

## IT STARTED WITH GALILEO

*by Eduardo Rodrigues da Cruz*

As is well known, Galileo on 25 February 1616 was summoned by the Inquisition “to relinquish altogether the theory that the Sun is at the center of the world and at rest and that the Earth moves.” This injunction was used against Galileo in his 1633 trial, and it was instrumental to his condemnation.

Fateful decision! Galileo still maintained the metaphor of the two books: of Nature and of Revelation. The church emphasized the traditional teaching that the latter should have priority over the former. However, Galileo was eventually taken as one of the martyrs of the scientific revolution, and the book of Revelation gradually faded away from the main scene. Only one book remained, and that is the one of Nature, read by science and used by technology.

This swift move, which dates back to the *annus horribilis* of 1616, was neatly summarized by Bertold Brecht in the twentieth century. In his *Life of Galileo* he depicts a dialogue between a disciple called “The Little Monk” and Galileo himself. I cite two excerpts of it:

The Little Monk— . . . How could they [his parents] take it, were I to tell them that they are on a lump of stone ceaselessly spinning in an empty space, circling around a second-rate star? . . . They would feel cheated. “There is no eye watching over us, after all,” they would say. “We have to start out on our own, at our time of life. Nobody has planned a part for us beyond this wretched one on a worthless star. There is no meaning in our misery. Hunger is just not having eaten. It is no test of strength. Effort is just stooping and carrying. It is not a virtue.”

Galileo—Today the virtues of exhaustion are caused by the exhausted land. For that, my new water pumps could work more wonders than their ridiculous super-human efforts. Be fruitful and multiply: for war will cut down the population, and our fields are barren! (A pause) Shall I lie to your people? (Brecht 1994, 83–84)

The historical move is from an eccentric (ironically, with the Earth as its center), two-storied world to one single cosmos with us at the center—just

Eduardo Rodrigues da Cruz is Professor of Religious Studies at the Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo, R. Monte Alegre, 984, Sao Paulo, 05014 SP, Brazil; e-mail erodruz@pucsp.br.

[*Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 3 (September 2007)]

© 2007 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

one step from a full-blown naturalistic world. Indeed, Enlightenment thinkers indulged in versions of the-book-of-Nature-only, as this well-known piece of the Baron D'Holbach (some say by Diderot) may show:

Vainly dost thou, O superstitious being! Seek after thine happiness beyond the limits of the universe, in which my hand hath placed thee. . . .

. . . Dare, then, to enfranchise thyself from the trammels of superstition, my self-conceited, pragmatic rival, who mistakes my rights; renounce those empty theories, which are usurpers of my privileges; return under the dominion of my laws.

. . . Return, then, my child, to thy fostering mother's arms! Deserter, trace back thy wandering steps to nature! She will console thee for thine evils; she will drive from thine heart those appalling fears which overwhelm thee; those inquietudes that distract thee; those transports which agitate thee; those hatreds that separate thee from thy fellow man, whom thou shouldst love as thyself. Return to nature, to humanity, to thyself! (Thiry 2004, 267–68)

Full consequences of what had happened in 1616 came 390 years later. Indeed, 2006 may be regarded as another *annus horribilis* for the science-religion dialogue, for three major candidates for bestsellers were published: Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006), Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006). The latter is certainly the best representative of the atheist crusade sparked by these books, written by a self-appointed enlightener of humanity. *The God Delusion*, as expected, has provoked a large number of reviews, defenses, and contests. Apologetic stances are needed, and in this case the number of valid criticisms is large: Dawkins included so many straw men that he became an easy target for his enemies.

This is not my concern here, however. My point is that Dawkins is right. Most of his assertions are commonsensical, at least at the level of a skeptical elite, composed of religious and nonreligious people alike, so reasonable that these assertions are known since antiquity. Deep inside, ingrained in them, all religious people of a skeptical bent—and there are many—have the same questions Dawkins has raised.

Take my case. Since I was old enough to ask “Why?” questions, I started to inquire of priests about religious assertions that violate good reasoning. Examples are many, but one of them, well known to people associated with the science-and-religion dialogue, is the wanderings of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. After all, the garden is “just a symbol” or “simply reality,” and if there is no alternative to this reality, what is it, after all? If we assume that Adam and Eve—whatever their existence may mean—are responsible for a fall from a flawless biological life, how is that Jesus Christ, God himself, has not restored us to this paradisiacal stage? So many questions from history, geography, and later on, from evolutionary theory!

Indeed, Dawkins's questions are everyone's but the most credulous and lurk behind every slip of faith. Whoever reads his book without being deeply moved by it has not understood its implications.

Even if we accept that every one of Dawkins's assertions is true, still everything remains to be said. No amount of scientific information can settle the question of whether symbols point solely to our inner self or also to a reality "out there." Let us take a cue from Dawkins himself. Toward the end of the book he says "'Reality' isn't a word we should use with simple confidence" (Dawkins 2006, 371; citation is taken out of context on purpose). Indeed, in these times of dark energy and dark matter, reality is not what it's supposed to be. He ends the book by citing once again J. B. S. Haldane's "queerer than we can suppose" (2006, 374). Well, we may turn the argument on its head. For most of us, reality is much more than what scientific description can offer to us (in a way, he agrees with this common idea; after throwing so much evidence in our faces, he acknowledges that science can offer only models of reality [p. 371]), so we do not worry much about this kind of scientific reductionism.

Let this argument offer no solace to us. The year 2006 was to a certain extent a watershed for the science-and-religion field, as 1616 was. As is common in the history of thought, old issues have to be raised anew. I think that we should go back to Galileo's concern: to uphold the two-books metaphor without conflating one with the other. Two suggestions: first, that we draw analogies between the "unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics" (Wigner 1960) for physics and the coherence of what is offered to us by Revelation and the depiction of reality by the sciences. Mathematicians usually come down somewhere between a Platonic interpretation of the mathematical world and a constructivist one, and the demand for physical reality is always present. Is there something analogous for Revelation? A second suggestion is linked to Dennett's and Dawkins's insistence on "reverse engineering" as the way to explain the complex out of very simple units. If we go back in the history of religions, can we extract apparently absurd doctrines out of very simple "religious units"? History of Religions and evolutionary approaches do that, but are there any other ways that may cohere with scientific findings? Has theology any part on it?

In sum, Dawkins and others are correct that religion is, in an important sense, eccentric and even absurd, contrary to rational common sense. Tertullian's metaphor of Jerusalem and Athens points to that. On the other hand, it is reasonable and has been entertained as such by sophisticated scholars throughout the centuries. After all, if religion contributes to humanness and speaks of the supreme rational being, it should be reasonable! In that case, its despisers are wrong. It is our responsibility as scholars to engage in such issues and offer good models of reality to our fellow human beings.

## REFERENCES

- Brecht, Bertold. 1994. *Galileo*. Trans. Charles Laughton. Intro. by Eric Bentley. New York: Grove.
- Dawkins, Richard. 2006. *The God Delusion*. Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dennett, Daniel. 2006. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking/Penguin.
- Harris, Sam. 2006. *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New York: Knopf.
- Thiry, Paul H., Baron D'Holbach (under the pseudonym M. de Mirabaud). 2004. *The System of Nature*. Vol. 2, *A Summary of the Code of Nature*, tr. Samuel Wilkinson. Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger.
- Wigner, Eugene. 1960. "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics." *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics* 13, No. 1:1–14.