

Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I have found it fascinating to see the increased debate between those who believe in God and those who do not because atheism has taken on a new fervency, a new militancy. You argue, however, that atheism is going into a twilight. Why do you say that and how do you answer the atheist arguments?

Alister McGrath:

Well, I think atheism is going into twilight; because I think that the many arguments that atheists brought forward in the past to demonstrate their case actually are beginning to lose their credibility. You're absolutely right to say that in recent years, atheism has become much more aggressive, much more militant. And I think the reason for that is because the prediction: religion is going to disappear is simply not happening. I mean, I used to be an atheist myself and certainly when I was growing up in the 1960s, everyone was saying: hey, religion's on the way out. We've got a secular world coming and a generation nobody's going to believe in God anymore.

And yet more people believe in God than ever before and not just that but a greater percentage of the population. I think atheists are angry about that, really angry. The theory says this, the observation says something completely different, and they feel that this is wrong. And so what I think we're seeing is an increased stridency which is basically an anger at the way the theory simply hasn't been fulfilled as they said it would.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay, use specific examples. Which are the arguments that you feel atheists are using but losing the battle based upon looking at the evidence.

Alister McGrath:

Well, let me give you one example which is very influential for me when I was an atheist many years ago, and that was religion leads to violence. And certainly, someone who was growing up in northern Ireland, that seemed to me to be a very, very powerful argument. The real difficulty is this: there is no doubt that religion can indeed be a significant element in generating violence. But if you look at the history of the 20th century. If you look, for example, at the Stalinist era -- you begin to realize that Stalin and others used violence to advance an anti-religious agenda.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I don't think any human group has a monopoly on violence.

Alister McGrath:

Precisely. The real issue here is that to be human seems to lead to violence. We are very, very good as human beings -- that inventing people for fighting other people. And it seems to me that what we need to recognize is there's something wrong with human nature that means that we end up fighting each other. It's not specifically religious, but religion can be a factor here. So I find the atheist argument that in some way if we got rid of religion, we get rid of violence as simply being incredible.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, I think we would get rid of a certain kind of violence. We certainly wouldn't get rid of all of it. But that is a sociological critique of religion, it's not a metaphysical one. It has nothing to do with religion's place or not place in reality. It just says what the effect of religion, or certain religions, may be.

Alister McGrath:

That's absolutely right, and again, we could easily make the point that in many ways atheism has become almost like a religion in recent years, generating its own sense of own, a group of high priests, its own set of dogmas, and its own sense of absolute certainty of its belief so that in effect you can't question them anymore.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

What are some other atheistic arguments that you'd like to take apart?

Alister McGrath:

Well one of them that we find in many atheists writers today is that in some way that science has made it impossible to believe in God; and you find this in a variety of forms. I think there are two main things I'd want to say in response to that. Number one, there are a very large number of scientists who are religious believers; and these are not stupid people at all. They are extremely erudite, well-regarded people; and that is a serious challenge -- this very simplistic belief: science disproves God. It's clearly much more complex than that. But much more complex, much more sophisticated is a point that goes like this: the scientific method is actually incapable by the verifying or falsifying the whole idea of God.

And, anyway, science is neutral. I mean, scientists may believe in God or may not believe in God; but it's not the science that drives them to that position. And one of my favorite scientists is Steven J. Gould who died a few years back. But Steven J. Gould was an atheist; but he wasn't an atheist because of his science. And he simply made the point: look, let me say it for the umpteenth millionth time: the scientific method cannot adjudicate on the God question. And that seems to me to be absolutely right. So this very simplistic approach: science leads to atheism -- seems to me to be utterly unsustainable.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But does that same position undermine natural theology; because many theologians today would use the natural world to argue for God being the best explanation.

Alister McGrath:

Well, let me make it clear that I'm saying science does not prove or does not disprove God; but it doesn't mean that science suggests certain things.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But you're saying that the atheistic position would say that science replaces, and, in a sense, almost disproves God.

Alister McGrath:

What science does on an atheist perspective is to eliminate the conceptual space for God. In other words, you force them into the corners and then you squeeze them out of the corners.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Right. The God of the gaps.

Alister McGrath:

The God of the gaps. I don't believe in the God of the gaps.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

The gaps get filled and there's no room for God.

Alister McGrath:

No. For me, God doesn't live in the gaps. The fact that we can make sense of things at all requires explanation. For me, God's in the big picture. Not the gaps. The fact that we can make sense of the world at all is astonishing; and the only way of making sense of that is to say there's some kind of resonance between the human mind and the natural order; and the best way of explaining that is God made me, God made the world, and there's a resonance there.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But don't blame the atheist for the God of the gaps. The God of the gaps was created by -- pardon the... -- other theologians or other people who maybe in past generations argued like you are for the same position, argued it differently. And they said: we can't explain this or we can't explain that and that's where God may fit.

Alister McGrath:

Point taken. And certain I'd want to say they got it wrong. And therefore, actually, curiously Christianity owes us a debt to some atheist writers to say this doesn't work. And they're right. Let's start all over again -- let's get it right this time.