WHY THE NEW ATHEISM SHOULDN'T BE (COMPLETELY) DISMISSED

by Gregory R. Peterson

Daniel Dennett begins his book *Breaking the Spell* (2006) by comparing religion to a lancet fluke, a small parasite that enters the brain of ants, causing them to climb to the top of stalks of grass so that they may be eaten by cows or sheep. While this does not end so well for the ant, it works out great for the lancet fluke, which is able to complete its reproductive cycle in the mammal's gut and then spread its progeny with the expelled feces. Perhaps, Dennett suggests, the human mind is enslaved by ideas in a similar manner, and goes on to remind us (in case we didn't get the connection) that *islam* in translation means submission.

The "New Atheism," as the movement behind the recent wave of books attacking religion has come to be called, is many things, but subtle is not one of them. To read the recent works on the evils of religion by Dennett, Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*, 2004), and Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006) is to expose oneself to heavy doses of hyperbole, sarcasm, and outrage, sometimes all in the same paragraph. The books have sold well enough to be on best-seller lists, and the authors have achieved, at least briefly, intellectual celebrity status. These works are intentionally divisive, and the reviews have ranged from the laudatory to the scathing, depending in no small part on the reviewers' sympathies with the take-no-prisoners approach of these works.

For most religion-and-science scholars, the likely action will be to read the reviews, perhaps listen to an interview or two on public radio, and then go on with one's life and research, secure in the knowledge that much of what these books contain is not sophisticated enough to bother with. I would suggest, however, that to completely dismiss these works would be a mistake. It is a remarkable fact that books promoting atheism and attacking religion, typically in the name of science and reason, are now regularly

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making best-sellers' lists, and this should be of no small interest, at the very least, to those of us interested in the history and social dynamics of religion and science. Clearly these works have tapped into a vein of public discontent with religious fundamentalism in the wake of horrific terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe as well as nearly a decade of dominance of American politics by a Republican party under the sway of the religious right. But more than this, these books have something to say, and while much can be dismissed, there are at least three themes that are worth paying attention to, partly because they likely reveal continuing public perceptions of religion and science and partly because they reveal areas where further quality scholarship is needed.

One need not go far into these works to discover that the theme of religious violence often plays a prominent role. This is most obvious in Harris, who spends a chapter each on Christianity and Islam to explain why they are so horrible, but it is very much present in Dawkins and to some extent in Dennett as well. Although the topic is a canard of antireligious rhetoric going back to the Enlightenment, it also is of considerable contemporary practical importance as the world faces threats of religiously motivated conflict, and it has been the subject of more sober analysis (for example, Stern 2004). The question is, does religion-and-science scholarship have anything to contribute here? Assuming there is such a thing as religiously motivated violence that is different in kind from other forms of violence, it is plausible that any satisfactory analysis will require both an understanding of the relevant sciences of human nature and well-informed religious and theological scholarship. Why, after all, do young, well-educated Saudi men seem particularly prone to messages of religiously motivated violence? How much of this phenomenon has to do with the particulars of religious traditions, or is the role of religion simply blinding us to other, biologically more basic drives? Potentially, religion-and-science scholars seem well poised to take up these questions.

To the extent that the new atheists do try to explain religious violence and religion in general in terms more sophisticated than human gullibility and irrationality, the primary appeal is to evolutionary and cognitive scientific theories. Both Dawkins and Dennett devote significant attention to this task, and although their own proposals do not seem especially promising (Dawkins chalks it up to an evolutionary predisposition for children to be credulous, while Dennett hypothesizes that religious devotion is the result of a co-opting of the brain systems involved in romantic and sexual commitment), they also are surprisingly cautious with respect to the theories of scholars such as David Sloan Wilson and Pascal Boyer, both of whom have more prominently attempted to explain religion in scientific terms. Clearly, Dawkins and Dennett concur, these scholars are on the right track, even if their particular theories may not pan out.

Except for those directly involved in such research, religion-and-science scholars have been largely silent on the rapidly growing field of cognitive science of religion, which has gained some prominence in recent years. There have been a few critiques (Haught 2003; Barrett 2007), but these have not, to date, been well developed. This is surprising, since the cognitive science of religion is a field that is in much need of critique, devoted as it typically is to a reductionistic account of religion that leaves little room for taking religious truth claims seriously. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to completely dismiss cognitive science of religion and related fields, not only because some of the empirical research that the field draws on is intriguing but also because the primary question they are attempting to address—why there is religion at all—is of considerable importance and interest. Despite their many faults, I would suggest that Dawkins and Dennett are right that there is a scientific side to the story, even though their intuitions on the completeness of that story are misguided.

A final point regards the relationship between religion and morality, which comes up in all three works. Because atheism often is equated in the public mind with immorality, the new atheists are eager to argue that not only can one be an atheist and be moral but that a morality based on atheism is superior to one based on theistic religion. There is some appeal to science and a good deal of not very sophisticated moral analysis in these arguments, but I would suggest that the questions asked are appropriate and in need of more enlightenment that we currently have. Here, my concern is not the superiority claim but exploring more fully how naturalistic and religious frameworks of morality result in different ethical commitments given their respective worldviews, for it seems likely that they would be different, but necessarily in the ways that are often cited even in the philosophical literature. Here, the sciences have potentially much to contribute, not only in the well-established work on the evolution of altruism but also in more recent fields such as neuroeconomics.

A final thought: Reading the new atheist literature sometimes gives the impression of reading religion-and-science scholarship through a fun house mirror. Many of the topics are the same, but the conclusions are inverted and the rhetoric is admittedly ramped up beyond the scale of what is academically appropriate. It also is clear that as the field of religion-and-science is now a well-formed community of scholars, the new atheists, perhaps for the first time, see themselves in a similar light. And, surprisingly, the new atheists are reading at least some of the religion-and-science scholarship, with Dawkins in particular giving at least some space to the likes of John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke. Let us hope they continue to do so and that confrontation and posturing can give way to more fruitful dialogue.

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