
A Defence of Polemics

Brian McClinton argues that *The God Delusion*, *God is not Great* and other recent anti-religious books are in a worthy tradition which includes some of the world's greatest literature

IN THE Sunday Times review of the paperback version of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Nick Rennison described the author as 'a brilliant and entertaining polemicist'. A.C. Grayling's *Against all Gods* is subtitled *Six Polemics and an Essay on Kindness*. They are only two of a spate of recent attacks on religious faith which also include Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. The latest, Christopher Hitchens's *God is not Great*, is the angriest of them all. This got me to thinking about polemics and why many people today, including some humanists, object so strongly to them.

The word itself comes from the Greek, 'polemos' – war – and 'polemikos' – warlike. Thus a polemic is a controversial argument or discussion, an aggressive controversy. Polemics is the practice of disputing religious, philosophical or political matters, and a polemic is often produced specifically to dispute or refute a widely accepted opinion.

Some of the reasons why many people don't like polemics include the following: a polemic is not seeking the truth but just an adversary to defeat; a polemic is full of hate and anger and is therefore irrational; a polemic is not objective, fair and balanced but aims to convince or change the opinion of others on some matter. In short, the polemicist seeks not truth but power.

I want to suggest that these criticisms are largely mistaken, and that in fact some of the greatest writings in history were polemics. Let's start in ancient Greece. According to *The Way and the Word: Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* by Geoffrey Lloyd

and Nathan Sivin, Greek thought is characterised by 'strident adversariality' and 'rationalistic aggressiveness'. The turbulent Greeks had to make their way in the 'competitive hurly-burly of the Hellenic world'. Thus dialectic and viva voce debate were the breath of philosophy. There was public argument and public polemic; and as for private reflection, did Plato not declare that thought is the soul bickering with itself? The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens*: "We can say with certainty that the philosopher, from the earliest times to the late Sophists and Rhetors, always appeared as a typical champion. He challenged his rivals, he attacked them with vehement criticism and extolled his own opinions as the only true ones with all the boyish cocksureness of archaic man. In style and form ... philosophy is polemical and antagonistic".

Next consider Jesus. In Matthew 23 he launches a polemical attack on the Scribes and Pharisees in a damning series of indictments against his Jewish co-religionists. They are assailed as hypocrites, blind guides and fools, whitewashed tombs, snakes, and murderers of the prophets. Their piety as well as their ethical conduct are subjected to a scathing attack. The Jesus depicted here is unquestionably a polemicist.

The first major criticism of Christianity was a polemical attack by the pagan writer Celsus in the second century. In his work *The True Word* he attempts not only to refute but also to ridicule the doctrines of the Christian faith. Some of his comments are interesting. For example, he rejects Jesus's praise of uncritical belief: "Why is it an evil to have been educated, and to have studied the best opinions, and to have both the reality and appearance of wisdom?"

Move on another thousand years and more. Martin Luther's *Ninety Five Theses*, nailed to the church door at

Wittenberg in 1517, was undoubtedly a devastating polemic against the practices of the Christian Church of his day and led to his excommunication by Pope Leo X. Luther responded by burning the papal bull of excommunication. He also engaged in polemical debate with Erasmus over free will and wrote a nasty polemic *Against the Jews and their Lies*, in which he advocated that Jewish synagogues should be burned and that these 'poisonous envenomed worms' be drafted into forced labour or expelled 'for all time'.

At first glance, it might seem strange to categorise Hamlet as a polemic, yet in many ways it perfectly fits the bill. In the play an angry, idealistic young man who has received a humanist education at Luther's university contemplates suicide because the real world is so different from his deepest desires. Hamlet is gifted with a great mind which he uses to observe the people close to him. He believes that things should be inherently good, and that people's motives should be fair. So he has a great deal of difficulty in coming to terms with all of the evil that is around him in a corrupt state: "Tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely" (Act I, sc 2).

When he lambasts the 'weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable uses' of this world, and man as a 'quintessence of dust', he is echoing the dramatist's disgust at the corrupt, self-serving nature of Elizabethan politics. The play is full of plotting, intrigue and spying, and the lust for power is a driving force throughout. Who can doubt that the author finds something rotten in the state of England and is expressing this anger through his protagonist?

Switch to the 17th century and we find that Descartes polemicalises with Fermat, Hobbes and others

regarding his mathematical work, Newton polemicises with Hooke, Huygens and Leibniz, and Kepler sustains various polemics on astronomic as well as on mystical matters. Leibniz and Bayle hold several rounds of debate with each other.

John Milton's polemical pamphlet *Areopagitica* was written in 1644 in response to the new Licensing Order designed to bring publishing under government control by creating a number of official censors to whom authors would submit their work for approval prior to having it published. Milton, who places freedom of thought 'above all other liberties', argues that knowledge is advanced through the utterance of new opinions and truth is discovered by free discussion. If the waters of truth "flow not in a perpetual progression they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition".

Next we move on to the 18th century and to one of Ireland's great polemicists, Jonathan Swift, whose Latin epitaph gives the measure of the man: "He has gone where savage indignation can no longer lacerate his heart – depart wayfarer, and imitate if you are able one who to the utmost strenuously championed liberty". In 1729 Swift, the master of shock, wrote a savage satire entitled *A Modest Proposal: For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*. The solution of course was for the Irish to sell them to be eaten. Swift was here writing a satirical polemic in which he was taking the English exploitation of the Irish to its logical or illogical conclusion.

Another great polemicist for freedom was Thomas Paine, whose *Rights of Man*, which appeared in 1791, became a philosophical cornerstone of the United States of America. Inspired by his outrage at Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution, Paine's text is a passionate defence of man's inalienable rights. An outspoken critic of organised religion, he

argues against monarchy and outlines the elements of a successful republic, including public education, pensions and relief of the poor and unemployed, all financed by income tax.

Paine's book was so controversial that the British government put him on trial in absentia for seditious libel (he had already left for Paris). It sold between nearly 200,000 copies in the first three years after publication, including 40,000 in Ireland.

The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, published in 1848, is a highly polemical work. In clear, brilliant language it presented the materialist conception of history and exposed the nature of capitalist exploitation and oppression. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles", it memorably declared. Of course, it was not only a critique but also a guide to action. It called on the workers of the world to unite against the capitalist system and, although it didn't have an immediate impact, it was to become one of the most widely read and discussed documents of the 20th century.

George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* as an anti-totalitarian polemic by fable. This story about a bunch of farmyard animals who run off their cruel human masters and try to build a new, free and just society, only to be betrayed and reduced to an even greater servitude, can be read as a profound critique of the Stalinist dictatorship foisted on the Russian people. He himself said that "*Animal Farm was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse the political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole*".

Herbert Marcuse was a mentor to the American and European New Left and student protest movements in the 1960s. In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) he argued that capitalism did not bring freedom but its opposite. Advanced industrial society created false needs, which integrated individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought. This results in a 'one-dimensional' universe of thought and behaviour in which aptitude and ability for critical thought and oppositional behaviour withers

away. Against this prevailing climate, Marcuse promotes the 'great refusal' (described at length in the book) as the only adequate opposition to all-encompassing methods of control. Much of the book is a defence of 'negative thinking' as a disrupting force against the prevailing positivism.

Modern polemicists in the Marcuse mould include Noam Chomsky, John Pilger and Michael Moore. All three are highly critical of laissez-faire capitalism which they see as failing to deliver on its promises. Chomsky has been relentless in his attacks on American foreign policy, which he believes does not bring freedom to other countries but its opposite. Pilger has written in similar vein about the West in general. Both have used the media to communicate their savage criticisms, but the most successful in this respect has been Michael Moore, whose Cannes films have all been popular polemics. Starting with *Bowling for Columbine* on American gun violence, he followed with *Fahrenheit 9/11* on the occupation of Iraq which won the 2004 Palme d'Or and has grossed over \$220 million worldwide, and now he has taken his hatchet to the ailing US health system in *Sicko*.

As we have seen, some of the greatest literature and film has been polemical in form. We should be pleased that it is so. After all, the world is full of falsehood and injustice, and is it not right that, as Shelley said in the wake of Peterloo, our 'blood should boil' at man's inhumanity to man and that in Swiftian terms, we should display our 'savage indignation with our pen or camera? In the end, it comes down to whether we agree with the polemic's argument or not. If we do, then it's fine, if not, then it's 'irrational', 'offensive', 'insulting', or whatever.

And what of the current publishing spree of militant atheism? In a post 9/11 world in which Bush, Blair and Islamicists have been fighting crusades, I say that polemical attacks on orthodox religion are more needed than ever.
