

# God in the West: the New Atheism and Its Discontents

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by Gerry Lynch

Thank you for inviting me to speak at a meeting of the William Temple Association. Temple has long been a man I have admired. Indeed, he is a man whose prayers I often ask for, particularly when I confront some problem of presenting the Christian faith publicly. His *Christianity and the Social Order*, about to have its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, posed questions once seemingly answered by the welfare state, but has become extraordinarily fresh and relevant again over the past generation as a result of the changes in work and welfare.

That's a reminder, at the start of my talk, that history does not move in straight lines nor proceed to any inevitable destinations.

Just ten years ago New Atheism stood at the zenith of its influence. A lot has happened since, and indeed the talk I will give tonight is considerably different than that I might have written this time last year.

It is often said that there is no period in history more difficult to understand than the very recent past. With that in mind, let us strain our imaginations to take ourselves back to the distant days of the mid-2000s, when the world was a very different place.

## **The God Delusion**

Few books have been launched at such a perfectly apposite moment as was Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* in 2006.

Two scenes dominated the public conception of God in the 2000s: the collapsing twin towers of the World Trade Centre after Al-Qa'eda attacked them; and Bush and Blair praying together before launching a badly planned war against the wrong target. By 2006, that war had gone awry, and Iraq was in the midst of sectarian bloodletting that was killing tens of thousands.

As a generation came of age with no real memory of how secular ideologies had powered the Cold War and the tyrannies of the Communist bloc, the world seemed to be menaced by an explicitly religious unholy trinity of Islamist terrorism, warmongering by Christian leaders from the West, and the refusal of pointless sectarian hatreds to die.

The post-Cold War dream of a new and harmonious world order underpinned by advancing technology and shared values of pluralism and tolerance had died, and the two great Abrahamic religions stood in the dock as that dream's assassin. The third Abrahamic faith, Judaism, had become indelibly identified in the public mind with an Israeli state that lurched ever deeper into religiously-fuelled territorial expansion and repression.

It was the personal God of the Abrahamic faiths that Dawkins, quite explicitly, took aim at. Buddhism and Confucianism were specifically given a pass in *The God Delusion*. Dawkins' target was the God of the Old Testament, whom he described as "arguably the most

*unpleasant character in all of fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving, control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully*". (Dawkins, 2006)

*The God Delusion* has sold more than three million copies in English, and has been translated into 35 other languages, from Turkish to Telugu. It was the most influential book of its era, with its arguments often repeated unawares by people who have never read it, so powerfully did its critique of God resonate with the popular consciousness.

Its impact was greatest, perhaps inevitably, among those who were young adults at the time it was published. Generation X, defined as those born roughly between 1965 and 1980, was a profoundly unideological cohort in the West. They had, until 2006, shown little interest in reading works of philosophy or theology; while their parents had come of age in a world where late night debates about the merits of *The Communist Manifesto* or *The Female Eunuch* were rites of passage for university students and working-class intellectuals at trade union conferences, Generation X stayed up until 3 in the morning playing computer games instead.

Coming of age in the long boom between the 1980s recessions and the crisis of 2008, Generation X was lucky enough to have its adult lives formed at a time of low unemployment and economic growth. Communism had collapsed, democratic Socialism was in retreat, as was the old Conservative triad of faith, flag and family. This was the era when one of the most influential works of political philosophy was entitled, without irony, *The End of History*, a celebration of the claimed universal triumph of liberal capitalism.

Just as that triumph began to look unsure, Dawkins wrote a book that seemed to explain why. It was the obscurantism of religion, and its tendency to legitimise hatred and prejudice, that threatened to destroy an incipient golden age. The generation that believed in nothing found something intoxicating in what Dawkins offered – something to disbelieve in. And that something was God.

Atheism was hardly a new idea in 2006. But Dawkins turned an idea into a movement. He gathered a contingent of atheist intellectuals known as the Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse, along with the trenchant journalist Christopher Hitchens and neuroscientists Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. Dawkins argued that atheism had to go on the offensive. Religion was not a subject on which reasonable people could agree to disagree. The God delusion was so damaging to human well-being, he argued, that it had to be attacked and rooted out as a menace to society.

In reality, *The God Delusion* wasn't a good book. More a rant than a coherent set of arguments, it caught the zeitgeist brilliantly, provided some stock argument lines for already committed atheists, and encouraged them to come out of the closet, especially in the US. In reaction, it spawned a revival of Christian apologetics and, interestingly, provoked some serious reaction from other atheist thinkers. Let's take a brief look at some of the atheists discontented with New Atheism.

## **New Atheism's Atheist Discontents**

Among the atheist thinkers sharply critical of the New Atheism, I find three particularly interesting – John Gray and Yuval Noah Harari, whom you might have heard of, and Jaron Lanier, of whom you probably haven't.

Professor John Gray is in my view the most interesting popular philosopher in Britain today, with a capacity to make complex arguments understandable to an interested non-specialist.

For Gray, New Atheism fails because it fails to account of the human condition. Firstly, Gray is a firm believer in the importance of myth. *“Life without myth”, he writes, “is like life without art or sex – insipid and inhuman.”* (Gray, 2013) By insisting that human improvement depends on the banishment of all myths, religious or otherwise, New Atheism is inhuman in ways that parallel the thinking that produced the horrors of Stalinism. It is blind to its own myth, the myth that human beings can be perfected if only the right social order can be concocted – and for Gray, that is the most dangerous myth of all.

Gray praises the Christian philosophical tradition, while rejecting Christianity; for him, the failure of Christianity lies less in its supernatural aspects than the progressive spirit it imparted to Western secular humanism – *“the idea that Jesus returned from the dead”, he writes, “is not as contrary to reason as the notion that human beings will in future be different from how they have always been.”* (Gray, 2013)

The Christian insight Gray cherishes most is the doctrine of original sin. That also lies at the heart of his rejection of political reform. New orders are not better than old orders. The overthrow of the Romanovs led to Stalin; the overthrow of the Habsburgs to the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans.

He writes: *“evil is not error, a mistake of the mind, a failure of understanding that can be corrected by smarter thinking. It is something deeper and more constitutive of human life itself. The capacity and propensity for destruction goes with being human. One does not have to be religious to acknowledge this dark fact.”* (Gray, *The Closed Mind of Richard Dawkins*, 2014)

I admire Gray's thinking but I am glad I do not inhabit his bleak thought world; liberation, for him, comes from an acceptance that life is meaningless.

Sharing Gray's belief in the power and importance of myth, and equally critical of the human condition, is the brilliant Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, whose sweeping, popular, books on human history and possible futures have deservedly sold well.

Harari, like Gray, is critical of the New Atheists' inability to recognise their own myths for what they are. He pinpoints the nearly identical philosophical framework lying behind the Communist societies of the Eastern Bloc and the dominant ideology of progress in today's West. Science and materialism can create hell as easily as heaven.

Harari doesn't believe in God, but instead believes that through the advance of information and genetic technology, as a species we are well on our way to becoming gods ourselves, and that worries him.

'Civilised' human history, for Harari, is redolent with the condemnation of other animals to lives of incredible cruelty or driving them to extinction to feed ourselves, a proneness to treating one another badly, and a danger of wrecking the planet's capacity to sustain life.

If humanity's past is any guide to its future, he believes, then the first humans to become gods are likely to use their powers to ensure that few others join them. The first human species that follows *Homo sapiens* is likely to do *Homo sapiens* what it did to the Neanderthal and the dodo.

It isn't a pleasant vision, but it's a long way from Dawkins' naïve optimism in a post-religious scientific utopia.

Finally, let's look at Jaron Lanier, one of the inventors of virtual reality, now writing and inventing new musical instruments full time. For Lanier, the son of a concentration camp survivor, the worrying thing about the internet is its power to gather mobs. Before the emergence of social media, Lanier had already noticed the tendency of people in online spaces to bully holders of minority opinions and fight other strong mobs in verbal pitched battles.

*"I wonder if some aspect of human nature evolved in the context of competing packs", he wrote in 2006, the same year Dawkins wrote *The God Delusion*, "We might be genetically wired to be vulnerable to the lure of the mob. What's to stop an online mass of anonymous but connected people from suddenly turning into a mean mob, just like masses of people have time and time again in the history of every human culture?" (Lanier, 2006)*

Like Gray, Lanier does not believe that technology can change human nature. Moreover, he believes science simply cannot answer some of the fundamental questions about human existence – from the nature of consciousness to why the Big Bang happened. People will always seek answers to those questions, he argues. In attacking complex and ancient forms of faith, New Atheists risked shattering them and leaving the field of faith to naïve and destructive superstition. *"When scientists absolutely reject God", he wrote, "we leave behind only a simpler and more dangerous God."* (Lanier, *Jaron's World: Peace Through God*, 2009)

For all that these three atheist thinkers can see how religion can help explain the nature of the universe, and be a force for good in human affairs, to all of them God is dead. They believe this even though none of them sees the secular humanism that has replaced Him as offering improvement. They seem to leave us with a choice of being deluded about human nature, like Dawkins, or dismayed by it, like Gray. If Dawkins' secular humanism offers no meaningful answer to the darkness of human nature, and has no means to reform it, it at least offers a hope, no matter how unrealistic, that things can be better than they are.

At least its idol, humanity, is a simulacrum that in some sense resembles God's image; atheism's dissenters, in worshipping nothing, seem also to be absent hope.

## **On Dover Beach**

For many generations, the triumph of reason, science and technology over God has seemed to be inevitable to many in Western societies. We need to step a long way back from 2006 to explore why. There are a number of interesting vantage points – from the anti-religious philosophies of Rousseau and Voltaire in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century, to the publication of *On the*

*Origin of the Species* in 1859, through to the launch of Sputnik in 1957. But let's settle for a year in history's byways – 1851.

In 1851, a technology utterly destructive to previously unquestioned understandings of humanity's place in the world was being unleashed – the denaturalisation of time.

Until the advent of the railway, time was an entirely local phenomenon, governed by the rising and setting of the sun, and often intimately linked with prayer.

Once the railways began to run on their precision timetables, a train running from London to Bristol would find it was ten minutes earlier on arrival than watches wound in London indicated, because the sun rises and sets ten minutes later in Bristol than it does in London.

As those railways formed themselves into networks with junctions, it became imperative to keep a standard time across the network, regardless of geography. There were a number of crashes in the early days of rail, with significant loss of life, simply because the drivers of two trains were keeping different time. Along with the railways came the telegraph wires, conveying news at the speed of light; they also began to carry standard time signals marking the passing of each second and minute, allowing clocks from John O'Groats to Land's End to be kept in exact step with the Royal Naval Observatory in Greenwich. And as soon as any country developed a railway network, a national standard time soon followed.

Of course, this didn't involve any revolution in scientific understanding. Copernicus dethroned the geocentric view of the universe in 1543. But the denaturalisation of time went into every home, affecting when people ate their dinner and whether they walked to work in the dark or the daylight. The impact of a simple change of timekeeping was so subtle to be barely noticed, then or since, and yet profound. It made humanity the master of nature and placed a visible sign of this in every factory and school, in every gentleman's pocket, and even on many churches.

Some in the Church of England, at least, understood what a threat this practical and seemingly minor change was to our understanding of our place in creation. Exeter didn't adopt standard time until the 1880s, with successive Deans of the Cathedral fighting a vigorous rearguard action, being reluctant to abandon the times that God ordained in nature for prayer in favour of those determined by railway company bureaucrats. The Deans of Oxford never gave up the fight, and Christ Church still runs on Oxford mean time, five minutes behind GMT, which is why Evensong starts there at 5.35 pm according to your watch!

1851 was also the year when Matthew Arnold, meditating on the retreating tide at Dover Beach, penned lines that have ever since seemed to encapsulate the inevitable decline of God in the face of reason:

*The Sea of Faith  
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.*

The long retreating roar of the Sea of Faith seems only to have gathered pace since. We learned that far from being placed in the Garden of Eden in the first week of the world's existence, we humans were part of an extraordinary, two billion year, chain of spontaneous evolution from single celled life. We learned that the atoms that make up the physical substance of the earth and our own bodies are recycled material from long dead stars. We learned that our DNA – the stuff that makes us human – is substantially shared not only with other mammals but with insects and plants.

Each advance in our scientific understanding of the nature of the world seemed to place God in retreat. Yet, at every moment, believing Christian scientists, and other believers in a monotheistic God, were working at the cutting edge of science. The Big Bang Theory was first posited by a Belgian Jesuit, Fr Georges Lemaître.

Still, elements of the Church fought a pointless rear-guard exercise to defend what had become an indefensible cosmology. From the Roman hierarchy's response to Galileo to the Victorian Anglican hierarchy's response to Darwin to the pseudoscience of modern American Evangelicalism, too many Christians, in the name of God, lashed out at science to defend their own systems of intellectual and ideological control.

Too many Christians exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an idol they had created – one that too closely resembled Dawkins' pastiche of an angry divine tyrant. And like all idols, the stupidity and powerlessness of that tyrant was too transparent for Him to be taken seriously.

Yet many, perhaps most, people think that idol is what Christians mean by God. Did Christians kill God by accident in a vain but bloody battle to defend the indefensible? Is God, in phrases redolent of 2006, a victim of 'collateral damage' from 'friendly fire'?

Is the door to belief closed to most people in the West for the foreseeable future?

## **Is God Dead?**

Remember, for us Christians God has already died – at three o'clock on the first Good Friday. Just as He rose from the dead then, He can rise again in Western societies. There are five factors which, I believe, are creating a crisis in the dominant narrative of secular materialism and will open space for God and perhaps – perhaps – also for Christianity.

These are:

1. The crisis in Western liberalism.
2. The overreach of technology.
3. The strangeness and beauty of the created order as revealed by science.
4. The revival of religion in non-Western societies.
5. The assumption of power by Generation X.

### **The crisis in Western liberalism**

The present crisis in political order and moral authority is too obvious to be commented on further. People across the Western world seem to have had enough of experts!

The things that make us miserable and fearful, however, are more subtle and profound. We are more and more likely to live our lives substantially alone; more likely to fear crime, although less likely to be victims of it; less likely to trust strangers.

The world is not proceeding along a road to the universal acceptance of what we have decreed to be universal values; unsurprisingly, as they are actually Western values and, substantially, they are Christian values, encoded in the 1940s by groups of people who were nearly all men, nearly all white Westerners, and mostly Christians.

William Temple, in whose memory we are gathered, was no fan of the idea that the Church should be apolitical, so let me turn to the unavoidable subject of President Elect Trump. For he is the incarnation of the crisis in Western liberalism, the product of the three great cultural revolutions that have swept the West since the 1960s – and the ugly side of all of them.

With his unmanageable sexual appetites, unbridled vulgarity, and studied contempt for learning, he is truly a child of the 1960s revolution that placed unrestrained personal autonomy as the only legitimate goal of the good society. With his greed, lack of any sense of the transcendent and obsession with wealth as the only true measure of personal success, he is truly a child of the 1980s money-first revolution. And his political triumph is only possible because of the 2010s revolution in online communications, that encourages us to create our own private online universes where facts are whatever we choose them to be from a limitless supply of online ‘news’ sources.

White American Evangelicalism has done Christianity no favours in its unholy alliance with Trump as a means to gaining control of the Supreme Court. It is important to remember that the vibrant Black Evangelical scene in the US holds little truck with the man, and that Evangelicalism in Britain and much of the rest of the world has reacted to him with horror. How Christianity as a whole deals with the Trump Presidency and what unfolds under it may turn out to be the biggest factor in how Christianity will be viewed in the West for several generations to come.

### **The overreach of technology**

The destruction being wrought by social media on our ability to carry out democratic dialogue is a suddenly obvious symptom of how information technology is outstripping our capacity to make sensible use of it.

Another symptom, with the capacity to do even more damage, is the almost godlike power being attributed to big data processed by algorithms. (An algorithm is just a step-by-step procedure, these days usually carried out by a computer.)

Let’s return to the American Presidential election. Hillary Clinton’s campaign made every major strategic decision on the advice of an algorithm called Ada. Ada didn’t notice that Hillary had a particular problem with working-class white men in the Midwest who had voted for Obama, because the people who programmed Ada wrongly thought she could win without a substantial white working-class vote.

Algorithms are just human constructs acting on human instructions. If the data entered into them is junk, the result will be junk. If the logic behind the processing of that data is faulty,

the result will be faulty. If the deep assumptions that underlie those processes are unwarranted, then acting on the projections they produce will be a recipe for disaster. Yet they are credited with the same magical power for predicting the future that oracles or tossing chicken bones were in the past – and this from a culture that rejects the idea of God as being illogically magical!

Overdependence on algorithms was a recipe for disaster for Hillary Clinton, just as it was for the world financial system when algorithms from Dubai to California projected that banks could make money forever for by selling ever riskier mortgages to ever poorer people on ever more expensive homes. The financial world remains addicted to algorithms – this was cause of the strange ‘flash crash’ in the pound last month. More worryingly, the world’s militaries are equally starstruck by the apparent predictive power of algorithms processing big data, and they are increasingly capable of operating drone-borne weapons without human supervision.

If the First World War was inevitable once the railways started rolling, then the Third World War may be inevitable once the algorithms of the world’s militaries begin to interact in a bad way.

Technology is neither good nor evil of itself; it merely amplifies our capacity to affect the world. Our technological capacity has long outstripped our moral capacity and that gap is widening.

### **The strangeness and beauty of the created order as revealed by science**

We move from the mundane daily reality of technology to the wonders of science.

Christians have long been told that they are playing a dangerous game if they worship a ‘God of the gaps’ – a God who can work wonders as long as they are outside the capacity of science to explain, because inevitably science would close those gaps in knowledge and leave God homeless. That, as we have seen, is part of the story of the last few centuries in the West.

But, far from the gaps closing as scientific knowledge advances, we seem to have moved into an era when the more we learn, the more we realise we still have to learn; moreover, the universe works in ways utterly offensive to common sense notions of cause and effect, which are ultimately governed less by clockwork order and more by common themes of symmetry, beauty and harmony.

Beauty, elegance, and symmetry have long been key factors in determining truth for mathematicians – when a number of solutions are potentially valid, precedence is given to the most elegant. Beyond maths, beauty increasingly seems to be of importance in the laws that govern the universe. The swirl of water down a bathplug is a miniature of the swirl of our Milky Way galaxy over a span of millions of years; the resonances that govern musical harmony also govern the energy states of subatomic particles.

In our quest to make societies that are rationally defensible as being fair, humanity has too often produced brute and inhuman ugliness from architecture to manners. Nature, it is worth remembering, is governed more by beauty than systematic logic.



## **The revival of religion in non-Western societies**

God may inevitably die in the face of advancing reason and technology; but outside the West He seems prone to being resurrected – and we Christians should always be alert to signs of resurrection! Let me briefly touch on the recent story of faith in China and in the Islamic world.

China underwent a revolution in thought still more profound than the West during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Even before Communism, Republican China was profoundly hostile to the traditional – and ancient – Chinese Confucian thought-world.

The educated élite saw religion as a powerful retarding force on Chinese national development, trapping the country in a backwardness that ensured its domination by foreign powers, and condemning its rural poor to accepting vicious exploitation by the landlord class as its fate in life mandated by heaven. Nor was Christianity, with some exceptions, generally more welcome, being seen as a means of creating a fifth column loyal to Western exploiters – one more Christian, one less Chinese, ran the old refrain.

After 1949, added potency was lent by Marxism-Leninism's unwavering hostility to religion as the opium of the masses. Adherents of traditional Chinese religious customs, Christians, and the country's ancient Muslim minority, were all subject to vicious bouts of persecution under Mao: these bouts have never entirely ceased.

But atheistic campaigns of that period needed no great propaganda machine behind them. Religion was, especially in the cities, dying anyway.

The extraordinary revival of faith in 21<sup>st</sup> Century China ought to undercut any simplistic notions that greater education and material progress inevitably crowds out space for religion. Firstly, a huge revival of traditional Chinese religious practice is underway. Qufu, the provincial town of 65,000 traditionally held to be Confucius' home city, now throngs with pilgrims and the great Temple of Confucius sees hundreds take part in religious ceremonies daily, many continuing those practices afterwards in cities across the country.

At the same time, an enormous growth of the Church is taking place, largely through the vehicle of house churches. The Chinese government's leading expert on unregistered churches has said publicly that he estimates there are around 50 million Christians in China; other estimates put the number closer to 70 million. All agree that the number is growing rapidly.

The story of the Islamic world over the past century should equally challenge any notion of inevitable religious retreat. Atatürk was the first of a series of strong nationalist leaders emerging from élites in the Islamic world who, like their counterparts in China, saw religion and its attendant cultural trappings as a main cause of material backwardness relative to the West. By the 1960s, the cultural and economic heart of the Muslim world – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Algeria – was run by secularists who, in contrast to China, mostly rejected atheism but instead sought to dominate and control clergy and religious institutions. Few were more than nominal Muslims, all were Nationalists, and most were Socialists.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 – the first modern revolution to reject the traditions of both 1789 and 1917 – came as a bolt from the blue at the time, seeming to be a throwback to an earlier age. Instead it was the harbinger of a new order.

In contrast to China, where the revival in religion seems to be in part a response to the soulless materialism of a long economic boom, in the Islamic world religious revival was driven by the failure of secular nationalism to deliver either prosperity or freedom. The spread of revanchist and supremacist forms of Islam by some of the oil rich and intensely devout Gulf States also played a major role. God has made a remarkable comeback in the Middle East, across class, sectarian and ethnic lines. And that, as we all know, has not been without serious problems.

### **The assumption of power by Generation X**

And we finish where we started, at Generation X, history's middle children here in the Western world, sharing neither the libertarian idealism of their parents nor the debt-driven puritanism and Stakhanovism of their millennial children. Now aged somewhere between 36 and 51, they are slowly assuming the top posts in business, politics, culture, academia and the media: the church is a bit of a gerontocracy, so there are few of them yet among our bishops and moderators!

The last generation who can remember life before the internet is the first generation for whom marrying someone of a different skin colour or the same gender is normal. This is the generation that largely abandoned the church and classical music but gobbled up modern art and their opportunities for mind-broadening travel and socially conscious volunteering in the Developing World. And let us not forget, this is the generation that in large measures imbibed the ideas of *The God Delusion* with grateful delight.

Is anything giving them pause for thought, as their beards turn grey and their paunches spread over their jeans? There are signs.

Radio 3 carried a wonderful interview with the novelist Zadie Smith a few weeks ago. Zadie, that great explorer of class, race and national identity in contemporary England is perhaps the ultimate Generation X-er. 42 years old and the child of an English father and a Jamaican mother, she grew up in a North London increasingly content with its own diversity.

She mentions her seven year old daughter recently seeing a clergyman in a dog collar on TV and asking her, 'Mummy, what's that man?' Did we really mean to throw out the baby with the bathwater, Zadie asked? Did we really mean to sever ourselves off from our cultural roots so forcibly?

We were the generation who learned to fix problems by clicking our mouse on the right point on our computer screens. And faced with terrorism and warmongering and fanaticism, we uninstalled God, and uninstalled Christianity along with Him. And inadvertently, we may have uninstalled the mental scaffolding that separates us from the brutality of the Graeco-Roman world that Christianity displaced, with its crucifixions and slave beatings and exposure of infants on hillsides.

It struck me forcefully how much fear there was in that conversation with Zadie Smith. The optimistic world of her young adulthood and mine is dead. We will be poorer than our

parents, especially in old age, and our children may well be poorer than us. Class has re-emerged from the shadows as a major determinant life chances. Just eight years after the election of President Obama seemed to encapsulate a new, post-racial, mentality, race relations remain as fractious as ever across the world.

Educated, tech savvy and powered by the internet, we were of the generation that was told it would create a golden age. 2006 was also the year that Time Magazine declared that thanks to the emergence of social media 'You' were the person of the year, with a mirrored front cover.

No generation in history was told more forcefully that the *vox populi* was the *vox dei*. Nobody before us has had such ample opportunity to make their voices heard – now look at what a sad and pathetic idol we make for ourselves.

In a long adolescence, that for many of us stretched into our thirties, we thought we were too sophisticated for God who was both the product and creator of backwardness. Now, we've had to grow up very quickly in a world that is not set to become a utopia. Abandoning God has not made us more rational, still less has it made us kinder and more loving. In the absence of religion, people still find plenty of reasons to hate one another.

Growing up may well involve us discovering that we were overly hasty in deciding we were too sophisticated for God. Generation X sees its idol staring at us in the mirror every morning and is well aware it is not worthy of worship – but it is worthy of being loved.

For Christians, our God is a God of unconditional love and unending challenge to respond to that love. Our God loves us enough to tell us things we don't want to hear. It is that God which a world that has been encouraged to have too high an opinion of itself needs to encounter.

And may that God who loves us, the Father who made us, the Son who saved us, and the Spirit who guides us, bless us this night and remain with us always. Amen.