

Religion and Science: the Emerging Relationship Conclusion



Pontifical Academy of
Sciences

*The claim that science is the only way to truth is a claim ultimately unworthy of science itself. Nobel Laureate Sir Peter Medawar points this out in his excellent book, *Advice to a Young Scientist*: ‘There is no quicker way for a scientist to bring discredit upon himself and upon his profession than roundly declare—particularly when no declaration of any kind is called for—that science knows, or soon will know, the answers to all questions worth asking, and that questions which do not admit a scientific answer are in some way non-questions or pseudo-questions that only simpletons ask and only the gullible profess to be able to answer.... The existence of a limit to science is however, made clear by its inability to answer childlike elementary questions having to do with first and last things—questions such as: “How did everything begin?”; “What are we here for?”; “What is the point of living?”’¹*



Richard Dawkins

The recent discussion about the relationship between religion and science in recent times has been largely stimulated by a spate of books by men referred to as the *New Atheists*. The works of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett have provoked a strong reaction from the scientific and religious communities. Richard Dawkins sees religion as an evil, as do the other writers. Religion is a poison to the culture. The numerous religious wars, bigotry, terrorism and the perpetuating of the *infantile illusions* of God and the afterlife (Freud), Dawkins et al., see as contributing to the imprisonment of the human mind and the failure of the culture to see that science is the only path to any truth.

The reaction to these authors has stimulated numerous conferences at the world’s leading universities to discuss this issue. Certainly there is much that Dawkins says in his book, *The God Delusion*, which a person of faith could agree with. For instance, a person

of faith is appalled at the violence, fear, terror, bigotry and other infamies done in the name of God down through the ages. The stain of the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, the Anti-Judaism of the Christian Churches that helped to fuel the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany, and the sometimes fearful and defensive attitude that some forms of Christianity take toward science, are things a person of mature Christian faith find abhorrent, deserving of prophetic critique! Yet, the *New Atheists* reflect considerable ignorance about matters concerning a balanced view of history, philosophy, theology, poetry and so on. Their fundamental position is that only by the use of human reason and science can humanity progress and rid itself of this evil thing called religion. In this they opt for *scientism* not science itself. They move from the concepts and data of science into metaphysics and don't even seem to notice that is what they are doing—or they don't care.



John Haught

Dr. John Haught, Professor of Theology and Religion at Georgetown University sums up the approach of the *new atheists*:

Scientism's main motive is fear of losing control. We can observe the narrowing instinct at work in the religious literalism that reads the sacred texts as though their purpose is to provide scientific information or lists of sexual acts to be avoided. The shrinkage includes;

- *Reducing, or trying to reduce, the entire monotheistic religious population to scriptural literalists, dogmatic extremists, escapists, perverts, perpetrators of human suffering and fanatics.*
- *Reducing the cultural role of theology to the systematic underwriting of religious abuse.*
- *Reducing the meaning of faith to mindless belief in whatever has no evidence.*
- *Reducing the meaning of "evidence" to "what is available to science."*
- *Reducing the whole of reality to what can be known by science.*
- *Reducing the idea of God to a "hypothesis". 2*

The chief challenge from the *New Atheists* comes from their embracing evolution as a godless process that proves there is no God. Upon close inspection it seems that the numerous detours and failed species seem to suggest a directionless and brutal process that no good God would create. However, there are some indications that creation and life are in a process of increasing complexity and diversity that seem to be at odds with mere chance and necessity. Many scientists take issue with Dawkins et al. Dr. Francis Collins, former head of the *Genome Project* states:

*Dawkins' definition of faith is "blind trust", in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence." That certainly does not describe the faith of most serious believers throughout history, nor of most of those in my personal acquaintance. While rational argument can never conclusively prove the existence of God, serious thinkers from Augustine to Aquinas to C.S. Lewis have demonstrated that a belief in God is intensely plausible. It is not less plausible today. The caricature of faith that Dawkins presents is easy for him to attack, but it is not the real thing.*³



Francis Collins

Molecular biologist and theologian (former atheist), Allister McGrath puts it this way:

The 'God Delusion' is a work of theater rather than scholarship—a fierce, rhetorical assault on religion and passionate plea for it to be banished to the lunatic fringes of society, where it can do no harm....many have been disturbed by Dawkins' crude stereotypes, vastly oversimplified binary opposition (science is good; religion bad), straw men and hostility toward religion. **4**

Dr. Collins and Dr. McGrath get to the heart of the matter; the *straw man* that Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens have created has nothing to do with the essence of religion, but only its perversion. The Prophets of the Old Testament and the Lord Jesus Christ all denounced the perversion of the religious expression of their day. Rather than religious faith being an evil that represses the humanity of human beings, it is the true source of human liberation! In fact, the true essence of Christianity is the God, who in kenotic, crucified love, acts to save the world in Jesus Christ. This is a God that suffers and works with human beings to co-create a world befitting the dignity of human beings and the sacredness of the creation.

While one can observe that the arguments of the likes of Richard Dawkins lack philosophical or conceptual veracity, we can be grateful to Dawkins et al. for their moral outrage at the inhumanity done in the name of religion. Those who are faithful adherents to their traditions abhor what has so often been done in the name of God by the distortions, or what Fr. David Tracy refers to as the *demonic side*, of organized religion. However, this being said we also must note the extraordinary achievements of the great traditions, especially in our Catholic tradition, of the inspiration for human liberation empowered by God's Holy Spirit that summons up prophets who call for justice and peace. We might also point out that a world devoid of meaning, which is the ultimate end of atheism, i.e., ending in nihilism, is not a world that could long be habitable for human

beings. The 20th century saw the outcome of godless systems—the gulag, death camps, the threat of nuclear holocaust. We can remember that once one denies the existence of God one denies that there is a final arbiter of the moral life, and then we hear the echo from Dostoyevsky in the *Brothers Karamazov*: *If there is no God then everything is permissible*. The *New Atheists* should be careful what they wish for!

There is ample evidence to conclude that on both sides of the argument personal perceptions and prejudices play a role that leads inevitably to distortion of true nature of the relationship between religion and science. Dr. Walter Theiring, a physicist from the University of Vienna notes:

The fierce battles between scientists and theologians seem to me not so much inherent to these subjects but rather due to the pretentious character of some of their representatives who believe they understand more than they do. This becomes better only once one has learned the due humility vis-à-vis the great mysteries of the cosmos. 5

This discussion will continue in our culture for years to come. But it is important to note that over 40% of all major scientists in the United States profess some belief in God. Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, Szilard, Hiesenberg, Schrodinger and many other scientists have professed belief in God. So being a scientist does not require being an atheist. The founder of modern quantum physics, Dr. Max Planck, expressed his view on this matter;

There can never be any real opposition between religion and science; for the one is the complement of the other...Religion and natural science are fighting a joint battle in an incessant, never relaxing crusade against skepticism and against dogmatism, against unbelief and superstition...On to God!6

The late Stephen Jay Gould, former Professor of Paleontology at Harvard University addresses his fellow scientists about God in this way:



(Stephen Jay Gould)

To say it for all my colleagues and for the umpteenth millionth time: Science simply cannot by its legitimate methods adjudicate the issue of God's possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm it nor deny it; we simply can't comment on it as scientists. If some of our crowd have made untoward statements claiming that

Darwinism disproves God, then I will find Mrs. McInerney [Gould's third-grade teacher] and have their knuckles rapped for it. 7



(Erwin Schrodinger)

One way to sum up this whole issue, and how one can respond to it, is found in the words of the Physicist, Erwin Schrodinger:

I am very astonished that the scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives us a lot of factual information, puts all of our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains but the answers are very often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously. 8

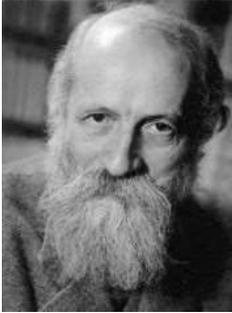


Cardinal Walter Kasper

There is no gainsaying the historical fact that organized religion has presented itself with two faces: the first being one of inspiration, challenge, consolation and hope; the other one of almost demonic excess fueling persecution, violence and war. Which face shows up in any given era depends on believers. That is the challenge of free will in which humans must take responsibility for the world they are creating. Using the name of God for evil purposes or for one's one agenda has been all too frequent in our world, the results of which lead to **forms of atheism expressed by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965**. The failure of believers to witness to the true God often leads to modern forms of atheism. Cardinal Walter Kasper puts it this way in quoting the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber:

God is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated...Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden. The races

of men with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their fingermarks and their blood... They draw caricatures and write "God" underneath; they murder one another to say "in God's name" ... We must esteem those who interdict it because they rebel against the injustice and wrong which are so readily referred to "God" for authorization. 9



Martin Buber

But all is not lost. Should people of faith truly witness to the God of liberation, love, compassion, peace and justice, the name of God will be more clearly understood and revered. He goes to state:

We cannot cleanse the word "God" and we cannot make it whole; but, defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over and over with great care.¹⁰

Is this not the surest method of refutation of the new atheists?

Notes

- 1 John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*, (Oxford, UK, Lion Hudson plc, 2007), p. 41.
- 2 John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens*, (Louisville, Kentucky; Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 38-39.
- 3 Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, (New York, NY:Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 164
- 4 Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicut McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Book, 2007), pp.96-97.
- 5 Henry Margneau and Roy Abraham Varghese, *Cosmos, Bios, Theos: Scientists Reflect on Science, God, and the Origins of the Universe, Life and Homo Sapiens*, (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Press, 1992.), p. 121
- 6 Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, (New York, NY, Harper One Press, 2007), p. 105
- 7 *Ibid.* p.165-166.
- 8 John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*, (Oxford, UK, Lion Hudson plc, 2007), p. 176
- 9 Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984), pp. 3-4.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 10

