

Beloved Unbelievers, Atheist Sermon

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Of all the programs I listen to on the transistor radio in my kitchen, the 'guest broadcasts', a.k.a. 'third-party programs', are by far most interesting. They are made by ideological broadcasting associations: Catholic, Humanist, Orthodox, Evangelical Protestant, Jewish, and perhaps in the near future also Islamic. They fascinate me because they are all so deliciously persuasive. It is not their intention to inform or to put into context, as is generally the case on public radio. These guest broadcasts are straightforwardly opinionating. What fascinates me is the complete falling away of the usual reserved detachment. These radio shows clearly aim at a constituency of the like-minded. These are the last programs in which the anchorman is candidly convinced of his rightness, delectably determined to win over, without taking into account the possible sensitivities of the wider audience. They all have the qualities of a sermon. You feel as if you are peeping in; call it eavesdropping radio. Their agenda is not slipped in surreptitiously. It is an essential part of the format. The tone is self-confident, but nevertheless I somehow sense a hint of awkwardness, as if they might be saying: we realize we are only 'guests', so do feel free to turn your radio off.

I deliberately do not switch stations. I am curious. What do people say when they are addressing the like-minded? And also: what do they say when they bear in mind that people of different persuasions may be listening in, curious people like me. And I keep wondering: how does this affect their line of reasoning?

Third-party programs satisfy a hunger that gnaws at me too. What your religious commitment is, and why, is a topic of conversation that has vanished from my social circle quite some time ago. It is generally assumed in the Low Countries that there is freedom of belief - and of unbelief - and that we have stopped to bother each other with the topic. Winning souls, or trying to convince friends of some Truth or other, nobody in my circle really goes in for that anymore. I see no attempts to convert, not between religions, and not between believers and unbelievers. Unbelievers look pityingly at believers and vice versa, but there is no longer the urge to persuade each other of concepts and constructs. Unbelievers are happy; the older generation, the no-longer-believers, perhaps even liberated. When religious tolerance reigns, there is simply no need to spring to the defense of a truth.

In fact, it can't be any other way. In our part of the world, believers are tolerant, non-fanatic and magnanimous. They have a liberal interpretation of their religion. They have redefined their creed into a spiritual principle, and have thus arrived at a new, modern form of piety. Their belief is now most often that god is not a being who makes demands, but a construct for those things that we cannot comprehend, whether it be rationally or emotionally. God can be just about anything: a split-off part of oneself, a judge, some sort of driving force, a moral beacon within oneself, one's deceased mother... Those who would rather adhere to a stricter line do so in private, and in closed communities that emphasize a most personal experiencing of faith. Even there god keeps himself tucked tidily away in the heads of his followers. Detractors see it as a form of salvage operation. They say believers are placing the goalposts so far apart that pretty much everyone ends up in the religious camp. Personally, I always found this opening up of the playing field something to be applauded. It's great that it is possible. After all, surely the broader the goal, the broader the minds?

Unbelievers, the newcomers to the field, have been able to win their position more or less undisturbed. In my home country Belgium, no harsh words have fallen since the second 'school struggle' in the fifties of last century. Secularization has been a process rather than a revolution, most probably because it was accompanied by rapid Catholic adaptation. Whether someone is a believer or not still has an influence on some social debates, but it is no longer a rift.

Recently, however, we have seen a pressure of a type we thought no longer existed. In July 2007 a senior lecturer in evolutionary biology at the University of Utrecht protested that the Dutch Evangelical television company EO had removed all references to the theory of evolution from the BBC series *The Life of Mammals*. Earlier in 2007, the book *Alien* by Marc de Bel and Guy Didelez had been censored. According to the Bible, there were no such things as extraterrestrial beings, let alone an extraterrestrial civilization, and so the title had to be changed. 'The Bible has a great influence on what children in the Netherlands get to read,' the journalist in my newspaper wrote drily. In March 2005 the former Dutch Minister of Education Culture and Science, the Christian Democrat Van der Hoeven, proposed that Intelligent Design should perhaps be taught in schools. Intelligent Design is related to Creationism. It is a more nuanced and more carefully thought out version, but the basic principle is the same: the universe and everything in it is part of a divine plan.

In the spring of 2007 the Council of Europe voiced its concern. It was becoming apparent that these ideas, blown over from the USA, were spreading throughout Europe ever more quickly. In its report the Council of Europe's Committee on Culture, Science and Education said: 'If we are not careful, creationism could well become a threat to human rights.' Advocates of strict creationism are out to replace democracy with theocracy, said the report, and it is part of the role of the Council's

parliamentarians to react before it is too late. It called the creationists' total rejection of science 'one of the most serious threats to human and civil rights'. On miscellaneous websites, and in a wide variety of blogs, there is much concern about the circulation of a heavy, expensive-looking book by the Turkish author Harun Yahya, *The Atlas of Creation*: the author rejects Darwin's theory of evolution. The book was delivered unsolicited to French, Belgian, Spanish, Turkish and Swiss schools and universities. Harun Yahya's productivity arouses suspicions that his name is a front for a writers' collective. The size of his website, with translations in various European languages, audio books, sophisticated graphics and assertive direct mailings, indicates substantial financial resources.

I hear conflicting theories about this deployment of the creationist big guns. The *Atlas of Creation* was written by a Muslim. The author shows that creationism and radical Islam work together seamlessly. In the US, however, observers claim that Christian America is arming its children with creationism in order to be ready to fight the Muslim foe. This anomaly is fascinating in its own right. 'Here we needn't worry about that sort of conservatism, after all, this isn't America,' people around me say. But I'm not so confident. In Europe the opposing forces are more likely to meet head on than in the US. They will incite each other, and the ideological debate will twirl into a double helix, a screw with multiple spirals threading round it: it is no longer a discussion between orthodox and moderate, and between Muslim and Christian, but also between the religious and the secular.

In the foreword to a recent edition of his bestseller *The God Delusion*, British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins says that he is often told that he is for preaching to the converted, to that wayward group who are in doubt already, or who no longer believe. His reply is that it is mainly readers from the US who thank him. Many unbelievers there are still in the closet and need his encouragement to come out. The debate in the US is now gaining popular support; atheist lectures and discussion evenings draw full houses. In Europe things are different. Many of us have already come out of the closet, but we have become lukewarm, even indifferent. I am now quite accustomed to no longer having to explain that I am an unbeliever, or why I am. We no longer discuss the topic; I can't imagine a conversation on someone's god or on a person's reasons for renunciation. Many of us have been atheists for so long - we are second or third generation 'heretics' - that faith seems completely irrelevant. But the writing is on the wall. Soon we may have to re-enter the fray. We too will have to fight the battle of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and many others in the Anglo-Saxon world, and we must be ready with atheistic opposition.

In almost every European country we see a tendency towards more rigid ways of thinking. Extreme ideas flourish. Dogmatic conviction is coming at us from all sides. There are clear indications that fanaticism is on the rise. Here they are again, the

prefects of the soul who believe that there is such a thing as a preordaining power, a supremacy with a project for you and me, perhaps even a vocation. And we are not ready for the debate. I have heard people describe themselves as believers, on the pretext that they believe in extraterrestrial life. And no, they didn't believe in god. Others are defending their unbelief with the aid of an enigmatic distinction between 'chance' and 'blind chance'.

We deal with attitudes of belief en unbelief in frivolous and evasive ways, our arguments lack depth and strength, vagueness reigns. We confuse tolerance towards those of different opinion with a lackadaisical attitude towards the critical underpinning of our own. Any area of thought that allows itself to get caught up in clichés makes itself vulnerable. In next to no time it will be overwhelmed by philosophies that put forward more convincing concepts and truths. How can we continue to take pride in our enlightenment if we lose the ability to defend our point of view?

Humans are genetically equipped to persuade. In every contact with others we try - albeit not always openly - to bring those others around to our way of thinking. When it comes to our conviction, however, our persuasion has little fervor; our enthusiasm is so lame that it barely amounts to taking a stand. We exhibit evasive behavior. We never even suggest that beliefs or creeds are worthy of closer examination. We find that we have already bickered enough. We assume that a fundamentalist faith could never gain a foothold here, because in Belgium religion is a private matter. But if we never talk about religion, how can we ensure that it stays private?

The intelligent plan

Not too long ago while riding my bike I was nearly knocked over by a delivery van. The van didn't hit me, but it only just missed me. As the light turned red at the end of the street it had to stop, so I hurried up to the driver's open window and asked him why he was driving so recklessly. The young male gave me a big smile and said that I needn't worry, nothing would happen to me: 'God is watching over us. He is looking out for you and for me.' 'You may think that,' I said, 'but I don't believe in god.' 'Too bad for you,' he answered. 'But that's not my fault, and neither is it God's.' And then he waved and tore off around the corner.

My rather bizarre reaction stayed with me: I waved back! That is how happy I was that that youth drove on. Not primarily because once around the corner he could no longer run me over, but because it meant that I no longer had to argue with him. I

had absolutely no idea what I could have said if our conversation had gone on, except to repeat that I did not believe in god. So it still exists, I thought, that divine providence I had last heard of during my schooldays with the Penitent Sisters in my native city of Poperinge. This man was almost certainly not a creationist, just an eager youth full with the divine plan. But he did give me an idea of the type of argument we atheists will soon have to counter. And I did not have my arguments ready. I never discuss this with my friends. I don't read opinion pieces on the topic in my newspaper. I, who believe wholeheartedly that you have to embrace the otherness of the other, am not prepared for this particular debate.

The ideological discussions that reached me over the years have primarily been about moral issues. The believers that I came across called god a 'beacon', a 'guiding principle', and god helped them to make the right choices. The unbeliever couldn't understand why anyone needed a god for that; he looked for his moral directives elsewhere. As our legal and judicial systems became more just, democratic and humane, the guiding principles from the religious books became secular laws and universal rights. You no longer needed a god to live a good and righteous life; you had the guarantee that in public life things would be settled more or less according to the rules laid down in the old books. Religion could become a private matter. Long discussions were no longer needed, nobody wished to quarrel about the existence or nonexistence of god, because after all, that was a question of 'faith'.

Creationism and Intelligent Design have unexpectedly changed everything. That morality can exist independently of any concept of god was widely accepted by European Christians, but now suddenly the god with the plan is back. His image even turns up among believers who are not generally considered conservatives. In an interview with Knack Magazine in August 2007, Mieke van Hecke, director-general of the Flemish Catholic Education Board, said: 'Sometimes, at the most unexpected moments, I quickly give thanks to God, because He has protected me. It may sound naive, but I believe God has a plan for me. I drive quite a lot, and there have been times when I've narrowly escaped a collision - well, when that happens, then I immediately say: "Thank you!" I don't believe such things can be a coincidence.' Mieke van Hecke's words are not half as alarming as those of the youth in the delivery van, but they still confuse me. If god ensures that nobody crashes into her, does he then also ensure that she doesn't crash into anybody? And what does that say about people who do get crashed into? I know the answer, it is in Wisdom (Apocrypha) 9:13., I've heard it often enough. World literature is brimming with descriptions of why we should not try to understand where the paths of god are leading us. That, supposedly, would be like lifting up our eyes to gaze upon a light that is brighter than the sun. And yet Mieke van Hecke still makes statements about god's plan. Is this - as she herself says - naive, or is there more to it?

Creationism seems to me an idea that will not easily take hold in the Low Countries. It claims that the world was created in six days, literally, just as it says in Genesis. But Intelligent Design is a different kettle of fish altogether. It is directly related to creationism, but it has polished up the concept. It argues that the earth is indeed as old as paleo-geologists claim, but that all those millions of years of evolution actually unfolded under the patient and intelligent eyes of a creative power. The intricacies of the universe are so complex that they can only be explained if we see them as the work of an all powerful designer. Intelligent Design brings to the fore a concept of god that had been pushed into the background, and that is now, due to creationism, back at centre stage: the watchmaker of the old days, the man with a plan.

It is perfectly possible that I have developed an oversensitivity to such a god with intentions and purposes. I have written a novel about the great flood. For three years I immersed myself in an early-Biblical End of Days and described the catastrophe from the point of view of a girl for whom the ark had no room. The god in the story doesn't much like his creation and decides to wash it away. That he has to revise his project is the fault of mankind; human beings are so corrupt that they have ruined it. A few chosen ones get to save their skins, the rest drown. Visualizing the fate of that doomed girl for three hundred pages was not exactly a barrel of laughs. Perhaps believers who talk about god's plans don't actually mean it all quite so literally, and probably the god who protects you against a car crash is only a construct, to express acceptance and surrender to the whims of fate? Do I simply suffer from an overheated imagination if I insist on asking what restraints there are on that god with a plan?

All my life I have felt sheltered by moderate believers. They emphasized my right to question their faith and cast doubt upon their own beliefs, a truly admirable attitude. They were the buffer between me and the fanatics, the people who called me 'apostate'. They knew how to express a religious idea and put across a religious point; they were always well able to reconcile paradoxes. In their 'guest programs', they no longer saw god as the transcendent will of my schooldays, but rather as a loving, creative force. As an atheist I felt an affinity for them; their humanism was similar to mine, and I was happy for the sanctuary they offered. I assumed that they knew their own conservative factions through and through, and that, if necessary, they would be able to call them to order.

The articles about Intelligent Design published in the Flemish press in summer 2007 should have confirmed that sense of shelter. After a couple of misunderstandings about the views of the Flemish Christian Democrats Luc Van den Brande and Cathy Berx with regard to creationism in schools, it became clear that even the Flemish Christian politicians still agree that there is a clear difference between a scientific and a theistic approach. Their plan to insert Creationism into our curriculum as a

'scientific' addition were sunk within days. Intelligent Design also clearly had no chance of making it into our biology lessons. So far so good, I thought.

But what has been happening outside the official curriculum? There the god with the plan has stepped back into the limelight. Have our believers also consigned him to the realm of myths and fables? The Flemish director-general of the Flemish Catholic Education Board still talks about the divine plan, so I guess there is still a good bit of life in the old god yet. And if Intelligent Design gains credence in the heads of our believers, does that mean that we see a religious radicalization? In other words: is Intelligent Design an extreme form of religion, or does it represent religious essence?

Degrees of (un)belief

Historically speaking, Intelligent Design was a progressive reflex. Immediately after Darwin's theses were published, his ideas were rejected by the majority of Western Christians. Nineteenth century believers found the idea of natural selection capricious and cruel; it did not fit well with the model of harmony that they expected from the god of their books. For modernists who did want to accept Darwin's theories, Intelligent Design offered a way out. They turned their god into a guiding power, a higher intelligence who – entirely in keeping with the harmony model – had a very clear plan, even if that plan was not quite so clear to mankind. In its earliest form, Intelligent Design was therefore a theologically liberal reaction. To fundamentalists the broadmindedness of Intelligent Design was nothing short of heresy. Funny how what started out as a progressive reaction now feels like a conservative stance.

By its very nature, belief seems to be something you can never really measure. And yet I constantly hear a distinction being made between moderate and extreme forms of religion. But when exactly does moderation turn into fundamentalism? In an attempt to chart (un)belief, I have devised a measuring instrument. Taking the philosophical question 'What is the nature of the universe?' as my starting point, I have divided the religio-philosophical spectrum into grades. In grades 1 and 2 of the newly invented reliogimeter we find the unbelievers. They are atheistic and *adeistic*. Grade 2 differs slightly from grade 1, because it is at this point that a (nonreligious) spirituality makes its appearance. In grade 3 come the agnostics. They are followed in grade 4 by the somethingists. Grade 5 is deistic. Deists believe in a god, but they do not believe that this god exerts any control or influence. From grade 6 on everyone is theistic. In grade 10 religiosity potentially comes into conflict with civil and human rights.

This religiometer makes it clear that I define believers as those who believe in a supramaterial power. That strict definition ensures that there can be no confusion with that other definition of 'believing in': having faith in or trusting in something, in the future, for instance, or in friendship. Moreover, it will become clear that not everything that we currently refer to as 'religion' is awarded a high grade on the scale. Buddhism, for instance, already making its appearance at grade 2. Many people see Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion.

Depending upon the fundamental perception to which people adhere, they are assigned to a higher or a lower grade of religiosity. Among other things, this instrument is designed to establish at which moment religious moderation gives way to religious fundamentalism.

Grade one:

"I am in and of the world. I have absolutely no feeling that I am part of what I would call 'a greater whole'."

Grade two:

"I feel I am part of a greater whole. I feel a certain connection with that greatness - that is to say with the world, with humanity and with the universe - but I do not for a moment believe that the greater whole is dependent on a power that exists beyond the laws of physics. If in situations of so-called 'singularity' the laws of nature no longer hold good, then for me there is still absolutely no question of something 'supernatural', but rather of different laws of nature subject to relativity."

Grade three:

"I feel I am part of a greater whole, but I find that I can't know whether the greatness I perceive falls within or beyond the laws of physics."

Next come the somethingists. They are but a small step away from the deists, but the concept 'god' is too charged for them to be able to use it.

Grade four:

"I believe that the greatness I perceive is indeed something that transcends the laws of physics, but I deliberately opt not to call it 'god'. I find every existing concept inadequate, so I prefer to call it 'something': 'There has to be something!'"

Grade five:

“I believe that the greatness I perceive is a supernatural power. I call it ‘God’. God transcends the material. God can be anything and everything. God is a presence, that is all that is known about God.”

Grade six:

“I believe in a supernatural power that I call ‘God’. God possesses human characteristics. He is an attentive, personified presence. He can feel love, be disappointed and cherish hopes. He is completely powerless, but He knows everything about me, because ‘the hairs of my head are all numbered’.”

Grade seven:

“God is more than an attentive, personified presence. He also has a plan for me. His plans are mostly mysterious.”

Grade eight:

“God not only has a plan for me, He also has a plan for the world and for other people, for all the other people, whether they believe in Him or not. Nothing happens without His involvement.”

Grade nine:

“God determines His plans and objectives so clearly that rules and laws can be derived from them. Most of these rules and laws concern human ethics. He furthermore determines my understanding of the creation of heaven and earth, of life and death, and of god and man. There are punishments for those who do not adhere to His rules, and rewards for those who do, just as there are also punishments for those who do not accept the prescribed understanding of the universe, and rewards for those who do. The nature of the reward is not always clear, but I trust that He will not forsake me’.”

In the tenth grade religiosity potentially comes into conflict with civil and human rights. In its more extreme expressions it may entail that ‘God’ summons the faithful to be his instruments and to take action when somebody fails to accept His God-given laws and understanding. The risk here is that this may lead to moral and physical coercion.

Grade ten:

“Because God can only realize his earthly objectives through man, He calls upon me to proclaim and explain. His laws and rules and to implement and enforce them. I am His instrument, and as His instrument I am at His disposal.”

By dividing up the ideological spectrum like this, we make Mieke van Hecke's answer classifiable: her exclamation comes in at grade 7 on the relijiometer. Grade 7 is the belief in an attentive, self-revealing supra-power who has plans - usually mysterious plans - for all of us. As an atheist, the question I have is: How do you impose checks on such a god with a plan? Doesn't grade 7 automatically and inevitably lead to grade 8, and just as quickly to grade 9? Or to put it another way: If god has a plan for Mieke van Hecke, doesn't that automatically imply that he also has a plan for her family? For the Education Board she chairs? For the planet on which she lives (and consequently also for me)?

I now realize I assumed that most believers in Belgium came in somewhere around grade 5 and 6. In those guest broadcasts on the radio I mostly heard about the god who is present in his absence, the god who is powerless in himself, the god who needs mankind because it is only through mankind that he is given form, all completely in line with the Schillebeeckx discourse of the 1980s. The meddling god, who makes his appearance in grade 7, seems to me to be undeniably a radicalization, a return to a more conservative and uncompromising model. We are now on the slippery slope to grade 10.

In the early days of our civilization, when religions developed and mankind was starting to philosophize, the prophets accepted that there was a limit to human knowledge. When confronted with something they could not comprehend, they shrouded themselves in silence. It was a mystery, an enigma not their place to question; delving into its exact nature was not regarded as a legitimate quest. But over the years, religions have lost the ability to accept mysteries. A bizarre metamorphosis has taken place. What was unknown and unknowable has been gradually filled in. God became flesh, an avatar with a will, a plan, a project, a focus, a destiny for each and every one of us. He evolved from a vengeful god into a paternal god, but always a god with human characteristics. He became an individual who watches, cherishes, monitors, tests, ponders, judges, rewards, punishes... In the wake of this personification came mantras and sharia, theorems and dogmas, postulates and doctrines. His metaphorical meaning was lost. He became such a well-defined concept that now even the somethingists, the marginal believers who actually do believe that there is such a thing as an extramaterial power, reject him.

The Flood and other hot issues

We are on the brink of hot times. Climate change is threatening everything mankind has ever achieved. Everyone who is under forty belongs to the it-can't-go-on-like-this generation. They grew up after the '70s and were raised on dire predictions: that resources were running out, that the world population was growing too quickly. It began with car-free Sundays and ended with... well, how did it end?

Never before had mankind been so close to the point of no return. Even during the Cold War, when that global destruction seemed imminent, we still believed that the situation was negotiable. The Russians loved their children too, so with enough good will a solution could be found. Today, things are different. We cannot bargain with melting glaciers en rising sea levels. In principle, the resulting shortages and mass migrations should bring the world's nations closer together, but it is most likely that things will turn out differently. Discrepancies that now seem irrelevant will soon become irreconcilable, every smoldering quarrel will flare up, every latent dispute will come to a head. Due to the resulting tensions, the god with a plan will show up in the debate. Unbelievers are doubly threatened: if our planet goes to ruin, we not only lose our comfortable precious environment, we are also robbed of our version of the afterlife. Our afterlife - we have no other - lies in the future, in the belief that each successive generation will be better off.

In my opinion, the collaboration required for us to weather the storm will be perfectly possible between atheists and believers of grades 5 and 6 of the religiometer, and perhaps even with those of grade 7. Things become much more difficult at grade 8. From grade 8 onwards - albeit still gradually - atheists become caught up in the beliefs of the religious, as their god also has plans for atheists.

The most problematic collaboration is that with the believers of grade 10. In grade 10 we not only have the deeply religious believers, but also dogmatists and fundamentalists. In conflict situations there is every likelihood that they will make me justify my apostasy to them. I'll have to come up with some pretty serious answers; there won't be time for jokes, so I won't be able to say that I don't believe in god as I don't believe in Dionysus or in the Flying Spaghetti Monster. In tempestuous times identities will be thickened. It will be up to Christians to avoid being sucked into grade 10 of the religiometer, and up to Muslims to liberate themselves from it.

RESPECT... NOT!

I live among are people of all persuasions: Muslims, orthodox Jews, Hindus, animists, practicing Catholics and so on. They frequently come to my family to clarify the dos and don'ts of their religion. They tell us the significance of the sacred objects in their homes and explain why they refuse certain foods. They talk to us about the breaking of their fasts and explain their rites of passage. They seldom ask me and my family: 'What is your opinion? How do you interpret this?' For some reason, they don't expect us to have such answers. Unbelievers, they assume, have no equivalents. They are merely against something.

At other moments too I hear how atheism is reduced to an anti-belief, a belief in nothing. In the work of the Christian author Gerard Bodifée I read that the withering of faith is weakening Europe. He says alienation, suicide and lethargy are on the rise because without religion there is no truly human life. What was it that gave rise to this negative image? Did unbelievers too often say: I don't believe, I only have faith in facts? We atheists did not attempt to define the void that some believers claim arises when you take away god. We left the matter well alone, and now believers are able to define that absence as a lack, in our habits and in our morals. Because we have said we do not believe in a superactor who transcends the material world, we've been called 'materialists', a term supposedly neutral, but that does entail a quite different connotation outside its philosophical context.

The word 'atheism' is, of course, in itself problematic. Grammatically it is a negation of theism. There is no particular word for people who refuse to believe in astrology, reincarnation or palmistry, but there is for people who refuse to believe in a god. That a word like atheism is indispensable underlines the defensive position of the atheist.

In their books, the prominent atheists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris primarily argue against the existence of a god. What we need most, however, are more positive arguments. I am of course aware that there is a vigorous humanist-liberal discourse that champions human values, but that reasoning dances gingerly around the hot potato of the negation of a god. I find myself at grade 2 on the religiometer because I have an overwhelming sense that I am part of a greater, intangible whole. I only need to gaze upon a Tuscan hill, go and sit in a concert hall, or take my beloved in my arms, and the hairs on my neck are already standing on end. That my goose bumps at such peculiar moments are more than just a physical reaction, and that there is something I am drawing strength from, something that makes me transcend myself and sends me into elation is an intuitive sense that as an atheist I have no desire to relinquish. Even with atheists divided into two different grades in the religiometer, my suspicion is that those atheists who have never experienced feelings of self-transcendence are the exception rather than the rule.

Since the beginning of time man has wrestled with his powers of understanding. For this we can thank the self-awareness generated by his cerebral cortex. We realize that although we may understand some things, there are many things we do not. The more we develop, the more distressingly obvious become the limits of our brainpower. Every new insight raises a dozen new questions. This does not contribute to our peace of mind.

More than any other, the millennium before Christ was the age in which mankind searched for answers, the period the German metaphysicist Karl Jaspers calls the *Axenzzeit*. That was also the time when the great world religions were founded: Taoism and Confucianism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in India, monotheism in Mesopotamia and rationalism in the Mediterranean Basin. All of them philosophized about the unknowable. Resisting the urge to give a name to that unknowable was far from easy. Names were given and images were made so that the masses could understand. People dubbed it god, or some other personified or non-personified entity. The name and the characteristics of the entity were determined historically and geographically. The higher power served three important purposes: it provided an ethical guideline for everyday life; it clarified questions about the cosmos and mankind's place in it; and it explained why it was that one day we have to die.

And then along came the atheists, the antitheists, the free-thinkers, the nonbelievers, the secularists, the humanists, the heathens, the infidels; just like everyone else we experience everything in two halves: the fathomable and the unfathomable, the explicable and the inexplicable. Just like everyone else, we are confronted with the unknown and the unknowable. But we decide not to call that unknowable god. For us the stumbling block is this: because believers absolutely want to understand how something as complex as life could begin at the dawn of time, they think of that very first, very simplest beginning, in which cells suddenly started to divide one day being preceded by something that is a million times more complex than that first cell division, namely a supernatural, uncreated god. Or, in other words, if the world is too complex to exist without a creator, then who created that complex mind called 'God'?

Atheist philosophy appears relatively late in history. Much has happened since that early, pre-Christian era. Mathematics, physics, neuroscience and all the other sciences have made hitherto undreamt-of advances. And yet that progress has not been able to take away that primordial feeling generated by our cerebral cortex. Atheists also are left with those important questions: *What is the nature of the universe?* and: *How should I live my life?*

For the second question we atheists have meanwhile built up a well-founded argument, but for the first we have failed to find something sufficiently watertight.

There are billions of people in the world with a clearly defined image of god. Numerically they are in the majority, and they are well able to defend their ideology. Due to the migration of peoples, there will be ever more and ever more complex debates. Time and again the question of who or what is god will be intertwined with the question of who or what is a good person. The believers will have carefully constructed arguments. If we cannot come up with equally well-constructed counter arguments, their line of reasoning will sound the most convincing.

‘Was he not a Muslim?’ my friends ask me when I tell them about the eager youth in the delivery van. He had lovely dark eyes, I remember, so perhaps he was of North African origin. I didn’t ask about his religion. After all, what difference would that make to the things that worry me? Whether we are talking about qadar or divine providence, the problem facing me and those like me remains the same: we have no ready argument.

We see how the debate is currently going in the USA: deists and theists against atheists and even antitheists. I have read the books and listened to the lectures of atheist advocates Sam Harris and others, but the way in which they are conducting their debate does not seem to me to be an example. Their debate is about the question of whether or not there is a god, and thus about who is right and who is wrong. This is a discussion that drives the two poles further apart: the old ‘yes there is, no there isn’t’, ‘us’ versus ‘them’ discourse. When you state that not being able to prove that god does not exist is on a par with not being able to prove that the tooth fairy does not exist, then the level of argument is already beneath contempt. It will end in condemnation and affront. There must be a better way of explaining our apostasy, one that does challenge but does not trample souls. Here in the Low Countries, especially in the religious Muslim communities, we are dealing with people who already feel insecure - and as a result threatened.

Should we instead turn to the agnostics for advice? They are most probably also preparing for the debate. Their argumentation, however, is rather shallow. Agnosticism says that you cannot know whether or not a superactor exists; it at least allows for the possibility that one does exist. For the agnostics there is no radical apostasy, but neither have they come up with any convincing arguments. A good case needs a solid structure. Simply stating that one cannot know is not enough. Shall we then turn to somethingism instead? ‘Surely there must be something,’ I hear those people say, distancing themselves from the possibility that there is ‘nothing’. But how do they set themselves apart from the fundamentalism now blowing in from other countries, these increasingly vocal new religious scholars? Do they have a lucid set of arguments from which we can learn?

With every problem that one encounters in life you have two options: either you look for the solution in the opposing camp, or you find it in yourself. I am not going to

replicate the work of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchins, and all these other rebellious thinkers in the English-speaking countries. I have no intention of battling against an ingrained, well-established concept of god the way they do. Much more interesting, it seems to me, is to try and find out what atheists can do to prevent the situation from polarizing even more. I have no problem with the anthropomorphic god of the middle grades of the religiometer; the image is of value, and dear to me after a mildly Catholic upbringing. I would rather ask myself if there is anything we can offer as an alternative? What do atheists have on offer?

Perhaps what we need is decisiveness. Harris and Dawkins have aplomb. Their approach has opened many eyes, but it also led to divergence. What we need in the Low Countries is not the aggressive atheism that smothers itself in evidence. The decisive attitude I am looking for is that of a determination to define oneself, away from the dubious definition of atheism foisted upon us by others, so that we return to the simple integrity of being an unbeliever. The ideological woolliness around me makes me long for a godless determination and a stricter atheistic doctrine, not starting from some atheistic fundamentalism with the ambition to abolish religion, but in the hope that atheism will automatically attract adherents if we can give it an appealing, new aura. What a relief it must be, I think, to be able to talk radically and freely from within your own ranks, to deliver a sermon, to write a proper pamphlet, to be a recognized third-party atheistic broadcaster. Not with the aim of offending, but outspoken and self-assured all the same. And naturally always slightly apologetic and with the unspoken, between-the-lines message: 'Feel free to turn the radio off.'

And that is why every evening at around 7 p.m. I listen to the transistor radio on my kitchen counter. I have no arguments, they seem to have so many. The Christian faithful have a lucid apologia with which to convince each other and their children of what they call 'the Glad Tidings', so what are the atheists' glad tidings? How do I formulate an ideological assertion? How do I underpin a metaphysical conviction? Do we atheists have an axiomatic truth to proclaim, or is it 'dormant', tucked away among the 'third-party broadcasters', who are only occasional guests, a half an hour at suppertime, when nobody is listening?

GUEST PROGRAM

Beloved Unbelievers,

Have you ever been overwhelmed by a sense of awe? I have such an experience every so often. It is so precious to me that I invariably try to find out what has caused it. Often it is sparked by insight: a surprising connection I discover, brainwaves that catch me unawares, flashes of inspiration and enthusiasm, forms and lines woven in such a pattern that I can only find them 'beautiful', sounds and pitches arranged in a way they seem to flutter down my spine like fingers. But the main trigger, I have noticed, is my amazement about the things that I cannot get my head around: concepts such as finiteness and infinity, confrontations with heights, widths and depths too vast for me to take in, questions about meaning and insignificance... My atheistic existence is brimming over with things that are too enigmatic for my limited powers of understanding.

For thousands of years mankind has been searching for ways to define that mystery. Forever trying to find images to represent the indescribable, whole hordes of simulacra have sprouted from our fertile minds. Every book, every canvas, every artifact is an attempt. Early in time we were looking for the unknowable in terms of beauty and consolation, and we have always found ourselves ending up in the same fields: religion and art. Religion and art are our answers to the understanding that everything around us is to be divided into two unequal parts: the fathomable and the unfathomable.

Today we have more adequate imagery for the discussion on this topic. Thanks to computers and the internet we finally have an *artifact* that resembles the human brain: sequences of concepts and thoughts that trigger new ideas and thoughts by association, with endless possible links. But artificial intelligence is not the same as a brain, because a PC has no consciousness, but anyone who wants to describe the limitations of his understanding nowadays nevertheless has a crystal-clear metaphor at hand: 'My hard disk is too small for this!'

One question a computer never asks is: what lies my hard disk, and what should I call it? If too much is asked of a PC, or if it is given something to process that is beyond its capacity, the word ERROR appears on the screen. The PC makes no attempt to define things that are beyond its limits, let alone express an opinion about things that are beyond its programming. It simply gives up, it bows to the inadequacy of its hardware. We humans seem to be convinced that the inability to know and to name automatically leads to disappointment or disillusionment. The PC has no such feeling. Human thought is many times more complex than computer thought, but this does not mean that we have nothing to learn from artificial intelligence: we must interpret 'not knowing' more neutrally, and we should stop seeing it as a failure.

When Christopher Columbus set foot on the shores of the New World, he called the natives who greeted him Indians. His hard disk needed upgrading before he could

understand that his world view had to be expanded with a new continent. Columbus's reflex is only human: we come up with provisional names because we think that without the word we cannot consider the concept. It is as if our brain would rather be mistaken than have to wait with the labeling. Naming is our *tic nerveux*, we do it on a hit-or-miss basis. The dismantling of our constructs happens afterwards, when it becomes clear that we are in error.

We are on the eve of hot times, beloved unbelievers. The new religious scholars are ready and waiting with words to fill any gaps that we leave open. What we need is an atheistic mission, a step-by-step unbelief plan. We need to set up a recovery program, its first goal being that we will be even more determined to leave well alone what we cannot possibly comprehend. The deferment of naming may not be a natural human reflex, it is a skill that we can acquire. By accepting our limits with the detachment of a computer disk, and not always struggling to name and explain immediately, we enhance our ability to be content with those limits. We learn to take account of the abyss, to listen without preconceptions to the deafening silence that wells up out of that chasm, to gaze upon the Rubicon without hope or despair, without illusions, without great or small expectations, and without vertigo.

Rik Torfs, a professor of canon law at the Catholic University of Leuven, compares being a believer with the raising of a white flag: it entails surrender. We atheists say it is learning to live with the error, accepting the limits of our understanding and our inability to always name and explain, that entails surrender. Reason and surrender are not mutually exclusive; the reasonable thing about reason is exactly the fact that it recognizes its limits. Does this place mankind at the centre of the universe, as is so often claimed about atheism? No, it acknowledges mankind's limitations, and it relies upon our ability to be satisfied with them.

The believer finds hope and consolation in what lies beyond the ERROR; the atheist regards that unknowableness more neutrally. The latter does not expect to find a comforting extramaterial entity beyond the limits of his intellect. He feels no need to see his fallibility in the light of an infallible power. But this does not mean that the atheist is self-important.

I do not know a single atheist who does not realize that whatever lies beyond the ERROR will go beyond the capacity of his hard disk. He draws hope and consolation from the expectation that he will always be able to gain more ground by pushing at the limits, and that he will always be able to acquire little upgrades by constantly expanding his knowledge and understanding. The prospect of an upgrade makes the atheist optimistic, enhanced understanding brings him joy. These are the preludes of those higher states of delight that everyone enjoys, including the atheist: enchantment, rapture, trance, and ecstasy - everything that makes those little hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

By using the image of the white flag, Rik Torfs inadvertently shows just how great the affinity is between believers and unbelievers. When we don't know we have but one recourse: our imagination. We search for images in language, and we can evoke images with language. We realize that those images may say nothing about empirical reality, but they are a depiction of something we find appealing. With a carefully constructed sentence - in which we do not profess to know what we are talking about, but instead circle around the topic with well-chosen words - we often strike home more effectively. Instead of getting closer to a concept with words, we create distance, we erect a palisade between what we can name and that which is beyond words. We use the metaphor, we fill in by allowing gaps to arise. When we do that, we are often engaged in some artistic pursuit: poetry, painting, song or music. That is what the arts do for us: they respect the abyss, the ERROR of our hard disk. Long before we have a word for it, they install a concept in our brain.

Every attempt to use a sound, an image, or a word to describe something that cannot be captured in sounds, images or words, turns man into a preacher: he testifies to his inability to say something about the unknowable and inexplicable. The believers' choice to call the unknowable 'god' is a literary one. It is a search for a word for something you know so little about that only the word is left. Designating something 'god' is an attempt to find an image for it and give it form. Just like many others, it is a concept that evades rather than describes: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.' (John 1:1-4).

Religion is art. It is one of the many ways of applying our imagination in areas that are beyond our powers of understanding. Whether we are atheists, agnostics, somethingists or moderate believers, we are all searching for metaphors. The imagery we use, the way we utilize imagination to fill in that which we cannot conceive, is not relevant. We are all primarily looking for something to stop us going crazy in the cosmos. The believer draws hope from what happens beyond the limits of the knowable; the unbeliever draws almost as much hope from what happens within them: the two ways of thinking are not irreconcilable. Atheists stubbornly maintain that there is no extramaterial reality, believers stubbornly maintain that there is, but because the mystery beyond the limits of the knowable is unknowable and inexplicable, these two ways of thinking can coexist.

My atheist campaign is therefore not directed at the moderate believers of grades 4 to 6 on the religiometer. Just like everyone else, these believers are searching for a metaphor for what lies beyond the ERROR; they choose an immaterial god about which they know nothing, but to which they surrender themselves. Theirs is a god of love, not of power or authority.

The real break occurs when god steps outside his metaphor, and there is talk of a plan, or intelligent design. From grade 7 on the scale of (un)belief we are dealing with an interventionist god. He suddenly seems to have acquired a mandate and an all-embracing will. Creation now has a cockpit with a master brain who orchestrates everything. From grade 8 he even governs the destiny of those who do not believe in him. Not only we the atheists, but also moderate believers have to oppose this unchangeable and unchallengeable god. We can only do that if we once again develop a sense of the unknown, and encourage a faculty for abstraction in young people, an understanding of figurative expression and metaphorical meaning, for allegories and parables, for aesthetics and enchantment. Our brain has a very limited ability to take in that which it cannot explain. We have to (re)develop that still. Atheists, somethingists, moderate believers and agnostics feel no need to simplify the mystery; the believers in the highest grades of the reliigiometer simplify it all along.

But we have to do more than that, beloved unbelievers. It is not enough to leave the unknowable and inexplicable unnamed, we must also retrieve and rehabilitate a number of words. Words such as salvation and redemption, hope and comfort, which have become intertwined with the idea of a god, have to be 'redeemed' by atheism. For far too long people have behaved as if such concepts exclusively belong to the religious domain. That is not the case. They demonstrably do not belong there; such notions are completely independent of any supernatural power, they occur before the ERROR.

Atheists also too need promises of salvation and redemption. These are the foundation of every commitment to our hard-pressed planet. We are teaching each other and our children to live with the ERROR, with the limitations of our hard disk. The more the world population grows, the more necessary it will be for us to focus on what we have - and not on what we are promised in a messianic future. More and more it will become necessary to learn to live with the scarcity we ourselves have created. We will have to evolve towards an economy of limitation, an economy of 'enough'. Realizing that you have enough and living without a feeling of constant lack, is the basis of joy. It is the start of a new mindset: the belief that our existence is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and the comprehension that what we can do, know and understand is all that we have to work with.

We want to be able to attest to peace and love again, without having to acknowledge them as characteristics of a divine identity. I admit, I have to deactivate all my cynical and self-relativizing reflexes in order to be able to talk again about sacrifice, mercy and contemplation, but it has to be done. I want to give those words back their capital letters. And follow them with an exclamation mark! After all, although these concepts are not material, they do belong in the material world in the philosophical and linguistic sense. They do not occur beyond our ERROR: they are knowable,

demonstrable and nameable. Although they are not always easy to define, they are not supernatural.

I also want to reclaim the words restraint, charity, honesty, equality, repentance, sacrifice and mission. I even want to reclaim the word creation. I want once again to be able to call the world in which we live 'a gift' and the maintenance of it 'a duty'. I want once again to be able to declare our planet holy. I regard my commitment to its preservation as a vocation. It must be possible for us to bring moral force back into our language in this way. Preaching has been (mis)appropriated by religion to such a degree that secular society now hesitates to take a moralizing tone. For centuries people have shouted 'Sin!' in the name of religion. They did it because a woman committed adultery, or because a man embraced a man. Sin does not occur beyond the limits of the explicable; it is understandable and knowable and so it is not a concept exclusive to believers. As far as I am concerned, waste, greed, selfishness should once again be equated with evil. Just as we abhor crimes against humanity, so too must we abhor crimes against nature and the environment. Those who can simply accept that 850 million people on our planet are going to sleep every evening with an empty stomach are evil. It is not those who make love in some unconventional way who are the sinners, it is those who squander our natural resources.

But even after we will have reclaimed these words and concepts from religion, our work will be far from over. In October 2007 prominent Muslim scholars sent Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders an open letter entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You*, describing the common ground between Christianity and Islam. What unites the two religions, it said, are their two most important characteristics: their belief in one god and their love for their neighbors. That letter appears to be a gesture of reconciliation, and it was certainly written with the best of intentions. The problem is that it contains an implicit criticism that non-believers too easily let pass. Saying that what Muslims and Christians have in common is their god and their love for their neighbors is just as absurd as saying that what they have in common is their god and their love of beauty, or their god and their love of life.

Love for your neighbors is not a *distinguishing* characteristic of Christianity and Islam. It is of central importance to all people of good will. Liberal atheism, Judaism, and undoubtedly a whole lot of other isms promote the same neighborly love. Laying exclusive claim to this supreme ethical rule is offensive. We must never go along with the believers' misguided assumption that religion is the only source of ethics. Love for one's neighbor is not a concept that occurs beyond the ERROR, and it is therefore not exclusive to those who believe in a supernatural power. In this sort of debate, we atheists must continuously confront believers, even moderate believers: it may well be true that you share a belief in a single god, but love for your fellow man is not something that sets you apart from others. The two philosophical questions:

What is the nature of the universe? and *How should I live my life?* must remain disconnected, and we have to defend that disconnection with all our might. Whenever anyone talks about Christian values, we must remind him or her that ethical rules were being formulated long before Christianity, and that they are still being formulated nowadays, independently of Christianity.

We furthermore must initiate the debate and call for moderation, everywhere and always. When we talk to believers, we must keep asking the question: What do you mean when you say that god has a plan for you? What are the consequences of such a belief? How do you make sure other people don't abuse this mysterious divine plan in order to achieve their own undesirable ends? What if the divine plan becomes a reason for not intervening when things go wrong, if there is global warming, for instance, or if a homosexual is attacked?

The step-by-step atheist plan will not be primarily focused on accommodating people who are struggling with existential questions because it stems from a more urgent matter: from a state of alarm, from consternation about the cruel and wasteful works of a god who steps outside his metaphor. Does this mean that atheists are afraid? Is the anticipation of difficulties a sign of fear, or is it just the opposite, a sign of courage? When a young man races through the streets in the conviction that some divine providence is ensuring that nothing bad happens to him or others, that is what makes me genuinely scared. But I like to see that fear as something that keeps me on my toes and helps me to ground my own claims.

We have to set to work, beloved unbelievers. No body of ideas is worthy of the name if it does not continuously redefine itself. If it fails to question itself, it becomes dogma. Atheism is no exception. Self-examination leads to argument. These arguments must be clear enough to be understood by the entire human race, by every section of society. If it wishes to be able to defend its motives, a broad-based group must be ready and able to convey them. If we do not formulate our ideas more clearly, and look for more effective metaphors for concepts that we know will always be beyond our comprehension, we will fall short. This was a first attempt, using simple metaphors: a computer crashing, a display lighting up, a border beyond which there is something you might illuminate with paint and musical instruments, but that you do not attempt to name.

Being a believer is a matter of upbringing. If that were not the case, Christian children would be constantly being born into Muslim families and vice versa. Being an unbeliever is also a matter of upbringing. Upbringing calls for a proactive attitude, it requires that principles be laid down and explained. We need better metaphors for the unknown and inexplicable. We have to practice our arguments until they are constantly at the tip of our tongues, and we know what to say when we meet a delivery van with a unscrupulous driver. That is of utmost importance to the

people who do not believe, but also to those who do. We have to state clearly that not believing is a genuine option, an option in which you do not assume that there is a power beyond material reality, we may then add that atheists do, however, take into account the limitations of the explainable, and that they transcend it with the help of words, images and sounds. If we are clearer about this, we will help to establish a society that is more understanding. If we do not, we are letting down thousands of people - usually youngsters - who will not hear it from anybody else, because they are surrounded by people who have not heard it either.

And now, dearly beloved, go in peace.

Anne Provoost