# **Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education**

Volume 40 *Re-creating Jesuit Higher Education: The General's Challenge* 

Article 20

9-1-2011

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#### **Recommended** Citation

Raschko, Michael (2011) "An Answer to Atheism: God Made Us Free," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 20. Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/20

# An Answer to Atheism: God Made Us Free

# By Michael Raschko

ow shall we speak of the ineffable? Thomas Aquinas tells us we cannot, for the essence of God is unknowable. But then he adds that the effects of God's work in creation and salvation do teach us something of God (Summa Theologica, Prima Pars, Q. 1, art. 7, reply 1). The problem, however, is that those effects are constantly changing either in reality or in our understanding of them. Modern cosmology recognizes that the universe has a history which moves through unique stages. Evolutionary biology finds that the history of life on this planet is hardly a steady state. Random variations constantly open new possibilities for life. Consequently, scientific understanding itself has changed as methods develop and paradigms shift. How can our language for God hold steady when the reality upon which it is based keeps shifting? Nor does what science shows us of the effects of God speak well of God.

The story of life on earth is replete with mass extinctions and a struggle for survival. Human life constantly dwells in the shadow of tragedy and evil. Nor do the effects of God in the work of salvation speak with a pure voice. Churches and religions, one of the key products and agents of God's saving work, have recently been involved in cases of sexual abuse, in radical and intolerant political movements, and in some cases in sponsoring acts of terrorism. Perhaps God would prefer silence to the speech about God that emerges from the contemporary scene.

All of the above provides grist for the mills of the new atheism which is boldly advocated by such thinkers as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. The Superior General, Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., has challenged those of us involved in Jesuit higher education to meet a number of contemporary issues with "imagination, creativity and critical analysis." Among the issues he raises are the new, aggressive atheism and the equally aggressive secularism that has provided atheism with its social framework. So how do we speak of God creatively and imaginatively in the current social and scientific setting?

Part of the problem lies within Christianity itself. There are elements in the Christian community that have succumbed to the false allurements modernity offers. Modernity has canonized Isaac Newton as the patron of what good thought should be: clear propositions, concisely stated, in mathematical formulas if possible, and containing a statement of truth that transcends the contexts of history and culture. If only religion could imitate his *Principia*. So there are those within Christianity who love the conciseness and the seeming universality and finality of the answers given by catechisms and canon law. Some love to read the scriptures through the lens of these modern notions of truth and see every verse as literal propositions of factual truths.

# We give the atheists easy targets

Conceptualist notions of truth may provide a sense of security in an insecure world, but they provide atheism with an easy target. Even a passing knowledge of modern science undermines a blanket literal reading of the scriptures. When Christians forget that their language for God is symbolic and that those symbols are profoundly shaped by culture and history, language for God becomes literal and absolute, and the cultural and historical factors that shaped that language

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become normative. When history and culture move on, this kind of Christianity is left holding a bag of relics and not a living language for the ultimate. Atheism is then able to take aim at an image of God which no longer speaks to the contemporary situation.

We must recognize that our way of speaking of God has a history that progresses. Our tradition's understanding has moved from a tribal war god to the kenotic God of justice and compassion revealed in Jesus. The new atheists love to mock the old war god who still lives in the hearts of some terrorists. But to view God in that way is much like identifying modern science with medieval alchemy.

How has the context for speaking about God undergone change? Science has played a major role in shaping our present understanding of the world. The new atheists love to point out that with the progress of modern science, God is no longer needed as a hypothesis to explain our world. The theories of the big bang and evolution explain the history of the universe and life on earth. Quantum mechanics and

chaos theory describe the roles of chance and spontaneity in the emergence of the new within those histories. Physics, chemistry and biology speak of the boundaries that shape the paths those histories have taken. God is not needed to explain the world. We may appeal to God as the explanation for the emergence of complex structures whose natural ori-

gin eludes science now, but eventually science will progress and nudge God out of those niches in the causal chain where we thought God was safely ensconced.

Using God as an explanatory factor in science is not fair to science, nor is it fair to faith. This hypothesis would reduce God to just another in a long list of finite causes that explain our world. God becomes another being. She may be the greatest and most powerful being, but she is now one among many. And she is not really needed.

This reduced status of God makes God vulnerable to another arrow the new atheists borrow from science: there is no scientific evidence for the reality of God. This argument depends on thinking about God as another object in the universe available to us through our experience of the world. There are trees, dogs, birds, planets, and God. We have good evidence for all but the last on the list. Science has removed God as a causal explanation and as an object of empirical experience, so how are we to speak of God?

*First, we must see the limits of science.* Science is remarkable. It uncovers and explains so much of reality. But much of reality lies beyond the horizon of its heuristic structures. For example, science may indeed have valid insights that tell us that human love is a survival strategy. Human love binds us together so that we might be able to pass our genes on to the next generation. But human love is so much more.

Science is valid within the limits of its circle of meaning. But it is only one way of knowing in a many layered understanding of reality that human beings need to navigate their way through the world. It is not the complete explanation.

Second, we can agree that science never has found evidence for God and never will. God is not a finite object of our experience like everything else science deals with. God will never be experienced like rocks and trees and human beings. Paul Tillich even claims that God does not exist. Finite reality exists. God is beyond that, the Ground of Being that holds all finite reality in existence. God does not explain earthquakes, or photosynthesis, or certain steps in the evolution of life. God explains why there is anything at all, why there is something, not nothing. As such, God is utterly beyond the finite.

*But, third, God is real, and God is experienced,* not like rocks and people, but deep within the experiences we have of the world. The experience of God accompanies us quietly in an indirect and immediate way as we directly experience the finite world. The experience of God is something

# God becomes another human being... And she is not really needed

akin to our self awareness. Self awareness is always with us as our attention is centered on the world before us, but we rarely advert to it. We can center our attention on our self awareness, but then it slips away as we are aware we are thinking about our self awareness. So it is with our experience of God. It always accompanies us, but eludes

our grasp. That is why our symbols for the presence of God are so elusive. The presence of the Spirit of God is like wind, fire, flowing water. You cannot hold it in your hands or your mind. It is elusive, because it is mystery. Mystery is not the unknown or that which is yet to be discovered or explained, not that which lies utterly beyond experience, but that which eludes our grasp, our desire to reduce and define.

We must learn how to live with mystery and how to listen to the presence of that mystery in the fabric of their everyday lives. We must learn the language of symbols which alone can uncover and express the deepest aspects of ourselves and reality.

God may have been removed from the chain of finite causes that shape and explain the history of the universe, but God is not out of the picture. God is active in the world, but not as one finite cause among many. Modern science tends to explain reality through efficient causality which looks at things in terms of the factors which precede an event. God rarely acts as this kind of a cause. We need to imagine God's work in creation and grace along different lines. The primary way God works is not as a past cause, but out of the future. God has created and set on its way a world governed by possibilities that random changes open. God does not directly create certain forms of life, but calls creation to explore the possibilities opened by life. God invites the world into greater complexity, greater possibility, and fuller life. The processes uncovered by science explain how creation moves into that future to which God calls us.

The second major shift in our contemporary scene is a reemergence of our awareness of evil. Gone is the melioristic optimism of the modern world. We now face global warming, the prospect that our financial future may not be as bright as we once thought, the atrocities of the twentieth century and the terrorism of the twenty first. The new atheists often point to the evil and tragic in our world as evidence either that God does not exist, or if God exists, he or she is not a god in whom people would want to put their faith. One need only glance at the news of our world to get a steady diet of the truly evil human beings have done to one another. Then there is the tragic element in life, the earthquakes, the tsunamis, the diseases that rob so many of life. The tragic element of life runs deeper than the latest headlines, however. Paleontologists tell us of the death of most of the species that have lived on this planet. They speak of mass extinctions that defy our imaginations. What kind of God creates this kind of a world?

# God limits ber freedom

Again, we need imaginative, creative thinking to lead us into new ways of trying to understand God and how God works in our world. In a world in which freedom and creativity are possible, God must step back and limit the realm of her activity. God cannot work in the world like a chess master moving the pieces around a board and so dictate the course of life or the course of human history. In that world there would be no freedom. God respects creation. In a world marked by spontaneity, creativity, and freedom, God must open a sphere for that spontaneity and freedom to work. In that world there will be false paths that cannot succeed at life, there will be changes that destroy older forms of life, there will be tragedy and death. In a world of human freedom, there must be the possibility of moral failure and the terrible harm we do to one another. Without freedom there would be no room for the love that is the glory of human life or the creativity that graces human history. One of the greatest of God's acts of love in creation is to limit God's own freedom, that our freedom might come to be.



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