

Debating Religion

On Debating Religion The "know-nothings", the "know-alls", and the "no-contests" Dec/94

A lecture by Richard Dawkins)

Richard Dawkins, well-known for his books on evolution, took part in a debate with the Archbishop of York, Dr John Habgood, on the existence of God at the Edinburgh science festival last Easter. [Easter '92 ed.] The science correspondent of The Observer reported that the "withering" Richard Dawkins clearly believed the "God should be spoken of in the same way as Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy". He [the correspondent] overheard a gloomy cleric comment on the debate: "That was easy to sum up. Lions 10, Christians nil".

Religious people split into three main groups when faced with science. I shall label them the "know-nothings", the "know-alls", and the "no-contests". I suspect that Dr John Habgood, the Archbishop of York, probably belongs to the third of these groups, so I shall begin with them.

The "no-contests" are rightly reconciled to the fact that religion cannot compete with science on its own ground. They think there is no contest between science and religion, because they are simply about different things. the biblical account of the origin of the universe (the origin of life, the diversity of species, the origin of man) -- all those things are now known to be untrue.

The "no-contests" have no trouble with this: they regard it as naive in the extreme, almost bad taste to ask of a biblical story, is it true? True, they say, true? Of course it isn't true in any crude literal sense. Science and religion are not competing for the same territory. They are about different things. They are equally true, but in their different ways.

A favourite and thoroughly meaningless phrase is "religious dimension". You meet this in statements such as "science is all very well as far as it goes, but it leaves out the religious dimension".

The "know-nothings", or fundamentalists, are in one way more honest. They are true to history. They recognize that until recently one of religion's main functions was scientific: the explanation of existence, of the universe, of life. Historically, most religions have had or even been a cosmology and a biology. I suspect that today if you asked people to justify their belief in God, the dominant reason would be scientific. Most people, I believe, think that you need a God to explain the existence of the world, and especially the existence of life. They are wrong, but our education system is such that many people don't know it.

They are also true to history because you can't escape the scientific

implications of religion. A universe with a God would look quite different from a universe without one. A physics, a biology where there is a God is bound to look different. So the most basic claims of religion are scientific. Religion is a scientific theory.

I am sometimes accused of arrogant intolerance in my treatment of creationists. Of course arrogance is an unpleasant characteristic, and I should hate to be thought arrogant in a general way. But there are limits! To get some idea of what it is like being a professional student of evolution, asked to have a serious debate with creationists, the following comparison is a fair one. Imagine yourself a classical scholar who has spent a lifetime studying Roman history in all its rich detail. Now somebody comes along, with a degree in marine engineering or mediaeval musicology, and tries to argue that the Romans never existed. Wouldn't you find it hard to suppress your impatience? And mightn't it look a bit like arrogance?

My third group, the "know-all" (I unkindly name them that because I find their position patronising), think religion is good for people, perhaps good for society. Perhaps good because it consoles them in death or bereavement, perhaps because it provides a moral code.

Whether or not the actual beliefs of the religion are true doesn't matter. Maybe there isn't a God; we educated people know there is precious little evidence for one, let alone for ideas such as the Virgin birth or the Resurrection. But the uneducated masses need a God to keep them out of mischief or to comfort them in bereavement. The little matter of God's probably non-existence can be brushed to one side in the interest of greater social good. I need say no more about the "know-all" because they wouldn't claim to have anything to contribute to scientific truth. Is God a Superstring?

I shall now return to the "no-contests". The argument they mount is certainly worth serious examination, but I think that we shall find it has little more merit than those of the other groups.

God is not an old man with a white beard in the sky. Right then, what is God? And now come the weasel words. These are very variable. "God is not out there, he is in all of us." "God is the ground of all being." "God is the essence of life." "God is the universe." "Don't you believe in the universe?" "Of course I believe in the universe." "Then you believe in God." "God is love, don't you believe in love?" "Right, then you believe in God?"

Modern physicists sometimes wax a bit mystical when they contemplate questions such as why the big bang happened when it did, why the laws of physics are these laws and not those laws, why the universe exists at all, and so on. Sometimes physicists may resort to saying that there is an inner core of mystery that we don't understand, and perhaps never can; and they may then say that perhaps this inner core of mystery is another name for God. Or in Stephen Hawking's words, if we understand these things, we shall perhaps "know the mind of God."

The trouble is that God in this sophisticated, physicist's sense bears no resemblance to the God of the Bible or any other religion. If a physicist says God is another name for Planck's constant, or God is a superstring, we should take it as a picturesque metaphorical way of saying that the nature of superstrings or the value of Planck's constant is a profound mystery. It has obviously not the smallest connection with a being capable of forgiving sins, a being who might listen to prayers, who cares about whether or not the Sabbath begins at 5pm or 6pm, whether you wear a veil or have a bit of arm showing; and no connection whatever with a being

capable of imposing a death penalty on His son to expiate the sins of the world before and after he was born.

The Fabulous Bible

The same is true of attempts to identify the big bang of modern cosmology with the myth of Genesis. There is only an utterly trivial resemblance between the sophisticated conceptions of modern physics, and the creation myths of the Babylonians and the Jews that we have inherited.

What do the "no-contests" say about those parts of scripture and religious teaching that once-upon-a-time would have been unquestioned religious and scientific truths; the creation of the world the creation of life, the various miracles of the Old and New Testaments,, survival after death, the Virgin Birth? These stories have become, in the hands of the "no-contests", little more than moral fables, the equivalent of Aesop of Hans Anderson. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is irritating that they almost never admit this is what they are doing.

For instance, I recently heard the previous Chief Rabbi, Sir Immanuel Jacobovits, talking about the evils of racism. Racism is evil, and it deserves a better argument against it than the one he gave. Adam and Eve, he argued, were the ancestors of all human kind. Therefore, all human kind belongs to one race, the human race.

What are we going to make of an argument like that? The Chief Rabbi is an educated man, he obviously doesn't believe in Adam and Eve, so what exactly did he think he was saying?

He must have been using Adam and Eve as a fable, just as one might use the story of Jack the Giantkiller or Cinderella to illustrate some laudable moral homily.

I have the impression that clergymen are so used to treating the biblical stories as fables that they have forgotten the difference between fact and fiction. It's like the people who, when somebody dies on The Archers, write letters of condolence to the others.

Inheriting Religion

As a Darwinian, something strikes me when I look at religion. Religion shows a pattern of heredity which I think is similar to genetic heredity. The vast majority of people have an allegiance to one particular religion. there are hundreds of different religious sects, and every religious person is loyal to just one of those.

Out of all of the sects in the world, we notice an uncanny coincidence: the overwhelming majority just happen to choose the one that their parents belong to. Not the sect that has the best evidence in its favour, the best miracles, the best moral code, the best cathedral, the best stained glass, the best music: when it comes to choosing from the smorgasbord of available religions, their potential virtues seem to count for nothing, compared to the matter of heredity.

This is an unmistakable fact; nobody could seriously deny it. Yet people with full knowledge of the arbitrary nature of this heredity, somehow manage to go on believing in their religion, often with such fanaticism that they are prepared to murder people who follow a different one. Truths about the cosmos are true all around the universe. They don't differ in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Poland, or Norway. Yet, we are apparently prepared to accept that the religion we adopt is a matter of an accident of geography.

If you ask people why they are convinced of the truth of their religion, they don't appeal to heredity. Put like that it sounds too obviously stupid. Nor do they appeal to evidence. There isn't any, and nowadays the better educated admit it. No, they appeal to faith. Faith is the great

cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence. The worst thing is that the rest of us are supposed to respect it: to treat it with kid gloves.

If a slaughterman doesn't comply with the law in respect of cruelty to animals, he is rightly prosecuted and punished. but if he complains that his cruel practices are necessitated by religious faith, we back off apologetically and allow him to get on with it. Any other position that someone takes up can expect to be defended with reasoned argument. Faith is allowed not to justify itself by argument. Faith must be respected; and if you don't respect it, you are accused of violating human rights.

Even those with no faith have been brainwashed into respecting the faith of others. When so-called Muslim community leaders go on the radio and advocate the killing of Salman Rushdie, they are clearly committing incitement to murder--a crime for which they would ordinarily be prosecuted and possibly imprisoned. But are they arrested? They are not, because our secular society "respects" their faith, and sympathises with the deep "hurt" and "insult" to it.

Well I don't. I will respect your views if you can justify them. but if you justify your views only by saying you have faith in them, I shall not respect them.

Improbabilities

I want to end by returning to science. It is often said, mainly by the "no-contests", that although there is no positive evidence for the existence of God, nor is there evidence against his existence. So it is best to keep an open mind and be agnostic.

At first sight that seems an unassailable position, at least in the weak sense of Pascal's wager. But on second thoughts it seems a cop-out, because the same could be said of Father Christmas and tooth fairies. There may be fairies at the bottom of the garden. There is no evidence for it, but you can't prove that there aren't any, so shouldn't we be agnostic with respect to fairies?

The trouble with the agnostic argument is that it can be applied to anything. There is an infinite number of hypothetical beliefs we could hold which we can't positively disprove. On the whole, people don't believe in most of them, such as fairies, unicorns, dragons, Father Christmas, and so on. But on the whole they do believe in a creator God, together with whatever particular baggage goes with the religion of their parents.

I suspect the reason is that most people, though not belonging to the "know-nothing" party, nevertheless have a residue of feeling that Darwinian evolution isn't quite big enough to explain everything about life. All I can say as a biologist is that the feeling disappears progressively the more you read about and study what is known about life and evolution.

I want to add one thing more. The more you understand the significance of evolution, the more you are pushed away from the agnostic position and towards atheism. Complex, statistically improbable things are by their nature more difficult to explain than simple, statistically probable things.

The great beauty of Darwin's theory of evolution is that it explains how complex, difficult to understand things could have arisen step by plausible step, from simple, easy to understand beginnings. We start our explanation from almost infinitely simple beginnings: pure hydrogen and a huge amount of energy. Our scientific, Darwinian explanations carry us

through a series of well-understood gradual steps to all the spectacular beauty and complexity of life.

The alternative hypothesis, that it was all started by a supernatural creator, is not only superfluous, it is also highly improbable. It falls foul of the very argument that was originally put forward in its favour. This is because any God worthy of the name must have been a being of colossal intelligence, a supermind, an entity of extremely low probability--a very improbable being indeed.

Even if the postulation of such an entity explained anything (and we don't need it to), it still wouldn't help because it raises a bigger mystery than it solves.

Science offers us an explanation of how complexity (the difficult) arose out of simplicity (the easy). The hypothesis of God offers no worthwhile explanation for anything, for it simply postulates what we are trying to explain. It postulates the difficult to explain, and leaves it at that. We cannot prove that there is no God, but we can safely conclude the He is very, very improbable indeed.

This was a lecture by Richard Dawkins extracted from The Nullifidian (Dec 94)

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