

The Root of All Evil?

Gerard J Hughes SJ

Professor Dawkins' latest diatribe against religion in general and Christianity in particular raises one or two serious issues, where there is certainly a case to answer – the attitude of the Catholic church to the use of condoms in connection with the AIDS crisis in Africa and elsewhere; the anti-scientific attitude of *some* right-wing American churches; the facility with which religion can be invoked to motivate violence and division.

None of these, however, is remotely sufficient to justify his general thesis, that religious belief in any form is irrational because it is hostile to the use of reason as exemplified in the sciences. First, Dawkins is remarkably vague about what exactly scientific rationality amounts to. He repeatedly emphasises the importance of 'evidence'; but he gives the impression that there is no problem at all about what is to count as evidence for some theory, nor that there is a process of assessing evidence which is vastly more complex than simply looking and seeing. One might think of the complexities of deciding whether the evidence in a trial justifies a conclusion beyond reasonable doubt. One could record all the statements of the witnesses, listen to the forensic scientists; and still have to assess what can reasonably be said. Or think of the debates among scientists about the possibility of producing a general theory of everything, which will integrate all our piecemeal theories in physics into one coherent whole. Must the universe have exactly eleven dimensions, then? So too in religion. Aquinas, for instance, insisted that to establish the existence of God one needs empirical evidence; but he was more alive than Dawkins seems to be to the issues involved in rationally assessing evidence. If one asks whether the starry heavens or the beauty of Earth constitute evidence that there is a God, and even if they do, how strongly such evidence might support the conclusion, one needs a much more sophisticated view of rational assessment than Dawkins showed any signs of appreciating.

His own use of evidence in the field of religion is, given his general insistence on its importance, remarkably cavalier. Thus, the pilgrims at Lourdes are described as 'desperate people', and this despite the totally non-fanatical balanced affability of the two women he interviewed; he does not apparently think he needs evidence for saying that Bernadette was 'impressionable'; or, if he has any, he does not tell us. Perhaps he simply assumes that

believers must be so. He likewise assumes, this time despite abundant evidence to the contrary, that all believers will either deny the theory of evolution altogether, or will have to assume that God constantly needs to interfere with creation, to lend a 'helping hand' (as Dawkins put it) to keep evolution going. The existence of God was asserted to be 'improbable', this time without even argument let alone evidence. Religion, Dawkins claims, requires believers to abandon reason in favour of a 'comforting faith'. Such breathtaking ignorance of, or wilful disregard for, the history of theology is explicable only if Dawkins himself has made his mind up about religion – any and all religion – in advance of any sympathetic attempt to understand a view before one claims to have refuted it. Yet such open-mindedness, Dawkins rightly insists, is the hallmark not just of the scientific but of the rational mind more generally. Only such prejudice explains his constant use of snide rhetoric instead of argument: do the pilgrims in Lourdes really 'wallow' in the stream rather than bathe?

Which is all a great pity. It would be to everyone's advantage if an atheist like Professor Dawkins were to deploy his considerable talents in an honest and rational debate with equally articulate and well-informed believers. If that were to lead to a discussion of the nature of human rationality in general, and the rationality of religion in particular, then we might be starting to get somewhere.

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