

Time to Stand Up

Richard Dawkins

Stop respecting religion and start submitting it to the same scrutiny as any other idea or argument, says Richard Dawkins. And September 11th 2001 makes this scrutiny more urgent than ever...

Distinguished British scientist, author and atheist Richard Dawkins, who was scheduled to accept an "Emperor Has No Clothes Award" on Sept. 22 at the Freedom From Religion Foundation convention, cancelled his appearance in light of travel difficulties after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks against the United States.

He supplied an exclusive article, reprinted below, which was read at the Foundation convention in his stead by James Coors, a professor of Agronomy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

*The essay is a follow-up to Dawkins' powerful article, "Religion's Misguided Missiles," appearing in *The Guardian* on September 15, 2001*

"To blame Islam for what happened in New York is like blaming Christianity for the troubles in Northern Ireland!" Yes. Precisely. It is time to stop pussyfooting around. Time to get angry. And not only with Islam.

Those of us who have renounced one or other of the three 'great' monotheistic religions have, until now, moderated our language for reasons of politeness. Christians, Jews and Muslims are sincere in their beliefs and in what they find holy. We have respected that, even as we have disagreed with it. The late [Douglas Adams](#) put it with his customary good humour, in [an impromptu speech in 1998](#) (slightly abridged):

Now, the invention of the scientific method is, I'm sure we'll all agree, the most powerful intellectual idea, the most powerful framework for thinking and investigating and understanding and challenging the world around us that there is, and it rests on the premise that any idea is there to be attacked. If it withstands the attack then it lives to fight another day and if it doesn't withstand the attack then down it goes. Religion doesn't seem to work like that. It has certain ideas at the heart of it which we call sacred or holy or whatever.

What it means is, "Here is an idea or a notion that you're not allowed to say anything bad about; you're just not. Why not? – because you're not!" If somebody votes for a party that you don't agree with, you're free to argue about it as much as you like; everybody will have an argument but nobody feels aggrieved by it. If somebody thinks taxes should go up or down you are free to have an argument about it. But on the other hand if somebody says "I mustn't move a light switch on a Saturday," you say, "I respect that."

The odd thing is, even as I am saying that I am thinking "Is there an Orthodox Jew here who is going to be offended by the fact that I just said that?" But I wouldn't have thought, "Maybe there's somebody from the left wing or somebody from the right wing or somebody who subscribes to this view or the other in economics," when I was making the other points. I just think, "Fine, we have different opinions." But, the moment I say something that has something to do with somebody's (I'm going to stick my neck out here and say irrational) beliefs, then we all become terribly protective and terribly defensive and say "No, we don't attack that; that's an irrational belief but no, we respect it."

Why should it be that it's perfectly legitimate to support the Labour party or the Conservative party, Republicans or Democrats, this model of economics versus that, Macintosh instead of Windows – but to have an opinion about how the Universe began, about who created the Universe... no, that's holy? What does that mean? Why do we ring-fence that for any other reason other than that we've just got used to doing so? There's no other reason at all, it's just one of those things that crept into being, and once that loop gets going it's very, very powerful. So, we are used to not challenging religious ideas but it's very interesting how much of a furore Richard creates when he does it! Everybody gets absolutely frantic about it because you're not allowed to say these things. Yet when you look at it rationally there is no reason why those ideas shouldn't be as open to debate as any other, except that we have agreed somehow between us that they shouldn't be.

[Is there an Artificial God? Douglas Adams' speech at Digital Biota 2, Cambridge U.K. September 1998](#)

Douglas is dead, but his words are an inspiration to us now to stand up and break this absurd taboo. My last vestige of 'hands off religion' respect disappeared as I watched the "Day of Prayer" in Washington Cathedral. Then there was the even more nauseating prayer-meeting in the New York stadium, where prelates and pastors did their tremulous Martin Luther King impersonation and urged people of mutually

incompatible faiths to hold hands in homage to the very force that caused the problem in the first place. It is time for people of intellect, as opposed to people of faith, to stand up and say, "Enough!" Let our tribute to the September dead be a new resolve: to respect people for what they individually think, rather than respect groups for what they were collectively brought up to believe.

Notwithstanding bitter sectarian hatreds over the centuries (all too obviously still going strong), Judaism, Islam and Christianity have much in common. Despite New Testament watering down and other reformist tendencies, all three pay historic allegiance to the same violent and vindictive God of Battles, memorably summed up by [Gore Vidal](#) in 1998:

The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal – God is the Omnipotent Father – hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates. The sky-god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is not just in place for one tribe, but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good.

In the Guardian of September 15th ([Religion's Misguided Missiles](#)), I named belief in an afterlife as the key weapon that made the New York atrocity possible. Of prior significance is religion's deep responsibility for the underlying hatreds that motivated people to use that weapon in the first place. To breathe such a suggestion, even with the most gentlemanly restraint, is to invite an onslaught of patronising abuse, as Douglas Adams noted. But the insane cruelty of the suicide attacks, and the equally vicious though numerically less catastrophic 'revenge' attacks on hapless Muslims living in America and Britain, push me beyond ordinary caution.

How can I say that religion is to blame? Do I really imagine that, when a terrorist kills, he is motivated by a theological disagreement with his victim? Do I really think the Northern Ireland pub bomber says to himself, "Take that, Tridentine Transubstantiationist bastards!" Of course I don't think anything of the kind. Theology is the last thing on

the minds of such people. They are not killing because of religion itself, but because of political grievances, often justified. They are killing because the other lot killed their fathers. Or because the other lot drove their great-grandfathers off their land. Or because the other lot oppressed our lot economically for centuries.

My point is not that religion itself is the motivation for wars, murders and terrorist attacks, but that religion is the principal label, and the most dangerous one, by which a 'they' as opposed to a 'we' can be identified at all. I am not even claiming that religion is the only label by which we identify the victims of our prejudice. There's also skin colour, language, and social class. But often, as in Northern Ireland, these don't apply and religion is the only divisive label around. Even when it is not alone, religion is nearly always an incendiary ingredient in the mix as well. And please don't trot out Hitler as a counter-example. Hitler's sub-Wagnerian ravings constituted a religion of his own foundation, and his anti-Semitism owed a lot to his never-renounced Roman Catholicism (see [Hitler Was Not An Atheist by John Patrick Michael Murphy](#)).

It is not an exaggeration to say that religion is the most inflammatory enemy-labelling device in history. Who killed your father? Not the individuals you are about to kill in 'revenge'. The culprits themselves have vanished over the border. The people who stole your great-grandfather's land have died of old age. You aim your vendetta at those who belong to the same religion as the original perpetrators. It wasn't Seamus who killed your brother, but it was Catholics, so Seamus deserves to die 'in return'. Next, it was Protestants who killed Seamus so let's go out and kill some Protestants 'in revenge'. It was Muslims who destroyed the World Trade Center so let's set upon the turbaned driver of a London taxi and leave him paralysed from the neck down.

The bitter hatreds that now poison Middle Eastern politics are rooted in the real or perceived wrong of the setting up of a Jewish State in an Islamic region. In view of all that the Jews had been through, it must have seemed a fair and humane solution. Probably deep familiarity with the Old Testament had given the European and American decision-makers some sort of idea that this really was the "historic homeland" of the Jews (though the horrific stories of how Joshua and others conquered their Lebensraum might have made them wonder). Even if it wasn't justifiable at the time, no doubt a good case can be made that, since Israel exists now, to try to reverse the status quo would be a worse

wrong.

I do not intend to get into that argument. But if it had not been for religion, the very concept of a Jewish State would have had no meaning in the first place. Nor would the very concept of Islamic lands, as something to be invaded and desecrated. In a world without religion, there would have been no Crusades; no Inquisition; no anti-Semitic pogroms (the people of the diaspora would long ago have intermarried and become indistinguishable from their host populations); no Northern Ireland Troubles (no label by which to distinguish the two 'communities', and no sectarian schools to teach the children historic hatreds — they would simply be one community.)

It is a spade we have here, let's call it a spade. The Emperor has no clothes. It is time to stop the mealy-mouthed euphemisms: 'Nationalists', 'Loyalists', 'Communities', 'Ethnic Groups', 'Cultures'. 'Civilisations'. Religions is the word you need. Religion is the word you are struggling hypocritically to avoid.

Parenthetically, religion is unusual among divisive labels in being spectacularly unnecessary. If religious beliefs had any evidence going for them, we might have to respect them in spite of their concomitant unpleasantness. But there is no such evidence. To label people as death-deserving enemies because of disagreements about real world politics is bad enough. To do the same for disagreements about a delusional world inhabited by archangels, demons and imaginary friends is ludicrously tragic.

The resilience of this form of hereditary delusion is as astonishing as its lack of realism. It seems that control of the plane which crashed near Pittsburgh was probably wrestled out of the hands of the terrorists by a group of brave passengers. The wife of one of these valiant and heroic men, after she took the telephone call in which he announced their intention, said that God had placed her husband on the plane as His instrument to prevent the plane crashing on the White House. I have the greatest sympathy for this poor woman in her tragic loss, but just think about it! As my (also understandably overwrought) American correspondent who sent me this piece of news said:

"Couldn't God have just given the hijackers a heart attack or something instead

of killing all those nice people on the plane? I guess he didn't give a flying fuck about the Trade Center, didn't bother to come up with a plan for them" (I apologise for my friend's intemperate language but, in the circumstances, who can blame her?)

Is there no catastrophe terrible enough to shake the faith of people, on both sides, in God's goodness and power? No glimmering realisation that he might not be there at all: that we just might be on our own, needing to cope with the real world like grown-ups? Billy Graham, Mr Bush's spiritual advisor, said in Washington Cathedral:

But how do we understand something like this? Why does God allow evil like this to take place? Perhaps that is what you are asking now. You may even be angry at God. I want to assure you that God understands those feelings that you may have.

What an honour, to be licensed to speak for God! But even Billy Graham's patronising presumption now fails him:

I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and He is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering. The Bible says God is not the author of evil. It speaks of evil as a "mystery".

Less baffled by this deep theological mystery were two of America's best-known televangelists, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. They knew exactly where to put the blame. Falwell said that God had protected America wonderfully for 225 years, but now, what with abortion and gays and lesbians and the ACLU, "all of them who have tried to secularise America... I point the finger in their face and say you helped this happen." "Well, I totally concur," responded Robertson. Bush, to his credit, swiftly disowned this revealing example of the religious mind at work.

The United States is the most religious country in Christendom, and its

born-again leader is eyeball to eyeball with the most religious people on Earth (the Taliban's religion-inspired laws include draconian penalties for men whose beard is too short – Monty Python could not have dreamed it up.) Both sides believe that the Bronze-Age God of Battles is on their side. Both take risks with the world's future in unshakeable, fundamentalist faith that God will grant them the victory. J.C. Squire's famous verse on the First World War comes to mind:

God heard the nations sing and shout

"Gott strafe England" and "God save the King!"

God this, God that, and God the other thing –

"Good God!" said God, "I've got my work cut out!"

Incidentally, people speak of Islamic Fundamentalists, but the customary genteel distinction between fundamentalist and moderate Islam has been convincingly demolished by Ibn Warraq in his well-informed book, *Why I am not a Muslim* ([see also his statement at the website for Secular Islam](#)).

The human psyche has two great sicknesses: the urge to carry vendetta across generations, and the tendency to fasten group labels on people rather than see them as individuals. Religion fuels both. All violent enmities in the world today fuel their tanks at this holy gas-station. Those of us who have for years politely concealed our contempt for the dangerous collective delusion of religion need to stand up and speak out. Things are different after September 11th. Let's stop being so damned respectful!

A revised version of a paper written for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Madison, Wisconsin, reproduced by kind permission of Richard Dawkins.