

DENIS ALEXANDER

Editorial – Science, Religion and Atheism

One of the striking characteristics of the past decade has been the rise of the new atheists with their strident attempts to drive a wedge between science and faith, claiming that the two are in some way incompatible. As propaganda in the public domain the new atheists have been quite successful in creating a secular cultural climate in which it feels as if science and faith are in opposition.

But we have to remember that the new atheists represent a rather recent, and I suspect quite transient cultural and political movement, and that once we start examining the rhetoric more closely, we quickly find that their grasp of philosophy and history, let alone theology, is extremely weak. It is difficult to institutionalise negative philosophies – and a-theism cannot live without theism.

The institutionalisation of a more moderate atheism has been suggested by Alain de Botton in his book *Religion for Atheists*. The positivist Auguste Comte tried the same experiment in the earlier part of the nineteenth century with his ‘religion of humanity’ complete with places for worship of humanity and secular sacraments. But all that remains of Comte’s vision is derelict places of humanistic worship scattered around France and Brazil. Humanity is not, it seems, sufficiently transcendent as an object of communal worship.

One of the articles in the present issue derives from a recent Faraday Institute Course held in Cambridge on the topic ‘Science, Religion and Atheism’. The same topic was addressed in pairs of lectures given either by a theist or by an atheist/agnostic. In theory there seems no particular reason why academic study of science-faith interactions should be influenced by one’s personal perspective. In practice the reality is otherwise as Bernard Lightman illustrates in his nuanced study of the key figures who first began identifying themselves as atheists or agnostics. Rodney Holder highlights a similar point in his intriguing comparison between the world-views of Georges Lemaître and Fred Hoyle.

Scientism continues to be promoted heavily by the new atheists and its careful and systematic demolition by one of Holland’s best-known philosophers, René van Woudenberg, is therefore to be welcomed. Bypassing scientism to become one of Europe’s most influential theologians in the science-faith arena in recent history, Jürgen Moltmann recounts how his pilgrimage to a living faith lay through the horrors of the Second World War. The ‘religion of humanity’ is a story of the gods that fail, but thankfully can lead to the God who does not fail.

Denis Alexander is Editor of *Science and Christian Belief*.
