“Render unto Darwin the things that are Darwin’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Recent Developments in the Battle between Science & Religion
My interest was piqued by a three-day symposium organized by Roger Bingham at the Salk Institute in 2006: Beyond Belief.

This was followed by a second conference, Beyond Belief II, in 2007.

I was struck by the intensity, acrimony, and condescending character of the criticisms of religion.

Dennett: “...I came to realize that it's a no-win situation. It's a mug's game. The religions have contrived to make it impossible to disagree with them critically without being rude.”
My background

- Raised Catholic, still comfortable with many of its values
- Raised with acceptance of evolution in particular and science in general from high school onward.
  - The interesting question was not whether these were compatible, but how.

- Not unlike Chris Hedges, I found myself dismayed by the tone of the discussion, by what seemed to be something approaching a Darwinian fundamentalism and a level of anger more often associated with the opponents of such views.
- Tone does not invalidate content.
Overview

Part One. The People.
• Briefly review the recent critiques by Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett;

Part Two. The Arguments
• Examine the principal arguments;

Part Three. The Answer
• Offer a possible resolution of this controversy.

Part Four. The Theology
• Comment on some theological dimensions of the controversy; and
Part One: The Critique: The People
The Four Horsemen

Four critics of religion have recently enjoyed surprising popularity, two in the United States and two in Great Britain:

- Sam Harris
- Richard Dawkins
- Christopher Hitchens
- Daniel Dennett

Sam Harris
http://www.samharris.org/

- Sam Harris was an undergraduate major in philosophy at Stanford with an interest in Eastern as well as Western philosophy.
- He is currently working on a doctorate in neuroscience, using fMRI to study religious belief.

Letter to a Christian Nation (2006) is a follow-up to the earlier work; here Harris replies to some criticisms of The End of Faith.
Religion is held off the table from rational criticism: no one is allowed to criticize religious beliefs, no matter how bizarre, from a rational standpoint.

- The Second Coming, the Rapture
- George W. Bush’s appeal to God in speeches
  - What if he appealed to Zeus or Apollo?
- The Virgin Birth; condom policy in Africa; stem cell research
- Islam and terrorism
  - Violence following Danish cartoons
  - Rewards to martyrs in heaven
  - 9/11 terrorists were middle-class, college educated
  - not the downtrodden of the earth
- God is not a moderate
- Inquisition, persecution of witches and Jews
Replace superstition with evidence and reasoned arguments

No dogmas

Spirituality important
  - Buddhist meditation
  - Hindu spirituality (Advaita Vedanta)

We need a “science of good and evil” to determine empirically what contributes to human happiness and human suffering.
Richard Dawkins
http://richiarddawkins.net/

• Richard Dawkins a scientist and author who holds the Simonyi Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford.

• His book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) popularized the idea of evolution as driven by genes.

Richard Dawkins, 2

- Dawkins argues that the “God Hypothesis” has insufficient empirical support.
- Rejects the notion of God as an object of worship.
- Criticizes the Argument from Design, asking in effect who designed the designer. Natural selection offers a better explanation of complexity.
Christopher Hitchens

http://www.hitchensweb.com/

- A British-American cultural critic and polemicist and atheistic humanist.
- Critiques of Mother Theresa, Henry Kissinger, and Bill Clinton.
Christopher Hitchens, 2

- Hitchens maintains that religion is "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children."
- Religious accounts of origins are false
- Religion suppresses human nature
- Religion encourages violence and blind obedience
- Religion discourages free inquiry.
Daniel Dennett

http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/incbios/dennettd/dennettd.htm

Video resources: http://www.reitstoen.com/dennett.php

Daniel Dennett is an American philosopher at Tufts University who specializes in the philosophy of mind and philosophy of biology.

*Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (1995)
2006

- Dennett proposes to study religion scientifically as a natural phenomenon
- Less polemical and antagonistic than Harris et al.
- Uses Dawkins’ notion of “meme” (anything that can replicate from one brain to another): religious memes increase good survival chances.
- Some people encourage development of religious memes even when they don’t believe in them.
Part Two: The Arguments
Overview of the Arguments

1. The Rational Scrutiny Argument
2. The Harm Argument
3. The Evolution/Scientific Knowledge Argument
4. The Scientific Explanation of Religious and Moral Phenomena
1. The Rational Scrutiny Argument

- This argument is present throughout the work of these four critics, but most prominent in Sam Harris’s work.

- If successful, this argument opens the door to all subsequent criticism.
  - Religion makes claims about the empirical world, some of which contradict the claim of science.
  - Religion makes claims about how we ought to act.
  - Religions make claims about themselves and their own supernatural origins.
  - Religion makes claims about what we might call the larger meaning of existence.

- This stands as another chapter in a centuries-long debate about the relationship between faith and reason.
  - This will be discussed in more detail below.
2. The Harm Argument:  
Premise 1

This is an argument we find in Harris and Dawkins in particular. In its most general form, its first premise would seem to look something like this:

– Religion causes great harm.
  • Support: religious persecution, religiously-inspired terrorism, condom policy in Africa, stoning of adulterers, etc.

– This premise seems incontrovertibly true, but is it sufficient?
  • Does religion also produce great goods?
    – Opposition to racism, support of human rights, opposition to apartheid, Bonhoeffer’s opposition to Nazis
    – If so, this might affect the rest of the argument, since you may just want to eliminate the toxic aspects of religion rather than all religion.

• Aren’t there other sources of harm, including science?
  – The tacit assumption in many of these discussions is that we have a choice between religion and science.
What exactly is the harm argument advocating? What conclusion does it draw?

- To eliminate religion?
  - Seems unlikely to be successful
  - Also seems naïve from a scientific standpoint.
    - If religion has an important function, it would be difficult to eliminate it without providing something equally powerful and compelling and attractive in its place.
    - Otherwise we simply have a war against religion, something no one seriously advocates.

- To eliminate “toxic” [Dennett] aspects of religions?
- To subsume all religious claims to

What audience is the argument directed to?

- True believers
  - To give up their belief?
  - To moderate their beliefs and actions to accord with reason and science?
- Moderates to give up their defense of more extremist members of their religion.
- Atheists and agnostics to, as Dennett says, “bring them out of the closet.”
3. The Evolution/Scientific Knowledge Argument

- Politically, much of the energy around this debate probably draws on stem cell research, teaching evolution in public schools, etc.
- A corollary of the first argument.
- Religious critiques/suppressions of science
  - Galileo, Inquisition

Galileo Galilei in front of the Inquisition in the Vatican 1632.
Joseph Nicolas Robert-Fleury
4. The Scientific Explanation of Religious and Moral Phenomena

- The fourth possible argument from science against religion suggests that science may be able to explain religious and moral phenomena, that is, provide a naturalistic (i.e., non-supernatural) account of the origins of our religious and moral experience that is at variance with the supernatural account given by religions.
It seems reasonable to assume that we will gradually develop an accurate neuroscientific picture of what happens in the brain when, for example, someone is speaking in tongues. See research by Andrew B. Newberg (at Penn) and others on the neuroscientific description of speaking in tongues.
Out-of-Body Experiences

Neuroscientific and Evolutionary Approaches to Morality

- Mike Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain*
- Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*
- Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds*
- Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*
Naturalistic Ethics

- This suggests that there are naturalistic explanations of apparently supernatural phenomena.
- Dennett: “They see me as showing how the magicians do their tricks.”
- *Beyond Belief 3* showed some of the exciting new work on human flourishing, providing an explanation of what contributes to human flourishing.
Part Three.
The Answer
The Issue

- The issue: if we render unto Darwin the things that are Darwin’s and unto God the things that are God’s, then what exactly—if anything--still belongs to God?

- What kind of God is still available as an object of belief? Of worship?

- My position will be an example of what philosophers call compatibilist theories—more specifically, weak compatibilism.
A Compromise Position

Each party must give up something:

- Religion must give up its claim to explaining the way things are; all it can do is tell us what we can hope for and to some extent the way things ought to be.

- Science must give up its pretense to providing meaning for life; all it can do is tell us the way things are.
A Compromise Position, 2

Each side retains something essential:

- Religion is still able to provide us both with
  - a moral community and
  - A sense of the purpose of human life.

- Science is still able to provide us with the empirical account of the way things are and how they have developed.
An Analogy: Art and Religion

We are now beginning to develop a clearer scientific account of how art works, that is, of the underlying neurobiological mechanisms that make artistic experience possible and powerful.

Ramachandran’s 10 Principles of Art, an attempt to map out some of the underlying laws of aesthetic experience.

- Such explanations do not undermine the power of art.
- Similarly, neuroscientific and evolutionary accounts of religious experiences do not have to undermine the experience itself.
Compatibilist Theories

- Compatibilist theories say that reason and religion can never contradict one another
  - Strong: they are saying the same thing
  - Weak: they say different things, but not contradictory things
Strong Compatibilism

- G. W. F. Hegel thought that reason and religion could be completely reconciled.
- Religion presents same truths as reason, but under a different form, as myth rather than as reason.
Weak Compatibilism

Thomas Aquinas believed that reason and faith could never contradict one another, but faith may reveal truths beyond the scope of reason.
“…the things that are Darwin’s”

- The sciences describe the natural world, including:
  - Evolution;
  - Moral experience, and
  - Religious experience.

- Furthermore, the natural sciences can to some extent tell us what is good for human beings, i.e., what promotes human flourishing.

- Religious beliefs can legitimately be criticized within this context.
“…the things that are God’s”

- The realm of the human good is underdetermined by science, that is, science specifies a range of possible goods for human beings.
- Within the range specified by science, religions can offer a more specific vision of the good life.
- Religion provides communities within which the good life can then be pursued jointly.
- Religion may provide accounts of the ultimate meaning of human life with the acknowledgment that these accounts cannot lay valid claim to literal truth.
Part Four.
The Theology
The Religious Spectrum

- The principal target of these critiques is Christianity, especially fundamentalism and Catholicism, and Islam.
- Religion comes in many other forms as well.
- There are significant differences both among religions and also within religions.
- Distinguish fundamentalism from pluralism.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

The French Jesuit (1881-1955) was a scientist and philosopher and theologian who sought to integrate faith and science into a single vision of consciousness heading toward an Omega Point.
Teilhard de Chardin’s work ranged from biology to theology.
The Dalai Lama and Neuroscience

The Dalai Lama spoke at the annual meeting of The Society for Neuroscience amid controversy, despite his very positive attitude toward science.

News

*Nature* 436, 452 (28 July 2005) | doi:10.1038/436452b; Published online 27 July 2005

Neuroscientists see red over Dalai Lama

David Cyranoski

Researchers petition against meditation lecture.

A growing number of neuroscientists are calling for the cancellation of a special lecture to be given by the Dalai Lama in November. The Buddhist leader is due to speak at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience (SFN) in Washington DC, but a petition against the talk has already gathered some 50 signatures.
There is a fundamental theological issue about the relationship between reason (including the laws of nature) and the will of God.

The voluntarist tradition (St. Augustine) sees God’s will as fundamentally unconstrained by reason. God, quite simply (and simplistically) can do whatever he wants.

The intellectualist tradition (Thomas Aquinas) maintains that God cannot do something that is irrational.

To the extent that God’s will is constrained by reason, science and religion are less likely to conflict, since science uncovers a rational order that is not contradictory to God.

To the extent that God’s will takes precedence over reason, we may find the laws of nature will be overridden by divine acts (e.g., miracles) and interventions in human and cosmic history.
Islam, Science, and the Will of God

- Islamic science flourished 800-1100 AD in Bagdad and preserved the works of the ancient philosophers.
- A shift occurred in Islam with Imam Hamid al Ghazali (1058-1111), who claimed that reason could not comprehend the absolute and the infinite.
- It came to be seen as blasphemous to attempt to constrain the will of God through the articulation of natural laws.
One of the crucial areas in which constraints on the will of God become important is the realm of miracles. Can God suspend the laws of nature? Intervene in human history? Change the natural world? If so, the natural world—insofar as it is affected by these divine interventions—is beyond the comprehension of science.
"Render unto Darwin the things that are Darwin’s, and unto God the things that are God’s."