

A CLASH OF FUNDAMENTALISMS

Denis Alexander

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Anyone who is familiar with the rather extensive academic literature on propaganda will immediately have recognised the genre had they watched either of the Channel 4 programmes by Prof. Richard Dawkins entitled '*The Root of All Evil?*' (Jan 9 and Jan 16). The time-honoured strategy in propaganda when attacking the 'opposing side' is to paint them in the blackest possible light, using the most gruesome examples, and then to make stark contrasts with one's own side which is, of course, full of truth, light and reason. The strategy is used repeatedly in politics, extensively whenever countries go to war, but rarely in the propaganda involved in advertising, which is of course far more sophisticated. In his case Dawkins chose to go for the old-fashioned 'black and white' style of adversarial engagement.

An important aspect of propaganda is that the examples chosen to demonise the 'enemy' must be, to a large degree, real examples. This is where the recent government propaganda exercise seeking to justify the invasion of Iraq, for example, came unstuck, because the 'weapons of mass destruction' did not in fact exist. Dawkins is on safe ground here because the vast majority of the world's population possess some kind of religious belief, so statistically the chances are very high that some of those beliefs will be bizarre, extreme and in some cases downright dangerous. So it is then a very simple exercise to travel around interviewing a subset of those cases, in the spirit of the old Ruby Wax show, and reveal their absurdities.

This provides the first of several ways in which, in this series, the Professor of the Public Understanding of Science from Oxford failed to convey how scientists normally go about their business. In science it is important to obtain a random sample in order to obtain some idea of variation within a sample, in contrast to propaganda exercises in which the 'answer' is already known before the data gathering process even begins. For example, Dawkins picked on a single faith school in order to highlight the fact that the teaching of evolution was inadequate in this particular school (although this was implied by an interview with its headmaster, not demonstrated by data from its curriculum), but conveniently forgot to mention that evolution is taught effectively and with conviction in the biology classes of thousands of church schools around the UK. There was the Jewish Rabbi from London ("surprising that he has such a strong accent despite living here for such a long time", says Dawkins) whose tiny orthodox school is opposed to evolution – with no mention of the fact that Jewish scientists are currently world leaders in research into evolutionary mechanisms, or that the vast majority of Jewish schools happily teach evolution. A more informative approach might have been to compare the small percentage of religious schools in which evolution may not be taught properly with the vast majority of religious schools in which that teaching is adequate: why the exceptions?

Extrapolating from limited data points to propose a general scientific conclusion is a common error in the life of any PhD student during their very first week in the lab, but not the kind of simple mistake that one would expect from an established scientist. Yet this series was full of such extrapolations. Dawkins finds some religious extremist from the heart of old Jerusalem or from the depths of rural Texas who are anti-scientific in their attitudes or, worse, committed to the use of force in order to defend their religious beliefs and, hey-presto, ergo “all religion is anti-science”, “all religion supports violence” etc. Do such exemplars exist? Of course they do, but to build general conclusions based on such limited data is a bit like a lazy evolutionary biologist finding a few mutant finches with abnormally long beak-length in a population on day one of a field-outing, and then returning home to claim that all finches of this species display the same properties.

This raises an obvious question: why didn't Dawkins choose to interview people more representative of their 'species'? There is something very uncomfortable in watching an academic making fun of people who do not share the privileges of his own particular educational background. Or, as parents tend to say more prosaically to their offspring on their first day at a new school: “If you want a fight, make sure you pick someone of your own size”. The only person whom Dawkins interviewed who remotely fitted this good advice was the Bishop of Oxford, but Dawkins decided that since he seemed so rational and sensible, he must definitely be an atypical member of the religious species, and the good Bishop's voice was faded into the background to allow space for Dawkins' voice-over, leaving the Bishop to mouth silently like Gerry Adams on the BBC news in an earlier era of Irish politics.

Why didn't Dawkins interview the many scientists in Oxford, or in the wider scientific community, many of them eminent in their fields, who see their faith and their science as synergistic and deeply integrated? He certainly knows they exist because he has debated with many of them in the past. Could it be that there is a deep insecurity here in allowing his arguments to be exposed publicly to academic rational scrutiny?

One of the attitudes that the scientific community tries to encourage is that of informed debate in which examples and counter-examples are carefully weighed up to draw well-justified conclusions. But the many counter-examples to Dawkins' thesis were simply ignored in this series. If religion is the 'root of all evil', then how come the 20th century saw the mass killing of humans in the name of state-sponsored atheism on a scale logs higher than the kind of numbers killed in the 'religious wars' of past centuries? As Jung Chang and Jon Halliday point out in their recent book on Chairman Mao (Mao: the Unknown Story, 2005, Jonathan Cape, p. 561), Mao was responsible for the deaths of up to 70 million people during his atheistic regime. At least 20 million people are thought to have died under the atheistic Stalin (see <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat1.htm> for a judicious discussion of such numbers). About 50 million people were killed as a result of the Second World War, started by the man who once reminded his dinner guests that “Christianity is a rebellion against natural law, a protest against nature” (H.Trevor-Roper (ed.), Hitler's Table-Talk, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1963). The applications of science were essential in rendering these numbers of killed so mind-numbingly huge.

When, near the end of the second programme in the series, Dawkins made the extraordinary claim that ‘we’ (who?) are now so much more moral than humanity of a few thousand years ago, one just didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Do we thereby conclude from these facts that all atheists are as evil as Mao, Stalin and Hitler? No, of course not, but it should at least give pause for thought before an atheist tries to take the moral high ground in pointing the finger at religion. A rational argument should certainly include such data in its deliberations. And it is of course worth pointing out that generally people do not give up on science because of its gross misuses during the course of human history. Nor do people give up on sex because of the existence of rape. Nor indeed religious belief because religious beliefs are sometimes misused and misapplied.

Perhaps the most depressing aspect of this series is that it made such a botched job of accurately explaining and exemplifying both science and religion in almost equal measure. This was an opportunity wasted. Nothing was presented in the programmes to dissuade the viewer from the stereotypical view that scientists are grumpy old men, somewhat arrogant, and with a chip on their shoulder. Were I an atheist, I think I would have cringed as I watched, in the same way that members of new Labour cringe when some tub-thumping old socialist party-member beats the drum for the revolution on prime-time telly, or as UK Christians cringe when exposed to the fund-raising antics of the latest US tele-evangelist. The public image of science is already fragile enough – this series did not help to challenge the stereotypes.

Even the science itself, scarce as it was on these programmes, was communicated in such a compressed way as to at least give a quite false impression. We were treated to an interview with a geneticist who informed us that genes were involved in the evolution of biological altruism – no problem there. But from there we suddenly leapt by implication to the claim that “genes explain morality”. Really? So how come the populations of North and South Korea, who in terms of genetic distance have been prevented from inter-breeding by a trivial length of time, have such different moral codes? Sure scientific concepts have to be simplified a bit for prime-time telly, but there was really no excuse in this case for not explaining the science, let alone the putative relationship between genetics and moral beliefs, more clearly.

Richard Dawkins may not contribute much to the peer-reviewed scientific literature, but he writes great popular books on evolutionary biology. I would recommend *The Ancestor’s Tale* (Phoenix, 2004) to anyone who wants a clear and balanced explanation of current evolutionary theory. Gone in this book are most of the outbursts against his academic rivals, and indeed against religion, that marred some of his earlier works. Dawkins even manages to say some nice things about the late Stephen Jay Gould, and about the fascinating research on the so-called Cambrian Explosion carried out by Simon Conway Morris. In reading this book one feels that here is a more mature Dawkins than the earlier hectoring version, more able to discuss alternative views calmly without always feeling that he has to be right.

It is such reflections which make it all the more puzzling as to why Dawkins should stoop in *'The Root of All Evil?'* to being involved in what is at heart a rather crude propaganda series. Out of the window went the judicious assessment of competing theories, the weighing of conflicting data and the idea of scientific tolerance, and in came the ranting, the misrepresentations and the crude exaggerations. Could it be that when opposing fundamentalist believers encounter each other, the mirror image is subconsciously recognised for what it is? Certainly there is something about religion which brings the worst out in Dawkins, and perhaps only he can explain why that should be the case. One unfortunate spin-off is to perpetuate mythologies about the supposed opposition between science and religion that have long since passed their sell-by date.

A few years ago Channel 4 aired what is generally accepted to be a rather good three-part series on science and religion under the title *Testing God*. The series certainly wasn't perfect, but it was far, far superior in every respect to *The Root of All Evil?* A genuine attempt was made to grapple with opposing arguments, and a wide spectrum of views was represented. The relationship between science and religion was presented not within the simplistic conflict framework that Dawkins finds so endearing, but as a multi-textured relationship, full of subtleties and ambiguities. Since then, the science has been moving on rapidly. Who knows, maybe there is some ambitious producer out there who might yet generate an up-dated TV series that will tackle the fascinating contemporary interactions between science and faith not as a propaganda exercise, but with greater integrity as a rational and richly textured narrative that will both educate and entertain the viewer by the sheer intrinsic interest of its material.

Dr Denis Alexander is Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion (www.faraday-institute.org) at St. Edmund's College, Cambridge, and is Editor of the journal *Science and Christian Belief* (www.scienceandchristianbelief.org).