



Richard Norman

Holy Communion

New wave atheism is aggressively antagonistic to religion. But, argues Richard Norman, it's more fruitful to find common ground.

It's not been a good year for God. Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great* have been riding high in the international bestseller lists, while in the US Sam Harris has addressed his *Letter to a Christian Nation* and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* has explored the question of how to explain the irrationality of religious belief. Michel Onfray's *In Defence of Atheism* has added a distinctively French tone to the assault, and AC Grayling's latest collection of elegant English essays is *Against All Gods*. It's not surprising that cultural commentators have identified a cultural wave, and given it a label: "The New Atheism".

Then there has been the rush of responses. Alastair McGrath's *The Dawkins Delusion* and John Cornwell's *Darwin's Angel* have replied to Dawkins in particular, and John Humphrys has followed up his radio interviews of religious leaders with a book, *In God We Doubt*, which is subtitled *Confessions of a Failed Atheist* (he can't bring himself to accept religious belief but he thinks it would be nice to be able to do so).

My intention here is to stand back a little from this parade of views and counterviews and ask about its implications for the humanist movement. What can we, as humanists in Britain now, learn from the debate around the New Atheism?

We should begin by recognising that the "New Atheism" is not really new. Its distinctive themes — religion as the enemy of science, of progress and of an enlightened morality — are in a direct line of descent from the eighteenth-century enlightenment and nineteenth-century rationalism. The "new" movement is better seen as a revival, a reassertion of the values of rational thought and vigorous argument. It has struck people as new because it has given new life to old disagreements and debates and done so with great panache and style. But we need to beware of fighting old battles in a world which has moved on.

What kick-started the New Atheism was, of course, the attack on the Twin Towers. That event, and subsequent acts of Islamist-inspired terrorism, reminded the world of the terrible deeds that can be performed in the name of religious fanaticism, especially if it is reinforced by dreams of immediate rewards in paradise. How to combat Islamist fanaticism is obviously a pressing question. At the same time, it would be foolish to let our attitudes to all

religions and all religious believers be coloured by a small set of specific outrages.

A second development which no doubt reinforced the New Atheism was the resurgence of creationism, on a small scale in the UK and on a scarily large scale in the US. In the States it's linked with the religious right and the malign influence of Christian fundamentalists on politics and government. Unsurprisingly, it's in the US that the New Atheism seems to be taking shape as a cultural movement, not just a publishing success. Dawkins has launched the "Out" campaign, encouraging American atheists to "come out". The success of these developments is sufficient evidence that they respond to a real need, and they reflect the extent to which American atheists have felt beleaguered. In some parts of the US it takes courage to come out as an atheist. But let's be honest — in Britain today, for most of us, it's a doddle.

This points to the danger of over-generalising about religion and about religious believers. By far the commonest criticism directed against the New Atheists is that they do over-generalise, and I think that the criticism is justified. To avoid being guilty of the same mistake myself, I'll focus only on the two bestsellers, Dawkins and Hitchens, because their books have done most to generate the larger movement. They are quite explicit in their desire to generalise about religion. Dawkins says: "I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called 'extremist' faith. The teachings of 'moderate' religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism."

And Hitchens is even more frank: his subtitle is "religion poisons everything". That really is too simple. In the "religion" that Dawkins and Hitchens relentlessly attack I simply do not recognise the many good, sensitive, intelligent and sometimes wonderful religious people I know.

Of course the generalisations are not just crude prejudices, they are considered and they are defended, and we should examine the reasons Dawkins and Hitchens give. For Dawkins the problem is that all religious believers are committed to faith rather than reason. He is rightly appalled by the resurgence of creationism, by the fact that many people still reject neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory because it is incompatible with a literal reading of the first chapter of Genesis. He knows perfectly well that the vast majority of Christians and other religious believers in Britain (though, worryingly, not in the US) are not creationists, but he thinks that, just by accepting the idea of "faith", they have sold out. He says: "Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of young minds. Non-fundamentalist, 'sensible' religion may not be doing that, but it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children [...] that unquestioning faith is a virtue."

So for him the difference between the so-called moderate, sensible religious believers and the fundamentalists is a minor one. He thinks that the real divide is between science and religion, because science is based on reason and religion is a matter of faith. In other words it's religion as such that is the problem.

Is that right? We need to be aware of the ambiguities of the word "faith". In some cases faith is no more or less than a set of overarching beliefs with which people make sense of the world. All religions are faiths in the first sense, and so is humanism, though most of us would prefer not to use the word because of its other connotations. There's no necessary opposition between faith in this

sense and reason.

But faith can also refer to our readiness to accept beliefs on grounds which are not conclusive. This covers a range of cases, from a hunch which you think will be confirmed, to a well-founded expectation based on past experience. A creationist website links to a video clip of Dawkins saying that he has "faith" that fossils will be found to fill gaps in the fossil record. He didn't mean faith in the creationists' sense of believing it without evidence, but it's a perfectly legitimate sense of the word — a belief backed by previous experience, for which further confirmation is sought. And though it's not the creationists' sense of the word, there are plenty of religious believers who would say that they have faith in this sense. They can't prove that there's a god, so their commitment goes beyond the evidence, but it's not unsupported.

Faith is also a way of describing a commitment to a belief which has no rational basis. Are there religious believers with this sort of unmediated belief? Yes, I'm sure there are, though I suspect that they often play on the ambiguity between that version of faith and the more everyday manner in which we say that we have faith in a person, that we trust them. I'm thinking of the evangelical Christians who say things like "How can I doubt God, since he has saved me, I have this special relationship with him and I trust him with everything in my life." But the general point is that faith means different things for different religious believers, and from the fact that they claim to have faith you can't infer that they are all irrationalists who believe things on "blind faith" without any evidence and have therefore sold the pass to the creationists.

Take the case of the many people who both hold a religious belief and accept evolutionary theory. They value scientific method, they accept the scientific evidence, and they say that the origin of species through natural selection just is the process by which God has created all living things. The question they then have to answer is: if we've got the scientific account, why do we also need a belief in divine creation? They would probably say something like this: the theory of evolution explains how living things have come into existence, but it doesn't explain why there existed, in the first place, a universe suited to lead to the evolution of life. Many Christians these days are keen on the so-called "fine-tuning argument": that if the basic physical constants had been just slightly different, the Big Bang would not have led to the emergence of galaxies and suns and planets, including at least one planet with the right conditions for the evolution of life. The initial conditions had to be "just right", and God is the best explanation of why they were.

Dawkins has an excellent reply to this argument. He argues that whatever the explanation of the initial conditions may be, God is not a good explanation, because the existence of a hugely powerful intelligence who knew all the physical constants and scientific laws is even more difficult to explain than the things it is supposed to account for. The essential point is one about "simplicity". Philosophers like Richard Swinburne argue that the best explanation is the most economical one, and explaining the universe by divine intention is the preferred explanation because it is the simplest. Dawkins rightly points out that this is a confusion. The explanation in terms of a divine creator may be simply stated, but the entity which is supposed to do the explaining is a highly complex entity, not a "simple" one. I agree with Dawkins. The argument fails. But it is still an argument. As so often, deciding whether an argument succeeds is a matter of judgement — of faith, if you like, in the second sense. But a mistaken argument is still an argument, still an appeal to reason and evidence. For a great many religious believers, belief in a

god is like that — faith, but not "blind faith".

Dawkins also thinks that it is blind faith that leads to crazy acts of religious fanaticism. "Even mild and moderate religion," he says, "helps to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes." He's thinking, obviously, of suicide bombers and Islamist terrorists, not to mention Christian extremists who murder abortionists, Hindus who slaughter Muslims, and all the rest of the fanatics. It was the killing of 3,000 people in the World Trade Centre that was the initial spur for the New Atheism, and for Dawkins it demonstrated that it is not extremism, but religion as such, that is the problem.

That's also Hitchens's view, and I turn to him now. His reason for generalising about all religion, for claiming that religion poisons everything, is primarily an appeal to the historical record. He has no difficulty compiling an appalling catalogue of all the terrible things done in the name of religion. The Old Testament is full of justifications for massacre and slavery. The Koran contains incitements to intolerance and the spreading of Islam by force. In the modern world, in the name of religion, rival groups have been slaughtering one another in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere. People's lives are blighted by repressive religious views and practices concerning abortion, contraception, masturbation and genital mutilation. And the length of the list demonstrates, for Hitchens, that religion poisons everything.

But it's a selective list, and it's not enough to justify the generalisation, since it invites the response: "What about all the good things done in the name of religion? What about all the religious believers who have stood up against political repression, who have worked for peace and tolerance, who have campaigned for justice and against slavery and poverty, and have devoted themselves to improving the lot of their fellow human beings?" Hitchens's answer is that if people do these things, it's not really their religion that motivates them — "this is a compliment to humanism, not to religion". The classic example is Martin Luther King, whom Hitchens rightly admires. King was a committed Christian who used the language of the Old Testament, the language of the "promised land", to inspire the Civil Rights movement. Hitchens says that this is mere metaphor. Although King uses the image of Moses leading his people out of Egypt, there is nothing equivalent to Moses's exhortation to massacre the other tribes in the land which God had promised to the people of Israel. King preached non-violence, and did not advocate revenge against white racists. Therefore, Hitchens infers, he was not a real Christian: "When Dr King took a stand [...] he did so as a profound humanist and nobody could ever use his name to justify oppression or cruelty [...] his legacy has very little to do with his professed theology. [...] In no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he a Christian."

The circularity in Hitchens's argument is obvious. Religion poisons everything. What about the good things done in the name of religion? If they're really good, that just shows that they're not really religious. The same circular argument appears in Hitchens's discussion of the atrocities generated by secular creeds. He says of totalitarian societies that because their leaders are regarded as infallible, such states are theocracies and therefore essentially religious. So the counter-examples simply confirm, for Hitchens, that it's religion that poisons everything.

Hitchens's appeal to the historical record is what I call the "headcount" argument — "Your lot have killed more people than our lot." It gets us

nowhere. The fact is that human beings are capable of doing terrible things and they are capable of doing wonderful things. This is true of religious believers, it's true of atheists, and it shouldn't surprise us. Religion — here I agree with another of Hitchens's persistent themes — is a human creation. It is, I suggest, a mirror which humanity holds up to itself and in which it sees itself reflected. Human beings attribute to their gods all their own human qualities — cruelty, revenge and hatred, but also love and compassion and mercy. That's why you can find a justification for anything, good or bad, in religion.

For Dawkins and for Hitchens that is part of the problem. Religious believers cannot avoid cherry-picking. They select from their sacred texts whatever fits their prior agenda. The homophobes pick out the texts from Leviticus or the Koran which order the killing of gays; their opponents say that this is incompatible with the idea of a god of compassion and tolerance. The warmongers and jihadists pick out the injunctions to slaughter; the peacemakers appeal to the contrary texts. Religions are deeply contradictory, and the application of them will always be selective.

But that is precisely why we should not lump all religious believers together. Humanism is more than atheism, it is about putting humanist beliefs and values into practice and trying to make the world a better place. And that is impossible unless we're prepared to cooperate with others who share those values, including those for whom the values are inseparable from a religious commitment.

It goes deeper than that. For many humanists, religious believers are also friends, lovers, colleagues, neighbours, spouses and partners. The attitude that religion poisons everything is unlikely to be an auspicious basis for such relationships. We really do need something a bit more nuanced.

And this brings me to my practical conclusion. If we are serious about our humanist values, we should look for all those who share them, and work with them. If, according to Hitchens, that means that such people are really humanists after all, then call them that if you wish, but accept that they may also be committed Christians or Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or whatever. The labels don't matter. If Christians are happy to defend science against the idiocies of creationism, let's work with them. When the news broke that state schools in this country were teaching creationism as science, Dawkins and Richard Harries, then Bishop of Oxford, issued a joint statement of criticism. Dawkins has been accused of inconsistency in doing so but it doesn't matter, it was the right thing to do and it was highly effective. After the most recent attempted suicide bombings in Britain, national newspapers carried a full-page advertisement by Muslim organisations condemning the bombings and dissociating themselves from them. What are we supposed to say? "You're just as bad"? That would be madness. They need our encouragement, and we need their help.

We have problems enough in the world. The threats of climate change, global poverty, war and repression and intolerance can never be countered unless we are prepared to work together on the basis of a shared humanity. Simplistic generalisations about religion don't help. In Dawkins's terminology, that means working with the "moderates" to counter the "extremists", but it's actually more complicated than that. Some of our allies against creationism may be deeply prejudiced against gays. Some of the best people working to combat global poverty may be Catholic anti-abortionists. Some of the Muslim allies we need to counter Islamist violence may have deeply sexist attitudes to

women. It all demonstrates what a deeply contradictory phenomenon religion is. But we know that. And if religion is so contradictory, that's probably because human beings are a deeply contradictory species.

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