

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND ATHEISM: THE CASE OF RICHARD DAWKINS

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Abstract:

Through the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church asserts the import of religious liberty for every individual and believes that one is entitled to live out one's faith. Thus, through *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Church has revealed her intention to create inter-religion dialogues and to encourage respect for the positive values of different religions. This raises a question as to whether such dialogues and respect as voiced in *Dignitatis Humanae* are applicable when it comes to the issue of atheism, a pressing issue faced by the Church today. This article explores the engagement of such document with atheism. Since atheism covers various views coming from a number of authors, this current article focuses only on the atheism as promoted by Richard Dawkins. Building his atheism upon science, Dawkins' views are worthy of our attention in today's world, which is characterised by unending scientific revolutions.

Keywords:

religious liberty • *Vatican II* • *Dignitatis Humanae* • *atheism* • *dialogue* • *science*

Introduction

In the period of three years between 1962 and 1965, the Catholic Church, gathered in the second Vatican Council, worked diligently to integrate the needs of the contemporary world with the whole tradition of the Church. This second Vatican Council has turned out to be a big project of *aggiornamento*, in that the Church no longer focuses on doctrines that tell people what to do, but she is also a Church that is willing to listen attentively to the world. Through a very long process, the Church has also declared her opinion concerning religious liberty, resulting in *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH).

Then, a question might arise: Does DH apply to atheism as well? This short paper seeks to delineate whether or not the DH also respects atheism. Clearly, the issue of atheism covers a very wide range of ideas and views; therefore, this paper would only specify the atheism promoted by Richard Dawkins. To be more precise, this paper tries to answer the question whether or not it is possible to respect the position of Dawkins in regards to religious liberty. Some allusions to the wide issue of atheism are given merely as the context of that of Dawkins'.

This paper consists of several parts. In the first part, after this short introduction, the view of atheism by Dawkins will be presented. An evaluation of it will be given in the second part. In the third part, my personal analysis on religious liberty vis-à-vis the Dawkins atheism will be laid out. This part is followed by a vision on dialogue, comprising two sections, and a conclusion.

Dawkins' Atheism

All through the history of humanity, atheism and theism have always coexisted. Philosophically speaking, it is always hard to answer what atheism and theism are.¹ The affirmation or denial of the existence of God has always been elusive. It is for the sake of clarity that a definition, although far from sufficient, should be made. Theism is a belief in a single, self-existent, eternal, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent and immaterial creator and sustainer of the universe from whence a number of ontological claims which admit rational assessments

are made.² Thus defined, theism has a lot to do with monotheism and Christian theological concepts.

Within the lengthy history of religious criticism, atheism has always been associated with human self-projection in religious beliefs and practices.³ Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Durkheim are the supporters of this position. Atheism holds that what human beings have always been worshipping is what they have found to be the essence within themselves; what they believe is what their fears and loves project into objectivity.⁴ In other words, the idea of God is nothing but a human creation. The human ability to transcend themselves renders it possible to devise a being with all those “omni” characters.

One projection has to do with science. In any events when science has not yet found the answer, it is easy to put God in the picture. God is the absolute response to anything that human mind cannot give satisfying and rational answers to. Right here, we have a complicated relationship between faith and science, between religion and science, between theism and atheism supported by what is said to be a scientific explanation. And indeed, the relationship between science and religion, especially in regard to liberty, has never been simple.⁵

Within this complicated scene, we have Richard Dawkins. Clinton Richard Dawkins was born in Kenya in 1941. He studied at Oxford University and obtained his Ph.D. in 1966. Then, he became a reader in zoology in the same university. For 13 years, from 1995 to 2008, he was Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science. Dawkins is an overt atheist and a big supporter of creationism. He is a keen exponent of atheism. He states this clearly in the preface of his *The God Delusion*:

“It is intended to raise consciousness - raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled. That is the first of my consciousness-raising messages”.⁶

This quotation shows Dawkins’ biggest ambition. Clearly, through its ten chapters, this book is meant to convert a theist to an atheist. Each chapter is addressed to a theist with certain convictions leading to their theist conclusion. Therefore, each chapter is to debunk a theistic concept and to propose an atheistic one.

Now we have a look at some basic characteristics of his atheism. “One of the greatest challenges to the human intellect, over the centuries, has been to explain how the complex, improbable appearance of design in the universe arises”,⁷ says he. The human questioning mind is then satisfied by religion that can provide the final answer to that question: there is God, the creator, and the great designer of the universe. This answer is, for Dawkins, wrong. The best and right answer according to Dawkins is the theory of evolution.

Generally speaking, this theory holds that in this universe there is a certain evolutionary process in which creations take place and it is through the same process that human beings are created. Thus, this theory explains the whence and whither of our human existence. All is within the process of evolution: man is the result of an evolution and is still within the same process that goes on continuously. For Dawkins, this theory is a sufficient answer for all the wonders that humans have over the mystery of the universe.

“The most ingenious and powerful crane so far discovered is Darwinian evolution by natural selection. Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that – an illusion”.⁸

Dawkins contends that to probe into the mystery of the universe, human beings should find a crane on which their questioning mind might climb for a better and more satisfying answer about the mystery. For Dawkins, Darwin’s evolution theory serves as the best crane. It shows the rational progress of whatever we are having now: the whence of human existence and, presumably, also the whither of it. The existence of a being as the great designer behind all, that is to say God, can never be accepted logically. Hence, there is no God.

One might then argue that the current existence of religion, which believes in the existence of God, is also the result of the long evolutionary process and the form we are having at the moment is the best possible form. It is interesting to notice that instead of following the route resulting in accepting religion, Dawkins sees religion as not more than a by-product of something else: it is the by-product of normal psychological dispositions.⁹

Human's psychological dispositions, along with material things, are believed to be inherited from one generation to the next in the evolutionary process. Religion, as a small part of such psychological dispositions, is also believed to be handed down from generation to generation.

Dawkins also contradicts the fact that religions have made great contributions to the history of the human race. One big contribution of religion is morality: the value that justifies whether what one does is good or bad. Religion provides human with rules concerning what is allowed and what is forbidden. Generally, one would agree that religion is one of the sources of morality. Dawkins, however, does not agree with that. He maintains that the source of morality is kinship and reciprocity.¹⁰

These two ideas of kinship and reciprocity are originally developed in his *The Selfish Gene*. In short, Dawkins asserts that the source of our deeds is the attempt of our genes to survive and protect ourselves and this, in turn, creates reciprocity out of which springs morality. All examples of child-protection and parental care, and all associated bodily organs - milk-secreting glands, kangaroo pouches, and so on - are examples of the working in nature of the kin-selection principle.¹¹ Kinship is not only connected to a social unit between any species that have similarities, but also has to do with how the genes work to protect themselves from extinction. And since long memory and a capacity for individual recognition are well developed in man,¹² there is a certain mutual understanding among human beings about certain values: who would fall into the category of good and who would fall into the category of bad; and so do humans have altruistic morality.

Chapter 8 of *The God Delusion*¹³ is dedicated to exposing the many mistakes that religions, especially Christianity, have committed in the course of history. In this chapter, Dawkins gives an account of numerous terrible things done in the name of religions. Finally, he concludes that

“Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. ... Immunized against fear by the promise of a martyr's paradise, the authentic faith-head deserves a high place in the history of armaments, alongside the longbow, the warhorse, the tank and the cluster bomb... Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools: that duty to God exceeds all other priorities, and that martyrdom in his service will be rewarded in the gardens of Paradise”.¹⁴

Putting the aforementioned into consideration, it seems fair to say that atheism is a complicated phenomenon with many definitions and arguments that support it. The atheism of Dawkins' is only one of such phenomena and his is specifically based on Darwin's evolutionary theory. From that theory, Dawkins goes on to argue that religion is but a by-product of inherited psychological dispositions. Moreover, he argues that religion is not the source of morality because there are many atrocious things done in the name of religions. One could sense that Dawkins tries to persuade the readers of his *The God Delusion* to comprehend religions as the source of evil.

An Evaluation

I would make a general evaluation on how Dawkins proposes his view on atheism. I do not wish to counter each and every argument that he set out but my evaluation will serve as the preparation for further evaluation on Dawkins' view of atheism from the view of DH which will be presented in the next part of this paper.

Dawkins starts by making a sharp criticism on the idea of God; hence, the title of the book *The God Delusion*. From the title, it is clear that Dawkins is absolutely certain that the idea of God is a delusion and he wants to prove that.¹⁵ *The God Delusion* is designed to convert a theist to an atheist. However, in the course of the book, we can easily find that Dawkins is shifting from a criticism towards theism, using both science and pseudoscience –and of course a promotion of the so-called scientific atheism- to a very harsh yet oversimplifying criticism towards religions.

The God Delusion is packed with presentations of problems arising supposedly from religions. In fact, all the events mentioned are not simply caused by religions. The 9/11, for example, is more than just a problem arising from faith and belief in God in one system of religions. It has other backgrounds! Therefore, it is a little too reckless to come to a conclusion that the one and only cause of such a disastrous event is religion.

Religion is persistently and consistently portrayed in the worst possible way mimicking the worst features of religious fundamentalism's portrayal of atheism.¹⁶ This is, of course, a very biased view of religions. Despite all their mistakes in the past, each and every religion makes countless good contributions towards humanity.

Overall, Dawkins' atheism is, I would say, a fundamentalist's aggression towards religions. In this part, we can see that fundamentalism belongs not only to those claiming the truth in a certain religion. Even an atheist could be a fundamentalist. Dawkins himself says that he is trying not to be a fundamentalist¹⁷ but then it turns out that the whole ideas he is pushing are forms of fundamentalism, par excellence. Thence, instead of giving a thorough scientific explanation to prove that God does not exist, his arguments are more like propagation full of hatred towards religions.

Toward a Dialogue

Now we can turn to what DH says concerning religious liberty, which might also include atheism, in this case, that of Dawkins'. This declaration had undergone a very long process before being promulgated in the second Vatican Council.¹⁸ Thus, DH is a declaration resulted from a careful and profound reflection on many other issues that could touch religious liberty. The process shows that through the council, the Church is gradually becoming more listening to the world. The voices brought by the fathers of the council mirrored the contextual situation. Therefore, in the process of producing the document, we see great efforts in achieving a prudent way of dealing with the concrete situation of the contemporary world.

According to DH, the religious liberty is based on human dignity. It states that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.

“This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. ...[A]ll men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power... [T]he right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person ... known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself” (DH 2).

This implies that all men have the dignity, which is from God himself (Cf. Genesis 1:27). This dignity does not depend on hypotheses about the process of the creation of man. This dignity is universal in that every man possesses it, simply because she or he is a human being. Therefore, this dignity is to be acknowledged and to be protected at all costs.

Moreover, the Church maintains that human dignity is always in relation to God's call to be in communion with Him. Through her pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, it is clear that

“The root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator” (GS 19).

The human dignity is of divine origin. Since the very beginning of creation, notwithstanding any other theories of this beginning such as that of Darwinian evolutionist theory, God has willed that human be in a communion with him. The fathers of the second Vatican council declare perfectly, “Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself (DV 2)”. The universal salvific will of God is directed so that man lives in eternal happiness with Him.

Atheism is the denial of God as well as the denial of the fundamental relationship between man and his creator. Within that view, the true sense of human dignity is lost. Human dignity is not the result of the blind fate in the universe. It is not merely a by-product of human intellectual capacity, which is fortunately acquired by man solely because of a certain process of evolution. Human dignity is the gift of God. Atheism then is not in line with the teaching of the Church and cannot be supported in the name of religious liberty.

Apropos of the issue of atheism, the tolerance over religious freedom might as well be put as what the Church affirms.

“Still, she strives to detect in the atheistic mind the hidden causes for the denial of God; conscious of how weighty are the questions which atheism raises, and motivated by love for all men, she believes these questions ought to be examined seriously and more profoundly” (GS 21).

Accordingly, I would suggest we not take the position of aggressively opposing the position of the atheist. In fact, it is always difficult, if not

impossible, to determine whether one is an atheist through and through or not.

GS teaches us to be wise when it comes to make judgments on atheism. As a set of proposition objecting to the existence of God and all that derives from it, atheism is of course to be rejected, though not with aggression and hostility. This prudence is required especially because atheism results not rarely from a violent protest against the evil in this world (GS 19). Such case calls for our effort to make this world a better place for everyone. Instead of condemning the atheists, the Holy Mother Church invites us to be more reflective and build a dialogue with all.

After that theological (theoretical) analysis, I would draw attention now to analyze the position of Dawkins, especially his tone, when he is building his arguments for atheism. His is the voice of disrespect towards religions and all theological statements. No wonder, his opponent has accused him of being an “aggressive antireligious propagandist with an apparent disregard for evidence”.¹⁹

Indeed, his tone is quite aggressive and attacking. This could be a hindrance towards *bonum commune* as the Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religions (NA 5). What Dawkins is doing in his *The God Delusion* is indeed a form of harassment, which is totally unacceptable.

A good dialogue can only start by respecting each other’s position. When one of the parties has begun to reproach the other, it is impossible to make a dialogue. A good dialogue starts with trust, *i.e.*, starting by an inner attitude that the other party has good intentions and is willing to do good. The position of Dawkins will make it difficult to make a true dialogue. Nevertheless, it is still an interlocutor and worth pondering over.

Being Challenged

I would like to offer some positive contributions from Dawkins’ harsh criticism. Most of his criticisms are directed towards intolerance and monolith view of religions. Perhaps some of our views or our ways of living out religions might trigger some people to detest religions in general

and thus denying the existence of God altogether. The criticism should enable us to be wiser and to profoundly reflect upon religions and how we, as members of the Church, could be the face of the mercy of God by living out our religions.

The criticism should also make us more open to build a dialogue, which characterizes the Church's openness to listen to the world. Pope Paul VI started a good progress towards the Church within this world when, in 1964, he wrote the encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam* (ES). For many, that encyclical letter serves as a program of his pontificate. ES 12-15 emphasizes the importance of making a dialogue with the modern world. It has been a big leap and a result of a careful reflection.

Dialogues and openness were big points back then in the 1960s. The Church seemed to be unready to face the wave of modernism, which at that time penetrated more into human life, both at the theoretical and practical levels. No wonder, the Church then struggled hard in grappling with modernism. Each pope would try his best in dealing with this but at the same time, it was clear that each pope had come from a certain context that contributed a certain stance he undertook.

Pascendi Domenici Gregis and *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* are the positions in which, at a certain point, the inchoate issue of modernism has not yet been carefully examined but, at the same time, a stance should be taken. With the spirit of openness, of *aggiornamento*, a dialogue is to be built with all possible interlocutors. The Church, however, keeps supporting good dialogues with all.

“While rejecting atheism, root and branch, the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue.” (GS 21).

Dialogue here means the genuine effort to engage one another “through the word” (*dia logos*) on what it means to [C]hurch in today's world.²⁰ Moreover, this is an invitation to a fruitful dialogue, that is, a dialogue that not only a matter of understanding each other or looking at each other's good side. This dialogue provokes concrete actions that involve everybody disregarding the differences.

In this case, the atheism of Dawkins is an interlocutor. The content and the tone are to be refuted but the fact that this position of atheism exists has invited us to be more and more open to dialogues without losing our integrity.²¹

Dawkins' atheism should never make us cower and step back. To engage with what is there in the world sometimes requires courageous attitude because there are always possibilities that out there someone might be mocking our faith. The history of our Church has shown that she grows not always because of anything agreeable. In her long history, the Church becomes wiser because of bitter oppositions.

Conclusion

Atheism, whose adherents may come to it through various ways, is really a big issue with many versions and forms. One of the versions is that of Dawkins'. Starting by the theory of evolution of Darwin, Dawkins comes to his atheism and he keeps promoting his view with the wish to convert his readers to be atheists.

His atheism denies the existence of God and, through some historical records, he shows that religion is the culprit of many distressing events in the history. Religion is even the source of violence and evil among mankind. An evaluation of his atheism, furthermore, displays that it is too harsh a criticism towards religions that might hinder attempts to build fruitful dialogues among different religions and to build *bonum commune*. In other words, theologically and theoretically, his atheism is unacceptable; practically it creates a huge obstacle towards interreligious dialogues and building *bonum commune*. But still, his criticism has positive contribution; that is, it invites us to profoundly reflect upon how we live out our religion and, for better or worse, it challenges us to be more open to dialogues.

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Endnotes:

- 1 J. J. C. Smart & J. J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997) 3.
- 2 Cf. *ibid.*, 3-4.
- 3 Michael J. Buckley SJ, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern*

- Atheism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) 102.
- 4 Cf. *ibid.*, 101.
 - 5 Frank M. Turner, "Science and Religious Freedom", in Richard Helmstadter (Ed.), *Freedom and Religion in the Nineteenth century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 55.
 - 6 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) 1.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 157.
 - 8 *Ibid.*,
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 177.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, 214-226.
 - 11 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1976]) 107.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 187.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 279-308.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 308.
 - 15 Cf. Alister E. McGrath & Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Illinois: 2007) 7-8. This book is also a strident answer almost for all arguments Dawkins made in his *The God Delusion*.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 14.
 - 17 Cf. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, *op. cit.*, 281-282.
 - 18 Silvia Scatena makes a very good study of the history of *Dignitatis Humanae*. Cf. Silvia Scatena, *La fatica della libertà* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003).
 - 19 Alister E. McGrath & Joanna C. McGrath, *op. cit.*, 12.
 - 20 J. Haers & P. de Mey (Eds.), *Theology and Conversation, Towards a Relational Theology* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003) 395.
 - 21 Cf. *ibid.*, 393-672.