

“The God Who Would Not Die,” by Paul Johnson. Excerpt from chapter two of *The Quest for God*. Copyright © 1996 by Paul Johnson.

The God Who Would Not Die by Paul Johnson

Sometimes, even more remarkable than historical events are historical non-events. What matters in history is not always what does happen, but what obstinately fails to happen. The twentieth century is a case in point. Immense events took place during it, events to make us marvel—and shudder. But from one perspective—the perspective of human spirituality—the most extra-ordinary thing about the twentieth century was the failure of God to die. The collapse of mass religious belief, especially among the educated and prosperous, had been widely and confidently predicted. It did not take place. Somehow, God survived, flourished even. At the end of the twentieth century, the idea of a personal, living God is as lively and real as ever, in the minds and hearts of countless millions of men and women throughout our planet.

This curious non-event is worth examining in a little detail. To begin with, we have to appreciate that belief in God has always been strong in the human breast. Until quite modern times, it is impossible to point to any society anywhere, however primitive or advanced, where belief in a god or gods—of some kind—was not general, and as a rule universal. Atheism was remarkably late in making its appearance in human societies. There was, to be sure, talk of atheists in the sixteenth century. Sir Walter Raleigh and his circle of scientific friends, such as Dr John Dee, were accused of atheism in the 1580s. But, closely investigated, their ideas turn out to be no more than a repudiation of the Christian Trinity. Raleigh certainly believed in a divine providence: his *History of the World*, indeed, is impregnated with the notion of a benign, determining hand in history. The worldview of Sir Francis Bacon, another man suspected of atheism, turns out to be similar.

It is a remarkable fact that the first well-known European figure who not only proclaimed himself a genuine atheist in life, but died an atheist, was David Hume, the great Scottish historian and philosopher. Hume’s death in 1776, as an unrepentant atheist, aroused awed comment on both sides of the Atlantic. Benjamin Franklin thought it a portent—rightly so. Dr. Samuel Johnson could not be convinced of the seriousness of Hume’s atheism—‘He lies, Sir’, he told Boswell. Johnson found it difficult to believe the assurance of Boswell, who had visited Hume on his deathbed, that the philosopher felt no pain at the thought of complete annihilation, a descent into nothingness.

It was not so, Sir. He had a vanity in being thought easy. It is more probable that he should assume an appearance of ease, than that so very improbable a thing should be, as a man not afraid of going (as, in spite of his delusive theory, he cannot be sure but he may go) into an unknown state, and not being uneasy at leaving all he knew. And you are to consider, that upon his own principle of annihilation he had no motive to speak the truth.

The death of the first confirmed atheist, then, was so remarkable as to seem almost incredible. But in the quarter-century that followed, events moved fast. Five years after Hume died, Immanuel Kant published his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he seemed to deal a mortal blow to traditional metaphysics. Metaphysics, as taught in the schools for the best part of a millennium, had been the means by which most Christian intellectuals, especially the clergy, had demonstrated belief in God to be a reasonable proposition, as well as an emotional conviction. Even more destructive of belief, especially among educated people, was the work of Friedrich Hegel. Hegel was not exactly a non-believer himself, though he certainly came close to it in his revolutionary youth. In his maturity, when he was Professor of Philosophy at Berlin University, and conscious of the beginnings of the nineteenth-century religious revival which swept through Europe in the years after 1815, he found it convenient to assert his religious orthodoxy. But his work as a whole pointed in quite a different direction. Hegel presented the entire history of humanity as an inexorable progression from lower to higher forms, from ignorance to knowledge, from unreason to reason. In this process religion had its place, an important place, indeed, because in its higher manifestations, such as monotheism and then Christianity, it established and then disseminated important aspects of knowledge. But it was no more than part of the continuing process and, having fulfilled its role, would yield to higher forms of human consciousness.

The assumptions behind Hegel's philosophy took a tremendous hold on the Western mind. They penetrated every aspect of Intellectual life, from the physical sciences to the burgeoning social sciences such as philology, economics, sociology and history, and even to biblical studies. Almost every radical thinker in the nineteenth century was a Hegelian of sorts. Marxism, for instance, would have been inconceivable without Hegel's notion of progression. In economic terms, Marx presented human progress as an advance from primitive to feudal to bourgeois to Communist societies. Just as pagan forms of belief were projections of the way in which the means of production were organized in tribal communities, so Christianity was a function of capitalism. When capitalism disappeared, as it soon would, Christianity—and Judaism, its fount of origin—would disappear too. The very notion of a personal God would vanish from the minds of men and women, except as a historical curiosity, like the weird crocodile and dog-gods of ancient Egypt.

The notion that belief in God was a mere phase in human development was reinforced by the hammer-blows of scientific discovery. First came the total recasting of the world's geology, in the 1820s and 1830s. The traditional chronology and historicity of the Old Testament were fatally undermined, or so it seemed. This demolition of the Book of Genesis was a more potent source of disbelief in Victorian times than the Darwinian Revolution which followed, in the 1840s and 1850s. Indeed, Charles Darwin himself professed belief and was at pains to emphasize that his work had no direct bearing on arguments for or against the existence of God. Nonetheless his work was used by the atheists, now organized and vocal, to assault belief frontally. His most articulate and forceful follower, T. H. Huxley, virtually declared intellectual war on Christianity at the 1860 Oxford meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science—and was widely held to have got the better of Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford, on that exciting occasion. Thereafter it became almost a commonplace, in intellectual

circles, to assume that religious belief was a receding force in human spirituality, and this applied whether you valued it or despised it. Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863) betrayed a sentimental attachment to Christ's ideas but presented him as a purely historical and human figure. Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, declared the death of God to be not merely a fact but a liberation for humanity: he appeared to hate God so much as almost to bring him back to life as a malevolent monster. Probably the most accurate presentation of the prevailing sentiment, on both sides of the Atlantic, was provided by Matthew Arnold's haunting poem, *Dover Beach* (1867), which stressed the almost unbearable sadness among sensitive and righteous men which the loss of faith occasioned. 'The Sea of Faith', Arnold writes,

Was once too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

This slowly became, and has remained, Arnold's best-known and most quoted poem, because so many intelligent and sensitive people exactly shared its awareness of the decline of faith, and regretted the loss of certitude. But there are problems with the poem. The image, though memorable, is not well suited to the loss of faith, if that loss is indeed irrecoverable. Tides do not merely ebb, they flow. The sea does not just withdraw and retreat, it returns and advances. If we pursue Arnold's metaphor, we can expect faith not just to decline but in time to recover. Alternatively, if Arnold was using the metaphor to portray a once-and-for-all disappearance of the sea of faith from mankind's Dover Beach, his forecast has been belied by the events of the twentieth century. The sea has not vanished leaving a naked shingle. What Arnold saw as a continuing event, in a Hegelian sense—he was much influenced by Hegel's ideas—until faith had disappeared completely and yielded to a higher form, has not continued. The withdrawal has halted. There may be no more positive atheists than in Arnold's time. There are without doubt many more agnostics. But equally there are many more believers. It is impossible to say whether the percentage of believers in the world is higher now than it was in the second half of the nineteenth century, partly because it is so difficult to define what we mean by belief, among Western populations let alone among Asian and African ones. But clearly, the event which Arnold thought would in time be completed, and which he tried to depict metaphorically, has not occurred. We still live in a world where the majority believe in something, in some way or another. Indeed, many more than a billion human beings are Christians—more than there were in the 1860s, when Arnold wrote the poem.

So Arnold was wrong. He was needlessly pessimistic. We can see too that Hegel was wrong because we have had demonstrated, before our eyes, the catastrophic failure of the system based on the ideas of his most influential follower, Karl Marx. The collapse of the Communist empire, or realized Marxism, in total and unqualified ruin, has been a vivid and costly and utterly persuasive demonstration that Hegel's central proposition, translated by Marx into political and economic terms, that human beings progress from

lower to higher forms, is false. Humankind may improve and learn to behave better, at any rate up to a point, but it does not change in fundamentals, and Utopian visions are dangerous fallacies. And one way in which men and women do not fundamentally change is that they continue to hanker for a supreme being, above and outside themselves.