

The Myth of the Dogmatic Atheist

By Brian McClinton

OPPONENTS OF the secularist outlook are fond of accusing us atheists of being dogmatic (I know, don't laugh - they think they're serious!). That kind of slur is to be expected from believers but, more annoyingly, the same charge is sometimes made by potential allies who really ought to know better. They include journalists who actually claim an affinity with Humanism but fail to commit themselves to the public face of the movement. Paddy Woodworth at the Carlingford Summer School in 2004 and Malachi O'Doherty the year before are obvious examples.

It is, of course, ironic to hear journalists making such an accusation since they are the arch-dogmatists - how often have you read a 'news' story qualified by 'I'm not sure', 'I haven't enough information to be more certain of my facts', etc? Indeed, as we know, they are the true drama queens of the intellectual world, exaggerating almost everything and qualifying nothing. Journalists generally don't want to let the facts or lack of them get in the way of a good story. A recent Mori survey found that they are the group least trusted to tell the truth.

And, of course, they are performing the same trick towards atheism that they do with almost anything: exaggerating any clarity and ignoring any doubt or ambiguity. So if an atheist gives an individual opinion, say on abortion, for journalists it becomes a party line - all atheists think the same, and so they are dogmatic - which is far removed from the truth.

I don't know if Jesus existed; Christians do. Who, then, are the true dogmatists? I don't know what will happen to me when I die; Christians do. Who, then, are the true dogmatists? I don't know whether there is a god; Christians do. Who, then, are the true dogmatists? I don't know whether the universe had a beginning and will have an end; Christians do. Who, then, are the true dogmatists?



The label 'atheist' is open to different interpretations. There is a common misconception that the atheist is more certain than the agnostic, a confusion which Paddy Woodworth repeats (see 'Agnostic about Everything', *The Ulster Humanist*, No 89). For Paddy, atheism 'springs from the same deluded and potentially dangerous quest for certainty as the dogmatic tendencies in the religion it opposes'. But this is only one interpretation of atheism, which is simply an absence of belief in the existence of gods. The certainty or lack of it about such a lack of belief varies from one atheist to another. It is quite wrong to suppose that we all share the same certitude. Not believing that something is true is not equivalent to believing that it is false: we may simply have no idea whether it is true or not.

Speaking personally, I am pretty certain that the Christian god does not exist, although I can't prove it. This could be described as a 'strong' atheist position. On the other hand, I do not know whether a force or forces created the universe, though I would be sceptical of such a notion. This might make me a weak atheist or even an agnostic on this question. The latter term (invented by T.H. Huxley in 1876) seems to be preferred by some people because the word 'atheist' carries the unjustified connotation of 'evil, nasty people' whom we should avoid in polite society. But what's in a name, for Christ's sake?

The term 'atheist' is really only a label, just like 'Christian' and, as we know only too well, there is much dispute over that particular appellation. What we mean by the label is more important than the label itself. But of course journalists are particularly hung up on name tags because they want to simplify everything rather than face reporting and analysing a more complex reality.

Actually, there is another label describing hostile antipathy to religion, namely antitheist, and I would certainly count myself among their number, believing as I do that religion is positively harmful. In the *Humanist Handbook* I wrote that 'the idea of a god rightly belongs to the dustbin of history'. Paddy Woodworth objected on the grounds that I was using a phrase of one of Marx's 'most ruthless interpreters, Leon Trotsky, at the moment of the Bolshevik imposition of dictatorship'. So what? No atheist that I know wants to impose his or her atheism at the point of a gun. We voluntarily throw rubbish in a dustbin, and there is nothing wrong with Humanists, atheists, agnostics, antitheists, sceptics freethinkers - call us what you will - looking forward to the day when the human race voluntarily discards the shackles of religious belief. Imagine there's no heaven, Paddy, Malachi and all you other closet 'humanist' journalists, it's easy if you try. □

