the multiverse hypothesis is that while it is logically possible for multiple universes with their own laws of nature to exist, this does not mean that they *in fact* exist. There is currently no evidence for a multiverse; it remains a speculative idea, and a rather desperate one at that. He quotes Richard Swinburne’s remark that “It is crazy to postulate a trillion. . . universes to explain the features of one universe, when postulating one entity (God) will do the job.” Flew himself compares the atheist attempt to the case of a school boy “whose teacher doesn’t believe a dog ate his homework, so he replaces the first version with the story that a pack of dogs – too many to count – ate his homework.” Not only have atheists failed to answer the question how the multiverse came into being and how the laws of nature arose, they have in fact greatly complicated things for themselves. “If the existence of one universe requires an explanation,” Flew argues, “multiple universes require a much bigger explanation: the problem is increased by the factor of whatever the total number of the universes is.” Again quoting Swinburne, he concludes that “the existence of a complex physical universe of finite or infinite time is something ‘too big’ for science to explain.”

In sum, science qua science cannot prove God’s existence. But it is also true that the laws of nature, the existence and nature of life, and the existence of the universe itself can only be explained “in the light of an Intelligence that explains both its own existence and that of the world.”

Take and read

Flew has described in this book some of the important arguments of natural theology, and he has done so in terms that the informed lay reader will be able to follow. I heartily recommend his book. I do so not merely because of its contents, as interesting as they are, but also and especially because Flew’s experience shows so clearly that science-based arguments against a materialistic, godless world picture can be intellectually persuasive. Christians ought to be aware of this fact and make use of the arguments. They must do so, as I mentioned before, both as a defensive strategy, in order to help

¹ See, e g., “Modern Science and the Christian Faith,” 2, *Clarion*, May 23, ‘08.

fellow-believers deal with attacks on the faith, and as an offensive one, namely in attempts to convince unbelievers and skeptics of atheism's absolute inability to explain the existence of the universe.