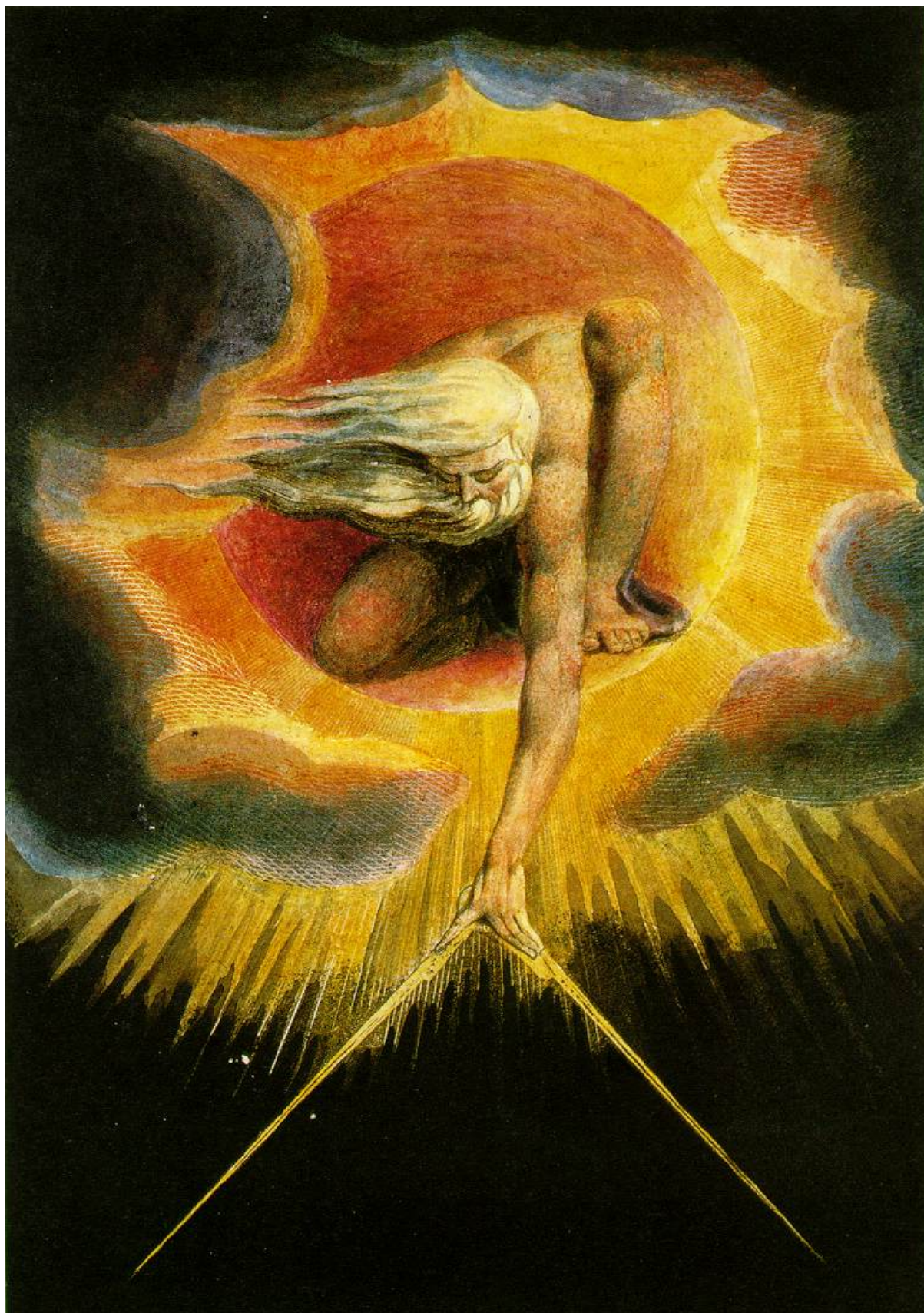


Many atheists are excellent, but atheism itself is hurting the West

by Conrad Black



I had intended to confine my long-jump [the moth-eaten current state of the Enlightenment in the West](#) to my last two action-packed columns here. But the scope and vigour of the reaction they elicited obliges me to return to the subject for the last

instance for what I promise will be a long time. Many thanks to readers for the approximately three quarters of the messages that I received that were positive and sensible, and betrayed no trace of proselytizing Christian zeal, which is a much too energetic and narrow focus than I am personally comfortable with (though, of course, I respect it, as I do all sane views on this contentious subject). I am less grateful for the unctuous assurances of the self-professed agnostics and atheists at pains to tell me they were law-abiding and civilized. I never implied otherwise, and have no problem with agnostics, who at least imply that their minds are open.

I have had as much as I can take for a while of the belligerent atheists who come crackling through the Internet assuming the airs of prosecutors, declaring ex cathedra that any suggestion of the existence of a supernatural force or that anything is not explicable by applied human ingenuity is medieval superstition. They have a trite little formula that they don't have to prove the existence of anything and so have the high ground in any argument and then lapse into Hitchensesque infantilistic mockery about pink-winged little men in the clouds. They are repetitive and obnoxious and their fervour betrays the vacuity of their position. I am declaring a moratorium for at least a few months on trying to reason with these self-exalted champions of reason.

Because there was so much misunderstanding and overwrought, misplaced hysteria from some readers, I will wind this up by restating key points with mind-numbing simplicity. We have no idea how the universe, or any version of the life and context we know, originated. We have no idea of the infinite, of what was before the beginning or is beyond any spatial limits we can imagine, even with the great exploratory progress of science. Miracles sometime occur and people do sometimes have completely inexplicable insights that are generally described as spiritual. No sane and somewhat experienced person disputes any of this. But there is a cyber-vigilante squad of atheist

banshees that swarm like bats over such comments and are hyperactive philistines better responded to with pest control measures than logical argument.

My contention is that it is more logical and reasonable to attribute these phenomena to the existence of a supernatural force or intelligence than either to deny that they exist, or to take refuge in the faith that they are merely aspects of our environment that we will eventually understand as we explore our planet and the contiguous universe.

I made the point that the Enlightenment that produced what is commonly called the Age of Reason started with a fusion of religious exuberance, scientific and intellectual exploration, and artistic and literary originality, all of which elements essentially reinforced each other. But the Enlightenment gradually adopted the position that science, exploration and reason are incompatible with religious faith, although the Judeo-Christian tradition – the role of conscience, the practice of justice, mercy, and forgiveness, along with intellectual curiosity and initiative – are the overwhelmingly powerful formative force in our history. Montreal's Paul-Emile Cardinal Leger was generally acclaimed when he addressed the scientific and intellectual communities at the Second Vatican Council and described faith as "This greatest friend of the human intelligence."

I did not suggest that the probable existence of a supernatural intelligence required anyone to plunge into religious practice or worship of any kind. That is a matter of taste and people should do what works for them and avoid what doesn't. I did not imply for an instant that those who deny the probability of a supernatural intelligence, whom I defined for these purposes as atheists, were incapable of being honest and decent people. Of course, in our society, most people, including most atheists, are reasonably honest and decent and get through their lives without horrible outbursts of

sociopathic behaviour. I did write that those atheists who purport to espouse the Judeo-Christian life without admitting the probability of some supernatural force are essentially enjoying the benefits of Judeo-Christian civilization while denying even the least onerous definition of its basic tenets. Thus do schism and hypocrisy raise their hoary heads.

As atheists renounce the roots of our civilization, they are troublesome passengers, and are apt to be less integral defenders of the West in time of challenge. They often dissent so uniformly and strenuously from any theistic notions that they have effectively established a third force that enjoys the society Judeo-Christianity has created while despising Judeo-Christianity and also purporting, generally, to despise the succession of dangerous adversaries that have threatened Judeo-Christianity, including Nazism, international Communism, and radical Islam.

Of course, an immense number of atheists, as defined here, fought with great valour over centuries and up to the present to defend our civilization. They certainly found it preferable to the enemies assaulting it. But they pose the difficulties of what Cardinal Richelieu called "a state within a state" (referring to autonomous 17th century Protestants) in renouncing Judeo-Christianity while enjoying and espousing an intellectually neutered version of it. They are effectively setting up a third option between Judeo-Christianity and its mortal enemies. This is an illegitimate option, intellectually, since it is really a hijacking of the West from its origins. It also does not gain any recognition from our enemies: the Islamic militants despise the West not because of the faith at its origins, but because it perceives the West now as a society without any spiritual views or values at all; as a wretched mass of materialist atheists (an understandable misapprehension at times). Presumably, we are all powerfully motivated to resist such an Islamic assault and will all presumably lock arms again and repel borders when

and where necessary, as we have since the rise of the Christian Era.

It is, however, and as I also wrote, a steadily more uneasy alliance between the atheists on one side and the theists and agnostics on the other, precisely because the commanding heights of our society – the ranks of government, academia, and the media – are so heavily dominated by aggressive atheists vocally contemptuous of Judeo-Christianity. The frictions in our own ranks become steadily more aggravated. Our Islamist enemies (which it need hardly be emphasized is far from being all Muslims) do not, when they contemplate us, detect our religious tradition, or any respect for anything except hedonistic and consumerist pleasures and spectacles. Of course, this is to some extent an illusion, as all polls and most experience show that the great majority of people in the West do accept the basic premise cited at the outset of this series of columns, that the most probable source of the inexplicable is a supernatural intelligence.

I also wrote that the atheists are becoming steadily more aggressive, more generally dismissive of the supernatural tradition, while swaddling themselves in commendable precepts that are generally variants of the Golden Rule and other such formulations. These are fine, but they will not in themselves assure a norm of social conduct and they have already led to the ghastly enfeeblement of moral relativism. Alternative scenarios emerge of equal worthiness, as right and wrong are concepts that are diluted by being severed from any original legitimacy. All schools of behavioural conduct compete on a level playing field and disorder gradually ensues. Man is deemed to be perfectible, the traditional matrix for authoritarianism. Where there is deemed to be no God the classic human deities – or Robespierre's Supreme Being, the Nazi Pagan-Wagnerian leaders, or the Stalinist incarnation of the toiling Slavonic masses – replace deities. Anyone who imagines that our legal system, unto itself, will assure

acceptable social conduct has had little experience of it. The entire apparatus of our society of laws has degenerated into a 360 degree cartel operated by and almost exclusively for the benefit of the legal profession.

Atheists are becoming steadily more aggressive, more generally dismissive of the supernatural tradition

I also wrote that, indicative of our deteriorating societal moral confidence and cohesion is our cowardly indulgence of sociophobic Islam – we both under-react to the outrages committed by Islamists and incite the inference that this is what religion produces. The implication, which was explicit in an exchange in this space last month, is that Islam is not more violent than Christianity, and that once embarked on the idea that any religious or spiritual conceptions at all may be worthy of consideration, that will include terrorist versions of religion. (That exchange had the added flourish that Nazism was deemed by my correspondent to be a discernible outgrowth of Christianity, an unspeakable falsehood and defamation.) There is even an element of this in the mawkish, excessive pandering to and amplification of the grievances of the native people in Canada. They have grievances and we have to address them more generously and thoughtfully than we have. But no one in the official leadership of Canada as an autonomous jurisdiction ever dreamt of imposing any version of genocide on them, and bumping John A. Macdonald off the currency and likening him to Hitler is a profanation made more scandalous and repugnant by its cowardly acceptance of historic lies.

I made all these points in gentle terms, as impersonally as I could, and dealt even with sharpish and laborious correspondence in the same way. These are, however, I submit, facts that have very serious implications for all of us, and we should not, as a culture and as a civil society, sleepwalk around them any longer.

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