Original Article

The antinomies of aggressive atheism

Lawrence Wilde
Division of Politics and Sociology, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG1 4BU, UK.
E-mail: lawrence.wilde@ntu.ac.uk

AUTHOR COPY

Abstract The spate of popular books attacking religion can be seen as a manifestation of the recoil against the idea of multiculturalism. Religious identities are also cultural identities, and no meaningful form of multiculturalism is possible that leaves religion outside the sphere of public recognition. This paper argues that 'aggressive atheism' undermines its appeal to reason by refusing to see anything of value in religion. It also risks exacerbating cultural differences at a time when reconciliation is needed. The critique focuses on the contribution of Richard Dawkins and examines a number of tensions within the aggressive atheism of his best-selling book *The God Delusion*. The second part of the paper introduces an alternative, a framework of reconciliatory dialogues, between atheism and religion and within religious communities, operating not just at a formal or institutional level but also in cultural expressions and in the practices of everyday life.
Contemporary Political Theory (2010) **9**, 266–283. doi:10.1057/cpt.2008.64

Keywords: religion; Dawkins; multiculturalism; reconciliation

Introduction

The recent spate of books attacking religious faith reflects the alarm felt by rationalists at the threat posed to secularism by the resurgence of religion as a social power. Not content to criticize the excesses of religious fundamentalism, the writers view all expressions of belief in God as an affront to rationality and an invitation to prejudice and judgementalism (Harris, 2005; Dawkins, 2006a and 2006b; Dennett, 2006; Grayling, 2007; Hitchens, 2007; Onfray, 2007; Stenger, 2007). For the most part this 'aggressive atheism' is intent on attacking religious thought and its influence on society, setting to one side the question of what a radical secular alternative might look like. However, it is not as apolitical as it might appear, for in denouncing the social power of

religion its stance is implicitly hostile to the idea of multiculturalism. Religious identity is a cultural expression, and, as Tariq Modood has argued recently, it is incoherent to place religious affiliation 'outside' multiculturalism as a civic or policy idea (Modood, 2007, p. 30). As such, attacks on religion *per se* can be seen as attacks on claims for the public recognition of all religious identities. Multiculturalism involves public recognition for minority cultures aimed at achieving the accommodation of difference, and as such it is compatible with a moderate form of secularism (Modood, 2007, pp. 78–84), but not with the strict secularism demanded by aggressive atheism.[1] In demanding the retreat of religion into the private sphere, aggressive atheism implicitly calls for a state that is neutral in relation to religion, but most societies are deeply imbued with religious traditions, expressed in such things as anthems, oaths, constitutions, public holidays and everyday discourse. If such a professedly liberal state is seen to harbour a bias against minority religions, some of the followers of these religions are likely to feel alienated.

One of the arguments of this article is that the confrontational tone of aggressive atheism runs the risk of saying to religious minorities that their cherished religious identities are not respected, with potentially serious consequences. This supports the view of Bhikhu Parekh that there is a better chance of accommodating difference if we include religious identities in the political process:

> Nothing in human life is an unmixed good and we should not take an unduly rosy or irredeemably bleak view of religion. Rather than keep it out of political life and allow it to sulk and scowl menacingly from outside it, we should find ways of both benefiting from its contribution and minimizing its dangers. (Parekh, 2000, p. 330)

Aggressive atheism, of course, views religion as 'irredeemably bleak', and the first part of this article challenges the assumptions on which this characterization is based. It examines the internal contradictions and ellipses in its position by focusing on the work of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, whose vituperative attacks on religion attracted wide audiences to two television programmes on British Channel Four in 2006 entitled 'The Root of All Evil' (Dawkins, 2006a) and whose follow-up book, *The God Delusion* (Dawkins, 2006b), sold over a million and a half copies worldwide within 2 years (Aikenhead, 2008). I focus on Dawkins for two reasons: first, he is arguably the most aggressive of the aggressive atheists, and also by far the most popular; second, as a renowned scientist, he trades on the familiar contrast between the pure rationality of science and the essential irrationality of religious faith, using this to question why any special respect should be given to religious beliefs in a secular society. I argue that, although aggressive atheism sees itself as a

AUTHOR COPY

champion of reason, Dawkins' emotive rhetoric and unbalanced diatribes undermine this claim. So too does his crude dichotomy between faith and reason and his refusal to consider the possibility that theology may have useful things to say about human experience and development. In short, his aggressive atheism mirrors the unreflective certitude it deplores in religion. The second part of the paper outlines a more constructive alternative to addressing the differences between believers and non-believers and between different types of believers. It points to the need for a widening and deepening of dialogues already in development if we are to move closer to the peaceful accommodation of differences in multicultural societies in a multicultural world.

Aggressive Atheism

The God Delusion is the most sustained of Dawkins' numerous polemical assaults on religion. In his threefold schema of religious thought, Dawkins describes theists as believers in a God who creates life and intervenes in it, deists as believers simply in God as an original creator and pantheists for whom God is a synonym for nature (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 18). He outlines a seven point scale of judgements on the existence of God which places at 'one' the strong theist who claims to know that God exists, and at seven the strong atheist who claims to know that God does not exist.[2] Dawkins places himself at 'six', claiming that although he cannot know for certain, he thinks God is very improbable (Dawkins, 2006b, pp. 50–51). There are a great many arguments and assertions in the book, not all of which depend on the rejection of belief in God, but what concerns here is Dawkins' attitude to those who believe in some form of God. I argue that there are three major tensions in Dawkins position. The first focuses on his rhetorical strategy, which combines a frequently abusive tone with a totally one-sided litany of the failings of religion and the irrationality of its followers. The second tension is found in his dismissal of faith as evil, a problem that flows from an over-simplification of the relationship between reason and faith. This is what Einstein describes as the 'extreme rationalist' position that overestimates the capacity of scientific methods in explaining social phenomena and underestimates the complexity of the development of normative frameworks (Einstein, 1984, p. 18). The third tension is closely related to the second, for in failing to see anything positive in religious thought he implicitly makes claims for science which are beyond its capacity to deliver.

It may seem trivial to quibble at the tone of a polemic, for polemics revel in their controversial nature and are designed to raise hackles. However, in this case, in which one of the principal objects of attack is the certitude and

AUTHOR COPY

vehemence expressed by religious zealots, it is surely self-defeating for Dawkins to adopt a rhetorical strategy that mirrors that of the position he abhors. He protests at the 'moral outrage' and 'frenzied malevolence' displayed by the fundamentalists (Dawkins, 2006b, pp. 211 and 214), but he attacks religion with the same temper. Rather than employing cool detachment to counter the fundamentalists, he elects to fight fire with fire. A much earlier critic of religious fundamentalism, Benedict Spinoza, pointed out in *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670) that the language of indignation used by the fundamentalists of his day reflected their inability to employ reason. Spinoza links the medium and the message:

> Every result of their diseased imagination they attribute to the Holy Ghost, and strive to defend with the utmost zeal and passion; for it is an observed fact that men employ their reason to defend conclusions arrived at by reason, but conclusions arrived at by the passions are defended by the passions. (Spinoza, 2004, p. 99)

AUTHOR COPY

Unfortunately, Spinoza's entreaty to sober reasoning is not heeded by Dawkins, who claims that the device of 'ridicule' is the only weapon against 'unintelligible' propositions (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 34). He then proceeds to savage not only religious fundamentalists but also those who hold pantheistic or deistic views. According to Dawkins, pantheists like Einstein run the risk of associating their position with the 'miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God', and, as such, are guilty of 'intellectual high treason' (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 19). Similarly the many scientists who believe in God on the grounds that the immense complexity of the world suggests a creator – deists – are derided as partaking in a 'dreadful exhibition of self-indulgent, thought-denying skyhookery' (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 155). These scientists, it should be remembered, are not supporting the idea of a God that intervenes, nor are they seeking to convert others to their belief, but are merely expressing a strong intuition that the immense interactive complexity of the world suggests some sort of unifying principle. The sense of wonderment that sparks this intuition is a spiritual feeling, a source of ethical commitment of respect for life and nature, but Dawkins' intemperate denunciation closes off this area of spiritual needs to intellectual inquiry.

This closure is not quite complete, for at one stage he admits that he shares with Einstein a 'pantheistic reverence' for the natural world, something 'we can all trivially subscribe to' (Dawkins, 2006b, pp. 14 and 153), and, indeed, this is evident in one of Dawkins' earlier works, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (Dawkins, 1998). However, this is not as trivial as he would wish to make it, for it raises a number of important issues concerning purpose (what are we *for*?), our attitude towards the unknown, and the relationship between science on the one hand

and philosophy and religion on the other. He is keen to have such a prestigious scientist as Einstein on his side here, rightly pointing out that although Einstein considered himself a religious person, he consistently rejected the idea of a personal God. However, in stating that Einstein was 'repeatedly indignant at the suggestion that he was a theist' (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 18), Dawkins tells only half the story. In fact, Einstein was not really perturbed by the familiar criticism from theists that he could conceive of God as some sort of impersonal life force. What really made him angry were those atheists who, instead of taking his position seriously, rejected *any* notion of God and 'quote me for support of such views' (in Jammer, 1999, p. 97). Indeed he has some caustic comments for the aggressive atheists of his day:

> Then there are the fanatical atheists whose intolerance is of the same kind as the intolerance of the religious fanatics and comes from the same source. They are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains which they have thrown off after hard struggle. They are creatures who – in their grudge against the traditional 'opium of the people' – cannot bear the music of the spheres. (Jammer, 1999, p. 97)

This observation by Einstein was expressed out of frustration at the rush to condemn him following the paper he delivered on 'Science and Religion' at the Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1940 (Einstein, 1982, pp. 44–49). Yet out of this came thoughtful and provocative dialogues between Einstein and theologians Paul Tillich and Hans Küng, both calling on the image of God as 'symbol' and revealing an unexpected closeness between their positions (Einstein, pp. 107–114). This is an example of the best we can expect from respectful dialogue, but it is abjured by the close-minded attitude that Dawkins displays in treating the pantheist view as 'trivial' and in closing off further discussion of what is actually meant by a 'personal' God.

Not only does Dawkins indulge in ridicule of all who disagree with him on this subject, but he uses a rhetorical strategy of multiple anecdotes in which a parade of 'clever' men scorn religion and religious people say very foolish things. A litany of the bad things associated with religion is not balanced by any attempt to see anything constructive in it, and there is no attempt to consider other factors at the forefront of modern conflict and oppression such as nationalism or the ruthless pursuit of profit. Now this bludgeoning strategy might be defended on the grounds that the book is a polemic, but I would suggest that it makes for a rather unconvincing polemic which ought to make the reader suspect that the anger comes from an inner dissatisfaction with some important aspects of the author's own position. Furthermore, within the polemic there is a serious attempt to use a Darwinian framework to explain the existence and persistence of religion, and a prejudiced rhetorical strategy is

AUTHOR COPY

not appropriate for a serious contribution to these important issues of anthropology and social psychology.

The issue of faith is bound up with Dawkins' refusal to accept the conventional boundaries between the concerns of religion on the one hand and science and philosophy on the other. He rails against the distinction made by the late Stephen Jay Gould, atheist and scientist, in his formula of 'non-overlapping magisteria' whereby science covers the empirical realm and religion covers the realm of ultimate meaning and moral value (Dawkins, 2006b, pp. 54–61). Gould is in a long line of scientists who have acknowledged the limitations of science in this way. Einstein, for example, argued that science 'can only ascertain what *is*, but not what *should be*, and outside of its domain value judgements of all kinds remain necessary'. Religion concerns itself not with facts and relations between facts but only with 'evaluations of human thought and action' (Einstein, 1984, p. 22). Of course it might be argued that issues of judgement belong with philosophy rather than religion, but it would be hard to deny the role religion has played in inscribing fundamental ends and values into the emotional lives of individuals and societies. According to Einstein, the authority of these ends and values is derived only in the 'powerful traditions which act upon the conduct and aspirations and judgements of the individuals' (Einstein, 1984, p. 19). This approach will not do for Dawkins, who insists that there is nothing beyond the range of science. One is tempted to say that this is a misplaced 'faith' in science, but for Dawkins science deals only in evidence, and faith, as he put it in his television programme, is a 'process of non-thinking' (Dawkins, 2006a). In his book he goes further, borrowing from the vocabulary of theology by condemning faith as an 'evil' because 'it requires no justification and brooks no argument' (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 308). There is a problem here, for this rigid separation of faith and reason elides some important questions about how we give meaning to our lives – issues of commitment and purpose.

I would suggest that it is in the sources of commitment to truth that there is shared ground between the scientific and religious viewpoints. Einstein is again a useful reference point here, for although he argues that science is concerned only with the 'is' and religion with the 'should be', he suggests that there are strong reciprocal relationships and dependencies between the two spheres. He argues that the urge for truth and understanding springs from the sphere of religion, and that faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are comprehensible to reason is a 'profound faith' shared by all genuine scientists (Einstein, 1984, p. 22). This view is also endorsed by Erich Fromm, who uses the example of science in his discussion of faith in *Man For Himself*. The scientist, he argues, does not proceed by making experiment after experiment and gathering fact after fact without some sort of vision of what he or she expects to find. This 'rational vision' is a necessary part of all creative

AUTHOR COPY

thinking, and although it is based on observation and study rather than sheer fantasy, it is nevertheless a manifestation of rational faith. Fromm argues that at every step in the scientific process, '*faith* is necessary'; it is expressed in terms of the vision as a rationally valid aim to pursue, in the conviction that the hypothesis is a plausible proposition and in faith in the final theory, at least until a general consensus about its validity has been reached (Fromm, 2003, p. 154). Einstein describes the 'religious feeling' of the scientist in a 'rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law', a feeling which is 'the guiding principle of his life and work' (Einstein, 1982, p. 40). The general point here is that pre-evidential intuitions play an important role in the scientific process, and Charles Taylor makes a telling comment against Dawkins' position when he points out that 'to hold that there are *no* assumptions in a scientist's work that are not already based on evidence is surely a reflection of *blind* faith' (Taylor, 2007, p. 835, no. 27, author's emphases).

Dawkins does not consider the possibility of a rational faith, insisting as he does on defining faith by its opposition to reason. His conception of faith is more accurately rendered as 'irrational faith' (Fromm, 2003, p. 152). Justifying an assertion or practice by stating that it says so in a sacred text is a clear example of blind faith and also an affront to reason, but that is an extreme form of faith, and it is possible to identify forms of faith that are not only *not* an affront to reason but are part of the reasoning process itself. Fromm argues that we should think of faith as an inner attitude rather than something primarily directed at something, and the original Old Testament use of faith (*Emunah*) means firmness, a character trait, rather than the content of a belief in something (Fromm, 2003, p. 149). More recently, Alain Badiou has asserted the centrality of this sort of faith (*pistis*, or 'conviction') to our current philosophical tasks (Badiou, 2003, p. 15). Dawkins displays that sort of faith in his allegiance to science, and in particular to Darwinian evolutionary theory, but he rejects the accusation that he is a fundamentalist because his belief is based on studying the evidence rather than on obedience to a holy book. He claims his belief in evolution through natural selection is not faith because he knows what it would take to change his mind, and, furthermore, he would 'gladly do so if the evidence were forthcoming' (Dawkins, 2006b, pp. 282–283). However, there is a problem with this assertion. Because scientific discovery involves surpassing previous knowledge, it is not always obvious within a scientific community what counts as valid evidence. The development of quantum physics is a good case in point. Werner Heisenberg, in recounting the process through which he and Niels Bohr settled on the uncertainty principle as the solution to the paradoxes of quantum theory, states that 'it was not a solution one could easily accept', as it involved transcending the conceptual basis of all classical physics since Newton. At times almost in despair, he asked himself 'can nature possibly be as absurd as it seemed to us in these

AUTHOR COPY

atomic experiments?' (Heisenberg, 2000, pp. 12–13). And, of course, quantum mechanics was simply too outrageous to be accepted by many world-renowned scientists, including Einstein, *despite* the evidence.

Although Dawkins trumpets reason over faith, rationality involves the formulation of goals, and when it comes to deciding to what ends we employ our reason we enter the sphere of morality. This is expressed by Max Weber as 'substantive rationality', whereby actions are calculated according to their efficiency in achieving 'ultimate ends' which inevitably involve some sort of ethical commitment (Weber, 1978, pp. 85–86). Although Weber refers to this type of rationality in the sphere of economic action, it has a more general application.[3] Substantive rationality involves a commitment to a goal that is not susceptible to empirical verification (or falsification). There is, therefore, a tension between the radical doubt at the heart of science and the firm conviction that necessarily accompanies scientific progress. This is evident when Dawkins brings his own scientific knowledge to the task of understanding the spread and persistence of religious thought. In response to the theistic argument that the organized complexity of life suggests the work of a creator, he argues that natural selection explains how such complexity develops from simple beginnings, but he goes much further than that in claiming that natural selection 'explains the whole of life' (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 116). This is a big claim, and it surely requires not only an element of faith to proclaim it, but also a great deal of qualification. As Dawkins readily accepts that there is no scientific consensus concerning the origin of life, then natural selection can explain only the evolution of life that has already started, and its adherents should be aware of its limitations.

What I take Dawkins to mean by saying that natural selection explains the whole of life is that the principle discovered by Darwin accounts for the process of the evolution of all life-forms, but even this goes much further than Darwin himself was prepared to go. In the introduction to *The Origin of the Species* Darwin argued that 'I am convinced that natural selection has been the main but not the exclusive means of modification' and complained in the final edition that he had been constantly misrepresented on this point (Darwin, cited by Gould, 2001, p. 85). Darwin was aware of the dangers of using his theory of natural selection to explain everything, and applying it to cultural change is fraught with such dangers. As Stephen Jay Gould argues, although natural selection made the human brain large, most of our capabilities and potentials may be non-adaptive side-consequences. The plausible claim here is that human cultural change operates not in a Darwinian way but rather in a Lamarckian way, involving the inheritability of acquired characteristics, a position also held by the historian Eric Hobsbawm (Gould, 2001, pp. 103–105; Hobsbawm, 2004). Dawkins' extravagant claim that natural selection explains the whole of life smacks of the same sort of misplaced

AUTHOR COPY

certainty which Dawkins deplores in religious thinking, and, furthermore, opens the door to positivism.

Viewed critically, positivism involves the inappropriate application of laws developed in the natural sciences to the social world, and this is very much what Dawkins is doing when he invokes his 'meme' theory to account for the development and persistence of religious thinking. Originally developed in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Dawkins invented the term 'memes' to denote units of cultural inheritance which serve as 'replicators', operating socially in an analogous way to genes (Dawkins, 1989, p. 192; McGrath, 2005, pp. 121–125). In *The God Delusion* Dawkins offers a memetic theory of religion, but when he begins that account he neglects to inform the reader that 'memes' are his own invented concept and instead treats them as though they have the same kind of facticity as genes and computer viruses (Dawkins, 2006b, pp. 191–200). Dawkins seeks to bring the scientific precision to bear on an anthropological issue, but he is actually proceeding in a speculative rather than a scientific manner (McGrath and McGrath, 2007, pp. 42–45). Furthermore, the scientific urge to isolate and analyse key variables as units is wholly unsuited to the task of understanding the evolution of ideas. As Mary Midgley argues, thought and culture are simply too fluid and complex to be understood as units, and the attempt to atomize culture in this way and trace the reproductive interaction between such units is the latest in a long line of discredited attempts to extrapolate scientific ideas beyond their proper place (Midgley, 2001, pp. 67–84). Certainly the memetic theory of religion does little to deserve the designation of a theory, and this determination to explain everything through a hyper-Darwinian framework looks distinctly like misplaced faith.

Finally, let us consider the consequences of a view that considers religion only as a destructive force. In *The God Delusion* Dawkins admits that the title of his television programme, *The Root of All Evil*, is misleading, because religion is not the root of *all* evil (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 1). Nevertheless, the whole tenor of the book suggests that religion is the primary cause of social calamity and that without it the world would be a much more peaceful place. This counterfactual approach not only ignores other sources of conflict such as national, ethnic and economic division, but it precludes the possibility of understanding religion as the historical development of human self-consciousness and moral awareness. Religion can be seen as perhaps the first human attempt to propose answers to questions about why nature operates in the way that it does and how we ought to live together. Rather than seeing reason as something that begins when we overcome the superstition of religion, we can view religion as a grounding expression of reason. This argument was made in the early twentieth century by Hermann Cohen in *Religion and Reason*, in which he stated that reason is the source of religion and can be seen as 'the mark that distinguishes man from animal' (Cohen, 1995, pp. 4–7). Dawkins

AUTHOR COPY

instead inveighs against the nastiness of the God of the Old Testament and fails to see the rich ambiguities in the stories about the relationship between God and humanity. He mocks the stories of the children of Israel misbehaving as soon as God turns his back (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 244), rather than seeing this as a dramatization of the human struggle to achieve moral self-awareness.

Where Dawkins sees only a vengeful God demanding sacrifice, radical humanists such as Ernst Bloch and Erich Fromm have detected a message of human liberation in the biblical depiction of the unfolding relationship between God and humanity. Bloch calls this the 'underground Bible' in which the 'Cannibal' version of God is periodically confronted and eventually gives way to the idea of the 'Son of Man' symbolizing humanity's 'emancipation' from God (Bloch, 1972, pp. 86, 148, 176). So, whereas Dawkins only laments the actions of God in sending the Great Flood, the covenant that follows reveals a startling retreat by God, who repents his action and promises that it will never happen again. Fromm interprets this not simply as a decisive step in the religious development of Judaism, but 'a step which prepares the way to the concept of the complete freedom of men, even freedom from God' (Fromm, 1991, pp. 24–25). Both Bloch and Fromm also argue the Garden of Eden story depicts not just a wrathful God but also a major development of human freedom. After all, the serpent is right, for when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit they do not die, their eyes are opened and they know the difference between good and evil; this act of disobedience can be seen as a founding act of human reason (Bloch, 1972, pp. 85–86; Fromm, 1991, pp. 64–65). One final example of the problematic nature of Dawkins' flat dismissal of the potential of religious thought is his failure to see any significance in Arian's denial that Jesus was consubstantial with God, Dawkins asks 'what on earth could that possibly mean?', and he dismisses such talk of 'essence' as meaning 'very little' (Dawkins, 2006b, p. 33). Now 'essence' in this instance can clearly be understood in biological terms, provided that we run with the idea of God as a person. If we do, it is not hard to appreciate the radical implications of thinking that Jesus was a man adopted by God rather than as the son sent down from heaven. The idea that a human can be elevated to the status of God detracts from the power of the authoritarian Father and elevates the idea of an autonomous and responsible humanity. The suffering and death of the Son of God at the hands of the authorities strikes a chord with the suffering masses, and with this conception of Jesus as being distinct in essence from God, early Christianity was a rebellious and egalitarian movement. As such, it was a doctrine that needed to be changed if the Church was to consolidate itself as the religion of the Empire with its own authoritarian structures (Bloch, 1972, pp. 160–164; Fromm, 1993, pp. 42–91).

These important stages in the evolution of human consciousness are lost in Dawkins's diatribe against religion and theology. Indeed, the aggressive atheist rejection of all such theological issues as irrational nonsense discourages the

AUTHOR COPY

development of an understanding of the underlying social meaning of religious disputes and their relevance for ethical questions of the highest importance. Dawkins displays an attitude towards religion described by Charles Taylor as 'subtractionist', in which human progress involves the gradual elimination of degrees of superstitious attachments until we arrive only at the human good, which, in Dawkins' account, is the realm of science. However, as Taylor argues, being left only with human concerns does not in any way tell us what our fundamental goals are, individually or socially, and modern humanism displays a striving for justice which is not explained simply in terms of the jettisoning of religious belief (Taylor, 2007, p. 572). This commitment to a framework of values is common to radical humanism and religion, and it invokes a realm of ideas and emotions which are commonly termed 'spiritual'. It is interesting to recall that when Marx described religion as 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions' (Marx, 1994, p. 57), he was not calling for the spiritual categories of heartfulness and soulfulness to be discarded but rather for them to be *realized* in the social relations of the future. It is precisely on this ethical plane, in the striving for social justice, that the concerns of radical humanism and religion meet. Aggressive atheism precludes such a meeting, but dialogues of this sort are necessary steps in learning to live with difference.

AUTHOR COPY

Dialogues and Multilogues[4]

Appeals for more dialogue often appear gestural or trite, so it is important to outline what sorts of dialogues are actually in train that provide alternatives to theistic and atheistic fundamentalisms. For dialogues to be meaningful, we need to be able to identify the specific processes that carry the potential to foster greater understanding of difference and mutual recognition and respect. Who talks to whom, what forms do dialogues take, in what social context and what outcomes are achieved?

Table 1 presents a framework for this network of conciliatory dialogues, not as utopian scheme but rather as an outline of ongoing but unevenly articulated processes. Distinctions are made between dialogues between theists and atheists, between different faiths, and within faiths between different denominations. For dialogue to be meaningful there needs to be some shared ground, and this is particularly true when the issues are likely to evince emotive responses. So, while a comparison of religious precepts might form the basis of inter-faith dialogue in formal or academic contexts, for dialogue to produce reflexivity among those who live by these precepts, the interlocutors would almost certainly need to share the same faith. On the other hand, reports of discussions between 'experts' at a formal level may trigger responses at informal levels, encouraging greater tolerance. In terms of the contexts in

Table 1: A framework of reconciliatory dialogues

Interlocutors	*Discursive contexts*	*Outcomes*
Theists and atheists	Formal Cultural Everyday life	Deeper understanding of shared ethical concerns Promotion of humane governance
Inter-faith dialogues	Formal Cultural Everyday life	Mitigation of tensions Promotion of peaceful co-existence Cooperation on shared ethical commitments
Inter- and intra-denominational dialogues	Formal Cultural Everyday life	Marginalization of calls to violence Cooperation on shared ethical commitments

AUTHOR COPY

which these dialogues take place, it is important to avoid restricting the idea of dialogue to formal meetings or exchanges between renowned representatives. What I term the 'cultural' level of dialogue involves the opening up of discussion of religiously grounded cultural practices through the full range of artistic media that embraces novels,[5] films, drama, music and also comedy. At the level of everyday life, dialogues are conducted in workplaces and social situations through processes of familiarization that encourage curiosity where suspicion may once have prevailed. Often it is children who lead the way here, learning at school about the variety of religious expressions and conveying this positive interest in different creeds to their elders. Finally, in terms of outcomes, they range from the minimal goal of avoiding conflict to the maximal goal of a global ethic of peace and harmony. Realistically, what is to be gained is some form of multiculturalism that is 'much more than toleration or the co-presence of mutually indifferent communities' (Modood, 2007, p. 65).

A few indicative examples may help to show the potential of these reconciliatory dialogues. In terms of dialogues between atheistic and theistic positions, from the perspective of social theory the contribution of Jürgen Habermas offers an excellent example. His commitment to communicative rationality and discourse ethics elicited a response from theologians, and he has responded in a constructive way that not only clarifies essential points of difference but also shows some common ground. For example, in an article in 1991 he sympathizes with the theologian Jens Glebe-Möller concerning the difficulties of reconciling secular and religious 'language games', finding agreement in the idea of cross-generational solidarity, expressed in materialist terms yet carrying strong spiritual overtones (Habermas, 2002, pp. 77–78, cf. Glebe-Möller, 1987, p. 112). Later in the 1990s, Habermas engaged with Michael Theunissen's 'negative philosophy', a way of conceiving of God beyond the idea of a presence, in order to achieve greater clarity on the conditions for

communicative freedom (Habermas, 2002, pp. 110–128). At the same time, he discusses the Catholic theology of Johannes Baptist Metz concerning the possibilities of achieving a political culture that can facilitate a multicultural society (Habermas, 2002, pp. 129–138). These engagements did not dissolve differences, but they pointed to hitherto unsuspected commonalities. The meeting that produced much greater publicity was Habermas's debate with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) in Bavaria in 2004, and their willingness to seek some common ground was symbolically important. Cardinal Ratzinger, not noted for his openness on matters of doctrine, nevertheless expressed agreement with Habermas's remarks 'about a postsecular society, about the willingness to learn from one each other, and about self-limitation on both sides' (Habermas and Ratzinger, 2006, p. 77). Habermas, champion of Enlightenment rationality, engages with religion because he is aware that rationality and morality developed historically in religious forms and that religion continues to play a vital role in providing a moral orientation for so many people in the world. In addition, he realizes that although philosophers and theologians give different descriptions of phenomena, they are nevertheless addressing substantially the same issues (Habermas, 2002, p. 126).

For similar reasons other social theorists who have earned their reputations without reference to religion have been drawn to discover the truths in religious discourse. Régis Debray writes on God (Debray, 2004), Alain Badiou on Saint Paul (Badiou, 2003), whereas Derrida calls for a spiritual faith beyond religion and theology (Derrida, 1998). Derrida's interest in religious thinking has interesting links with the 'negative' theology mentioned above, as Hart has pointed out (Hart, 1998, pp. 259–280). This process of 'reaching out' to one another from the standpoints of radical social theory and religion reflects concern about the evanescence of ethics in a world in which ethical interventions are desperately required (see, for example, Blond, 1998; de Vries, 1999; Keenan, 2003; Davis, Milbank and Zizek, 2005). There remains, of course, the dividing line between theistic and atheistic perspectives, but such dialogues reveal strong affinities in different approaches to concepts such as reconciliation, transcendence and justice. Today the challenges for dialogue between atheism and theism cover a number of areas, as Richard Falk argues, including an ecological concern for 'wholeness', a concern for human and animal suffering, a trust in the cooperative potential of human beings and a commitment to 'a pervasive pedagogy of tolerance as the foundation of citizenship, nationally and globally' (Falk, 2001, p. 96).

In the sphere of inter-faith dialogue, the religious idea that seems most closely connected to the normative goal of multicultural harmony is that of the 'universal ecumene', which acknowledges that there is a truth in all religions. From this perspective, a sense of universal religiosity can inspire initiatives on peace, the eradication of poverty and the protection of the environment. As

AUTHOR COPY

Susanne Rudolph argues, the deep commitment to the idea that there is truth in all religions is incompatible with actively seeking converts, and this is one of a number of obstacles, but it is an idea that has already developed a major following (Rudolph, 2005, pp. 189–199). In terms of global institutional developments, an initiative launched through the United Nations Conference for Interfaith Cooperation and Peace in New York in 2005 has led to the emergence of the Tripartite Forum for Interfaith Cooperation for Peace. Other bodies that contribute to the process of seeking common religious ground and defusing differences are the United Religions Initiative, which has special consultative status with the UN, and the London-based World Congress of Faith. One of the most influential of these inter-faith initiatives has been the movement for a Parliament of the World's Religions. The Parliament met in Chicago in 1993 as part of a centennial celebration of the first Parliament, also in Chicago, and the major discussions focused on a document, *Towards a Global Ethic*, drafted mainly by Catholic theologian Hans Küng. He later developed the ideas into a text, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, which has become an important point of reference for discussions of global justice. Here, he invokes the many expressions of the Golden Rule to affirm the commonality and longevity of this moral principle, the oldest form coming from Confucius in the sixth century BC – 'what you yourself do not want, do not want to do to another person' (Küng, 1997, pp. 97–99). This is an aspect of religion that Dawkins is unwilling to acknowledge; religion has undoubtedly been a source of conflict, but religious beliefs may also provide the motivation to act towards reconciliation. The Parliament now meets regularly, focused on specific issues of global justice, although certain important religious groupings are absent from the process, such as evangelical Protestants, orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Muslims.[6] Besides these international initiatives there are many thousands of groups at work in communities all over the world, assisting social harmony and working actively for social justice (Smock, 2002). A US based study by the sociologist Paul Lichterman has shown via a detailed ethnographic study just how significant the religions are when acting as civic groups dedicated to healing social divisions (Lichterman, 2005).

Finally, in situations in which religion is associated with aggression, an intra-faith dialogue becomes virtually the only communicative means through which violent fundamentalism may be restrained. It is perhaps the most difficult of dialogues to develop, because fanatical sects are aware of the need to dissociate themselves from their most closely related denominations. Nevertheless, it is only through this discourse that the selectivity of fanatical use of sacred texts can be held open to scrutiny. Examples can be found within all religions, but here I will mention only a few examples, from Christianity and Islam. Within Christianity, Randall Balmer's *Thy Kingdom Come* provides an Evangelical

AUTHOR COPY

Christian's critique of the dramatic move to the Right taken by the Evangelical movement in the United States. He questions the 'selective literalism' that places overwhelming emphasis on attacking abortion and homosexuality while ignoring other messages from the Bible, such as 'care for the poor and opposition to war' (Balmer, 2006, pp. 33–34). In the conclusion to his book he contrasts his own reading of the principal Bible messages, emphasizing social justice and equality, to the militaristic aggression of the Religious Right that continues to ignore issues such as torture and poverty (Balmer, 2006, pp. 167–191). Evangelical Christians will never listen to Dawkins, but they may listen to Balmer, a former editor of the leading US evangelical journal *Christianity Today*. Within Islam, attempts have been made by Islamic scholars to question interpretations of the religion which support violence and intolerance (Modood, 2007, pp. 139–145). For example, Bassam Tibi argues at length that the history of Islam reveals a great deal more flexibility of interpretation than modern *jihadists* are prepared to accept. In particular, he argues that the *shari'a* or sacred law is a post-Koranic construction which should not be rigidified and proposed as a complete replacement for state law (Tibi, 2005, pp. 153–166). He also expresses concern that the current politicization of Islam will produce 'gated' communities within non-Muslim societies, leading to the alienation of Islam from the rest of humanity (Tibi, 2005, pp. 269–272). Seyyed Hosein Nasr argues against the modern emphasis on *jihad* as 'holy war', for its literal meaning of 'exerting effort' in the name of God has always lent itself to a call for spiritual and social renewal without the implication of violence. Nasr points out that even where *jihad* has obviously referred to holy war, as in the defence against the Crusades, strict rules of conduct deplore injustice, including attacking the innocent (Nasr, 2002, pp. 256–272). Nasr also argues for an Islamic defence of human rights and responsibilities capable of contributing to the creation of harmony between religions and peoples throughout the world (*ibid.*, pp. 275–306). We should note here that although dialogue with extreme fundamentalists may be effected only within a faith or sect, the content of that dialogue need not be contained to 'internal' religious affairs, and An-Na'im makes the point that it is vital for such dialogues to discuss the implications for Islamic identity in modern societies, including the right to dissent, and that it be supplemented by cross-cultural dialogues (An-Na'im, 1999, pp. 110–111).

AUTHOR COPY

Conclusion

The dialogues outlined above display a commitment to reaching an understanding of the meanings and social implications of positions all too often supported or opposed in implacable fashion. The combined effect of dialogues at all the levels denoted is to challenge negative preconceptions and increase awareness of shared

concerns. Through the development of a culture of reconciliation, suspicion begins to give way to fascination, and social claims based on religious identity can more readily be negotiated in a mutually respectful way.

Aggressive atheism's wholly negative view of the social impact of religion allows no space for such constructive dialogue. A standard rhetorical ploy is to highlight the worst excesses of fundamentalist religions and warn that any accommodation of religious identity in the public sphere will involve a 'return to the Dark Ages' (Grayling, 2007, p. 47). Another is to suggest that multiculturalism involves a dangerous relativism by declaring that any set of views is as worthy of respect as any other. Michel Onfray, for example, is particularly scathing in his attack on what he terms 'today's dominant branch of secularism', alleging that in decreeing the equality of all religions and of those who reject them it is accepting the 'equality of magical thinking and rational thought' (Onfray, 2007, p. 216). Daniel Dennett alleges that 'some multiculturalists' (none are named) claim that people from the affluent world can never understand the subjectivity of Third World people (Dennett, 2006, p. 260).

The commitment to reach understanding between different viewpoints does not open the floodgates to fundamentalisms of various kinds, but rather serves to draw fundamentalisms into a terrain in which they will not flourish. The equation of multiculturalism with an 'anything goes' relativism is a gross caricature. Supporters of multicultural societies are committed to the core values of inclusive democratic states, and claims for the accommodation of religious views and practices will be weighed against those values. The outcomes will vary according to the prevailing conditions and circumstances, but the commitment to the process of accommodation through negotiation is a *sine qua non* for the emergence of societies capable of becoming comfortable with their differences. What is important is the encouragement of a disposition, which intuitively seeks to reach a better understanding of positions that may seem arcane or even offensive. The intention is not to tolerate the intolerable or condone practices that breach human rights, but rather to create a fair society which is sensitive to the variety of deeply-held values in its midst, and is eager to explore the possibilities for their accommodation.

AUTHOR COPY

Notes

1 Of the writers listed as 'aggressive atheists' Daniel Dennett may be regarded as the exception here as in the final chapter of *Breaking the Spell* he advocates the development of more tolerant dialogues and institutions to break down mutual incomprehension. However, in terming this goal a 'utopian global conversation' he acknowledges how far removed it is from anything that might be realized in the near future (Dennett, 2006, p. 329).

2 This is the position adopted by Victor Stenger (2007), whose *God The Failed Hypothesis* is subtitled *How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist*.

3 In an interesting discussion of Weber's typology of rationality, Immanuel Wallerstein points out that Weber draws two pairs of distinctions, between 'instrumental' and 'value' rationality in the sphere of social action, and between 'formal' and 'substantive' in the sphere of economic action. 'Value rationality' refers to action informed by ethical considerations which is undertaken irrespective of its prospects for success, and Weber is clearly sceptical of its prospects in the face of the seductive power of instrumental rationality. However, he is far more receptive to the possibility of achieving substantive rationality, and this opens up the possibility of subordinating the pursuit of short-term individual gain to long-term social goals (Wallerstein, 1999, pp. 141–144).
4 Modood suggests the term 'multilogues' to describe the overlapping nature of the interactions between secularism and religion and between and within religious identities (Modood, 2007, p. 65).
5 E.L. Doctorow's novel *City of God* is a good example, for it deals with relationships between theist and atheist, Christian and Jew, and between different Jewish affiliations – for a discussion see Wilde, 2006, pp. 391–405.
6 There is also a concern that the Parliament is becoming heavily influenced by representatives of the New Age Movement.

References

Aikenhead, S. (2008) 'People Say I'm Strident', interview with Richard Dawkins. *The Guardian*, 25 October, p. 31.

An-Na'im, A.A. (1999) Political Islam in National Politics and International Relations. In: P. Berger (ed.) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's Publishing.

Badiou, A. (2003) *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Balmer, R. (2006) *The Kingdom Come: An Evangelical's Lament*. New York: Basic Books.

Bloch, E. (1972) *Atheism in Christianity*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Blond, P. (ed.) (1998) *Post-Secular Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Cohen, H. (1995) *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press [1919].

Davis, C., Milbank, J. and Zizek, S. (eds.) (2005) *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*. Durham, USA; London: Duke University Press.

Dawkins, R. (1989) *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dawkins, R. (1998) *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*. London: Penguin.

Dawkins, R. (2006a) *The Root of All Evil*. Channel 4.

Dawkins, R. (2006b) *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam Press.

Debray, R. (2004) *God: An Itinerary*. London: Verso.

Dennett, D.C. (2006) *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. London: Allen Lane.

Derrida, J. (1998) '*Faith and Hope*' *in Religion*. Cambridge: Polity.

de Vries, H. (1999) *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Einstein, A. (1982) *Ideas and Opinions*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Einstein, A. (1984) *The Einstein Reader*. New York: Citadel Press.

Falk, R. (2001) *Religion and Humane Global Governance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Fromm, E. (1991) *You Shall be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition*. New York: Henry Holt [1966].

Fromm, E. (1993) *The Dogma of Christ*. New York: Henry Holt [1963].

Fromm, E. (2003) *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. London: Routledge [1947].

Glebe-Möller, J. (1987) *Political Dogmatic*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

AUTHOR COPY

Gould, S.J. (2001) More Things in Heaven and Earth. In: H. Rose and S. Rose (eds.) *Alas Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology*. London: Vintage, pp. 85–105.
Grayling, A.C. (2007) *Against All Gods*. London: Oberon Books.
Habermas, J. (2002) *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
Habermas, J. and Ratzinger, J. (2006) *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.
Harris, S. (2005) *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. London: The Free Press.
Hart, K. (1998) Jacques Derrida: The God Effect. In: P. Blond (ed.) *Post-Secular Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
Heisenberg, W. (2000) *Physics and Philosophy*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
Hitchens, C. (2007) *God is Not Great: The Case Against Religion*. London: Atlantic Books.
Hobsbawm, E. (2004) History: A New Age of Reason. In: *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December.
Jammer, M. (1999) *Einstein and Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Pres.
Keenan, W. (2003) Rediscovering the Theological in Sociology: foundations and possibilities. *Theory, Culture and Society* 20(1): 19–42.
Küng, H. (1997) *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. London: SCM press.
Lichterman, P. (2005) *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Marx, K. (1994) *Early Political Writings*, Joseph O'Malley (ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
McGrath, A. (2005) *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Blackwell.
McGrath, A. and McGrath, J.C. (2007) *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheistic Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
Midgley, M. (2001) Why Memes? In: H. Rose and S. Rose (eds.) *Alas Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology*. London: Vintage, pp. 67–84.
Modood, T. (2007) *Multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
Nasr, S.H. (2002) *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
Onfray, M. (2007) *In Defence of Atheism: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*. London: Serpent's Tail.
Parekh, B. (2000) *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
Rudolph, S.H. (2005) Religious Transnationalism. In: H. Juergensmeyer (ed.) *Religion in Global Civil Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Smock, D.R. (ed.) (2002) *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*. Herndon, VA: USIP.
Spinoza, B. (2004) *A Theologico-Political Treatise and a Political Treatise*. New York: Dover.
Stenger, V.J. (2007) *God, the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press.
Tibi, B. (2005) *Islam Between Culture and Politics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
Wallerstein, I. (1999) *The End of the World as We Know it: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis, USA; London: University of Minnesota Press.
Weber, M. (1978) *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
Wilde, L. (2006) The Search for Reconciliation in E.L. Doctorow's *City of God, Religion and the Arts* 10: 391–405, Brill.

Date submitted: 1 July 2008
Date accepted: 23 October 2008

AUTHOR COPY