

Evangelical Atheism Today: A Response to Richard Dawkins

By

Ted Peters

**Professor of Systematic Theology
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
and the Graduate Theological Union**

It used to be that atheists didn't bother anybody. They simply stayed home from church on Sunday and avoided praying. The social impact was minimal. But, now this is suddenly changing. With vigor and zeal and cross country stumping, a new breed of evangelical atheists is launching a crusade to liberate our society from the chains of religion. Religion poisons the minds of our youth because it teaches children to rely on something other than critical thinking. Religion is responsible for the violence in our world, because belief in a supernatural and jealous god leads us into war to defeat infidels. Only atheism, only outright disbelief in God, can rescue our society from endless religious conflict.

Aggressive Atheists

A *Wired* magazine columnist sounds the alarm: "The New Atheists...condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God...Religion is not only wrong, it's evil." Religion is irrational; and it makes societies prone to violence. Religion, especially fundamentalist religion, incites violence. What today's atheists want are more converts so they can bring peace. Although not yet organized into a marching army, we can identify a posse forming around malcontents such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. "A band of intellectual brothers is mounting a crusade against belief in God" [Gary Wolf, "The Church of the Non-Believers," *Wired* (November 2006) 182-193]. Curiously, the new atheists are evangelizing for non-belief.

Just as the Christian crusaders sought to take Jerusalem away from the Muslims, the new atheists want to take science away from Christians and other religious believers. Science rightfully belongs to atheism, they contend. "Atheism, and its justification through science, is the apotheosis of the Enlightenment," writes Oxford chemistry professor, Peter Atkins ["Atheism and Science," in Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 136].

Richard Dawkins: Evolution vs. Christianity

Perhaps the most visible of the banner waving crusaders for non-belief is Oxford professor of science education, Richard Dawkins. It was Dawkins who in 1976 gave us the concept of the “selfish gene,” and who is known for championing the field of sociobiology. What is so delightful to the theologian is that Dawkins confronts the question of God with utmost clarity. Does God exist? No. Well, probably, no. The question of God is a scientific question, he avers. And scientists can only speak in probabilities, not absolutes. So, it is Dawkins’ *scientific* judgment that, most probably, God does not exist.

Dawkins is clear on who he wants to see defeated. He says he is not attacking any specific divine figure such as Yahweh, Jesus, Allah, Baal, Zeus, or Wotan. Rather, he is attacking all of them at once. All belief in such divinities can be swept up into a single “God Hypothesis,” which Dawkins attempts to falsify. “I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*” Dawkins advocates “an alternative view: *any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution*” [*The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) 31]. Let us attend to the logic here. If God would exist, it would take the form of an eschatological existence, not a primordial existence. No god more intelligent or more complex than the material universe could have existed at its simple beginning. Such a god could only evolve like everything else evolves. “If (which I don’t believe for a moment) our universe was designed, and *a fortiori* if the designer reads our thoughts and hands out omniscient advice, forgiveness and redemption, the designer himself must be the end product of some kind of cumulative escalator or crane, perhaps a version of Darwinism in another universe” [*Ibid.*, 156].

Even with this slim opening toward the coming into existence of a future intelligence, Dawkins closes the door on divinity. No God existed at the beginning, at the origin of the universe or at the origin of life. And no God now guides the evolutionary process of speciation. Natural selection does. Wondrously, natural selection has produced an intelligent designer, us. We *homo sapiens* are the most intelligent beings in nature’s earthly history to date. We might expect even higher intelligence to develop in the future. The evolutionary development of the human race is what Dawkins believes in. Further, he contends, belief in evolution requires disbelief in God. Note how Dawkins has substituted natural selection for divine providence, and substituted the revelatory power of Darwin’s theory of evolution for scripture. The evangelical atheists look for their messiah in science, especially Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution.

Does Atheism have a Patent on Science? No.

Now, can we honestly say their atheism is itself scientific? No. The materialist worldview the evangelical atheists espouse is in fact an ideological add-on, a superimposition. Atheism is not inherent to scientific inquiry itself. For Dawkins to apotheosize natural selection within evolutionary theory is simply unwarranted.

“Dawkins’s critique of religion cannot properly be called scientific” writes Marilynne Robinson [“Hysterical Scientism: The Ecstasy of Richard Dawkins, *Harper’s Magazine* (November 2006) 86].

I can honestly admit that I appreciate one thing about the new breed of atheists, namely, their strong advocacy for critical thinking in natural science. We must grant that the pursuit of scientific inquiry feeds the human soul hungry for knowledge about the wonders of our natural world. Yet, I object to the unnecessary ideology of materialism which they attach to science. Rather than admit that their atheistic commitment is itself an act of religious faith, albeit a negative act, they attempt to borrow the prestige of science to buttress their cause. The problem is that science belongs to all of us, not merely to the atheists among us. [See: <http://www.counterbalance.net/evo-brf/index-frame.html>]

Is Religion the Source of Evil?

This is my response to Dawkins on science. But, what about the complaint made by the evangelical atheists that religion is violent and atheism is peaceful? Sam Harris speaks for the movement: “religious faith remains a perpetual source of human conflict.” [*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2004) 236]. In order to bring global peace, we need to stamp out religion. The religions Harris particularly wants to eliminate are Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. These irrational and violence prone holdovers from a pre-modern era must be dispensed with. “All reasonable men and women have a common enemy....Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself”[*Ibid.*, 79].

Now, let us ask: do atheists have a record of higher virtue than religious people? Not according to history. When we look at the twentieth century, we can see that the most horrific genocidal atrocities--Hitler’s global war combined with the holocaust in central Europe, Stalin’s purge of non-Communists in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Block, Mao Tse Tung’s incessant reign of terror and murder, the Khmer Rouge’s killing fields in Cambodia--were all perpetrated in the name of atheistic ideologies. What more compelling evidence could there be that it is misguided to point the finger of blame for this or other humanly perpetrated atrocities at religion alone! What delusion could even suggest that either science or atheism or a combination of these two could provide a peaceful alternative!

The new atheists have heard such criticisms before. They respond defensively by saying that the versions of atheism responsible for the horrific killings of the previous century were impure atheism. In the case of Stalin and Mao, their atheism was contaminated by Marxist atheism. In the case of Hitler, his science was contaminated by the spurious theory of eugenics. Evidently, orthodox atheism founded on orthodox science has not been tried yet. But, when it is tried, then it will provide a peace and tranquility not yet achieved by religion or by unorthodox atheism. Well, this seems to be the argument the evangelical atheists leave us with.

In her widely read *Harper* review cited above, Marilynne Robinson says she is not persuaded by Dawkins’ attempt to exonerate atheism by extricating science from Nazi genocide. Even though religiously led anti-Semitism certainly predated the rise of Darwinism, during the second decade of the twentieth century, it was at such a low ebb

that it had virtually no active influence on German society. It bordered on the forgotten. What happened then was that Hitler adopted Darwinian eugenics into his program of racial hygiene; and within the eugenic theory he redefined the “Jew” in genetic or racial rather than religious terms. Hitler produced a scientized racism. The winds of the *Zeitgeist* then began to blow in the direction of genocide. It was science, not religion, that propelled Nazi Germany toward the holocaust, says Robinson. “To Dawkins’s objection that Nazi science was not authentic science I would reply, first, that neither Nazis nor Germans had any monopoly on these theories, which were influential throughout the Western world, and second, that the research on human subjects carried out by those holding such assumptions was good enough science to appear in medical texts for fully half a century. This is not to single out science as exceptionally inclined to do harm, though its capacity for doing harm is by now unequalled. It is only to note that science, too, is implicated in this bleak human proclivity, and is one major instrument of it” [84]. In short, to identify atheism with pure science in order to distance it from the Nazi atrocities fails in its attempt to persuade that a scientized atheism would usher in human virtue and world peace.

Replacing the “God Delusion” with the “Dawkins Delusion”

Perhaps we should replace the “God Delusion” with the “Dawkins Delusion.” The historical fact that secular and overtly atheistic ideologies self-consciously founded on what they deem “science” have been responsible for ruthless murder on the scale of millions if not tens of millions cannot be overturned by a flip of the ideological switch, by simply saying these forms of scientific atheism were not the form that the current evangelical atheists advocate.

Theologically, two things need to be said. First, the human propensity for violence and even genocide is just that, a *human* propensity. It matters not whether the society marching toward war or murder is secular or religious. In either case, whatever science or religion is culturally available will be used to justify destructive intentions. Believers in religion need not whitewash their own religious tradition; they can afford to be realistic about the manner in which religion like anything else can be pressed into the service of justifying violence and destruction. Second, the confidence of the evangelical atheists that movement toward a scientifically based society will bring the rule of reason and eliminate current violence is itself a delusion. It commits the fallacy of false cause. By naming religion as the cause of violence, this position is looking for a scapegoat rather than looking for a deeper and broader explanation.

Having said this, I can sympathize to a certain level with the exasperation the evangelical atheists feel in regard to what they perceive to be religious forces in global politics. If what they see is suicide bombers in the name of a transcendent promise perpetrating fear and suffering among the most innocent of victims, how can they avoid rising up in outrage? And, it is a fact that suicide bombers are trained in religious schools and are promised religious rewards for their acts of merciless killing. It is easy to think that religion is a fault here.

Religious leaders among the various faiths of the world have a responsibility to clean up their own act, so to speak. Our era calls for strong religious leadership, for a loud blast on the angelic trumpet that declares God’s will for a global society

characterized by peace, cooperation, justice, care, and, most importantly, love. The resources for such leadership lie at the foundations for each religious tradition, including Islam. Conversion to atheism would at best amount to a diversion leading to a blind alley. Despite the challenge of religious violence in our world, our religious leaders need resolute courage to call to our attention the will of our loving God.