

Review: Religion debate, York Union

[Lucie Parker](#) reviews the York Union's spectacular first event

Wednesday 23 October 2013



Peter Cave

Last Tuesday saw the first of [the York Union's](#) new series of talks and debates, kicking off the term with a debate on the motion "This House believes religion is irrational and today's society would be better off without it". Proposing this motion were Peter Atkins, a former professor of chemistry at the University of Oxford who maintains that religion is evil, and Peter Cave, Chair of the Humanist Philosophers who purports religion to be an illusion. Arguing against the motion were the team of Selina O'Grady, a historian and journalist proposing that humans are innately religious, and Andrew Brown, a journalist and author who holds religion to be exempt from the paradigm of rationality.

The set up of the debate was well structured and successful in creating a solid intellectual arena within which the debate could seamlessly flow between both the panel members, as well as the wider audience. Asking audience members to vote on the motion before entering the debate acted as a tool of engagement, requiring a preconception of thoughts on what was to come and sparking automatic interaction. The formal debate structure, chaired under Adam Seldon's watchful eye, created a professional and controlled environment that, rather than suppressed any thoughts, allowed the debate to flourish along the track of the motion that had been set, vanquishing any irrelevant tangents along the way. Opening up the argument to the audience for a Q & A session after the initial debate achieved the aim of magnetically enticing greater interest from them, sending a cascade of opinions rippling around the room. What was particularly impressive about this sell-out event was not just the volume of those who attended; it was the huge proportion of members of the public, whose enthusiastic contributions enriched

the level of debate.



Selina O'Grady

The room was spectator to the thought-provoking range of ideas delivered by the panellists. Peter Atkins sparked things into action, using astute philosophical logic to emphasise religion as a deceitful blanket which smothers 'our ability to comprehend' the nature of the world. His persuasive use of rhetoric to appeal to the arguably universal human value of honesty brought a tangible dimension to what he purported. Selina O'Grady came next, a self-declared atheist who held that 'some of religions beliefs are barking mad, but we as a human group are religious'. Her sociological declaration that anything with values is a religion created the first stirrings of controversy, with many unable to grasp her belief of the Olympic ceremony as a religious ritual. Peter Cave used his speech to outline the classic paradox between the empirical evidence of human suffering against the abstract notion of God's supposedly benevolent nature, concluding that religion is a falsehood. Lastly, Andrew Brown came forward to outline the absurdity in applying rationality to religion, maintaining that 'you might as well ask if it is green'.



Peter Atkins

The one criticism that can be levelled at the debate is over the nature of its content. Many strands of arguments were put forward, yet the limited interaction between panellists meant that these strands were never picked up and woven into a coherent conclusion. Another feeling put forward by Magnus Mulvany, and echoed by a second audience member vote on the motion, was that the opposition's 'slightly underwhelming and unsubstantial claims, in the end, failed to deceive', with the proposing side excelling in oratory skills and intellect. Yet overall this event was indicative of York Union's promise. They succeeded in 'engaging an otherwise apathetic and intellectually bored student population in a spectacular fashion; this is the start of something important' (Will Ingram).



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