God, Secularization and the New Atheism

The Rev. Dr. Gary Gabriel Nicolosi

(The Smyth Lecture delivered at St. John’s Anglican Church, Elora, Ontario on October 26th, 2008.)

I. The Rising Tide of Secularization

The Rev. Walter Jabusch is a priest of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago and the former director of spiritual formation at the American College of the Catholic University in Louvain, Belgium. Several years ago he wrote an article recalling an incident on a Sunday afternoon in the great Romanesque abbey church of Maria Laach in German Rhineland. A mother and father with three preteen children strolled down the aisle casually licking their ice cream cones. There was no hint of embarrassment that licking an ice cream cone might not be the appropriate thing to do in a church. And yet, theirs was not an act of deliberate sacrilege or blasphemy – just total indifference.

Father Jabusch sees this family as a symbol of secular Europe – a Europe where the church is no longer an enemy to be attacked but a historical relic that is ignored. Yes, the outward trappings of Christianity are still present – majestic churches and monasteries drape the countryside. But Christianity no longer animates daily life, and with so few people attending church the Christian faith is not being passed on to a new generation.

Europeans, Father Jabusch suggests, seem to lack the experience of what it means to be Christian. He writes: “They have gone to church now and then, but for many there has been no movement of the heart, no challenge to the will, no stimulus for the mind. Religion has become meaningless and boring. If you see someone in church, it is for a concert, a Bach cantata or a Mozart Mass, or perhaps for a baptism, a wedding or a funeral. But now even the ‘ethnic’ or ‘cultural’ Catholic is disappearing, and the sacraments are being neglected…Millions of nominal Christians now ‘cease to be anything at all.’ All those seminaries and convents are almost empty, the great abbey churches and cathedrals are beautiful but underused monuments of a bygone era, though some are rescued from decay by governments who appreciate their value for tourism. Others, like St. Jacob’s and the Dominican church in Leuven, are locked up, with windows broken and roof leaking, quietly waiting for the demolition crew.”

As I read Father Jabusch’s account, I thought of the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who first proclaimed that “God is dead” because “belief in the Christian god [had] become unbelievable.” We might want to take issue with Nietzsche and say instead that, in Europe at least, God is on life support. However, there is little doubt that Christian Europe no longer exists. Atheism, agnosticism and secularism are common convictions among Europeans today.

Europe’s churches are grand but empty. Only 3% of the population of Sweden attends church. In Norway the figure is 4%. In Holland 9% of the population attends church regularly; France, 7% and in Germany, 11%. The Church of England, with 28 million baptized members has an average Sunday attendance of less than one million. In fact, the Church of England now has a lower church attendance than the Roman Catholic Church in England.

The state of religion in British Columbia, the province where I minister, is much like Europe. About 20% of the province’s population are members of a Christian church; only 7% attend worship regularly – the same level as France. About 53% of the people of British Columbia believe in a personal God, with as many as one-third believing in a universal spirit or life force.

Although sociologist Reginald Bibby sees signs of a Canadian religious resurgence, from my perspective the trends are not encouraging. In Canada, less than 20% of the population regularly attends church; roughly half of that in the United States. The Anglican Church of Canada has gone from a membership 1.3 million in 1961 to 642,000 in 2001 – a 53% decline. The church loses about 13,000 members each year. At that rate, the last Anglican will leave the church by 2061.
What makes this decline even more alarming is that there has been a massive exodus from the church by both Baby Boomers and Generation X. The situation is even worse with the Millennials. Today the average Canadian is 30-something and the average Anglican is 60-something – and the gap is widening.

On the whole, religious life in Canada is far more like Europe than the United States. According to a July 7, 2008 report in MacLean’s magazine, the percent of Canadians who say religion is very important to them is 28%, whereas in the United States the figure is 60%. The Canadian government seems more amenable to allowing pornographic cable television stations than Christian radio stations, if CRT rulings in September 2008 are any indication. And where in the United States politicians are expected to talk about their faith and how it influences their decision-making, in Canada public discourse about God is shunned and secularization is imbedded in the culture.

By secularization I mean, as Owen Chadwick put it, “the growing tendency of {humankind} to do without religion, or to try to do without religion.” In the world of secularization, there is loss of a religious frame of reference, a loss of religious relevance to the issues of the day, and a loss of transcendence beyond the here and now. Secularization happens when one grand narrative – say, the Christian story – no longer holds society together. Pluralized beliefs make inevitable privatized faith, marginalized religion and relativized values. Secularization means that Alexander Campbell’s 19th century grand vision of “one God, one moral system, one Bible” has broken down irretrievably. Today we live in a secular vacuum, what Richard John Neuhaus has termed “the naked public square.”

All this makes evangelization increasingly difficult. Just how difficult, is illustrated by George Hunter, Professor of Evangelism at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky. Hunter suggests we look at two relatives – Geoffrey who lives in 15th century Yorkshire, England and Sidney who lives in 21st century London. Although a tradesman with no formal education, Geoffrey’s whole life centers on Christianity and the church. He knows by heart the stories of Jesus as taught by the local priest. He observes the holy days and feast days, regularly makes his confession, attends Mass faithfully, and fasts during Lent. Geoffrey cannot conceive of himself as anything but Christian.

Sidney, on the other hand, has no conscious Christian background. He is more influenced by technology than by religion. He knows more about his iPod, MP3 player and Blackberry than the Bible. If you commended Christianity to Sid, you would find him not to be an atheist saying, “I don’t believe in God.” Nor would you find him to be an agnostic, saying, “I don’t know if I believe in God.” Sid, in fact, is an agnostic, saying, “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

What happened between the time of Geoffrey in the 15th century and Sid in the 21st century? Simply put, a new world emerged – a world that went from the great medieval synthesis of faith and reason to a modern world that squeezes faith out of the affairs of everyday life. In this new emerging world a growing number of people have no Christian memory, no Christian background, and no Christian vocabulary. Quite simply, the God question is not a question many people are asking or even feel a need to ask.

Remember the Marquis de Laplace in his famous reply to Napoleon on where is God in his conception of the universe. Laplace remarked, “I have no need of that hypothesis.” Today, many people seem to have no need for God. They work out in the gym, meditate or practice yoga, focus on their careers, eat organic foods, play golf, watch hockey, go to pubs, shop and enjoy themselves, and perhaps even marry and raise a family – but God does not figure in their lives.

II. The Assault on Religious Faith

How did we get to this state of affairs? We could go back to the period after the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) when Europe determined to move beyond the controversies of faith to the harmonies of reason.

The French rationalist philosopher Descartes echoed the sentiments of many in Europe when he wrote, “That nothing ought to be admitted as True, but that which has been proved by good and solid reasons.”
The Dutch philosopher Spinoza went further and postulated a universe ruled by the cause and effect of natural laws, without purpose, without design. For Spinoza, a pantheist, God was Nature and Nature was God.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume made a persuasive case that anything that could not be empirically verified should be relegated to the flames as the worst kind of sophistry. Thus, both the existence of God and the immortality of the soul were put in doubt.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant attempted to defend the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, but even he wrote a book titled *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* in which he argued that faith must be subordinate to reason in order to avoid superstition and fanaticism. Kant reversed St. Anselm’s maxim that faith seeks understanding by insisting that understanding must shape faith. Take, for example, God’s command to Abraham that he kill his son Isaac. Kant responded to such a command this way:

Abraham would have to answer this supposedly divine voice:

‘That I ought not to kill my good son, that is, wholly certain;

but that you, who appear to me, are God, of that I am not certain

and never can become certain even if it should resound from the (visible) heavens. (6)

Kant wrote his work towards the end of the 18th century. In his own mind he was attempting to save religion from its critics. However, by the end of the 19th century, organized religion had suffered severe blows from Marx, Darwin and Freud. Darwin’s theory of evolution was an enormous challenge for believers – not because Christians believed in a literal six day account of creation or that God could not create the world through some process taking billions of years. No, Darwin’s picture of evolution, involving natural selection, cast doubt on the goodness and beneficence of God creating a process that seemed so cruel and heartless and relentless – what Herbert Spencer would term “survival of the fittest.” What kind of God would create the world in such a way?

Let me offer a case study of how traumatic 19th century British Victorian society was for Christian believers. The poet Christina Rossetti wrote that lovely Christmas carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*. Singing that carol, you would not know that it really is a cry of faith in a God who was increasingly marginalized by the secular, scientific world of Victorian England. Although we may not realize it, “the nineteenth century was easily the best-documented moment of widespread doubt in human history,” as historian Jennifer Michael Hecht put it. (7)

Christina Rossetti wrote her poem at a time when Darwin’s theory of evolution had become popular, and philosophers and scientists were increasingly rejecting the idea of revealed religion, and especially the truth claims of Christianity. The romance of faith was giving way to the bleak, barren landscape of a world with no God, no solidarity with humanity, and nothing but blind chance. And so, she writes:

> In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,

> earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;

> snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,

> in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Can you sense the quiet desperation of those words? “Snow upon snow, snow upon snow” falls to the ground, transforming the landscape of Europe into cold, barren tundra, relentlessly extinguishing the flame of faith. Yes, it is a difficult time to believe in God when the best and the brightest have relegated religious belief to the margins of intellectual discourse. There is Matthew Arnold, the son of the great
Anglican priest Thomas Arnold of Rugby, writing the poem “Dover Beach” with its haunting image of the tide waning in Dover Beach, symbolizing the waning of Christianity from Europe. There is the novelist Thomas Hardy throwing down the gauntlet in his poem, “God’s Funeral.” There is Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer and George Eliot, and many others…all with a word that no longer believes in the “Word made flesh.” (8)

Can you sense the heaviness of soul in Christina Rossetti’s words? She is writing about Christmas in a world that does not believe in Christmas. She doesn’t know how to respond to this unbelief, much less feel adequate to give a response. All she can do is fall back on faith – the simple, heartfelt faith in Jesus. And so, she concludes:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?*

*If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;*

*If I were a wise man, I would do my part;*

*Yet, what I can I give him – give my heart.*

You give your heart when you can no longer give your mind. Faith, for Christina Rossetti, is to believe in the mystery of God even when rational explanations fail us.

And yet, since the time of the Enlightenment the arguments against God’s existence have been relentless, with perhaps none more poignant than the one made by the 18th century French philosopher Voltaire. On November 1, 1755 the Lisbon earthquake struck without warning, destroying much of the city and killing countless thousands, many of whom died while attending Mass on All Saints Day. Voltaire asked: How could a gracious God allow such an awful tragedy to happen to the very people who believed in him? Is God really in control of things? If God is in control, then what kind of God would allow such tragic suffering to happen?

Voltaire was echoing the question raised by the 5th century philosopher Boethius: “If God is righteous, why evil?” Boethius answered, “Either God wishes to prevent evil but cannot, in which case God is just but not omnipotent. Or God can prevent evil but does not want to, in which case God is omnipotent but not just.”

A friend of Sigmund Freud’s, a cancer specialist, told Freud that, when he died and came before the throne of the Almighty, he would take with him a cancerous human bone and demand an explanation. Why did not God make a better job of creating the world? It rather looks, as David Hume once mockingly suggested, as if it had been badly bungled, or as if it were the work of a committee.

Life raises all the questions we can handle regarding God’s existence. There are doubts enough a plenty. If we are honest, we have to admit there is always an area of darkness in life hinting that God may not exist. The British mathematician and philosopher Bertram Russell wrote a famous book titled *Why I Am Not a Christian*. He was later asked what he would say if he died and found himself confronted by God, demanding to know why Russell had not believed in him. “Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence,” was Russell’s reply. (9)

The 20th century saw a forceful challenge to Christian faith from philosophers of the British school of logical positivism. A.J. Ayer dismissed all religious faith as absurd. For Ayer and his fellow logical positivists, truth is to be found only by the scientific method that formulates hypotheses about phenomena on the basis of physical observations that can be tested over and over. Since religious claims are not subject to empirical verification (or falsification), rational inquiry requires that they disown them. Ayer showed a particular contempt for Christianity when he wrote that, “one reason for not believing in Christianity is that there is not the slightest evidence in its favor.” (10)
By the end of the 20th century, the relentless assault on religious belief had pushed Christian faith to the margins of intellectual respectability among the major universities of Europe and North America. Universities that were founded as religious institutions now replaced their theology departments with religious studies departments – for while the study of faith was impermissible, the scientific study of religion was not. Gradually but persistently Christianity among academics moved from the mainline to the sideline of scholarly legitimacy – fading away “not with a bang but a whimper.”

III. The New Atheism

As the 21st century began, religious belief in Europe and Canada seemed harmless enough. It existed on the intellectual margins of society, not very prominent and not at all important. That all changed with the events of 9/11. The world saw the horror of Islamic terrorists shouting “God is Great!” as they crashed their hijacked planes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Religious belief, so it now seemed, was neither safe nor harmless but deadly. From the ashes of 9/11 came to prominence the new atheists of the 21st century: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, and others. (11)

In his book *God is Not Great*, Hitchens argues that religion is fundamentally toxic to human society and must be directly challenged and eradicated where possible. Religion “poisons everything,” he writes, and religious morality amounts to psychological abuse. Needless to say, Hitchens finds nothing good or worthwhile in Christianity, and even Mother Teresa is lambasted.

Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* writes that there will come a time when we will acknowledge the obvious: theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance. Indeed, it is “ignorance with wings.” It is not surprising then, that Harris yearns for a time when faith will be banished from public life and from our own minds.

The socio-biologist Richard Dawkins describes religion as a “virus,” and in his book *The God Delusion* proclaimed that monotheism is “the great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture.” For Dawkins, faith in God is not just an error in judgment. It is sheer madness. He quotes approvingly Robert Pirsig’s book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: “When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion, it is called religion.” To Dawkins, the God of the Bible is “arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, blood-thirsty ethnic cleansing; a misogynist, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal…sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” (12)

The intellectual foundation of this new atheism is not new. It is a worldview known as “scientific naturalism” – a label first used by Thomas Huxley in the 19th century to emphasize the principle that science must never appeal to supernatural explanations. The new atheists expand this concept and assert that the natural world is literally all that exists. There is no divine creator, no cosmic purpose, no soul, and no possibility of life after death. They believe that lifeless and mindless physical stuff, evolving by impersonal natural processes over billions of years, is the ultimate origin and destiny of everything, including living and thinking beings. This materialist worldview is itself the offspring of “scientism” – the assumption that the modern scientific method is the only way for reasonable, truth-seeking people to gain knowledge of the real world.

Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris are passionate about their cause – as passionate and zealous as any fundamentalist believer. Their arguments are couched in the rhetorical violence they spurn in others, and their use of ridicule to disparage religious faith shows their contempt.

They are reminiscent of a central character in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. In that novel, a priest on the run from an atheist regime in Mexico is finally captured by government soldiers. Late in the story, the lieutenant responsible for his capture has a conversation with the man he is planning to execute in order to deprive the local population of its last active priest. “You’re a danger,” the lieutenant tells him. “That’s why we kill you. I have nothing against you, you understand, as a man.”

“Oh of course not,” the priest replies. “It’s God you’re up against.”
“No,” says the atheist, “I do not fight against a fiction.” (13)

Well then, who is he fighting against? If God is a fiction, why is he so angry? Dawkins, as I have just cited, comes out fighting, ready to do battle, with a “take no prisoners” mindset. He candidly admits, “I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.” Because all religious faith is so destructive to human existence, no accommodation is possible. As Harris candidly acknowledges, tolerance should end where religious faith begins. The goal of the new atheists is nothing less than the eradication of God and religious faith from every facet of human life both public and private.

IV. A Response to the New Atheism

There are many ways to respond to these new atheists both in terms of their methods and the substance of their arguments. One thing is clear: the scientific method can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. Neither can the theory of evolution adjudicate the matter one way or the other. As Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project put it, “Science is the only reliable way to understand the natural world…But science is powerless to answer questions such as, ‘Why did the universe come into being?’ ‘What is the meaning of human existence?’ ‘What happens after we die?’” (14)

Here is where I think the church should focus its energies in connecting with a postmodern, post-Christian culture – on four questions that are at the heart of human existence:

♦ Who am I? The chemist tells me I am composed mostly of water, and contain quantities of carbon, calcium and salt. The DNA in every cell in my body contains all the information needed to make an exact replica of me – enough, if it were written out in English, to fill thousands upon thousands of pages in a book. Yes, every human being is composed of a combination of chemicals. But am I more than this? Who am I?

♦ Where am I? The astronomer tells me that I am a speck on the face of a medium-sized planet spiraling around a middle-aged star. The star, our sun, is just one of four billion suns in the Milky Way, and it is only a single galaxy, the one in which our planet happens to reside. But there are billions of galaxies spaced about a million light years apart. Within the range of existing telescopes there are at least one hundred million galaxies such as our own Milky Way, each galaxy with millions of stars. Our life-dominant sun is one mediocre star among the myriad that, by the late Carl Sagan’s estimate, outnumber the grains of sand on all the beaches of the world. (15) When I think of the immensity of the universe, I feel small. I feel lonely. I feel insignificant. Where am I?

♦ Why am I? Martin Heidegger’s question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” seems unanswerable. Philosophers dispute why human beings exist at all. They can’t agree if there is a purpose to life – a reason for living – or if life is absurd, as the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre claimed. Why am I?

♦ Who am I? Where am I? Why am I? The religion or philosophy or scientific worldview that can best answer these questions will dominate the 21st century. However, I do not think these questions are answerable until we answer a fourth and still more basic question: Is there a God? If God does not exist, then there is no ultimate meaning to life. If God does not exist, then we have no reason for existing. If God does not exist, how can any of us commit ourselves to rational inquiry or the pursuit of truth or even reliance on our own intellectual prowess?

It is important to understand the logical implications of a world without God. How could I be fair or unfair, just or unjust in a godless world? If human beings are simply products of evolutionist materialism, then why be concerned about political or social issues at all? Why engage in the pursuit of truth if “truth” itself is a fiction? If there is no justice, if there are no rights and wrongs, and if there are no safeguards of any kind, then what kind of world are we left with, except one where the strong dominate the weak and self-interest and expedience determine every action? If Karl Marx’s dictum is true that, “the material
world to which we belong is the only reality,” then all human values – love, caring, sharing, compassion, justice, loyalty and friendship – are at bottom empty pursuits in a meaningless world. Life has no purpose, no meaning, except what we arbitrarily give it. We are simply accidents on a remote speck of cosmic dust destined eventually to be sucked into the nothingness of a black hole. Bertram Russell, to his credit, faced the issue courageously. When asked about life after death, he replied, “I believe that when I die, I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive.”

Yes, we can speculate about the existence of God. We can disagree on whether the world is creation or accident, but both standpoints require faith. It may take a lot of faith to believe God created the universe, but perhaps it takes even more to believe that the whole of existence – the intricacy of life, the harmony of nature, the beauty of the world, and the mystery of love – are all meaningless chance.

Today the Big Bang is the accepted scientific theory for the beginning of the universe. But, as Francis Collins points out, the existence of the Big Bang begs the question of what came before that and who or what was responsible. Collins states, “The Big Bang cries out for a divine explanation. It forces the conclusion that nature had a defined beginning. I cannot see how nature could have created itself. Only a supernatural force that is outside of space and time could have done that.” (16)

Remember Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*. Why did so many people buy, and then struggle through this difficult volume filled with esoteric vocabulary, impenetrable sentences and astonishing observations like: “…The initial state of the universe must have been very carefully chosen indeed if the hot big bang model was correct right back to the beginning of time. It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as an act of a God who intended to create beings like us.” (17)

Hawking claims he is an atheist. If so, he is an atheist who recognizes that the universe is put together with ingenuity so astonishing that it cannot be a purposeless accident. While this view does not necessitate a personal God, it does lead us to a certain reverence and awe for the mystery that is the universe. This is what biologist Ursula Goodenough has called, “the sacred depths of nature,” and even non-religious scientists are attracted by this idea. Here, I believe, is where many believers and non-believers can find common ground: in their shared reverence for the grandeur of nature.

It was Albert Einstein who said that, “Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind.” (18) Einstein was not a believer, but he viewed himself as a religious man. I think he had it right when he said in a speech, “The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion, as well as all serious endeavors in art and science. He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and is a feeble reflection, this is religiousness.” (19)

A book I return to again and again is Margaret Craven’s *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. You may know the story: a young priest is assigned to a remote First Nation’s village in northern British Columbia. One incident has the priest encounter a rather disgruntled teacher who complains about living conditions in the village. The story continues: “There was one more thing the teacher felt it his duty to inform the vicar. The vicar might as well know right now that as for himself, he was an atheist; he considered Christianity a calamity. He believed that any man who professed it must be incredibly naïve.

“The young vicar grinned and agreed. There were two kinds of naïveté, he said, quoting Schweitzer. One not even aware of the problems, and another which has knocked on all the doors of knowledge and knows man can explain little, and is still willing to follow his convictions into the unknown.

“‘This takes courage’ he said, and he thanked the teacher and returned to the vicarage.” (20)
Here is the religious spirit as its best: reverence, awe and humility about the mystery of life and the grandeur of the universe. There is more truth in life than we can ever know, more mystery than we can ever grasp.

To reiterate: science cannot prove or disprove God’s existence; but as the priest-scientist John Polkinghorn says, “Science creates the feeling that there is more to the world than meets the eye.” (21) What this “more” is; is the great spiritual quest of our time. From the New Age to Eastern sages to Christian mystics, from Deepak Chopra to David Suzuki to Eckhart Tolle to the Dalai Lama to Father Thomas Keating to Pope Benedict XVI, there is a search for more than meets the eye.

V. A Mission Strategy for a Secularized Culture

I think this is where the church has enormous opportunity to tap into the spiritual yearnings of people in our secularized culture, whether they are religious or not, believe in God or not. Rationalism can take us only so but it cannot help us to appreciate a Mozart symphony or a Bach fugue. To be human, truly human, we need to see reality “as wondrous and amazing, life-giving and nourishing, beyond all our explanations, to which the appropriate response is awe and gratitude and doxology.” (22)

Several years ago Harold Mumma published his remarkable book *Albert Camus and the Minister*, which reported on the conversations the French existentialist had with an American Methodist minister. Camus, who by this time had become famous for such novels as *The Plague* and *The Stranger*, admitted to his minister friend, “I am searching for something I do not have, something I am not sure I can define.” Whether Camus ever found that something is problematic, but the book suggests that in his last years Camus came very close to becoming a Christian, and admitted to the minister, “I have been coming to church because I have been seeking. I am searching for something that the world is not giving me.” (23)

The “something the world is not giving me” – we can call that something “mystery.” People today are open to mystery, even if they cannot explicitly believe in the existence of God. People are searching for that something more, something they cannot define or describe but they feel in their hearts. Call it the quest for harmony or wholeness or oneness with the world around us. Deep down at its roots it is a quest for the transcendent source of their being. As St. Augustine put it, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.”

Even the new atheists have restless hearts. Take Sam Harris, for example. His book *The End of Faith* is an indictment against God and organized religion. And yet, this committed atheist seems to be drawn to the mystical. In an address to the Atheist Alliance International last October, Harris said that he did not like being categorized as an atheist because to him it “seems more or less synonymous with not being interested in what someone like the Buddha or Jesus may have actually experienced... yet these experiences often constitute the most important and transforming moments in a person’s life.” He went on to express his admiration for deep meditation and for the cultivation of silence and solitude. Such a person discovers a “universe of mystery” and a place where “selfhood is relaxed” and “negative social emotions such as hatred, envy and spite” are replaced by emotions “such as love and compassion.” (24)

What is Harris looking for, if not a kind of spirituality that may indeed lead to a joyous, compassionate, loving, powerful, boundless, light-filled reality that Christians call God?

And then there is Woody Allen. In January 2008 he was interviewed by *Maclean’s* magazine. He was asked about the paradox of making meaningful films but believing in a meaningless existence. Here is how he responded: “I have no real answers or knowledge of these things, I only have my feelings about them, and I am ready to explore all the possibilities. My own personal conclusion concurs with what seems to be the everyday finding of our physicists, that [the world] was an accident, that it will end, and it was just an odd little phenomenon that has no meaning, that [it] wasn’t created by any super-being or with any design, it’s just a chance phenomenon and a micro-speck in an overwhelming, violent universe, and it will end, and everything that Shakespeare did and Beethoven did, all of that will be gone, and every
planet will be gone, and every star will be gone – down the line – but that’s where we we’re headed, out of nothing to nothing.” (25)

And yet, despite what appears to be his completely nihilistic philosophy, Allen refuses to give up on life. He goes on to say, “And yet the trick, to me, seems to be to find, not meaning, but to be able to live with that and enjoy life.”

Yes, life is still to be affirmed and valued and cherished. I ask: how can the church speak to Woody Allen and the many like him in Canada who love life – beauty, love, goodness – even as they believe that in the end life will be sucked up into a black hole of nothingness? What good news does the church have for the Woody Allens of the world?

Christians believe God created the world, but God did not simply go away and leave everything to its own devices. God is involved in the world. God holds the world together. God sustains it and keeps it going. God cares about it. So if there is a God who made us and cares about us, it stands to reason that God would not leave us in the dark about himself – or even to grope our way to him. Christians believe that God has shown us who he is in Jesus Christ. In T.S. Eliot’s memorable phrase, Jesus shows us the God who is “the still point of the turning world.”

In Jesus we know God not just as Creator but as Father – the personal, powerful source of life and love. In Jesus we know God as Savior – because God gives us life, fullness of life, abundant life, life after life: a life we could not give ourselves but which is given us as gift. In Jesus we know God as Spirit – because the God who made us is also in us and with us: always and everywhere. In Jesus we discover that the purpose of life is communion with God.

Francis B. Sayre, Jr. was for many years the Dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. In one of his sermons after he retired, Francis Sayre told a story about a woman on Martha’s Vineyard. She had been twice widowed, and now spent much of her time and energy as an artist. She attended church now and then, but she admitted to Dean Sayre that she could no longer believe in the teachings of her youth: that Jesus was God, or that his birth was from a virgin, or that he was resurrected after he died. “Do you believe these things?” she asked him.

“Yes,” Dean Sayre told her gently, “I do believe all those Christian things, and so do you! For they are not literal, logical, fact statements like two plus two equals four. Rather, they are symbolical, allegorical, poetical descriptions of realities far deeper than two plus two. They express the reality of life, of this spirit and its kinship with eternal truth: miracle and mystery in all ages and climes.”

Dean Sayre went on to preach: “It is not for me, or any priest, to attempt to clothe the creedal insights with the simple arithmetic of everyday; that’s the work of the Holy Spirit. But it is rather to share the living wonder that surrounds all things – planets and galaxies, the trees around us, and your soul and mine…Look to yourself, dear lady of Martha’s Vineyard, not to me, for the gift of peace – call it Christ if you can – which lies within you and between all people.” (26)

We all know this God, Woody Allen, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Europeans and Canadians included. As you gaze upon the stars and see the immensity of space, as you ponder the complexity of life, the miracle of birth, the mystery of love, you walk among the trees or along the lake, as you experience the surf on the beach or climb the mountains and gaze upon the vistas, as you give the gift of love and receive that love from another person, you have an intuitive sense that life is miracle and mystery, and that upholding it all is a divine presence we call God.

Every human being, I believe, has this heartfelt suspicion that just beneath the apparent contradictions, brokenness and discord of this everyday world lays a hidden unity that gives our lives meaning and purpose and significance. When we embrace God, or more accurately, when God embraces us, we have a sense that our individual lives are caught up in a great cosmic story that is headed somewhere wonderful. We are not alone. We journey in the company of a Great Companion whose inexhaustible energy will ceaselessly work to bring ultimate love to every relationship and situation. In the end, we are not destined
to be swallowed up by a black hole into nothingness but to experience the eternal embrace of the One who gives us life, sustains our life and offers us abundant life. That, dear people, is not too hard to believe, just too good to believe, we being strangers to such goodness.

Oh, I know…believing in God does not iron every wrinkle out of life. In fact, trusting God complicates life. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do the innocent suffer? Why couldn’t God have created a better world than this? Frankly, we will never know the answers to these questions, at least not in this life. And yet, at the heart of Christian faith is the belief that the power and wisdom behind the universe is love, and that this love will triumph against all the evil and suffering that come our way. Believing in God may not make your cancer go away, but it can give you the sense that in times of difficulty you are upheld by everlasting arms.

My favorite play is Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. It is a magnificent presentation of the drama of everyday life. It expresses the basic idea that if we live with the proper perspective, then every moment of living is sacred. Seen from an over-arching view, all of life can be lifted from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the sight of the commonplace to the scene of creation.

Nothing sums up this philosophy better than a scene in *Our Town* in which a letter is sent to a Grover’s Corners girl by a minister who is a humorist and, probably, unknowingly, the profoundest person in the world. The letter is addressed as follows: “June Crofut; the Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; …Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God…” (27)

Yes, you and I are in the mind of God. And so, we come back to the big questions:

- **Who am I?** I am God’s child.
- **Where am I?** I am in God’s world.
- **Why am I?** I have been made by God to know and enjoy God forever.
- **Is there a God?** Yes. In the mystery and wonder of life there are glimpses of God, a God fully revealed in Jesus, and by the Spirit working within me I believe in him.

*The Rev. Dr. Gary Gabriel Nicolosi*

*The Smyth Lecture*

*St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church*

*Elora, Ontario*

*October 26, 2008*


8. For an excellent study of religious skepticism and unbelief in the Victoria era, see A.N. Wilson, God’s Funeral (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).


26. Francis B. Sayre, Jr., The Mystery and the Miracle” preached at Christ Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts on August 4, 1991. The sermon was published in Cathedral Age, the magazine of the Washington National Cathedral.

27. Thornton Wilder, Our Town (New York: Perennial Library, 1957) 45