

THE NEW ATHEISTS

Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens share a number of vital concerns. They are all opposed to any attempts made by fundamentalists to place religious claims about the natural world on the same level as claims made by science. In particular, they oppose attempts to construe “intelligent design” as a valid scientific hypothesis. See, for example:

“... , creationism, or “intelligent design” (its only cleverness found in this underhanded rebranding of itself) is *not even a theory*. In all its well-financed propaganda, it has never even attempted to show how one single piece of the natural world is explained better by “design” than by evolutionary competition. Instead, it dissolves into puerile tautology.” (Hitchens, *God is not Great*, p. 86)

Also, they are concerned about religious fundamentalism, and Biblical literalism. They worry about attempts by the Christian right to introduce the teaching of creationism/intelligent design into the science curriculum.

All of them are committed to scientism: the view that the only valid form of knowledge is scientific knowledge.

One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the forerunners of religion, and one would like to think – though the connection is not a fully demonstrable one - that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell. (Hitchens, p. 64) All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons [i.e. the previous quote]. I read, for example, of some ecumenical conference of Christians who desire to show their broad-mindedness and invite some physicist along. But I am compelled to remember what I know – which is that there would be no such churches in the first place if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse, and all manner of other things now easily explicable. (Hitchens, p. 65)

To different degrees, they are also committed to a “correspondence” theory of truth:

QUOTATIONS ON SECULARISM

The pragmatist's basic premise is that, try as we might, the currency of our ideas cannot be placed on the gold standard of correspondence with reality as it is. ... From the point of view of pragmatism, the notion that our beliefs might "corre-



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spond to reality” is absurd. (Harris, *The End of Faith*, p.179-80)

Dawkins’ commitment to epistemological realism somewhat more subtle:

Philosophers, especially amateurs with a little philosophical learning, and even more especially those infected with ‘cultural relativism’, may raise a tiresome red herring at this point: a scientist belief in *evidence* is itself a matter of fundamentalist faith. All of us believe in evidence in our own lives, whatever we may profess with our amateur philosophical hats on. ... We believe in evolution because the evidence supports it, and we would abandon it overnight if new evidence arose to disprove it. No real fundamentalist would ever say that. (Dawkins, *The God Illusion*. p. 319)

William James, one of America’s greatest philosophers, one of the founders of a uniquely American philosophy, saw the relation between natural science and religion this way:

The sciences of nature know nothing of spiritual processes, and on the whole hold no practical commerce whatever with the idealistic conceptions towards which general philosophy inclines. The scientist, so called, is, during his scientific hours at least, so materialistic that one may well say that on the whole the influence of science goes against the notion that religion should be recognized at all. And this antipathy to religion finds an echo within the very science of religion itself. The cultivator of this science has to be acquainted with so many grovelling and horrible superstition that a presumption easily arises in his mind that any belief that is religious probably is false. (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. p. 533.)

Dawkins reproaches other scientists (S.J. Gould) and philosophers (M. Ruse) for their attempts to reconcile science and religion:

It is conceivable that (S.J. Gould) really did intend his unequivocally strong statement that science has nothing whatever to say about the question of God’s existence: ‘We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can’t comment on it as scientists.’ This sounds like agnosticism of the permanent and irrevocable kind. ... It implies that science cannot even make *probability* judgements on the question. This remarkably widespread fallacy – many repeat it like a mantra but few of them, I suspect, have thought it through – embodies what I refer to as ‘the poverty of agnosticism.’ Gould, by the way, was not an impartial agnostic but strongly inclined towards *de facto* atheism. On what basis did he make that judgement, if there is nothing to be said about whether God exists? (Dawkins, p.81)

Dawkins attacks on M. Ruse, “Another prominent luminary of what we might call the Neville Chamberlain School of evolutionists”, are similar. He quotes “his colleague”, the

Chicago geneticist with approval:

Ruse fails to grasp the real nature of the conflict. It is not just about evolution versus creationism. To scientists like Dawkins and Wilson [E.O. Wilson the celebrated Harvard biologist], the real war is between rationalism and superstition. Science is but one form of rationalism, while religion is the most common form of superstition. Creationism is just a symptom of what they see as the greater enemy: religion. While religion can exist without creationism, creationism cannot exist without religion. (Jerry Coyne, quoted by Dawkins, p. 92)

Dennett does not attack religion head on. He merely asks for the right to study it, scientifically:

It is high time that we subject religion as a global phenomenon to the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds of the planet. Why? Because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about. (Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p.14)

But, he rules out the possibility that religion be studied in a manner that is different from the natural sciences:

A subtler, less forthright, but equally frustrating barrier to straightforward inquiry into the nature of religion has been erected and maintained by the scholarly friends of religion, many of whom are atheistic or agnostic connoisseurs, not champions of the creed. They do want to study religion, but only *their way*, not the way I am proposing, which by their light is “scientific,” “reductionistic,” and, of course, philistine. I alluded to this opposition in chapter 2, when I discussed the legendary gap that many want to see between the natural sciences and the interpretive sciences. ... Anyone who tries to bring an evolutionary perspective to bear on any item of human culture, not just religion, can expect rebuffs ranging from howls of outrage to haughty dismissal from the literary, historical, and cultural experts in the humanities and social sciences. (*ibid.* p. 259)

Dennett does not mention in the above quotation those “friends of religion” who, like Gould and Ruse might share his views on eliminating the gap between the natural and interpretive sciences. Take for example, Ruse:

My position is simply this. Although I am myself a nonbeliever, I do not think that traditional religion contributes to this non-belief. Note that I say traditional religion. I obviously don’t think you can believe in Noah’s Flood and be a modern biologist or geologist. But the central, basic, traditional claims of religion—stay with Christianity for simplicity—about a Creator God, and the special place of humans, and even eternal salvation, seem to me beyond the range of science.

Although I joke about Foucault and those sorts of things, I have been deeply in-

fluenced in my view of science by the thinking of philosophers and historians in the past half-century. Strongest influence of all was Thomas Kuhn, especially his insistence that scientific thinking is deeply and necessarily metaphorical (something he thought was equivalent to his claims about paradigms). What Kuhn pointed out is that while metaphorical thinking is very powerful, in both explanatory and heuristic senses, it succeeds in major part by ignoring certain questions, ruling them off limits. If I say my love is a red, red rose, I am saying nothing about her mathematical abilities, and if I say (as today's scientists do say) that the world is a whacking big machine, I am saying nothing about such questions as why there is something rather than nothing, why morality, or (and this is more controversial) why computers made of meat (aka brains) produce sentience.

I think science leaves these questions open, and if religion wants to try to answer them, it is perfectly legitimate for it to do so. It doesn't mean that we have to accept the answers of the religious, and it doesn't mean that religion cannot be criticized—I have said that for me personally the problem of evil is beyond solution—but I don't think it can be criticized by science. (M. Ruse on line: March 20 2011. *New Atheism: Disaster Comparable to the Tea Party*.)

Dawkins quotes Gould “bending over backwards” in accommodating religion:

The net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisterial do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for example, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the old cliché, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock f ages: science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven. (J.S. Gould, the *Rock of Ages*, quoted by Dawkins, p. 78)

So, Dawkins:

This sounds terrific – right up until you give it a moment's thought. What are these ultimate questions in whose presence religion is an honoured guest and science must respectfully slink away? ... I would prefer to say that if indeed they lie beyond science, they must certainly lie beyond the province of theology as well. (R. Dawkins, *ibid.*)

This is what Nietzsche says about the relation between science and religion:

No! People should not come at me with science when I am looking for the natural antagonist of the ascetic ideal, when I ask, “*Where* is the opposing will, in which

an *opposing ideal* expresses itself?” For that purpose, science does not stand sufficiently on its own, not nearly; for that it first requires a value ideal, a power to make value, in whose *service it could have faith* in itself—science is never in itself something which creates values. Its relationship to the ascetic ideal is still not inherently antagonistic at all. It’s even more that case that, for the most part, it represents the forward-driving force in the inner development of this ideal. Its resistance and struggle, when we inspect more closely, are not concerned in any way with the ideal itself, but only with its external trappings, clothing, masquerade, its temporary hardening, petrification, dogma.

The new atheists’ attack on religion is motivated largely by political considerations. Again, Dawkins gives a striking illustration of this point:

I am not suggesting that my colleagues of the appeasement lobby [i.e. Ruse and co.] are necessarily dishonest. They may sincerely believe [that science and religion do not overlap], although I can’t help wondering how thoroughly they have thought it through and how they reconcile the internal conflict in their minds. There is no need to pursue the matter for the moment, but anyone seeking to understand the published statements of scientists on religious matters would do well *not to forget the political context*: the surreal culture wars now rending America. (p. 94, my emphasis)



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They seem to have no interest in attempts to re-vitalise theology. They find those attempts too esoteric:

It is true that certain theologians and contemplatives have attempted to recast faith as a spiritual principle that transcends mere motivated credulity. Paul Tillich, in his *Dynamics of Faith* (1957), rarefied the original import of the term out of existence, casting away what he called “idolatrous faith” and, indeed, all equations between faith and belief. Surely other theologians have done likewise. Of course, anyone is free to redefine the term “faith” however he sees fit and thereby bring it into conformity with some rational or mystical ideal. But, this is not the “faith” that has animated the faithful for millennia. ... My argument, after all, is aimed at the majority of the faithful in every religious tradition, not at *Tillich’s blameless parish of one*. (Harris, p. 65, my emphasis)

In another passage Harris makes it clear that, in his view, Tillich’s “blameless” position is inconsistent with central texts of the Scriptures:

It is only by the most acrobatic avoidance of passages whose canonicity has never been in doubt that we can escape murdering one another outright for the glory of God. (Harris, p.78)

In his most recent book, Harris admits that liberal Christians might not recognize themselves in the “Christians” he addresses. But he continues:

They should, however, recognize one hundred and fifty million of their neighbours. I have little doubt that liberals and moderates find the eerie certainties of the Christian Right to be as troubling as I do. It is my hope, however, that they will also begin to see that the respect they demand for their own religious beliefs gives shelter to extremists of all faiths. (S. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, p. IX)

Dennett expresses similar doubts about the pertinence of experimentation with new theological ideas. He too challenges those who have doubts about religious orthodoxy “to say this from the pulpit” (Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p.209). See also:

Belief in belief in God makes people reluctant to acknowledge the obvious: that much of the traditional lore about God is no more worthy of belief than the lore about Santa Claus or Wonder Woman. ... The trouble is that, since this advice won’t be heeded, discussions of the existence of God tend to take place in a pious fog of indeterminate boundaries. (*ibid* p. 210)

Dawkins explains why he considers religious faith as an evil:

More generally (and this applies to Christianity no less than Islam), what is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them – given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by – to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades. (Dawkins, op. cit, p. 347-8)

Harris just thinks that strong belief in God is a “mark of madness or stupidity”:

While believing strongly, without evidence, is considered a mark of madness or stupidity in any other area of our lives, faith in God still holds immense prestige in our society. Religion is the only area of our discourse where it is considered noble to be certain about things no human being could possibly be certain about. (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, p.67)

William James – whose radical empiricism might be congenial to the new atheists – has the following hypothesis about belief in God:

Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther side*, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* (nearer) side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life. Starting thus with a recognized psychological fact as our basis, we seem to preserve a contact with ‘science’ which the ordinary theologian lacks. At the same time the theologian’s contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and to suggest to the Subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as ‘higher’; but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true.

This doorway into the subject seems to me the best one for a science of religions, for it mediates between a number of different points of view. Yet it is only a doorway, and difficulties present themselves as soon as we step through it, ... Here the over-beliefs (creeds) begin: here mysticism and the conversion-rapture and Vedantism and transcendental idealism bring in their monistic interpretations and tell us that the finite self rejoins the absolute self, for it was always one with God and identical with the soul of the world. Here the prophets of all the different religions come with their visions, voices, raptures, and other openings, supposed by each to authenticate his own peculiar faith. (William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 556-8)

This is how Charles Taylor sees modern atheism:

Unbelief goes together with modern (exclusive) humanism.

So goes the story. The crucial idea is that the scientific-epistemic part of it is completely self supporting. That's something the rational mind will be led to believe independent of any moral convictions. The moral attributions to one side or other come when you are trying to explain why some people accept and others resist these truths. The connection between materialist science and humanist affirmation comes because you have to be a mature, courageous being to face these facts. ...

From the believer's perspective, all this falls out rather differently. We start with an epistemic response: the argument from modern science to all-around materialism seems quite unconvincing. Whenever this is worked out in something closer to detail, it seems full of holes. ...

Where the classical epistemologists claimed it as an obvious truth of "reflection", or inner observation, that one was first of all aware of the ideas in our mind; the proponents of the death of God want to see Godlessness as a property of the universe which science lays bare. ... So here I am arguing that it is only within some understanding of agency, in which disengaged scientific enquiry is woven into a story of courageous adulthood, to be attained through a renunciation of the more "childish" comforts of meaning and beatitude, that the death of God story appears obvious. ...



Stanislav Szomolányi, foto: Miro Nóta

[...] it is crucial to this outlook of “death of God” atheism that it understand itself as science driven; to accept that it has espoused one view of adult agency among possible others would be to admit that there is something here which needs defence [but] has received none. ...

This is not to deny that science (and even more “science”) has had an important place in the story; and that in a number of ways. For one thing, the universe which this science reveals is very different from the centred hierarchical cosmos which our civilization grew up within; it hardly suggests to us that humans have any kind of special place in its story, whose temporal and spatial dimensions are mind-numbing. This, and the conception of natural law by which we understand it, makes it refractory to the interventions of Providence as these were envisaged in the framework of the earlier cosmos, and the connected understanding of the Biblical story. Seen in this light, “Darwin” has indeed, “refuted the Bible”. (Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age*, pp. 562-66.)

“DEATH OF GOD” AND RADICAL THEOLOGY

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!”—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

“How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean

ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.” (Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Aphorism 125, “The Madman”)

Before Nietzsche, Hegel also affirms the death of God. There are two aspects of this death: a) for the “unhappy consciousness”, the one for whom God was absolutely other than finite beings, God dies and b) the God of love dies with human beings every day, and is resurrected with them every day: it becomes human.

But this humanity in God - and indeed the most abstract form of humanity, the greatest dependence, the ultimate weakness, the utmost fragility - is natural death. ‘God himself is dead,’ it says in a Lutheran hymn, expressing an awareness that the human, the finite, the fragile, the weak, the negative are themselves a moment of the divine, that they are within God himself, that finitude, negativity, otherness, are not outside of God and do not, as otherness, hinder unity with God. Otherness, the negative, is known to be a moment of the divine nature itself. This involves the highest idea of spirit. In this way what is external and negative is converted into the internal. On the one hand, the meaning attached to death is that through death the human element is stripped away and the divine glory comes into view once more - death is a stripping away of the human, the negative. But at the same time death itself is this negative, the furthest extreme to which humanity as natural existence is exposed; God himself is involved in this. (Hegel, (1827) *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, p.250

The death of the Mediator [Jesus] is the death not only of his *natural* aspect or of his particular being-for-self, not only of the already dead husk stripped of its essential Being, but also of the *abstraction* of the divine being. ... That death is the painful feeling of the Unhappy Consciousness that *God Himself is dead*. (Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.477, Section 785).

Altizer achieved great popularity in the mid-nineteen sixties as the advocate of “Death of God Theology”. He sees the death of God this way:

Contemporary theology is unquestionably in a state of crisis, perhaps the most profound crisis which Christian theology has faced since its creation. This crisis is manifest in three areas: (1) in the relation of dogmatic theology to its biblical ground, a crisis posed by the rise of modern historical understanding; (2) in the

relation of theology to the sensibility and *Existenz* of contemporary man, a crisis created by the death of God; and (3) in the relation of the community of faith to the whole order of social, political and economic institutions, a crisis initiated by the collapse of Christendom. I intend to focus upon the second of these areas, although it can only be artificially isolated from the other two. Furthermore, we shall simply assume the truth of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, a truth which has thus far been ignored or set aside by contemporary theology. This means that we shall understand the death of God as an historical event: God has died in *our* time, in *our* history, in *our* existence. The man who chooses to live in our destiny can neither know the reality of God's presence nor understand the world as his creation; or, at least, he can no longer respond -- either interiorly or cognitively -- to the classical Christian images of the Creator and the creation. In this situation, an affirmation of the traditional forms of faith becomes a Gnostic escape from the brute realities of history. (Altizer: "Theology and the Death of God" in T.J.J. Altizer and W. Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. p. 95)

What Altizer means by "the death of God" is that: a) it is the Father, the transcendent God of onto-theology who has died b) it is Christ, the divine in humanity who was resurrected and c) in this Resurrection God enters history in the flesh and blood of the community of faithful. His rejection of Gnosticism, (Gnosticism is a total rejection of the profane world: the *Existenz*) leads Altizer to declare, following the spirit of the Hegelian dialectic, that theology must begin by affirming the "*coincidence of opposition*" between the profane world and a biblical mode of faith. "Theology today, he says, is faced with the overwhelming task of establishing a dialectical synthesis between a radically profane "subjectivity" (*Existenz*) and an authentically biblical mode of faith." (*op. cit.* p. 103)

The last word to Nietzsche:

The meaning of our cheerfulness. The greatest recent event—that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least, whose eyes—the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some suns seem to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, "older." But in the main one may say: the event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having *arrived* as yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality.(Nietzsche: *Gay Science* Aphorism 343)