

# Atheism as culture and condition

## Nietzschean reflections on the contemporary invisibility of profound godlessness

The only really effective antidote to the dreariness of reading the New Atheists, it seems to me, is rereading Nietzsche.

– David Bentley Hart (2010)

In this paper I focus on a difficulty in our contemporary discourse about atheism. My rough thesis is that certain important problems stem from the fact that contemporary culture at large is already fine tuned with many of the crucial ‘virtues’ that are held forth strongly by leading atheists. Thus, one might perhaps claim that the New Atheists are mostly preaching to the already converted. However, the main problem with this picture is that a ‘cultural atheism’, or secularism, of the kind that I have in mind is far from identical with the ‘ideological atheisms’ of the contemporary debates. The theologians who respond to atheists are extremely frustrated and the debate is asymmetrical. If there is some sort of cultural identity between these camps it is constituted by an invisible cultural logic that expresses a profound godlessness beyond ideological distinctions. I will focus on the Swedish context and its peculiarities in order to theorise this cultural logic. In dialogue with Friedrich Nietzsche, I develop a notion of moral emptiness and connect it to the idea of profound godlessness. I then suggest that his creative and affirmative criticism of nihilism is an interesting opening for further debate.

THE SO-CALLED NEW VISIBILITY OF ATHEISM has proved to be both intriguing and frustrating. To many, especially a quite large group of theologians, it has become *more* than frustrating, due to the supposed difficulty in finding any serious and sincere argumentation for the atheist case.

But how should we value such verdicts? To me it seems that the atheists have a very good position in the debate. Atheism *ought* to be a quite natural and self-confident ideological companion to the secular lifestyles of the Western world that appeal to almost

everyone, no matter whether they are atheists or believers. However, the ‘intellectual quality’ of today’s atheist argumentation against religion is rather poor. It cannot be denied that some of the most high profile intellectual atheist critics of religion are curiously arrogant, and their own arguments do not always live up to the academic standards they put forward against religion (Hitchens 2007: 5).

This has of course irritated many of the theologians who understand themselves as modern, enlightened and critical of religious irrationality and intolerance. David B. Hart, for instance, who claims to have gone through more or less all of the books and pamphlets penned by the New Atheists, professes that this reading experience makes him feel as if he ‘had just left a banquet at which [he] had been made to dine entirely on crushed ice and water vapor’ (Hart 2010). What Hart describes is an utterly meagre collection of judgments, ‘most of which consists in simple category mistakes or the kind of historical oversimplifications that are either demonstrably false or irrelevantly true.’ He comes to the conclusion that many of the New Atheists just could not have bothered less to get even the most obvious facts right, or to give anything close to a fair account of the ideas they want to challenge. As an expression of contemporary intellectual thought, therefore, Hart views New Atheism and its popularity as ‘a social and spiritual catastrophe.’

This *frustration* is interesting in itself, and Hart is far from alone.<sup>1</sup> Many Christian commentators are stunned by the carelessness and intellectual malevolence of the bestselling atheists; they have been quick

1 See e.g. Beattie 2007, Day 2008, Hahn & Wiker 2008, Hart 2009, Haught 2008.

to declare that the mindset of the New Atheists is much closer to that of religious fundamentalism than to the ideals of democratic humanism they want to defend (McGrath 2007: 4). Moreover, such indignant reactions are not wholly confined to religious intellectuals. The renowned literary critic and Marxist, Terry Eagleton, has written extensively against the New Atheists (Eagleton 2009). The Swedish philosopher, historian and atheist Sven-Eric Liedman has attacked the New Atheists for being exclusively antagonistic in their 'lack of tolerance and blindness to the religions' aesthetic and cultural values' (Liedman 2008). And in relation to Richard Dawkins' best-seller *The God Delusion* (2006), yet another atheist, Michael Ruse, has confessed that he feels deeply embarrassed to be an atheist when he confronts the kind of intellectual sloppiness that is typical of Dawkins' book (Ruse 2009).

What, then, do these repeated accusations of dishonesty and intellectual immorality represent? The extreme self-confidence of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens (who died in December 2011), Michel Onfray, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett is obvious, and their immense popularity apparently renders them uninterested in defending themselves against critical responses and accusations. Harris, for instance, acts and reacts as if he was completely immune to the recurring allegation of secular fundamentalism or atheistic dogmatism:

The most common impediment to clear thinking that a non-believer must confront is the idea that the burden of proof can be fairly placed on his shoulders: 'How do you know there is no God? Can you prove it? You atheists are just as dogmatic as the fundamentalists you criticise.' This is nonsense. (Harris, in Williams 2011.)

Put differently, the New Atheists seem to see themselves as the protagonists of something immediately true and self-evident; something that no one who is thinking clearly could deny.

I agree with David B. Hart when he claims that the whole industry around the New Atheism can be interpreted as yet another version of light entertainment. But is this a 'spiritual catastrophe'? Or is it the boisterous effect of a more profound cultural godlessness which silently allows for all kinds of atheistic extravagances while, at the same time, religious and theological perspectives may be wholly in tune with secular standards and still not taken seriously at all? Perhaps, then, the *real* spiritual catastrophe rather

lies in the *mutual* failure to open up a sophisticated dialogue about this common cultural predicament.

Against the background of this suggestion, the purpose of my essay is to develop a critical perspective on culture that might shed more light both on the multifaceted phenomenon of atheism and the dynamics of religious responses to this phenomenon. Even though atheism is a fairly natural standpoint in a secular society, the new setting makes certain aspects of atheism controversial in *new* ways. If atheism was controversial in the West fifty or hundred years ago, it was because it stood up against the Christian hued normality of its Western context. Today, when the Western cultural context is no longer so strongly coloured by religion, atheism rather becomes controversial because it tends to hijack the Western cultural and intellectual default position, amplifying it ideologically in a way that becomes intolerable for many still-religious people, who themselves are already deeply involved in processes of adaptation to this cultural default position (such as the many Christian theologians mentioned above). But it is also intolerable to large groups of people (especially immigrants) whose beliefs and cultural sentiments are rather alien to the whole cultural negotiation that has gone on between Christianity and atheism in the West for several hundred years. The problem we have to tackle, according to this line of thought, involves making a judgement as to whether or not atheism is still of any particular interest as an ideology or standpoint. Is it still a liberating option, or just a vulgar expression of a sentiment which the majority already accepts without necessarily becoming atheists? Is it in the service of enlightenment, or is it an amplified Western ideology that reduces 'other' people to their religious beliefs, instead of opening up possibilities for cultural interaction and change?

Attempts to answer big questions like this tend to differ very much depending on the cultural context in which the questions are asked. I will develop my reflections in close connection to my own Swedish experience of the debates on atheism. There are several reasons to believe that Sweden is a special case when it comes to atheism. However, precisely for that reason the Swedish case might also illuminate the wider debate. I will try to 'universalise' my perspective a little bit by relating it – in a quite experimental way – to Friedrich Nietzsche's thought on religion and modernity.

## The Swedish context: state-church, Ingemar Hedenius and atheism

As in many cultural settings, contemporary Sweden has its own debate on atheism and secularity, and this is not wholly similar to the corresponding debates in other countries. In Sweden, at least, it does not make much sense to speak about a 'new' atheism. There is perhaps a new *visibility* of atheism in Sweden, but even that can be disputed (Sturmark 2011). It is possible, however, to argue that Sweden today experiences a *return of the visibility* of an atheism that was typical some decades ago. Let me explain.

Back in the 1940s Sweden was still a monolithic state-church society with a quite remarkable ethnic homogeneity and a relatively distinct Lutheran cultural identity. Secularisation was of course irrevocably in process; social democracy was indeed the strong ideological force, but the official Christian identity was nevertheless not generally experienced as a particular threat to the spirit of progression that was characteristic of the emergent modern Sweden. One reason for this was perhaps that the hegemonic state-church had been effectively subsumed under the secular state centuries ago, and there was a clear separation of religious life from public life, based on the Lutheran doctrine of the 'two kingdoms'. Thus, religiously speaking, Sweden has been relatively constrained over the centuries.

However, there were totalitarian aspects to this religion as well. Sweden had no formal freedom of religion until 1951. Until 1860 it was illegal to gather in the name of another confession than the Lutheran. After that date one could leave the Church of Sweden, but only if one moved to another denomination approved by the government. Consequently, the theologians at the theological faculties were deeply involved in the state-church business, and academic theology was formed as a traditional counterpart to the majority religion.

It has also to be remembered that Sweden was not at war, which meant that the public intellectual debate was not severely interrupted or shattered. Even if it was not exactly business as usual, there were at least no major ruptures because of civil disorder.

In this context, in 1946, a distinguished philosopher from Uppsala University, Ingemar Hedenius (1908–82), was invited by the editor-in-chief of one of the big daily newspapers in Stockholm, *Dagens Nyheter*, to open up a public debate on religion. And so he did. After little more than a year he had managed to generate a highly critical public attitude towards Christianity and the Christian faith, especially

among educated people. The debate developed over two phases: First, Hedenius attacked the basic rationality of traditional Christian faith. He argued that people with any sense of intellectual honesty were obliged to take their leave of what he saw as a depraved biblical worldview.

This step triggered a series of responses from well-known theologians, such as Anders Nygren and Gustaf Aulén, who mainly used standard insights from academic theology to explain how the Bible and Christian faith can be interpreted in ways that do not necessarily lead to intellectual bankruptcy. But this was exactly the response that Hedenius had expected, and the debate went into its second phase, where Hedenius took the opportunity to publicly ridicule academic theology and especially the individual Lutheran theologians that had responded to him.

Now, this 'debate' was not really a debate. Hedenius had won the support of public opinion, and the situation for theology became embarrassing. The newspaper hosting the debate was obviously on Hedenius's side and gave him a very privileged position. No matter what the theologians said, everything was interpreted as part of a sham intellectual strategy to shield irrational faith from serious intellectual scrutiny.

Hedenius's contributions to the debate were published as a book in 1949, with a title that translates as *Belief and Knowledge*. It became an immediate best-seller and was destined to influence a whole generation of teachers and students during the 1950s and 60s. The book was generally understood to be an honest plea for atheism in face of the backwardness of religious belief. One of my colleagues, Johan Lundborg, has written extensively about this period and the associated debate. In 2002 he published a book which translates as *When Atheism Conquered Sweden*. This title says quite a lot about the long-term effects of the whole incident. One has to bear in mind what I said earlier: Sweden at the time was fairly monolithic – the intellectual climate could really only harbour one big public truth at a time. Supposedly, this is also the reason that this particular 'debate' never really reached out beyond Sweden. Philosophically speaking, Hedenius's arguments were neither original nor groundbreaking. According to my view, it was the revealing blow against the state-church society and the intellectual predicament of the university theologians that made his critique effective in the Swedish context.

It is of course tempting to see the Swedish shift from a public Christianity to a public atheism during

the 1940s and 50s as a groundbreaking cultural event. It was of course a groundbreaking *intellectual* event, but was it really a cultural revolution of any kind? In my view, it was not. Rather, I think it makes sense to see the established state-church norm as the cultural 'glue' that kept atheism as a new ideology within the old cultural frames. The old religion was indeed 'our' religion, but to some extent it was also a religion that had merged with the secular state.

Against this background, Hedenius's attack on Christianity's irrationality can be interpreted not as a straightforward rationalistic attempt to conquer an irrational enemy, but rather as an attempt to make secular people aware of what he saw as the basically irrational grounds of the old Swedish cultural identity. His attack on Christianity and theology was a blow against the *modus vivendi* between Swedish religion and secular society; an exposure of the alleged irrationality haunting society through its neutralised and secularised state religion. To put it differently, Hedenius wanted to turn people actively against the clerical order that they often did not embrace very actively, but accepted as a fairly uncontroversial part of their own cultural tradition and identity.

During this process, academic theologians became the significant other of the project, mainly depicted as fifth columnists of the universities. By tradition they had a position in the academy, but now it was not clear that they could survive the test of progressive secular academic thought. One of his most monumental and patronising statements against theology is politically set on the purification of the whole system of knowledge in religious studies and theology.

I want to suggest a small reform. The theological faculties should not be closed down – the scientific study of Christianity and other religions should continue. Instead, the theological faculties should be reorganised and integrated with the arts faculty. Theologians ought not to be alone in making courses and planning their education, they must not be alone in grading doctoral dissertations or evaluating the qualifications for chairs and lectureships in theology – they only have the right to do so in a community of a humanistic majority [arts faculty majority]. Theologians who happen to be real humanists have nothing to worry about in face of this reorganisation, and theologians who hail the principle of the autonomy of theology will just have to submit to their more unprejudiced

colleagues. If this reorganisation were to be realised, then the dubious and unscientific theological mentality would perhaps already have disappeared after one or two generations of professors. This would also lead to the build-up of a plausible and straightforward education in Christianity in the secondary schools. To educate the teachers in Christianity is the same type of problem as educating *their* teachers. (Hedenius 1964: 295, my translation and italics.)

In connection to this statement, it is important to underline that theology as an academic field *did not* unfold along these lines, at least not in terms of the organisation of the faculties. Hedenius's hopes failed in that sense. But it could nevertheless be argued that important dimensions of the intellectual spirit of Hedenius were implemented in academic theology through the new generations of Swedish theologians. This does not mean that the new generation of theologians was a group of atheists in charge of a religious heritage that they now could destroy without hesitation. What it means is that the new spirit of theology (especially in Uppsala) after Hedenius was incontrovertibly in line with important aspects of Hedenius's atheist politics. The idea of a normative, Church-related theology was finally relegated from the academic theological agenda.

In connection with what I said about the religious situation in state-church Sweden before Hedenius, however, one could perhaps also argue that it was not too hard for theology to take this step – the Church did not offer a very radical defence against it and was quite in line with the development that had started within theology long before Hedenius. The crucial problem in the debate between Hedenius and the Swedish theologians was rather that the theologians understood themselves as *modern* Christians. Their attempts to answer Hedenius formed a modern Christian reply to the modern atheist. According to my interpretation, it was *Hedenius* that *made them* look medieval. The actual transition from a situation with confessional faculties of theology, to the present situation with non-confessional faculties of theology, was therefore not as dramatic as Hedenius's rhetoric would suggest. The faculties had been gradually de-confessionalised from the 1960s and onward, but the strong practical tie to the Church of Sweden was still there for many decades, and when the Church was finally separated from the state in 2000 it was not because the Church had developed a strong new profile in opposition to secular culture. It was rather due the



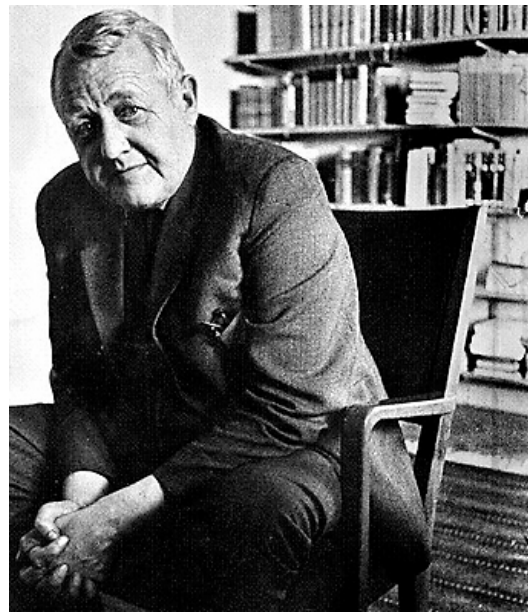
culmination of a social development within the legal framework of religious freedom.

### 'New' Atheism in Sweden

When the phenomenon that is often called 'New Atheism' reached Sweden less than a decade ago, it was (of course) promoted in close relation to this heritage from Ingemar Hedenius. Sweden has seen no Dawkins, Dennett, or Onfray. The new atheistic movement rather springs from a Swedish humanist-ethic association (coupled with the International Humanist and Ethical Union, IHEU). Back in 1979 it was the retired Professor Ingemar Hedenius who wrote a draft constitution for this association. In 1999 the fellowship changed its name to 'The Swedish Humanist Association'. This became the beginning of a new era for the Association, with a high profile in the media and a strong impact on public opinion. Moreover, the Swedish answer to the international voices of the 'New Atheism' is the chairman, Christer Sturmark (not an academic person, but a successful IT entrepreneur during the 1990s). Of special importance was the publication of his book arguing against religion, with a title which translates as *Belief and Knowledge 2.0* (Sturmark 2006). Note that this title is identical with the title of Ingemar Hedenius's famous book from 1949, besides the '2.0', which signals that it is intended to be a slightly upgraded version of the atheism and critique of religion that Hedenius advocated. The Swedish Humanist Association and Sturmark did not really aim at a *new* atheism; rather they intentionally reframed Hedenius's public philosophical argument for a new day.

But there are also big differences as well. First, of course, one can discern the marked difference between the philosophy professor and the IT entrepreneur. Sturmark relies on Hedenius's philosophical groundwork from the forties. As far as I know, no one in the Swedish atheist camp claims to have developed or refined the basic lines of argumentation. Secondly – and closely related to the previous point – the debate has more or less left the academy (which is much more pluralistic these days) and has plunged out into the new pluralistic situation of post-Christian Sweden. Academic theologians do of course respond now and then, but it is more of a debate between humanists and high profile ministers and Church people.

However – and now we reach the point of my exposition where the question of newness really becomes decisive – even though the Humanist Association is eager to underline that Hedenius's basic



Ingemar Hedenius

principle of rationality is the only necessary guideline for someone who wants to see through religion, the actual debate has become more and more complicated as it has been confronting all the 'new' forms of religiosity and religious controversy that have surfaced in Swedish society in recent decades.

The thesis I have sketched above, about the actual closeness between the secularised Lutheran heritage and the reinstatement of Hedenius's atheism in our time, can be used to confront this complexity. In the most recent stage of the debate Christer Sturmark has co-authored articles in the form of debates with profiled ministers from the Church of Sweden on themes such as 'The Church must make peace with the critics of religion' (Borg & Sturmark 2011). The basic idea in this article is to claim that secular humanism and Swedish Lutheran Christianity should begin to recognise their common secular heritage. In a response to this, one of the leading official theologians of the Church of Sweden, Cristina Grenholm, went even farther and argued that the supposed conflict between secular humanism and the Church of Sweden is an illusion (Grenholm 2011). Although this manoeuvre from Grenholm can be seen as a kind of rhetorical trick, it still illustrates the fact that the debate builds on a very peculiar secular ground.

A parallel debate, and one more internal to the Church, centring on a dogmatic issue, adds to this picture. A minister of the Church of Sweden, Ulla Karlsson, has recently stated that she wants to do away with all mythical theological concepts that fo-

cus on atonement, sacrifice and suffering. She advocates positive and humane concepts that underscore possibilities for human progression (Karlsson 2011). Her statement led to a very emotional debate and she was quite alone in the media storm. A leading theologian in the Church of Sweden, Anne-Louise Eriksson, responded that the problem with Karlsson's position, and the reason that no established theologians came to her defence, was that Karlsson's criticism of the Christian doctrine of atonement 'is so well known' – she obviously kicks in open doors (Häll 2011).

To give yet another example, Sturmark and a Lutheran representative (and others) have jointly defended children's rights against all forms of religious circumcision, with reference to UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child (Bergström *et al.* 2011). They were immediately accused of flirting with traditional Christian anti-semitism (Zetterholm 2011). This added to an already inflamed debate on a possible intellectual kinship between the form of secularism that the Humanist Association represents and extreme right-wing ideology on migration (Gerle 2010). This debate is still going on, mostly in newspapers and on weblogs, and their adversaries have called this debate 'the battle of identity'.

Against the backdrop of the last example one can argue that the Swedish Humanist Association has managed to draw important voices from the Swedish religious camp into their own camp. Together with important Swedish Lutherans they now struggle against other religious bodies besides the secularised version of traditional Swedish Lutheranism. The flip-side of this example, where religious protectionism comes to the fore, is of course that the humanist atheists, who engage in this particular religious debate side-by-side with the Lutherans, by no means escape the accusations of being themselves rooted in the problematic aspect of the *Christian* cultural heritage. Hence, the price for this involvement with religious people is that the atheists – at least momentarily – have to give up Hedenius's *abstract* theoretical critique of religion. To say the least, with academic Church theologians and ministers now standing in the midst of the atheist camp, the picture is not as clear as it once was.

Against the background of my idea of a common



The atheists are not alone in their wish to do away with traditional Christian concepts.

cultural predicament that is very seldom debated as such, I tend to view this Christian engagement in the humanistic (and atheistic) cause as a *quite natural step*, given the history of Swedish atheism over the last seventy years, including its impact on academic theology and its impact on theological development in the Church of Sweden. The common denominator in the debates – which itself is seldom debated – is a *secular condition in which many Swedish Christians obviously feel more allied with secular humanists and atheists than with religious people from other – non-Swedish or non-Lutheran –*

*traditions*, Islam being the most typical example today.

My point has been to underline the notion that religion in Sweden has been a public matter all the time – but as a public matter, religion has been domesticated and secularised, not least through a protracted historical encounter with public atheism. Sweden has fairly recently experienced the emergence of a *new* public religion in the form of an emerging visibility of other traditions and customs. This triggers ideological curiosities that momentarily reveal the deeper cultural interconnections between secular atheism and traditional Swedish religion.

### Visible traces of the invisible: cultural circularity and moral emptiness

After this brief interpretation of the Swedish debate, I will try to develop my theoretical sketch of a deeper cultural connection. I do this with reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's thought and a somewhat different Swedish example, namely, a surprising statement from the late Nils Elvander, who was an atheist and a university professor in political science during the second half of the twentieth century. The following was published in a newspaper two weeks after the disastrous tsunami of December 2004.

I left the State Church for reasons of principle at the beginning of the 1950s. Ever since my youth I have been a convinced atheist, and I have no belief in eternal life. We have only this one life on earth, and it is for that reason that we must make the best we can of it. This also means helping those in need. But the strength

of individual will must be multiplied in a constructively organized collaboration. The Swedish Church, with its organizational experience, its powerful contribution to our common cultural heritage, its rich fund of conviction and good will, and its ability to communicate a personal message to people in need, is a necessity now and will be for a long time. Archbishop K. G. Hammar found the right words about the need of those severely stricken to seek and find a glimmer of hope in these days of shock and despair. He did this on 30 December during a televised sermon from a church in southern Sweden, when he spoke in a simple and gentle, yet also deep and clearly formulated way about the possibility of finding comfort in the midst of the blackest despair by reaching God in a silent search. ... After the Church was separated from the state five years ago its membership has sunk at an increasing rate. If this trend continues, the Church will have severe economic problems: churches will close, congregations will be consolidated, but will still dwindle in the long run, and the support of the state can no longer be counted upon. Just when the Church is most needed – it is shrinking. That is, unless those members who hold or held a negative position or those who are indifferent change their minds! We ought to now close ranks around the Church – even those of us who do not believe – and stay in the church or, as in my case, return to it. I hope and believe that many will share my opinion. (Nils Evander, in Martinson 2005.)

This appeal discloses something that Friedrich Nietzsche was among the first to formulate in polemic way: atheistic humanism and European Christianity have a kind of shared historical fate. In the eyes of Nietzsche, it was a problem that the most enlightened attempts to divest culture of Christianity and Church dogmatism resulted in displaced and secularised forms of Christian morality. Nietzsche describes this distinct echo of Christianity in common morality as Christianity's 'most general effect and conversion' in Europe (Nietzsche 1997: 82). According to Nietzsche, Christianity does not reverberate in a clear dogmatic, creedal or even religious form. He rather saw the impact as a 'residuum of Christian states of mind' (*ibid.*), which were left intact when explicit beliefs in an otherworldly sphere had become obsolete.

For Nietzsche, the modern philanthropic belief in charity and love was a practical, ecclesial model

that gradually turned into the new enlightened form of faith. An *invisible Christian moral structure* thus became constitutive for the influential anti-Christian humanistic spirit of the tradition, borne from Voltaire via Comte and Mill up to the socialists. Hence, to put it bluntly: what we register when a contemporary, atheist professor returns to the bosom of the Church is not much more than a late – although startling – *disclosure* of a basically invisible cultural *circularity* between Christian and atheist morality in the secular situation.

However, even though Nils Elvander's curious appeal makes the connection outspoken and visible – like some of my other examples above – it is still the *invisibility* of Nietzsche's connection between Christianity and atheism that strikes me as an important point to discuss further in relation to the contemporary debates in Sweden. In view of Nietzsche's genealogical account it is not very surprising that the invisible order surfaces and becomes visible now and then, but the important thing is not the visibility as such.

Let me explain: I have no reason whatsoever to suggest that Nils Elvander's call for an atheistic return to the Church was fraudulent, or meant as a mere provocation, but the position he suggests is still a very artificial and unstable ideological position, given the way we normally think and act in relation to belief and religious practice. The majority of Swedish atheists will surely not join the Church of Sweden because of his plea. And the general concept of being a member of the Church is not immediately suited for Elvander's curious atheist position. His position is of course understandable, but not really sustainable in the long run. On the surface the differences prevail, as it were. This means that Elvander's ideological statement more than anything else can be treated as an explication of a profound lack of difference beneath the surface. Elvander's ideological position short-circuits Christian and secular moralities and thereby I will argue that it bespeaks a profound *moral emptiness* (or lack of real moral alternatives) that seems to haunt contemporary forms of Christian faith *and* contemporary atheism.

An inverted version of Nils Elvander's statement can be discerned in the following attempt to grasp the signs of the time. In this example from Denmark, the invisible cultural circularity crystallises and becomes visible through the words of the atheistic philosopher Thierry de Duve:

In the spring of 2003, the news came from the diocese of Helsingør – Hamlet’s country, quite appropriately – that Thorkild Grosboell, a theologian and minister in the Lutheran Church of Denmark, was an atheist. The pastor later retracted, but the fact remains: he had publicly stated that he believed neither in God, nor in the eternal life of the soul. Mr. Grosboell is my post-Christian hero. I sincerely hope that history will remember his name as that of a pioneer in a new kind of enlightenment. To see the existence of God denied by rabid anticlerics, Marxist militants, disenchanted positivists and materialists of all stripes is hardly a surprise. To see a minister trained in theology – and one, to boot, who has not at all renounced his spiritual mission, and whom his flock seems to appreciate and love – calmly and rationally declare his agnosticism is far more thought provoking. My bet is that some day Thorkild Grosboell will be canonized, when it will be clearly understood that the function of established religion – Christianity last but not least – was to prepare for humanity’s definitive exit from the religious. (de Duve 2006: 652.)

The paradoxical ideology that this statement embraces is not easy to qualify as a responsible or workable form of ideology, at least not for ordinary people. Atheism *is* the denial of God and the Church *has* – in one way or another – to proclaim God’s goodwill for everyone. I think it is fair to say that we still live with a quite solid ideological consensus that atheism and Christian faith are basically different entities. This makes Grosboell’s position and de Duve’s ideological embracing of it unstable and provisional in the same way as Elvander’s.

However, again the importance of Grosboell’s and de Duve’s positions does not lie in what they personally happen to stand for, but in the fact that their attempts to express something ideologically new or different momentarily captures and visualises a dull sameness in the depth of the secular cultural order. This sameness secretly influences the ideological debate and locks it up in a ghostly emptiness. Despite the marked differences on the ideological surface, then, my examples suggest that the ordinary atheist never is far from being a true Christian – and the ordinary Christian is never far from outright atheism.

This motif of moral emptiness is captured well by Nietzsche’s own famous aphorism in *The Gay Science*, where a madman enters a marketplace and yells to the

secular atheists in the street that God is dead. Their reaction is laughter. After a furious sermon the madman concludes, ‘I come too early’, ‘my time is not yet’ (Nietzsche 2001: 119–20). The insane prophet had already experienced the full revolutionary meaning of this event, but this meaning had not reached the ordinary atheist people in the street. He proclaims that death of God is ‘on its way’ (*ibid.*). Was he insane, or was it just because the message concerned the invisible depth of the cultural sentiment that he appeared to be insane?

Just a page or two later in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche himself (not the madman) concludes: ‘What decides against Christianity now is our *taste*, not our reason’ (Nietzsche 2001: 123). This is a very dense comment and because of the aphoristic context it is not wholly clear how it should be approached. If ‘taste’, however, is interpreted as a natural secular inclination against religion, quite distinct from compelling reasons against it, but also distinct from moral indignation over religion, then Nietzsche’s verdict can be helpful for a further decipherment of my constellation between the present antagonistic debate between atheists and Christians on the one hand, and the idea of an invisible circularity in the depth of secular culture on the other.

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned the *frustration* among many of the theologians that have commented on the bestselling books of the New Atheists. This frustration can be approached in line with Nietzsche’s idea of the preponderance of taste: the carelessness and almost complete lack of insight-



Friedrich Nietzsche



ful evaluation of religion in influential atheist books – such as Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* – is connected to the lack of deep and thoroughgoing differences between the position one defends and the position one rejects. The New Atheists write *as if* they had strong reasons and *as if* they have a deep moral reason for their aversion. But, actually, the fact that they proceed in a way that is unconvincing for those readers who are not already convinced indicates that their discourse first and foremost expresses their *distaste* for religion. The *rational* point of departure of an author such as Christopher Hitchens seems apparent at a first glance. He claims to have no experiences that make him morally indignant, at least not on a personal level (Hitchens 2007: 4). The reason he holds forth is scientific. But as soon as one goes further into his argumentation one realises that what he is doing most of all is spewing out something that he just cannot stand: it is his distaste that leads the way (Hart 2010).

Sam Harris, in his bestseller *The End of Faith*, is morally indignant. The opening lines go like this:

The young man boards the bus as it leaves the terminal. He wears an overcoat. Beneath his overcoat, he is wearing a bomb. His pockets are filled with nails, ball bearings, and rat poison. The bus is crowded and headed to the heart of the city. ... The young man smiles. With the press of a button he destroys himself, the couple at his side and twenty others on the bus. The nails, the ball bearings and rat poison ensure further casualties on the street and in the surrounding cars. All has gone according to the plan. (Harris 2004: 11.)

This is of course terrible. According to Harris there could have been many different reasons for the deed. And yet the following question comes to his mind when he contemplates the problem further: ‘Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy – you-can-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy – to guess the young man’s religion?’ (*ibid.*).

This should teach us all to take leave of belief. As Harris’s story develops, however, the only thing that looks trivial is Harris’s argumentation. Thus, the same can be said about him as was said about Hitchens: the book gives *no compelling reasons* to take leave of ‘belief’ in general: there are only contained here *distasteful examples* and rhetorical constellations that obviously amuse people and make them feel good.

Thus, the antagonism between the New Atheists

and the intellectual defenders of faith is obvious and real in the sense that the former group judges religion abstractly and without much care and sympathy, as something that is worthless and despicable, while the theologians want to make distinctions and add some academic rigour to the debate. But both sides invoke reason and rationality against irrational forms of religion and share certain ideas about religion and rationality. Their *strategies* for getting this culturally established enlightenment message out differ considerably, and to the frustration of the religious commentators, it has proved to be much more successful to appeal to secular enlightenment clichés in order to activate an already tangible public distaste for religion.

### **Atheism as culture and condition: the invisibility of profound godlessness**

I will now go on to argue that the common lack of substance – the moral emptiness – that secretly connects the atheists and their antagonists in the secular West can also be viewed as a profoundly *godless* cultural grammar. Atheism, informed by Christian ideals, is the natural idiom for everyone in a culture that acts and lives as if God does not exist – *etsi Deus non daretur*. However, my somewhat paradoxical examples – where atheists surprised the public by returning to the Church and Christian ministers scandalised their fellow Christians by becoming atheists – also display that almost nothing of this deeper cultural godlessness is captured by the neat ideological label ‘atheism’ (given the use of it in the public debates). Speaking with Nietzsche, the atheists, new or old, are rather good Christians when they batter their enemy, and the Christians are good atheists when they complain about this irrationality. Mostly, this outrageous aspect of our cultural grammar stays under the surface; sometimes it shows its face and bespeaks the moral emptiness of the culture we live in, but why add the claim that it is rooted in a more profound godlessness?

Nietzsche’s basic criticism of European morality is well known and it is ultimately based on a rejection of what he understands as *Christian nihilism*.

Nietzsche identifies Christianity with a deeply rooted hatred of this world through what he understands as a deceitful longing for a world beyond. He argues that the Christian denigration of this world lives on in the godless ideologies of modernity, for instance in the form of unselfish love, charity and brotherhood. Christian love and charity is the flip-side of the dogmatic insistence on an eternal afterlife,

because it ultimately sacrifices the individual on the altar of the general (a higher cause):

Today it seems *to do everyone good* when they hear that society is on the way of adapting the individual to general requirements, and that *the happiness and at the same time the sacrifice of the individual* lies in feeling himself to be a useful member and instrument of the whole: except that one is at present very uncertain as to where this whole is to be sought, whether in an existing state or one still to be created, or in the nation, or in the brotherhood of peoples, or in new little economic communalities. (Nietzsche 1997: 83, my italics.)

The important thing here is to underline the idea of an invisible logical relation between Christian roots in culture and the reaction against these roots in the name of freedom through science, morality and economic development. The secular as a promise of a genuine freedom to handle and develop *this* world is secretly tied together with an embarrassing mistake in ancient times, which originated in a fear of the threatening unknown. This led humanity to interpret the actuality of this world as something low and unworthy, and it resulted in a metaphysical need for a better world.

Yet, the invisible continuation of the logic that secures a denigration of this world in modernity should not necessarily be understood as a pessimistic rejection of the *possibility* something different. Nietzsche defends both a true scientific spirit and a creative 'theological' mentality, but to do so he has to unmask Christianity and take leave of the 'religiously' informed scientific ideals of enlightenment in one stroke.

Consequently, when Nietzsche writes about religion it is not always easy to decide if he really means religion in the plain sense, or if he actually means the derivative form of religion that sometimes masquerades as 'science', or as a cultural sentiment of enlightenment.

One type of honesty has been alien to all religion-founders and such: they have not made their experiences a matter of conscience for their knowledge. "What did I really experience? What was going on inside and around me? Was my reason bright enough? Was my will turned against all deceptions of the senses ... ?" None of them has asked such questions. ... But we, we

others, we reason-thirsty ones, want to face our experiences as sternly as we would a scientific experiment, hour by hour, day by day! We want to be our own experiments and guinea-pigs [*Versuchs-Tiere*]. (Nietzsche 2001: 179–80.)

On the surface, this excited aphorism stands up against what Nietzsche associates with a religious way of experiencing the world. But in the wider context of Nietzsche's thought, it is tempting to go a step further and actually interpret it as a criticism of modern nihilist thinking in general, where the ghost of a God constantly tempts culture to shy away from reality.

This interpretation would give the short sentence about the preponderance of taste in the rejection of Christianity a somewhat different value. If Nietzsche's statement about the preponderance of taste is taken not as straightforward advice to reject religion for aesthetic rather than moral or theoretical reasons, but as a critical comment on a particular cultural predicament, where the borders between irrational delusion and reason have been blurred definitively, then the appeal to the 'reason-thirsty ones', who dare to face their experiences, can be viewed as a redemptive gesture in which the whole nihilistic cultural logic of modernity is thrown off in favour of an affirmative perspective on this life. Nietzsche calls this 'yes-saying'.

This reading of Nietzsche's preponderance of taste is supported by a short sentence in *Daybreak*, where Nietzsche proclaims: 'How fine bad music and bad reasons sound when one marches off to fight an enemy' (Nietzsche 1997: 224). A morally empty culture, locked into its own past misinterpretation of the world, is always prepared to bestow irrational activity with the name of reason. This reveals its depravity and this is *profound godlessness as nihilism*, and it could very well be characterised as a 'spiritual catastrophe' (to use David Bentley Hart's phrase). In such an irrational framework the antagonisms between theologians and atheism are as superficial as the allegiances between atheists and Lutheran theologians in Sweden are natural.

Thus, given this picture, it is not religion as such, or atheism as such that are problematic or liberating, nor is the state of profound godlessness problematic in itself. What is threatening is the depraved *nihilism* that emerges when profound godlessness is *masked* in theological or quasi-theological ideologies. Nietzsche's late work *On the Genealogy of Morals* ends famously with the statement that Christianity – understood as the epitome of an ascetic world-denying

ideal – has expressed through its history a basically successful form of will to power, namely the ‘will to nothingness’. According to Nietzsche, who proclaims the creativity of the will, this is much better than ‘to not will’ anything at all. In this way Christianity has rightfully had its glory: ‘it gave man a meaning’. (Nietzsche 1999: 412.) The worrying thing for Nietzsche is that a new form of resentful asceticism covers this worn-out meaning. Nietzsche talks about this substitution in modernity as an ‘*abstinence* called atheism’ (*ibid.*).

He is himself an atheist, for sure, but his atheism is not an endpoint, only a starting point. To embrace the profound godlessness in an affirmative way – that is a non-nihilistic way – is therefore not to continue within the empty framework of the ‘*abstinence* called atheism’, but to create a new morality through a radical will to power over one’s own life. I quote again from *The Gay Science*:

If one considers how an overall philosophical justification of one’s way of living and thinking affects each individual – namely like a sun, warming, blessing, impregnating, shining especially for him; how it makes him independent of praise and blame, self-sufficient, rich, generous with happiness and good will; how it incessantly turns evil to good. ... Oh, how I wish that many such new suns would yet be created. Even the evil man, the unhappy man, and the exceptional man should have their philosophy, their good right, their sunshine! Pity for them is not what is needed! We have to unlearn this arrogant notion, however long humanity has spent learning and practising it. ... [A] new *justice* is needed! And a new motto! And new philosophers! The moral earth, too, is round! The antipodes, too, have their right to exist! There is another world to discover – and more than one! On to the ships, you philosophers! (Nietzsche 2001: 163, my italics.)

Nietzsche himself has often been understood as a nihilist. The main reason for this rather far-fetched idea is perhaps that the values he himself ridicules and relates to nihilism are the values that have been most precious for modern culture. The dilemma that makes it so difficult to understand Nietzsche on this point is expressed by himself: ‘God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow. – And we – we must still defeat his shadow as well!’ (Nietzsche 2001: 109.)

## Conclusion

To end where I started: the debate on New Atheism has been – and will perhaps continue to be – deeply antagonistic. Against the backdrop of my reflections one can perhaps say that the relative intellectual fruitlessness of this antagonism is a sign of a deeper irrationality underneath the debate; the different participants are much closer to each other than anyone are ready to admit. If a spiritual catastrophe is on its way it has to be understood in relation to this ubiquitous lack of fantasy, not just in relation to arrogant atheism.

This idea was first sketched against the background of the Swedish situation, where atheism as a public ideology has matured over more than half a century. I mentioned a secular Church tradition in which Swedish religious intellectuals today are prepared to close ranks with atheists against a common, irrational other. I also gave a couple of paradoxical examples where atheists have embraced the Church and the Church has become the framework of atheism. By this I put the antagonistic debate in a light that opened up the possibility for a Nietzschean interpretation of the present secular culture as nihilistic, morally empty and profoundly godless. The atheists indeed rule over their Christian adversaries, but only at the cost of any real intellectual substance.

To say all this is pretty easy, however. But if there is something to this insight, what shall we do with it? We can of course continue to read culture through the cipher of a dead God, whose shadow still lingers. We can use this cipher in order to become less antagonistic, and more creative in our acceptance of differences. If our times are characterised by a profound godlessness and if this often results in nihilism, I believe that this nihilism mostly reaches us in the form of fear of the other and hatred towards those who dare to expose the moral emptiness of our own identity.

An important task, therefore, would be to continue the debate about atheism as a way to overcome the labyrinths that tie us to the past in a way that alienates us from the future. Nietzsche is an interesting resource for this task, since his ‘reading of history and his deconstruction of the Western worldview constitutes an ethical as well as aesthetic practice. He has created the conditions whereby future generations can choose to free themselves from the burden of past values.’ (Makarushka 1994: 101.) ■

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