

## ARTHUR C. CLARKE'S SECULARISM

Arthur C. Clarke – one of Sri Lanka's most famous and distinguished residents - died aged 90, on March 19 2008. While Clarke's contributions on space explorations, communications technology and writings on these themes have been publicized and lauded in the local press, less is mentioned about his warnings of the dangers of fundamentalism in religion and his strong secularism. Throughout his life, Clarke often took issue with religious bigots and with those who denied Darwin's theories.

Although Voltaire, a philosopher of the Enlightenment, proclaimed that "God is Dead" over 200 years ago, and Charles Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species* over 150 years ago, debate still continues on issues of both atheism and evolution. Christianity, however, has ceased to dominate the lives of people in Western Europe (where churches are almost empty and clergy hard to recruit), and in Britain, more Muslims worship at mosques than Christians attend church on Sundays. But fundamentalism flourishes, promoting violent conflict and war in many parts of the world.

There are many modern-day Voltaires who have created an interest in challenging beliefs in God(s) and religion. Most sensationally in recent years have been Francis Wheen's *How Mumbo Jumbo Conquered the World*, scientist Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion*, and the philosopher Slavoj Zizek's article "Atheism is a Legacy Worth Fighting For" (*Polity* Vol 3, No3). Unfortunately when 'Third World' scholars write critically of religion - as did Taslima Nasreen, Salman Rushdie or S.J. Tambiah - they are villified by extremists.

Arthur Clarke was certainly in the secular tradition, as seen in his insistence that "absolutely no religious rites of any kind, relating to any religious faith should be associated with my funeral." His many pronouncements on religion, and his belief that religious fanaticism leads to violence and war, are revealing. Clarke said he suspected that "religion is a necessary evil in the childhood of our particular species" and added that "there is possibility that humankind can outgrow its infantile tendencies." In an interview to the *Free Inquiry* magazine on the topic of "God, Science and Delusion" he said:

But it is amazing how childishly gullible humans are. There are, for example, so many different religions – each of them claiming to have the truth, each saying that their truths are clearly superior to the truths of others – how can someone possibly take any of them seriously? I mean, that's insane. And such insanity concerns me, especially now that waves of lunacy are washing over the United States and the world in the form of millennial cults.

To Arthur Clarke one of the "great tragedies of mankind" was that morality had been "hijacked by religion":

So now people assume that religion and morality have a necessary connection. But the basis of morality is really very simple and doesn't require religion at all. It's this. "Don't do unto anybody else what you wouldn't like to be done to you." It seems to me that that's all there is to it.

Sri Lanka mercifully has not become a theocracy, and if we are to honour the memory of Arthur C. Clarke, we should continue to stress the importance of secularism which is a necessity for maintaining unity in diversity. Clarke towards the end of his life said that if he was granted three wishes, they would be - proof of extra terrestrial life, freedom from dependence on oil, and an end to the civil war in Sri Lanka. We hope that all these wishes will be realized soon.

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