

THE GOD OF THE GAPS

Dennis Vanden Auweele[♦]

1. Introduction

Our present age has, especially in the West, an explosion of publications by scholars of various backgrounds, each in their own way, propagating some form of atheism. Some of the more outspoken among these are Daniel Dennett,¹ Richard Dawkins,² Christopher Hitchens,³ Sam Harris,⁴ Victor Stenger,⁵ David Mills⁶ and Gref Graffin.⁷ These authors engendered, especially in Northern America, a lively debate on the value, the scientific foundation and the rationality of religion. In the United

[♦]**Dennis Vanden Auweele** is a doctoral research assistant at the Institute of Philosophy, Catholic University of Leuven. He is currently pursuing his research on the theme of 'Radical Evil' in Modern philosophy with a particular emphasis on the relationship between religion and philosophy under the supervision of Prof. William Desmond. He has lectured and published on the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Immanuel Kant and the philosophy of religion in general.

¹Daniel Dennett is a university philosophy professor (Tufts University) and a prominent member of the 'Brights Movement' that tries to promote a purely naturalistic world-view in the United States of America. His publications on this subject include: *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, London: Penguin Books, 2006; *Science and Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

²Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist and a popular science author. Some of his work include: *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; *The Blind Watchmaker*, New York: Norton and Company, 1986; *The God Delusion*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

³Christopher Hitchens is a journalist, columnist and author of *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York: Warner Books, 2007.

⁴Sam Harris is a neuroscientist and philosopher. His works include: *The End of Faith*, New York: Norton and Company, 2004, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, New York: Knopf, 2006.

⁵Victor Stenger is a physicist and author of *God the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007; *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*, New York: Prometheus books, 2009.

⁶David Mills is a popular atheist author; he published, among others *Atheist Universe: The Thinking Person's Answer to Christian Fundamentalism*, Berkeley: Ulysses Press, 2006.

⁷Gref Graffin is an evolutionary biologist and lead singer of the rock band 'Bad Religion.' His recent contribution (co-authored by Steve Olson) to this debate is *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science, and Bad Religion in a World without God*, New York: IT Books, 2010.

Kingdom, the so-called 'Oxford God-Debate' has pitted on the one hand Richard Dawkins and his cohort Peter Atkins and on the other Archbishop Rowan Williams, theologian Alister McGrath and the biochemist/theologian Arthur Peacocke against each other. Recently, these last three have been joined by the theologian and born-again Christian Keith Ward. A staggering amount of works have been published by authors on both sides of the issue in an attempt to defend their respective position from attacks from the opposite side. A certain recurring theme in this discussion is the notion of the 'God of the gaps'. The 'God of the gaps' is a term, usually used in a demeaning fashion, to caricature a religious person's claim that those issues that science has not (yet) exhaustively explained must be explained by God. Needless to say, few advocates of a religious life openly defend such a view of God. This approach is mostly linked to American creationism and intelligent design, both of which I would characterize as poor science and even worse religion.⁸ The term 'God of the gaps' most likely has its origin in the Lowell Lectures by Henry Drummond on 'The Ascent of Man' (1894) in which he states: "There are reverent minds who ceaselessly scan the fields of Nature and the books of Science in search of gaps – gaps which they will fill up with God. As if God lived in gaps?"⁹ The term was popularized and scorned by the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1944)¹⁰ and his advocate Richard Bube (1971)¹¹ who believed that any understanding of God as filling gaps of scientific knowledge was most certainly going to lead to the steady recession of divinity as 'gaps' are progressively filled by science over time.

In this paper, I will examine the claims of the 'God of the gaps' notion and offer a critique from a philosophical point of view. The conception of the 'God of the gaps' is mostly held by on the one hand proselyte atheist scientists in a haphazard quest to refute, what they

⁸The creationist and controversial college professor Michael Behe has defended a view similar to 'God of the gaps' in his: *Darwin's Black Box*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. He points for instance to the 'irreducible complexity' of the bacterial flagellar motor which, in his view, could not be explained by evolution. Shortly after writing his book, however, a number of publications showed that the bacterial flagellar motor could indeed be explained by evolution.

⁹<http://henrydrummond.wwwhubs.com/ascent10.htm>

¹⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

¹¹Richard Bube, *The Human Quest: A New Look at Science and the Christian Faith*, Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1971.

perceive to be, the claims of religion and on the other hand fundamentalist fideistic religious believers who use it to point towards the shortcomings of science and the necessity for a supernatural agent so to account for the intricate complexity of creation. First, I will expand on the notion of the 'God of the gaps' and offer an illustration. Second, I will point to the obvious and less obvious limits of this theory as it focuses on religion and science in a negative sense. Third, I will point towards a different understanding of the relationship between science and religion in a more positive light. Lastly, I will make some comments on the possibility of dialogue between science and religion as we need to move towards a rational faith or faithful rationality.

2. God of the Gaps: Definition

The notion 'God of the gaps' is usually used in a demeaning fashion to describe a tendency by believers of a certain persuasion to warrant the credibility of their faith by pointing to the fact that science has not explained certain things therefore these gaps require a supernatural explanation. This reasoning puts science and religion into an antagonistic relationship and is, in itself, fundamentally flawed on a logical level: if science has not (yet) explained x, it does not follow that (1) science will not ultimately be able to explain x or that (2) x requires a certain supernatural explanation. Popular gaps are the evolution of the human eye, the rise of (self-)consciousness and the 'creation' of the universe. Science has not yet fully explained and detailed the natural processes pertaining to these; this does not mean, however, that science is fundamentally unable to explain these or that they require a supernatural explanation. Still, those who adhere to creationism or its more moderate sibling intelligent design point¹² towards these 'riddles' in order to make credible their faith in a personal and transcendent (supernatural) God. As a consequence of this, a lot of scientists of an atheist persuasion have turned into crusaders and proselytizers: they attempt to do away with any and all riddles of nature in order to conclusively prove that the religious outlook on life is fundamentally wrong. An astounding number of thinkers, such as Richard

¹²Creationism entails the belief that the Earth and the rest of the universe are created by a supernatural agent. The term is mostly used in contrast with certain biological understandings of the evolution of man such as Darwin's theory of evolution. Intelligent design is a pseudoscientific offshoot of creationism (akin to 'creation science') that attempts to validate the opinion that certain processes and features of the universe and living things cannot be explained by purely naturalistic means, but require intelligent design.

Dawkins, Victor Stenger and David Mills, utilize science not to attain greater and more knowledge, but rather to defend their naturalistic worldview. Allow me to illustrate this issue by reference to a contemporary phenomenon.

In Cern, Switzerland there is a controversial experiment running at the Large Hadron-collider. At this institute, a number of scientists are attempting to recreate the elemental status of the universe that is presumed at the 'time' of the Big Bang. They attempt to speed up mass to such a velocity so that it approaches the speed of light and turns into pure energy. When this velocity is achieved, it is believed that the Higgs-Boson particle will be created. The existence of this particle needs to be verified in order to fill a certain gap in the standard model for particle physics which would conclusively attest to the veracity of the Big Bang theory. This particle is often referred to as the 'God-particle'¹³ because it is claimed to be the last hiding place of God. According to some scientists, proving the veracity of the Big Bang theory will result in demonstrating the inexistence of God and the failure of religion. A number of scientists have openly revolted against this hidden agenda; they prefer to base their research on scientific curiosity rather than it being an attempt to disprove religion. In his column in the London magazine 'The Guardian', journalist and physicist Ian Sample has suggested a contest to rename the 'God-Particle' because it has to him some undesired connotations. A group of physicists have ultimately opted for the name 'The Champagne Bottle Boson.'¹⁴ The research conducted at the Large Hadron Collider and the hidden agenda of some scientists exemplify the drive behind the 'God of the gaps'. Religious people who defend this view tend to point towards some unsolved questions in the area of science to make plausible the claim of the existence of a supernatural entity, while scientists who defend this view tend to utilize this notion in order to be able to conclusively do away with religion as a whole. David Mills puts it as follows: "As a general historical observation, each step forward taken by science has further distanced the hand of God from perceived intervention into natural events. As humanity's gaps of knowledge were slowly replaced by scientific understanding, a 'God of the Gaps' found fewer and fewer caverns of intellectual darkness in which to live."¹⁵

¹³The term 'God-particle' is derived from Leon Lederman's book: *The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* New York: Delta Press, 1993.

¹⁴"Anything but the God Particle," London: *The Guardian*, 29 May 2009.

¹⁵Mills, *Atheist Universe*, 86.

This genre of crusading or proselytizing atheist is somewhat of an interesting breed in the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy has known two types of atheists exemplified in two thinkers: Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Rorty. Nietzsche was a Prussian philosopher raised in a strict Christian (Protestant) household: most of his immediate male family members were Protestant ministers. He lived a strict religious life, but found when he reached maturity that religion could not offer the answers he hoped to receive. Nietzsche's problem with religion was not on the level of truth or justification, but rather on the existential and moral level: he deemed religion (especially Christianity) to be ugly, weak and decadent. He yearned for a strong, beautiful and life-affirming existence. As a consequence, he had to deny religion and set out unto the unknown critiquing all traditional and stable accounts of truth, morality and social organization. The death of (his) God was a horrible experience to Nietzsche. Richard Rorty is an American philosopher propagating pragmatism and liberal irony. He holds to a form of 'cheerful nihilism' or the simple acceptance of the non-existence of God. The vacuum that filled Nietzsche with horror is simply accepted by Rorty as a matter of fact. Some authors have pointed out that Rorty's easy-going acceptance of nihilism and the worthlessness of being can be a dangerous venture.¹⁶ The new proselytizer atheist seems to have certain characteristics of both Nietzsche and Rorty: they claim to simply accept nihilism and the non-existence of God, but still feel a certain amount of passion to free themselves and others from religious prejudice.¹⁷ They venture upon a

¹⁶See, for instance, K. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth Century Responses to Meaninglessness*, New York: University of New York Press, 1992.

¹⁷Ian Markham draws a distinction between 'fundamental' (Dawkins et al.) and 'real' atheism (Nietzsche). He continues to argue that Nietzsche's atheism is the only real atheism because it affirmed the horrifying consequences of atheism such as the downfall of epistemology, morality and social order. This recourse is often made by contemporary defenders of theism: they claim that most areas of human interaction, most importantly morality, will fall to shreds if theism is rejected. Ian Markham, *Against Atheism: Why Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris Are Fundamentally Wrong*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. The atheists try to show that morality does, in no way, depend on religion and that often the more religious nations have the highest crime rates. See: D. Cupitt, *After God: The Future of Religion*, London: Phoenix, 1997, 101-106; D. Brink, "The Autonomy of Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, M. Martin, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 149-166; Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 241-259; Mills, *Atheist Universe*, 47-53; Stenger, *The God Hypothesis*, 193-215; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 278-308.

crusade to persuade others to forsake their religious beliefs and become pious atheists.¹⁸ On the other side, we find a number of religious advocates who explicitly set out to bring the atheist back into the flock by any means possible. It seems that both sides are digging deep into the trenches and refuse to budge therefore blocking any and all communication. I think that this stalemate is due to certain drawbacks of the 'God of the gaps' concept. In what follows I will attempt to show its shortcomings and offer a new perspective on religion that can work in order to re-open the lines of communication.

3. The Limits of the God of the Gaps

There seems to be an innate tendency of human reason to be ill-satisfied with that which is unexplained. The history of philosophy speaks of philosophers stating that it was wonder at the strange and unfamiliar world that enflamed their philosophical pathos. Socrates, in Plato's dialogue *Apology*, recounts the tale of his election by the oracle of Delphi as the wisest of all the Greeks. His wisdom consisted of the self-acknowledgment of his own ignorance and the drive to attain sure and stable knowledge. Kant, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, claimed that he was filled with awe and amazement by the starry skies above him and the moral law within him. This amazement moved him to his own critical philosophical process in order to make sense of metaphysics and morality. In a way, the avowal to some form of 'God of the gaps' is an ersatz solution to be rid of wonder and amazement.

According to Dawkins, both science and religion are moved by ignorance, but in different ways. Science is driven by ignorance as it tries to overcome it by filling the gaps with determinate knowledge through scientific research and experiment. Religion, so claims Dawkins, rejoices at ignorance and thrives through it. There is an innate tendency of religion to manifest and preserve ignorance as religion thrives on gaps in scientific and rational investigation. In this perspective, the logic of religion is defeatist and lazy.¹⁹ Dawkins raises an important point about some forms

¹⁸Attesting to this fact in a dreary fashion is the so-called Converts' Corner on Richard Dawkins' webpage. On this page, people who have converted to atheism can share their tale with the world. Remarkably, however, the majority of people who respond to the page are those who more or less have been atheists their whole life or those who only moderately believed in religion and who have let go of their residual faith as they read Dawkins' work. It seems that the pious and fundamentalist believers are not convinced by Dawkins' rhetoric.

¹⁹Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 151 ff.

of being religious such as creationism and intelligent design theory. These forms of religion actually thrive on the gaps in science and claim that God must be postulated to fill these gaps. However, scientific gaps are progressively filled and there is no reason to assume that there are scientific questions that are fundamentally unsolvable.²⁰ In this way, creationism and intelligent design theorists feel the chilling gaze of scientific progress in the back of their necks and are forced to be progressively retreating. While I do not doubt that a lot of creationists and defenders of intelligent design are honest believers, they unavoidably turn God into an ersatz solution to real knowledge.

The 'God of the gaps' turns God into a negativity: the holes that science has not filled (yet) are the refuge of God. Whenever this outcome is presented to a religious believer, he would find this hard to accept. Still, when questioned about the legitimacy of their religious beliefs and the existence of God, the religious man is often moved to point towards areas of knowledge that are not entirely clear yet. Still, how would this affect God-talk? The 'God of the gaps' holds an ambivalent relationship to science. They often defend the veracity of religious revelation but in a similar manner accept the obvious veracity of science as it is pragmatically able to explain and manipulate different aspects of nature. In this way, the progressive nature of scientific process pushes back the veracity of revelation. No learned man these days would ever defend that congenital diseases are punishments by God even though the Bible may say so. The truthfulness of Scripture is downplayed through scientific progress while still attempting to hold on to the ultimate truthfulness of religious texts. This relationship is, to say the least, problematic. One cannot behold the obvious truthfulness of science and scientific progress and still hold on to the absolute truthfulness of religious revelation.

Fundamentalists on both sides attempt to use science as a means to corroborate their claims and I find myself opposing both views as they

²⁰In Stephen Hawking's latest addition to this debate, *The Grand Design*, he claims that while science can never really conclusively prove that God does not exist, it does make the existence of God unnecessary. This is somewhat problematic with regard to other issues raised in this book. Hawking adheres to m-theory which claims that there are, in grand total, 11 dimensions. As our knowledge of some issues in these dimensions increases, our other knowledge becomes more uncertain. For instance, the more we fix a particle's spatiality, the more uncertain its velocity becomes. Hawking argues that these uncertainties in no way invite speculation about God. See S. Hawking, and L. Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, New York: Bantam Books, 2010.

share a similar prejudice, namely the 'God of the gaps.' Proselytizer atheists use science and its progressive nature to make plausible the non-existence of God or at least the falseness of religious convictions.²¹ Creationists and defenders of intelligent design claim that the gaps of science are to be filled by the postulation of God: only through the postulation of a supernatural being could we make sense of creation, the intricate complexity of the human being and morality. As these areas of knowledge are progressively filled, the creationist is pushed back and forced to mitigate his point of view. This leaves religion, to say the least, in a poor state. The 'God of the gaps' thinks on God in negativity: an ersatz solution to difficult problems. I wonder if this is really the spawning ground of religious belief and whether science and religion really need to exist in an antagonistic relationship. I will attempt to introduce a different way to look upon religion in the next section.

4. The Positivity of Religion

In part, I would agree with Dawkins that religion is propelled by some form of ignorance, but this ignorance is not to be understood in a purely privative sense. One could speak of a basic perplexity that exceeds any determinate urge to overcome it: a fundamental astonishment that fuels religious passion.²²

Religious passion and philosophical/scientific activity seem, at first glance, to be on opposite sides. A closer inspection however reveals an intricate and mutual relationship and inter-dependence. Religious passion prefigures any determinate attempt to make sense of the world; in fact, it is the driving force of our philosophical being. In primordial religious passion, the world is filled with value and man is open to this valuing outside of his own process of estimation and measuring. When the former Pope, his Holiness John Paul II, was asked why God seemed to be hiding,

²¹The most nuanced account of this is given by Daniel Dennett. He claims that all scientific insights ultimately support atheism. While I do not disagree with his statement, I do disagree with his assumption that scientific truth is the only real truth. Daniel Dennett, "Atheism and Evolution," in *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Martin, ed., 135-148.

²²A thinker with a very nuanced and interesting perspective on perplexity and religious being is William Desmond. He claims that perplexity invites us to accept the idiotic or pre-reflexive goodness of being and throws us beyond immanence in a truthful search for hyperbolic transcendence. His work on this notion is most noteworthy; in particular: William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy: Metaphysical Thoughts from the Middle*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.

he responded by saying that the question answers itself. Our human nature is to be universally probing; always searching for proof and univocal disclosure. Yet, we are only able to ask this question if we are open to some notion of divinity and absolute value: our thought is, in the terms of Thomas Aquinas, determined by being which is infused with divinity. Ever since Modernity, we have grown accustomed to think on being as determined through thought and not the other way around. Think for instance of Descartes' claim that my thinking affirms my own existence (*Cogito, ergo sum*). If God were not a mystery, there would be no need for us to look for Him.²³ While I do not share the same Christian religious zeal, there is something to be said about this religious passivity. Our search for truth is fuelled by primordial mystery: should our zeal be to conclusively overcome this mystery, our passion would lose all ground. Finding the 'ultimate answer to life, the universe and the everything'²⁴ would be detrimental to human ambition as it would extinguish our desire. We need a constant re-awaking and revitalization in order to be desiring and ambitious beings. This makes us to think on mystery in a positive rather than a privative sense.

This new view on mystery can foster thoughts on religion in a more positive sense than the filling of gaps left by science. Religion can be taken to be the inspiration for our progressive search for answers and our delight in attaining greater and higher self-mastery. In all fairness, I must admit that religion can serve the opposite goal (and it has, far too often, done this): it can work to cultivate ignorance and work as a force for moral evil. This however does not mean that religion itself as a project should be forsaken; it simply means that our existing religions should be subjected to some form of philosophical scrutiny in order for them to fulfil their proper

²³John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, A. Knopf, ed., New York: Arnaldo Mondadori, 1994, 37-41.

²⁴This term stems from the best-seller science fiction novella by Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, New York: Del Rey Publishing, 1995. In the novella, a group of people are looking for the ultimate answer to all of life's questions and, when the answer is revealed to be 'forty-two,' they set out to search for the question itself. The search for knowledge must continue otherwise human existence is miserable. *The Hitchhiker's Guide* itself, which is the focus point of the novella, is an encyclopaedia that attempts to centralize all knowledge. The adage of the book is 'Don't panic:' we should not fear the mystery as it fuels our drive for knowledge. Ironically, this adage is quite akin to the exhortation that John Paul II made when he became the vicar of Christ, namely 'Be not afraid.' John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 225-229.

goal. Though some so-called religious zealots have taken religion in a wrong direction, there is no need to scorn the religious pathos as a whole. Think, for instance, of the story by Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazow* of the Grand-inquisitor. Around the year 1500, Jesus returns to earth and is imprisoned and questioned by the Grand-inquisitor. During the whole chapter, Jesus does not speak a word. The Grand-inquisitor goes to argue that Jesus' appearance and teachings would be detrimental to the Church as it has worked tirelessly to undo Jesus' message of love and responsibility. The Church has served to chain people and has taken away their freedom, forcing them into obedience. Jesus' answer is paradigmatic for true religiosity: he "suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on the forehead. That was His answer. The old man shuddered."²⁵ Jesus answers by showing his love and attempts to re-awaken the religious passion of the inquisitor beyond his own petty will to power. True religion does not make any claims; it simply awakens awe and vitalizes the soul with the necessary passion to go forth. A different illustration of the same subject is seen in a philosophical narrative written by William Desmond.²⁶ Four different people are given the chance to elaborate their own views on the Biblical story of the Prodigal Son. The first is K (referring to Kant) who scorns the father in the story because he lets his son go astray and follow his passions. Still, this venture was necessary to attain true freedom. The second is H (referring to Hegel) who claims to appreciate the father's original generous giving, yet the son needed to go out in the world alone to fully come to himself. The third is M (referring to Marx) who states that the son's rebellion against his father was necessary for him to self-manifest himself through working in order to attain money. The fourth is N (referring to Nietzsche) who claims that it was the passion to leave a traditional home and wonder the high seas in search for esthetical self-creation that moved the prodigal son to leave home. All four of these claim that it was necessary for the Prodigal Son to refuse his father in order to become a true self. The father answers: "I let them go. It was good."²⁷ He allows each of them their claims and does not want to tyrannize any of them. He does not regret his original generosity to his Prodigal Sons: "They are all good boys at heart, and boys will be

²⁵Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazow*. Transl. Garnett, C. (New York: Signett Books, 2007), 299.

²⁶William Desmond, "Dream Monologues of Autonomy," *Ethical Perspectives* 5 (1998), 305-321.

²⁷Desmond, "Dream Monologues of Autonomy," 320.

boys." He does not care that his sons might forsake him, as long as "the sweet glory of life is blessed ... and when they call, if they call, I will come."²⁸ The excessive generosity of God is not exhausted by sin or rejection. God is the Old Man that allows people to be and act as they wish even if they ultimately act clueless. God is the mystery that vitalizes all endeavours to be and would accept even the harshest rebellions. Even the most committed atheistic scientist has a religious zeal, namely truthfulness. In this way, being religious is a way to manifest and revere the mystery that moves us all to be whatever we desire to be. The mystery invites us to be silent on some things: to let go of our probing speech and accept something that infinitely transcends us. Mystery is etymologically related to the Greek *muein* which means to close one's eyes and mouth and keep the mystery.

There is a side to this issue that might not be enjoyed by positivistic proselytizers. We might be allowed to deny the original giving and move away from it in our own way, truthfulness would beckon us however to rejoice in the mystery of the gift. A certain religious truthfulness invites us to accept that we are not the originators of our own curiosity, that we are not the fuel that makes our fire burn. The fire burns within us; we are living in closeness with a mysterious sense of divinity within us. This divinity is not to be understood in any scriptural or overly anthropomorphic sense, but rather as an openness to the sacredness and the goodness of human endeavour and being. This is at the heart of Friedrich Nietzsche's rhetoric when the last pope speaks to Zarathustra: "Some God within you converted you to your godlessness"²⁹ or, in my paraphrase, "it is the God within you that rejects the God above you." The God Nietzsche denies is the God that is the work of men; the projection of human weakness and intolerance. Nietzsche advocates a sense of divinity which could be associated with the ever-enduring search for value and playful creation of beauty. It is the God within him that propels him to love life (*Amor Fati*) and beautify being (Will to Power). This invites us to acknowledge that there is a sense of truthfulness that exceeds empirical truth; a truth that is not bound by scientific rhetoric. This sense of truthfulness can work as a means to enable communication between religion and science.

²⁸Desmond, "Dream Monologues of Autonomy," 321.

²⁹"*Irgend ein Gott in dir [dass] dich bekehrte zu deiner Gottlosigkeit.*" Frederick Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, Herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, Verlag Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1967-1977, Band 4, 325 (My translation).

5. Truth and Dialogue

Science and religion, properly understood, are quests for truth; yet, their respective truths reside on different levels. The conflation of these levels of truth leads to fundamentalism on both sides as we have seen with the notion of the 'God of the gaps'. In order for dialogue to commence, we need to discern between three levels of truth and confine religion and science to their proper level. Only then are we able to move towards a rational faith or faithful rationality.

I can discern three different levels of truth. The first and most basic level is empirical truth which is the sole domain of science. Religion has no business in making empirical statements. Religious stories should therefore never be read in any all-too-literal fashion: their truth lies beyond the empirical. The theories of creationism and intelligent design are therefore moving beyond their reach: one cannot make empirical claims from the viewpoint of religion. The second level of truth is moral truth where religion and science overlap. Science cannot make claims on 'ought' or 'unconditional value' which are very central concepts of morality. Religion however, as it is fundamentally open to value that transcends autonomous valuing, can make value judgments on certain things as exceeding empirical worth. Religion is assisted, on this level, by science as it can temper the unconditional call of some valuing by prudential and practical reasoning. Kant's moral philosophy was for instance not open to prudential reasoning as it focuses very strongly on unconditional value: we may, for instance, never, no matter the circumstances, lie. Empirical prudential reasoning might open us to accept some exceptions to sacred rules. The level of morality is a constant dialogue between unconditional values and prudential casuistry. The third level of truth is the transcendent level which is the sole area of religion. Transcendent truth ushers us to acknowledge a primal passivity preceding our own desires and ambitions.³⁰ It beckons us to be open to tradition,

³⁰In this way, the area of inquiry into our religious being is reserved, for the most part, to philosophical inquiry. Theology, as the study and interpretation of sacred texts, can be helpful to refresh our openness towards religion; it should, however, refrain from making statements that transcend its scope. A popular new way to approach religion, often called 'light religion,' is professed by the theorists of the theological turn in phenomenology such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo. Caputo defends a theology of the event. John Caputo, *The Weakness of Go: A Theology of the Event*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006. He claims that our intimation with God can only come through a Logos of the Theos (Word of God): theology itself tries "to follow the track

infinite love and the goodness of being prior to any attempt to value this from an immanent standpoint.³¹ Science is filled with a spirit of instrumentalisation which cannot make sense of intrinsic value; religion opens us to accept inherent value through perplexity, beauty and sacrality. The truth of religion is to give meaning to personal experiences, communal life and any and all scientific ambition.

If science and religion limit themselves to their proper areas, not making claims that exceed their potential, we can have a faithful science and a rational religion. A rational religion would be a religion that is cleansed from empirical claims: we abstain from making claims on the origination of the universe, the empirical veracity of miracles performed by Jesus and the reality of an afterlife whether Heaven or Hell (as well as other empirical claims that may originate from reading religious texts).³² A faithful science would be a science that acknowledges that it is not the only human activity that is worthy to be affirmed; it is preceded by a

of the name of God to stay on the trail it leaves behind as it makes its way through our lives." Only through confrontation with something 'eventful' can we come to be intimated with God and we should be "praying for the courage to welcome this event." While I admire his candour in perpetuating the mystery of religious being, I do feel conflicted about his insistence on a passive acceptance of divine events. I believe that we ourselves should set out to find God in the mystery of being and not merely confess our own fragility. In Caputo's view, we should "confess to the poverty of our philosophy" and welcome the theological event. I would claim that philosophical inquiry into the mystery of being can better lead to a more truthful and finessed understanding of religion beyond theology.

³¹Keith Ward has argued for a similar perspective on this, but I fear that he has a different outcome in mind. He claims that "the question of God is certainly a factual one, but certainly not a scientific one" as it can never be conclusively settled. We need to open ourselves to a truth beyond scientific truth which "atheists are missing ... [they] need a widening of vision that will disclose the reality of God to them" (Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God: Doubting Dawkins*, Oxford: Lion, 2008, 143). Ward seems to be too much taken in by his Christian faith in a personal all-powerful God and fails to perceive what transcendent truth really entails.

³²In an attempt to further their polemic and spiteful attacks on religion, some atheists condemn rationalizations of religion. Dennett claims that any abstraction or rationalization of religion does not constitute a real religion anymore and real religion is to be scrutinized by science as a deceptive naturalistic process (Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 10-18). Stenger claims that "one can always abstract any concept so it is out of the realm of scientific investigation. But these gods would not be recognized by the typical believer" (Stenger, *The God Hypothesis*, 11). Their rhetoric is so obsessed with destroying religion that they fail to see that a rationalized version of religion can be very beneficial to man.

religious openness that determines its own practices. Should religion make any claims that trespass on the area of science, these should be rejected. Yet, if religion stays on its place proper as a source of inspiration, motivation and sacral service, it should be left to its own devices. On the level of morality, science and religion should remain in constant respectful dialogue. Religion should make science ever wary of the fact that not everything can be simply exchanged for something else; for example, some things have value exceeding their monetary value. Science however should remind religion that their uncompromising absolute claims might not be appropriate given a certain situation. This dialogue should be held with the utmost respect and sincerity in search for truth.

6. Conclusion

The adherence to some notion of a 'God of the gaps' inevitably puts religion in a poor position and can only lead to a negative notion of God and religious practices. I have tried to re-open the possibility for a more positive understanding of religion that transcends the fundamentalism on both sides. We have started to think of religion as a passion for the mystery of being which should be affirmed in truthful honesty. Science and religion both have their role to play in human life but should be kept in their proper place.

As God-talk was progressively being silenced and a 'philosophy of God' seemed to belong to the dim and distant past, philosophers have grown hesitant to speak on God and religion. The theological turn in phenomenology with protagonists such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-luc Marion has given the first stimulus towards a renewed, finessed argument on the divine. The more general debates, however, still focus on God in a negative sense, aptly named the 'God of the gaps'. At times, it seems even to be inappropriate to mention God in educated, much like Nietzsche's madman experienced when professing his message. William Desmond phrases this intuition very aptly as follows: "I remember a time when to mention God or religion in the company of advanced intellectuals was like mentioning sex in a prudish Victorian drawing room. An icy silence would descend, and the silence communicated more than the argument possibly could: we do not now talk of these things"³³ I think we are on a threshold here: either we re-open ourselves to a positive sense of mystery and offer religion its proper place or we recede further and further into shallowness. Personally, I am more inclined to be profound and not shallow.

³³William Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought?* New York: Fordham, 2005, xi.