

# The Root of All Evil?

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**R**ichard Dawkins asks some captivating questions about religion. Overall, he comes across as somewhat worried, like someone who, after waiting patiently for the death of religion, is finally obliged to admit that faith is showing no sign of waning. Many viewers of his two episodes have probably considered his claims of little significance, over-charged as they were with provocative half-truths, embellished by various disrespectful remarks and crass metaphors. If we delve deeper, however, we may extract some decent arguments worthy of intelligent debate. I will mention three.

First, there is nothing inherently wrong in subjecting religion to criticism. On-going self-evaluation and rational debate have been part and parcel of religion since the dawn of history. In Christianity, for instance, much of what Jesus did can be seen as a constructive critique of the religious practice of his time. Jesus wanted to rediscover what had become neglected or distorted. His scathing attack on all kinds of religious hypocrisy and pride is striking. And he wasn't the only one in history to do this. Religion needs constant purification. In a sense, the Enlightenment assault on religion in Western civilisation has had some beneficial effects. It has helped us recognise caricatures of God for what they were, and thus helped us get rid of them.

Religious education, if done properly, is precisely concerned with showing the human struggle in journeying towards the proper relation to the Divine. Dawkins is right in saying that there is a possibility of teaching wrong things to our children, and that this should cause concern. This possibility arises in all branches of knowledge. It doesn't follow, however, that we should close our schools to eliminate the possibility of teaching wrong things. Did anyone ever dream of stopping science teaching because some of our theories today may turn out to be mistaken tomorrow? What needs to be done in religious education, as in all other kinds of education, is to make sure children learn what is needed to grow in virtue and intelligence. For instance in Christian schools, the example of Jesus is essential for the fostering of an attitude of self-examination and continual conversion.

The second argument worth considering is the one on evidence. This is a major issue running right through Dawkins' reasoning. He thinks the scientific world-view is unshakeably justified, while the religious one isn't. The question of justification is as crucial in science as it is in religion. And we cannot naively reject religious claims just because they are justified mainly by testimony rather than experiment. The role of testimony within scientific practice is a growing area of research. Individual scientists cannot establish all the claims they need. There is an inevitable role for mutual trust both in science and religion.

What is really worrying in Dawkins' approach, however, is that he himself makes a very dubious use of evidence. He challenges various religious interviewees for evidence, but then neglects evidence for his own more eccentric claims. The very choice of interviewees undermines his whole approach. He disregards an elementary point of scientific method. For a good survey, observation needs a random

sample not a biased one. Dawkins never applies this fundamental principle here. He seems to have first decided what to prove and then chosen interviewees to confirm his hypothesis. He never bothers to consider contrary evidence, even though he recalls his former professor whom he commends for doing exactly that. Is it possible that Dawkins couldn't find individuals who represent a healthy view of religion? In Christianity, for instance, did he ever consider prominent people like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who spent her life helping the poorest of the poor precisely because of her deep religious faith? He did not. Did he ever think of the innumerable, unnoticed, under-estimated priests, nuns, and lay people who dedicate their entire lives to bringing health, hope, and joy to countless families in the most derelict shanty towns imaginable, precisely because they are driven by faith? He did not. Instead, he tried to convince television viewers that the few exceptions he interviewed justify a general claim: that religion is bad for society. One would expect better reasoning from a prominent scientist.

The final point I want to mention is faith. For Dawkins, faith is a 'process of non-thinking', similar to a virus caught at childhood and then passed on from generation to generation through education. Again and again he resorts to Darwin for support. One wonders, however, whether Darwin can offer the support he needs. A Darwinian explanation often starts off from the status quo. It deals, for instance, with why polar bears are white, or why rabbits have long ears. Now consider humans. Dawkins accepts that religious faith has been with us since the dawn of history, and that it's still going strong. Doesn't this show that we are dealing here precisely with something related to an essential trait of *Homo sapiens*? It seems reasonable to hold that, with the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, life on the planet reached a stage where a deep sense of questioning and self-consciousness became possible. This is characteristic of humans. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard spells it out: human beings don't only exist but are infinitely interested in existing. The human religious dimension therefore is not to be discarded or ridiculed, but managed properly.

Moreover, let's not be impressed with just one side of the story. Apart from Dawkins, there have been other scientists who expressed themselves on faith. For instance, Louis Pasteur, father of microbiology, was quite clear about the possible harmony between science and faith: 'The more I study nature, the more I stand amazed at the work of the Creator ... science brings men nearer to God.' Another scientist went even further. He insisted that scientists themselves need faith: 'science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion. To this there also belongs the faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith. The situation may be expressed by an image: science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.' This was published in 1941, written by Albert Einstein.

Dawkins doesn't seem to be rendering a service to science. I very much fear he's abusing it.