



Published as:

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Year: 2007

Title: Speaking theologically in a suspicious world

Journal: St Mark's Review

Volume: 2

Issue: 203

Pages: pp 87-93

ISSN: 0036-3103

Abstract: This article responds to the spate of recent publications atheistic perspectives suspicious of religion. It considers the various grounds on which such suspicions are based, and offers constructive responses from faith and theology.

Speaking Theologically in a Suspicious World

Yet another book critical of religion from an atheist perspective was published this year. It was aimed not only at Christianity but also at other religions. Entitled *Against All Gods*¹, its author A. C. Grayling sees religion as the ‘lunatic fringe of human thought’ and criticises it for making people ‘childish and violent and unthinking’.² Grayling calls upon numerous historical and contemporary examples for his argument, from the crusades to the war on terror. His preferred alternative is secular humanism, with its commitment to reason and freedom of thought.

We live in a world suspicious of religion, that is, untrusting of its validity, authority, power and traditions. To be suspicious is to consider that religious beliefs and practices, while claiming to be true, are actually falsehoods, covers for wrong thinking and actions that belittle and cause harm to their participants and to society at large. The work of suspicion is to uncover these falsehoods and reveal the ‘real truth’ behind them.

To engage in theology in a suspicious world requires humility and courage as we examine the reasons for suspicion and work out our responses. As we shall see, there are various grounds on which people are suspicious of religion and theology, some rightly so. But such grounds are not necessarily knock-down arguments and there is room for theology to make its own response, and to defend a position of faith.

In this paper I consider three types of suspicion with which theology needs to engage if it is to remain credible in the public sphere. The first has already been alluded to – suspicion on the grounds that faith is unreasonable. Related to this is the process of secularisation, whereby a society that once may have put its trust in religious authority and tradition now puts its trust in reason, and along with that, science. In such a society religion is seen as naïve, superstitious and infantile.³ Australia may never have been thoroughly religious, but it certainly displays the marks of secularity now.⁴

The second form of suspicion belongs to the so-called ‘Masters of suspicion’, whereby faith and theology are seen as ideologies, masks for human projection, the desire for power and the protection of privilege. This form of suspicion sees religion in more sinister terms, not only as wrong-headed but as a lie – supposedly about God but really about human interests and desires.

The third type of suspicion is grounded in the hypocrisy of the church that preaches one thing and lives another. It is hard to trust a church that preaches love and peace, yet engages in sexual abuse of children, for example. This third form of suspicion concerns the way spoken theology informs and relates to the Christian life. Merely *speaking* theologically is not enough on its own. How it is lived matters.

I will consider these three forms of suspicion in turn, and look at how we might address each one theologically. I will then make some concluding remarks on speaking theologically in a suspicious world.

Suspicion on the grounds of unreasonableness.

I cannot here discuss the history of secularisation and its causes, which is admirably done elsewhere.⁵ I can however testify to a number of recent publications against religion from atheistic arguments which are from secular humanistic perspectives: Richard Dawkins', *The God Delusion*⁶, Michel Onfray's *The Atheist Manifesto*⁷, Christopher Hitchens', *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*⁸ and the one already mentioned, Anthony Grayling's *Against All Gods*. On a recent visit to Glebe Books, I noticed these books and others like them all on display together near the 'Religion' section.

Grayling expresses the secular humanist concern that religion expects people to *believe* things and it is belief or faith that he sees as the problem. As he puts it: 'To believe something in the face of evidence and against reason – to believe something by faith – is ignoble, irresponsible and ignorant, and merits the opposite of respect'.⁹ Hence he sees religion as making people childish, violent and unthinking.

What response might theology make to this criticism? To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that blind faith in religious teaching and authority can be dangerous and can lead to violence. However, religions are not necessarily intrinsically violent, and sometimes a simple, unquestioning faith can lead to goodness and peace. It depends on the teaching and its context and many other factors, and is not merely a matter of faith being bad and reason being good. In other words there is certainly room for criticism of religion, but there is also room for criticism of reason. Grayling assumes that reason and philosophy *per se* would make people mature, peaceful and considered, yet that in itself is a form of faith and hope without much evidence. Philosophy and reason, although they can contribute to human maturity, can also serve violence and ideologies, just like religions.

I would, however, like to take a different tack by way of response to the suspicions from secular society. And that is to say that although religious beliefs can be infantile, it is in the nature of spiritual paths to lead their followers to a way of seeing the world that is more mature than reason. That is, faith is not necessarily unreasonable or irrational, (meaning pre-rational and childish) but rather in its mature form is beyond reason (that is, including reason but more than that). When in our Australian Anglican Prayer Book we are blessed with the peace of God, which passes all understanding, we are offered something that human reason will never grasp.¹⁰ It is beyond understanding, for it surpasses, is more generous and larger-hearted than is reasonable. It can only be understood through the eyes of faith, through the spirit and not through the mind alone.

Further, theology and the Christian faith are not primarily about assenting to beliefs in certain doctrines but about a way of life in relation to God. To speak theologically about this way of life is to engage first with the language of faith and its symbols, metaphors and narratives that are given to us in the tradition. We have been given a rich inheritance and as Paul reminds his readers in 1 Cor 4:7: 'what do you have that you did not receive?' There is a giftedness about being human, and about religious traditions, that guide and orient us in relation to God that is more than the history of ideas and reasonable thoughts. There is, further, a humility needed to accept this gift rather than rely solely on our own autonomous, thinking selves.

Paul Ricoeur maintains that symbolic rather than conceptual language is primal. Symbolic language is not merely decorative, giving colour and interest to life and faith, but is the only way in which humanity's deepest experiences can be expressed. More than that, he argues that such language is revelatory, a discovery (that is, an uncovering) of what it means to be human and about human being in relation to divine being.

Now in treating the symbol as a simple revealer of self-awareness, we cut it off from its ontological function; we pretend to believe that 'know thyself' is purely reflexive, whereas it is first of all an appeal by which each [person] is invited to situate [oneself] better in being...¹¹

In other words, we cannot know ourselves by reflecting on ourselves in isolation, but only by way of a detour into what has been told, written down and handed on, given to us as gifts in traditions, particularly religious traditions, and for Ricoeur, particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition. Philosophy and reason have their limits, because they do not work from this primal, symbolic language that is so fruitful for knowing and being, but rather remain on the level of conceptual thinking or autonomous thought. Religious traditions carry for us the gift.

For example, from our Christian scriptures and liturgies we can know ourselves more profoundly, and situate ourselves in relation to God through understanding ourselves as creatures, made in God's image; as sinners, fallen short of the glory of God; as mortal, like the grass that withers and dies; and as redeemed, bought back, sought out and shown the way home. All these symbols and metaphors have their place within the larger story of God's creative, loving and saving acts. So when Christians gather, they retell the story, worshipping God in thankfulness. Within the context of worship they exchange the greeting of peace, the confession and forgiveness of sins, share the bread of life and the cup of salvation. This, for me, is not ignoble, ignorant, infantile or violent.

Speaking theologically in a secular world, we need to acknowledge the genuine criticisms of ignorance, fanaticism, infantile behaviour and violence where they occur. However, to uphold secular reason as the final and absolute arbiter of truth is somewhat shallow and limited, and fails to concede the rich gifts we have been given in what Christian theology calls revelation.

Suspicion of ideologies

The second form of suspicion comes from a line of attacks from Feuerbach, through Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, and includes some contemporary critical theories such as feminism and post-colonialism. These attacks, at times scathing, cast Christianity as a mask for what are actually human concerns, projections and power plays. Again, these Masters of suspicion have been considered in detail elsewhere, so I will take them as read and offer a theological response.¹²

First, Christian theology has as a central doctrine the doctrine of sin. We know the human heart to be deceitful, corrupt, violent, and self-centred. One response, then, to the Masters of suspicion is to say 'thank you'. You serve theology by fleshing out the many ways in which the corruption of the human heart continues to work in religion as elsewhere. It is the task of theology to discern true faith from false faith and bad

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religion. Indeed, Paul Ricoeur and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have built into their theological method a hermeneutics of suspicion so that theologians may become more conscious of the privileges and power positions that make their way into theology (their own and others), and the ways in which theologians project the concerns of their own small worlds onto the larger world and onto God. A hermeneutics of suspicion in theology is meant to enable theologians to see their ideologies so that they may repent of them for the sake of the one true God.

Connected to this is the theological concern with idols, worshipping what is human-made rather than worshipping God. This is not an easy or simple distinction to make, but critical theories that discern ideologies in our theology and Christian life can serve our desire to love and worship God, not things less than God.

However, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and post-Christian feminists mean more than offering constructive criticism and a few warm suggestions. They mean to bring the house down, the whole enterprise of religious faith and theology. They wound to kill, not to heal, and their criticism is that Christianity is irredeemably shot through with ideologies and projections of one kind or another. In their view, we are better off without it.

While this absolute stance is difficult to hear, and while I advocate a careful listening to it, there is still room for theology to question their criticisms and to make a response. For one, each critic speaks from his or her own world-view and philosophy, each claiming an absolute summation of religion. How can they all be right? Do they not start cancelling each other out? That is, the particular suspicions they each articulate must also be applied to each other. Ideologies and projections are in and through all human endeavours, not just religion.

Further, they each reduce religion to their own world-view, and being reductionist, lose credibility. For Freud, religion is 'explained' as a psychological phenomenon as human beings project their fears and wish-fulfillments onto God their 'Father'. For Nietzsche, religion is 'explained' in terms of power relationships whereby the weak make a virtue of their weakness, calling it servanthood, while actually being resentful of the strong and their power. For Marx, religion is 'explained' in socially constructed terms as an ideology that upholds the power and privilege of the bourgeois, while keeping the masses ignorant and appeased. By each reducing reality to their particular view, their claim to an absolute 'truth' is itself open to suspicion.

Although there is some truth in all of these critiques, religious faith and theology are more than that which any one explanatory theory can contain. Theology can resist a totalising view that it is only one thing or another, and in response, get on with being the best expression of Christian faith that it can be. It can seek its truth in truthfulness, in an authenticity of the inner life for individuals and as faith communities,¹³ which in turn finds its expression in compassion for the world.

Suspicion on the grounds of hypocrisy

I have included a section on hypocrisy because it is a perennial problem as a source of mistrust, but also because it is a particular problem within the Anglican Church of Australia now. In relation to child sexual abuse by clergy and other church leaders, there has been a loss of confidence and trust in the church, and the Anglican Church

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in particular, according to national surveys.¹⁴ Tom Frame in his new book, *Anglicans in Australia* devotes a chapter to this issue, 'A Crisis in Behaving'. He quotes Phillip Aspinall speaking as Archbishop of Brisbane in 2006 as saying:

While the large-scale and ongoing changes to our procedures show our resolve to tackle abuse, they give us no automatic right to victims' trust. Some victims may be too hurt and angry to trust us again.¹⁵

I commend Tom Frame's chapter for its presentation of the problem and of the Anglican Church of Australia's responses to child sexual abuse cases, its procedures for prevention, accountability and ensuring professional standards. Speaking theologically into this situation calls for changes of behaviour as well as changes in thinking about how leaders use their power and authority in relation to others in their care, in order for the church to become a trustworthy community.

There is still much theological work to do in thinking through what forgiveness, reconciliation, justice and healing mean in situations of abuse or trauma. Theologians can well learn from conversations with psychologists, lawyers, ethicists and those involved in restorative and transitional justice about these matters, as well as make their own contribution.¹⁶

Speaking theologically in a suspicious world is an uncomfortable business, though comfort was never a promise for the Christian life. As I said at the beginning, it requires humility and courage. I would add integrity between the gospel preached and the life lived, for individual Christians and church communities. The most effective way to counter suspicion, to become trustworthy and respected, is through the quality of our lives, and through theology's contribution to such things as peace, healing and reconciliation in our public life.

Heather Thomson
21.9.07

¹ Grayling, A. C. *Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness*. London, Oberon Books, 2007.

² SMH, Spectrum, September 1-2, 2007, pp. 28-9.

³ Kennedy, P. *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions for Old Beliefs*. London, I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 89.

⁴ As indicated, for example, by falling church attendances. See Peter Kaldor, *Build My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches*. Ashfield, Open Book, 1999, p. 22 for church attendance trends from 1950 to 1998.

⁵ Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology*, Chapter 5: 'Secularity and Suspicion', pp. 83-109.

⁶ Dawkins, R. *The God Delusion*. London, Bantam, 2006.

⁷ Onfray, M. *The Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*, Carlton, MUP, 2007.

⁸ Hitchens, C. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 2007.

⁹ SMH, Spectrum, September 1-2, 2007, p. 29.

¹⁰ *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Shorter Edition, Mulgrave, Broughton Books, 1999, p. 144.

¹¹ Ricoeur, P. *The Symbolism of Evil*, translated from the French by Emerson Buchanan, New York, Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 356, 353; The words in brackets are replacing 'man' and 'himself' respectively.

¹² See for example Winifred Wing Han Lamb, *Living Truth, Truthful Living*, Adelaide, ATF Press, 2004, on the critique of Christian faith by the Masters of suspicion, and on theological responses. See also Kennedy, *op.cit.*, 'Secularity and Suspicion'.

¹³ Lamb, in *Living Truth and Truthful Living*, argues this position well.

¹⁴ Frame, T. *Anglicans in Australia*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2007.

¹⁵ Frame, *Anglicans in Australia*, p. 151.

¹⁶ See for example, Griswold, C. L. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. Cambridge, CUP, 2007, a book recommended by Elie Wiesel for dealing in depth with 'one of the most urgent topics facing humankind today'. See also, Amstutz, M. R. *The Healing of the Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005; and Sullivan, D. & Tift, L. (eds) *Handbook of Restorative Justice: A Global Perspective*. London, Routledge, 2006.