

The resurgence of atheism: religion under attack

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The resurgence of atheism

The theme of my essay is to provide an overview and make a critique of a new attack on religion that has come from one of its oldest enemies. It is the challenge from atheists and championed especially by two articulate, educated and impressive writers – Richard Dawkins from the UK and Sam Harris from the USA. However, as I will argue in this essay, these two writers are but the tip of a very large iceberg that is gaining momentum and opposing not only the fundamentalists within religious traditions, but also liberals (the majority of us here today), who value religious traditions but want to make them more reasonable, tolerant and life-enhancing. Moreover, the attack upon religion is not limited to Christianity, but Islam as well.

Atheists today are increasingly organized, confrontational and inclined to go public with their grievances. They have emerged from their foxholes and are encouraging others to declare their allegiance to what has been dubbed: “the church of the non-believers.” They have a new “out” campaign to encourage non-religious to admit their atheism and be proud of it. You can buy your t-shirt with a large A from the Richard Dawkins website. Atheists from across many academic disciplines are joining forces to challenge religious people about their ideas of God, faith, and their way of understanding the cosmos: they are committed to weakening religion’s hold on people’s minds and hearts. They exhibit the same fervor that is commonly ascribed to their opponents, preaching an alternative gospel that we can be content in this world without the need of a divine Being. They are marching in the fight against religion.

The new atheists

The new atheists are Richard Dawkins, Anthony Grayling, Daniel Dennett, Michel Onfray, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. Here are some snippets of each author to give a flavour of their views:

- Richard Dawkins – ‘although atheism might have been logically tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist’ (*The Selfish Gene*); ‘DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is and we dance to its music’ (*River out of Eden*).
- Anthony Grayling – we’d be better off without religion. ‘To believe something in the face of evidence and against reason is ignoble, irresponsible and ignorant and merits the opposite of respect’ (*Against all Gods*).
- Daniel Dennett – religion is a natural phenomenon: we must shatter its supernatural spell and ‘break the traditional taboo against inquiring so openly and searchingly about religious affiliations and convictions’ (*Breaking the Spell*).
- Michel Onfray – atheism faces a ‘final battle’ against ‘theological hocus pocus’ and must rally its troops. ‘We can no longer tolerate neutrality and benevolence’ (*Traité d’athéologie*).
- Christopher Hitchens – ‘Jerry Falwell’s foul rantings prove you can get away with anything if you have “Reverend” in front of your name.’ Religion poisons everything. He is influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach: God did not create humans, but humans have created God (and religion).
- Sam Harris – ‘Words like God and Allah must go the way of Apollo and Baal or they will unmake our world’ (*The End of Faith*). Atheists just add one more deity to the list of those gods who have disappeared in human history

Criticisms of religion

So, if you try to extract the ideas from these leading atheists, what are the main criticisms of religion?

First, all subscribe to the view that Darwinism – evolution by natural selection – has dispensed with the need for a God-hypothesis. Science offers us an explanation of how complexity (the difficult) arose out of simplicity (the easy). The hypothesis of God offers no worthwhile explanation for anything, for it simply postulates what we are trying to explain.

Second, religion is irrational and allows its followers to believe anything and permit them to do anything, including perpetrating the most horrendous crimes against those of another religious persuasion or none. Religions have correctly been described as “Licensed insanities.”

Third, religion is a purely natural phenomenon. There is no supernatural realm or God. Humans have created God in their own image using their local cultural lenses and the wide range of beliefs in various gods is evidence of this.

Fourth, the events of 9/11, 7/7 etc and the growth in fundamentalism in religions reveal that religions are not a ‘force for good.’ Rather, the opposite is the case and we need to be protected from religion. Religions are the cause of most wars or conflicts in the world.

Islamic atheists

But, the atheist attack has not arisen solely within Western or Christian cultures. Islam has been a fertile breeding ground for its own dissidents. While the threat of the death penalty for

apostasy might hold sway over some Muslims not to denounce their faith, it has not prevented the likes of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Ibn Warraq and Taslima Nasrin from questioning the tenets of Islam. Ignoring their own personal safety they have mounted a fierce campaign for the liberation of minds. In her two books, *The Caged Virgin* and *Infidel* Ayaan Hirsi Ali outlines her own journey as a Muslim and her condemnation of Islam as a medieval, misogynist cult that is at odds with the modern world. In particular she praises Theo van Gogh, a provocateur and *enfant terrible* of the Dutch cinema who was ambushed and killed by a bearded man in Arab clothing as he cycled through the heart of Amsterdam in 2004. The man was later identified as Mohammed Bouyeri, a Muslim of Dutch-Moroccan nationality, and his attack was prompted by the director's film, *Submission*, which highlights the repression of women in some Islamic cultures. Part of his footage depicted a voluptuous girl in a transparent gown with verses of the Qur'an painted across her naked chest, back, stomach and thighs — ostensibly to dramatize the humanity of the oppressed female beneath the Muslim veil. Ayaan Hirsi Ali wrote the text of the film.

Ibn Warraq (a pseudonym) is a most prolific writer. He has made available critiques of Islam and applied historical and literary criticism to the Qur'an and the historical person of Mohammed. The founder of Islam, like the founder of Christianity, becomes more human and less divine and the sacred texts are fallible human documents that reflect the outlooks of special interest groups and were written many years after the events they purport to describe.

Taslima Nasrin describes herself as a physician, a writer, a radical feminist, human rights activist and a secular humanist. Born in Bangladesh her main criticisms of Islam centre on its treatment of women and its anti-modernism. She views Islam as wedded to a patriarchal system that is out-dated and oppressive.

Causes for the rise of atheism

So, what are the causes for the rise of atheism? First, all major religions have become more assertive and demanding in defense of their belief systems. They have protested, often violently, against any criticism of their beliefs and values, most notably by imposing *fatwas* upon and even murdering those they consider blasphemers. Not only individuals like Salman Rushdie, but religious writers, artists, cartoonists, film-makers, abortion doctors, as well as gay and lesbian communities have felt the wrath of extremists whose God needs protecting.

Second, atheists view religious people as unreflective, unwilling to question their own belief systems, and resistant to intellectual or academic scrutiny of their creeds, scriptures and dogmas. In societies founded upon secular values, religious beliefs do not merit special status, and religious claims must be scrutinized and held up to literary, historical, and philosophical criticism. Religious leaders cannot claim immunity from the satire of writers, cartoonists, and comedians who refuse to privilege their founders, clergy, or sacred texts. Religious people cannot peddle highly speculative and even irrational beliefs without expecting those ideas to be interrogated.

Atheists are no longer willing to allow their lives and societies to be hijacked by religious extremists. They are not only fighting back but asking others to declare their support.

Five Responses to the atheist challenge

Having outlined the case for atheism I shall in this second part of this essay give five responses from progressive religion. These are: (1) redefine our understanding of God, (2) Scriptures/Texts/Founders must be open to scrutiny (3) religion must respond to the claims of science (4) the attraction of religious naturalism (spiritual atheism) and (5) it be acknowledged that we are fighting the same enemy.

1. Redefining God

In my book, *The God Problem: alternatives to Fundamentalism* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006) I outline alternative understandings of ‘God’ that lead to a more benign image that does not necessitate believing in a God of terror. In the words of Bishop Spong “the God of the old theism must die.” In the book I include three modern understandings of God:

The first, panentheism, is outlined in the works of John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg. Panentheism (pan=everything, en=in, theism=God) means that God is in everything, yet is more than everything. God is an immanent and transcendent deity, not separate from the world but surpassing the world we know. The ‘God-experience’ is important, yet God is ultimately a mystery. ‘God’ is a human word, but it points to a reality that is not human.

Second, non-realism has been advocated by Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering. Non-realists regard “God” as a metaphor or a symbol of that which is of ultimate concern. God is a not an external reality but a useful fiction by which we express our deepest concerns and hopes.

Third, according to popular ‘grassroots’ spirituality, God is revealed in a myriad of ways, though a whole host of different channels and not limited to the historic religions as expressed by Allah, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna etc. Language about God might be ‘energy,’ or ‘spirit.’ The idea of a transcendent deity is replaced by the interconnectedness to the divine principle; “we regard ourselves as part of an endless interconnective spiritual tissue.”

2. Textual criticism

The sacred texts of all religions must be subject to literary, historical and textual criticism in just the same way as other historical documents. The texts will be revealed to be human documents that are fallible and culturally conditioned. As Spong has shown in his book, *The Sins of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) the Bible has been used to justify the subjugation of women, discriminate against homosexuals, advocate racism and support

environmental degradation. Interestingly, the Muslim writer Irshad Manji concurs in her estimation of the negative way the Qur'an has been used to justify violence:

For too long, we Muslims have been sticking fingers in our ears and chanting 'Islam means peace' to drown out the negative noise from our holy book. Far better to own up to it. Not erase or revise, just recognize it and thereby join moderate Jews and Christians in confessing 'sins of Scripture,' as an American bishop says about the Bible. In doing so, Muslims would show a thoughtful side that builds trust with the wider communities of the West.

3. Science and religion

It is imperative that liberals have a theology that coheres with Darwinism. The challenge of creationism and intelligent design must be thwarted. The advances in understanding of the age of cosmos cannot be reduced to the crass nonsense of Bishop Ussher and his dating of the point of creation at 4004BC. Theologians need to embrace the scientific enterprise and repent of their former ways of silencing scientists. They need to respond to the challenge of Richard Dawkins and those who promote scientific materialism in an intelligent way.

4. Religious naturalism/spiritual atheism

It is often thought that there is no point of contact between hard-nosed scientific rationalists and theologians. However, religious naturalism provides a way in to discussion of religious feelings. Simply put, religious naturalism is the awareness that nature, in and of itself, can and does elicit feelings of awe, wonder, and humility—feelings often described as “religious” although these have no supernatural content. Indeed, Richard Dawkins describes himself as “a spiritual atheist.” Perhaps, the best book on religious naturalism is by the biologist, Ursula Goodenough, aptly entitled, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. Her book is a poem in praise of evolution and the only language that she can use is the language of her religious upbringing – Christianity. Her book reads like a religious story, which she labels: “the Epic of Evolution.”

5. Fighting the same enemy

We acknowledge that we are all fighting the same enemy: fundamentalism. There ought to be a collusion of forces: religious liberals, secularists, agnostics, seekers, ‘people of good will’ ready to combat the scourge of fundamentalism that divides the world into a seething mass of competing tribal deities. Each religious tradition must begin the process of theological deconstruction. The claims of religions and holy books must be scrutinized and debated. Only then can religions move from claims of superiority to peaceful co-existence.

Conclusion

It has been my contention in this essay to show that reason and reasonable people do exist with existing religions (or as the brochure for the conference says: ‘affirming the contribution of reasonable and tolerant religion to public discourse in our society.’) It is self-evident that as the popular singer, Sting, wrote “without the voice of reason every religion is its own curse.” It is imperative that religions turn the negative impression that they are anti-life and replete with fundamentalists. Liberals must once more take the reins and show that religions can be a force for good and that they enhance rather than diminish life.

The Reverend Dr Nigel Leaves has academic credentials from the Universities of Oxford, London and Murdoch (Australia). He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1986 and has served the Church in many capacities in Papua New Guinea, Hong Kong, United Kingdom and Australia. He is presently Warden and Dean of Studies at The John Wollaston Anglican Theological College in Perth, WA. Nigel has had a lifelong concern to bridge the perceived gap between academic and lay education and to make the Christian faith relevant to each succeeding generation. He has published three books – two on the writings of the Cambridge philosopher-theologian, Don Cupitt, and his latest one: *The God Problem-alternatives to fundamentalism* which is very pertinent to the theme of this conference. He is a Fellow of both the Westar Institute/Jesus Seminar and The Jefferson Center in the USA. He is in demand as a speaker both here, in the USA and the UK. He is married to a fellow Anglican priest and has a 12 year old son, an aspiring golfer, who regularly embarrasses his dad on the golf course!!