There is an old Irish joke, retold here by Richard Dawkins, about somebody in Northern Ireland who responded to a survey question about religious affiliation by declaring himself an atheist. ‘Would that be a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist?’ came the insistent reply. Faced with a similar inquiry, I would be obliged to declare myself a Catholic atheist. By this I mean that I am an atheist by conviction, but a Catholic by upbringing and tribal affiliation.

I know that some people raised as Catholics blame the Church of Rome for their difficulties in later life, nourishing a particularly degenerate literary genre. As a child taught by nuns and brothers, I endured a fair amount of pious claptrap and casual corporal punishment and some inappropriate sexual interest. But any detriment suffered was far outweighed by a sound education and by exposure to a rich cultural heritage – of art and music, scripture and ritual. For this I retain gratitude, affection and respect.

Though as an atheist I feel I should welcome Dawkins’ diatribe against religion, as a Catholic atheist, I find myself repelled by his crass polemic – and I am not alone (1). In his comments on Catholicism, Dawkins reveals a combination of old-fashioned Protestant anti-Popery with the fashionable contempt of the liberal intelligentsia for any kind of religious faith. Thus he refers to the ‘semi-permanent state of morbid guilt suffered by a Roman Catholic possessed of normal human frailty and less than normal intelligence’ (p167). Discussing the consequences of clerical sexual abuse in Ireland, he suggests that ‘horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place’ (p317). These are statements of such unmitigated prejudice – and indeed absurdity – that it is shocking to find them in a serious book by a reputable author.

Dawkins’ patrician scorn for all forms of religion leads him to miss the essential point. Religious faith cannot be dismissed as a manifestation (or as a cause) of psychopathology or stupidity. Religion, in Marx’s words, is ‘the fantastic realisation of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality’ (2). It is ‘the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not found himself or has already lost himself again’. In a world in which human beings are estranged from themselves and from others and lack control over their own destiny, they seek refuge and consolation in the worship of divine forces. Religion provides a distraction, an alibi, an evasion, an abdication of responsibility. The persistence of religion poses a range of specific historical and political questions which Dawkins’ resolutely ahistorical approach does not even begin to answer.

Where he sticks close to the terrain of science with which he is familiar, Dawkins is at his most convincing. He shows that God is a much more improbable hypothesis for the origin of the universe than a scientific, materialist theory. He confirms that Darwin’s theory of evolution provides a more plausible account of the emergence of human life on Earth than the Book of Genesis. Yet his attempt to deploy evolutionary psychology to explain the continuing salience of religious faith in the twenty-first century is as unconvincing to me as I found Brother Alpheus’ exposition of Aquinas’ five proofs of the existence of God when I was 13. When Dawkins reduces diverse
political conflicts – in Northern Ireland, in Israel, in the former Yugoslavia – to religious causes, he reveals the vacuity of his ahistorical approach (while confirming popular prejudices). When he seeks to explain the terrorist outrages of 9/11 and 7/7 in terms of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ he obscures the more important determinants of these events in the ideology of multiculturalism (part of the liberal consensus regarded by Dawkins as the pinnacle of evolutionary progress).

The most curious feature of Dawkins’ crusade against religion is that it is mounted at a time when the social influence of religion is at a low ebb. In the USA, Dawkins follows liberals in grossly exaggerating the influence of the religious right as a way of avoiding any reflection on the lack of popular appeal of their own agenda. In the UK, Dawkins concentrates his fire on one school in Gateshead where creationism has crept on to the curriculum (allowing him to sneer at Peter Vardy, the vulgar ‘car salesman’ millionaire who has bankrolled the school). Yet, while he happily tilts at windmills, Dawkins ignores much more influential currents of irrationality – such as the cult of environmentalism – which has a far greater influence on the national curriculum than notions of ‘intelligent design’.

While Dawkins can readily identify common features between South Pacific cargo cults and the Christian churches, he seems oblivious to the religious themes of the environmental movement. Just like evangelical Christians, environmentalists preach a ‘repent, the end is nigh’ message. The movement has its own John the Baptist – George Monbiot – who has come out of the desert (well, Oxfordshire) to warn us of the imminent danger of hellfire (in the form of global warming) if we do not repent and embrace his doctrines of austerity and restraint (3). Beware – the rough beast of the apocalypse is slouching towards Bethlehem to be born!

Far from challenging the pervasive influence of this bleak outlook, Dawkins goes so far as to endorse the abjectly anti-humanist theories of Peter Singer, one of the movement’s most fundamentalist apostles (4). Though this movement’s promotion of the anti-scientific ‘precautionary principle’ constitutes a greater threat to scientific experimentation than the pathetic attempt of a few evangelicals to return the teaching of biology to the Old Testament, it is entirely ignored by Oxford’s professor ‘for the public understanding of science’. While university theology departments are in decline, courses in various schools of ‘alternative health’ (which share only a foundation in pre-scientific thought) have grown apace in recent years – but Dawkins is too busy berating the bishops to notice.

In the turbulent years before the First World War, Jewish anarchists in London’s East End provoked riots by picketing the synagogue in Brick Lane on holy days, baiting the faithful while they fasted, by publicly eating ham sandwiches (5). In a similarly self-indulgent fashion, Dawkins seems to revel in causing offence to the devout. But this sort of posturing against religion does nothing to challenge the roots of religious faith. The Brick Lane synagogue was built as a Christian church and is now a mosque: while much else has changed around it, it is clear that the need for religious worship endures. ‘Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.’ (6)

Notes


(2) Karl Marx, Introduction to Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 1844

(3) George Monbiot, Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning, Allen Lane, 2006; see James Heartfield’s review on spiked: A secular version of kingdom come

(4) See The new priesthood of the kitchen, by Michael Fitzpatrick
(5) William J Fishman, East End Jewish Radicals, Five Leaves, 2004

(6) Karl Marx, Introduction to Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 1844
Dave Hill -- The science of ancient truths

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