

# Sacred Atheism, or Atheism in the Service of Beauty

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Richard Dawkins  
and Rowan Williams  
before their debate at  
Oxford University,  
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There has been a great deal of talk about the departure of Americans, especially among the youngest generation, from established institutions of religious practice. “Spiritual but not religious” is the label of choice for many of those newly separated from traditional religious structures. A smaller but ever-increasing cohort prefers a direct declaration of “atheist” or “agnostic.”

Though the spiritual-not-religious may express their dissatisfaction with

religious structures in a way distinct from atheists, they have more in common than may first appear. Both groups take for granted the anti-scientific, objectified, conceptualized, codified nature of religious faith in the contemporary world and find it wanting. The harder atheist position includes a critique of metaphysical arguments and rational conceptions of God. The spiritual-not-religious react more powerfully to institutions’ attempts to regulate sexual behavior, exclude new ideas, and attack scientific knowledge.

What is it, precisely, that the “nones” reject? They reject the Church as an institution in pursuit of social conformity, a public structure searching for a metaphysical basis for crowd control. The voice of the religious institution seems to say, “How are we to engage the unruly masses in the great project of civilization, tame their appetite for unstructured awe, and substitute for it a reflexive credulity, dependent on the religious institution as the dispenser of everything one needs to know?” The church morphs into a repository of formulaic dogmas and miraculous narratives, ideally suited for providing all the arguments necessary to dispel doubt and furnish certainty.

But what if the foundation and aim of religion is something other than what is popularly understood? What if the common definitions and descriptions of the divine distort more than they enlighten? What if the conceptualization of the divine leads to an excessive confidence in human formulations to define religious experience? What if an excessive certainty in theological precision leads to the imposition of idolatry and religious conformity instead of truth?

Let’s begin with the rehabilitation of some terms much despised in Christian circles. The first of these, despised with ample historical basis, is atheism. Another irritant, especially detested by contemporary culture warriors, is secular humanism. But what might be called *sacred atheism* and *sacred humanism* have a crucial contribution to make. This proposition continues a line of thought begun by one of the great Orthodox thinkers of the twentieth century. Olivier Clément, modifying terminology from Sergii Bulgakov, proposed *divino-humanism*, an idea corresponding

more or less to what I will discuss here as sacred humanism.<sup>1</sup> Clément was both praised and vilified for proposing that the insights of atheists such as Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Ludwig Feuerbach should be incorporated into the future of Orthodoxy, essentially assigning atheism a sacred role.

Discussions, rants, and formal debates between non-believers and believers have become quite common in the world of social media. The recorded results only rarely rise to an intellectually rigorous level. There are exceptions. Among them are the debates held at Oxford University in 2012 and Cambridge University in 2013 between Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, and Rowan Williams, the theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury. Toward the end of the Oxford debate, the following exchange occurred between the two participants:

**Dawkins:** What I can’t understand is why you don’t see the extraordinary beauty of the idea that we can explain the world, the universe, life—physicists are now telling us—starting from literally nothing. That is such a staggeringly elegant and beautiful thing. Why would you want to clutter up your worldview with something so messy as a god? . . .

**Williams:** Interesting you say clutter, because I entirely agree about the elegance and beauty of what you’re talking about. . . . I was happy to quote you in a Christmas sermon a couple of years ago on this subject because, if I may say so, you write wonderfully about exactly that elegance and that beauty. It’s a delight to read and I find I am inspired by

<sup>1</sup> See the excellent treatment of Clément’s thought by Pantelis Kalaitzidis in this issue of *The Wheel*.

that. I don't see "clutter" coming into it at all, for the simple reason that I'm not thinking of God as an extra that has to be shoehorned somehow into this—

**Dawkins:** —which is exactly how I see it!

**Williams:** Yes, well, that's where we disagree, isn't it?<sup>2</sup>

And so we are met with the insight that Dawkins and Williams were on the verge of articulating, had not the incompetent moderator so rudely interrupted the flow of their thoughts. They did not quite have the time to say how the beauty they both perceived was an entry, an access point, the portal through which one must pass to understand the meaning and significance of human experience in the universe, with or without using the word "god."

Is Dawkins' rejection of the "shoehorned" god a rejection of the one true God, or a denunciation of inadequate language ("clutter") used to describe ultimate reality? Is Dawkins sending people away from God, or merely smashing idols? Dawkins sees "god" as an extraneous object that has to be forced into the universe to make it fit; is there another way to look at god?

Richard Dawkins is not quite as much of an atheist as he and many of his online admirers protest. He believes in Beauty. At the end of the debate, he was deprived of an opportunity to articulate how the beauty we perceive in the universe (and our descriptions of it) constitutes an ultimate value. Are we too optimistic in hoping he might offer a perspective on the question of the divine more useful than endless wrangling over the existence of some objectively defined god? Whether god exists or not is secondary to the

question, "Who do you say god is?" or, "How should god be described?" Indeed, the question of the existence of god disappears entirely once one admits the problem of god's existence is solved only when that god is defined.

Richard Dawkins might be doing God's work.

Rowan Williams did not have the chance to express how God is an integral part of the beauty perceived in creation, not a "shoehorned" afterthought. Though he had little opportunity to show it at the end of this debate, we don't have to look hard to find such thoughts elsewhere in his work.

Rowan Williams is doing God's work—a less surprising assertion.

But is any of this real? Is there any hope to revive the Church by recognizing the truth and power of Beauty? The verdict is still out. Various proposals, from right and left, have been advanced to entice the nones back to the fold. Results to date are not encouraging. On the one hand are some who came to faith from a background very much like my own (I was raised in a non-religious home, coming to Christianity as a young adult) but are now enamored of a church that eschews "deviant" modernity and revels in the resurrection of antiquarian peculiarities. These are the converts to spiritual archeology, who maintain that the most faithful replica of the (imagined) past must be the Church's project for the future. Rod Dreher, in *The Benedict Option*, proposes a modern recreation of the late antique withdrawal from contemporary life. Dreher's idealization of the Christian past is hardly unique; such spiritual projects appear in abundance on the

<sup>2</sup> "Richard Dawkins versus Rowan Williams: Humanity's Ultimate Origins," Oxford University, February 2012, 1:19:00 to 1:20:15, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zruh7XqSxo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zruh7XqSxo).

internet. On the other hand, progressive voices for change (certainly less common in the Orthodox Church) are calls for the demythologizing of all premodern narratives, which are considered incompatible with modern scientific understanding. The late Episcopalian bishop John Shelby Spong and his admirers constitute the far left flank of this tendency.

All of these efforts—on both “right” and “left”—are doomed to fail, not because they have nothing to contribute, but because they lack a unified understanding of the essence of the Church, the role of the Church in every age, regardless of its current ascending or descending status. In the past, a burden fell upon the Church that far exceeded its divine calling. The accidents of history are responsible for the unwieldy agglomeration of functions absorbed by the Church. The problems began when its prepackaged, overburdened mechanisms for decreeing comfort and certainty (dating to the time of the Constantinian settlement) became overwhelmed by newer, updated visions of awe at the beauty of the universe. This should never have been a stumbling block for the Church, yet the historical institution, overwhelmed by the accretion of social responsibilities, balked at any challenge to the safe descriptions of God created in the past. But true beauty is never safe. It is always a challenge, always new, as inexhaustible as the creator on whose ground it rests.

The sacred atheist plays the role of C. S. Lewis’s Andrew McPhee in *That Hideous Strength*, the role of the eternal skeptic, the doubter, who refuses easy answers unsupported by evidence. This is the one who will not accept a Christian faith based on a frozen cultural artifact that claims to

be *the* Church. Dawkins finds beauty in scientific inquiry; Williams insists that true theology expresses it too, that the same beauty is found in the cosmos and in revelation. Sacred atheism is capable of service to the beauty of creation, and hence—perhaps surprisingly—of service to sacred theology.

Why indeed *should* Dawkins accept the dried out husk of a conceptualized god, the objective god (who is no god at all), if an infinitely more compelling model of *divine beauty* is available? Atheism is not the enemy; it is barely mentioned at all in Scripture (though Psalm 14 is often mistakenly taken as a reference to atheism). Idolatry, on the other hand, is front and center on the list of condemnations. This is not to say that Dawkins and the spiritual-not-religious crowd are missing out on nothing; they most certainly are. But at whose feet should we lay the blame for their lack of vision? Is it their own fault, or the fault of those who have trivialized the infinite, conceptualized and objectified the incomprehensible, and reduced divine beauty to law and syllogism?

Secular humanism may or may not be a viable social philosophy, but sacred humanism is essential for Christian faith—especially for those who recoil at the word “humanism.” It is what allows the construction of the Church. Christianity can never be an *individual* experience. The contemplative comes down from the mountain and greets others. The shepherd describes the sunset after the thunderstorm: “I too saw what you describe!” The subjective becomes the possession of all through the communal experience of Beauty. The necessarily subjective and individual becomes ecclesial, liturgical. If the access point that allows the discovery of the one true God (not the

ersatz god, the demiurge, the decoy deity) is perception of divine beauty, then the collective response, *sacred humanism*, is the True Church, where we give thanks for Beauty, Life, and Truth, where we offer back to God all the beauty we have found. In this way, we are all artists, co-creators with the one creator. And we recognize the beauty in each and every one of us as Christ himself.

The nones have walked away from much of the religious teaching of the past. This teaching was often an amalgam of scientific speculation (now hopelessly outdated), moral teaching that allowed a certain level of social cohesion (dangerous if applied rigidly, with no regard for context), and genuine insight into humankind's existential predicament, which was often expressed through poetry and narrative. Only the last of these elements deserves our attention, and it must be carefully severed from the former two.

Sacred atheism keeps us honest. It smashes the conceptual idols that prevent us from seeing the entry points to communion with the one true God. Sacred humanism allows us, who have managed to catch a glimpse of the divine beauty insofar as it has become visible in creation, to see the beauty in nature, in our art, our music, our gardens, our pets, our work, our hobbies, our spouses, and our neighbors, so that we find ourselves compelled to create our own sacred space, with and without words, recreating the divine beauty in worship, in liturgy. In this way we discover the universal human vocation. Sacred theology, then, has a very humble role: to provide words that help us reorder ourselves to the contemplation of that which surpasses all understanding.

The antidote for thinking of God as a concept or as a moralizer is enshrined in the Orthodox Church, even if few are eager to unleash its power. The Church calendar exhibits the proper approach. The first two Sundays in Lent are dedicated to Beauty and the experience of it. First comes the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the Sunday of the restoration of the icons. Though not as obvious to a theologically unsophisticated churchgoer, the second Sunday presents Saint Gregory Palamas as the defender of religious *experience*. His teachings on uncreated energies and inaccessible essence may be a difficult intellectual concept, but his insistence on the accessibility of divine experience, a vision (however attenuated) of the divine uncreated light is an essential component of Orthodoxy.

Moreover, the centrality of Beauty is embedded in the very opening verses of sacred tradition:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void [*tohu vavohu*], and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. (Gen. 1:1–4)

The *tohu vavohu* and darkness are in contrast to the light and the good; formlessness in contrast to beauty.

The Church has such powerful tools to resist the creeping social burdens placed on her, yet there is much debate on how and to what extent we should avail ourselves of them. The recognition of beauty has played an extraordinary role in the history of the Church.<sup>3</sup> The collected teachings of the great spiritual masters are called the

<sup>3</sup> See Brandon Gallaher, "All Things Shining: Sergii Bulgakov's Theology of Beauty," *The Wheel* 26/27 (Summer/Fall 2021): 42–49.

*Philokalia*, “love of beautiful things.” Vladimir Lossky speaks for a long line of Orthodox thinkers and contemplatives when he describes the importance of divine beauty. In comparing the two theological approaches, the apophatic (proceeding by negation) and the cataphatic (proceeding by positive statement), Lossky writes:

The ladder of cataphatic theology which discloses the divine names drawn, above all, from Holy Scripture, is a series of steps upward, intended as an aid to contemplation. These are not the rational notions which we formulate, the concepts with which our intellect constructs a positive science of the divine nature; they are rather images or ideas helpful in directing us and fitting our faculties for the contemplation of that which transcends all understanding. On the lower steps, especially, these images are fashioned from the material objects least likely to lead those inexperienced in contemplation into error. It is, indeed, more difficult to identify God with stone or with fire than with intelligence, unity, being, or goodness. What seemed evident at the beginning of the ascent—“God is not stone, He is not fire”—is less and less so as we attain to the heights of contemplation, impelled by that same apophatic spirit which now causes us to say: “God is not being, He is not the good.” At each step of this ascent, as one comes in contact with loftier images or ideas, it is necessary to guard against making them a concept, “an idol of God.” Then one can contemplate the *divine beauty* itself: God, in so far as He manifests Himself in creation. Speculation gradually gives way to contemplation,

knowledge to experience; for, in casting off the concepts which shackle the spirit, the apophatic disposition reveals boundless horizons of contemplation at each step of positive theology.<sup>4</sup>

Lossky is not talking about the exaltation of the irrational; note his remark that positive theology contributes to contemplation. However, focusing on *conceptualizing* God can lead too easily to codifying such knowledge in order to achieve unwarranted certainty. We should aspire to raising mental categories that promote contemplation of divine beauty, by which we achieve greater awe and wonder, but our understanding must not fall victim to the reflexive act of idol making. The original sin of religion becomes known to us under the form of idolatry. What did Adam and Eve choose instead of the beauty of the garden? They chose certainty (the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil) and idolatry, the conviction that they could construct a reality based on their own understanding of what it would mean to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5).

Olivier Clément had similar things to say about *conceptualizing* God:

People never cease to project on to God their individual and collective obsessions, so that they can appropriate and make use of him. But they ought to understand that God cannot be apprehended from without, as if he were an object, for with him there is no outside, nor can the Creator be set side by side with the creature. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 19:28), as St. Paul said to the Athenians. . . Nor is God an object of knowledge. Concepts, which never come without a

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1976), 40, translation slightly modified and emphasis added.

secret wish to classify and to possess, are powerless to grasp the one by whom we ought to let ourselves be grasped. "Grasped" in two senses: of being open to receive him, as he freely reveals himself, and of being seized with wonder.<sup>5</sup>

Clément was not inventing a teaching out of whole cloth; rather he was directly dependent on the kernel of the patristic tradition, as he demonstrates with two citations that accompany the commentary quoted above:

Every concept formed by the intellect in an attempt to comprehend and circumscribe the divine nature can succeed only in fashioning an idol, not in making God known. – Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*

Only wonder can comprehend his incomprehensible power. – Maximus the Confessor, *On the Divine Names*<sup>6</sup>

Idols abound—the idols of the mind. They have resulted in the *objective* god, the manageable god, who is subject to manipulation by ideology. Ideologies of the right and the left abound, among purveyors of religious nostalgia as well as secular scientific enthusiasts. The corrective is the contemplation of

divine beauty, not the imposition of ideological programs.

And so, in an effort to bring back those who have departed into the hinterlands of "no religious affiliation," we who still find value in the historical Church might offer the following topics for discussion:

- Why the Orthodox faith in Jesus Christ is degraded in the presence of religious certainty
- Why the Orthodox faith in Jesus Christ is degraded in the presence of religious systems of law, morality, and ethics
- Why the Orthodox faith in Jesus Christ is degraded in the presence of the religious exercise of political power and cultural coercion

All these corrosive priorities have been added to the genuine faith, accumulating to deleterious effect over the centuries and seemingly threatening to destroy—as if such a thing were possible—the very Foundation upon which they were laid.

True religion is art. Not a museum piece, but a vast collaborative public art installation. The Church must be nothing less. ✱

<sup>5</sup> Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 26–27.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 27.



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