

The Dawkins-Hitchens Challenge to Religion

by: Douglas Lockhart

I can only regard with bewilderment an educated man who is also religious
Anton Chekov

Never, neither indirectly nor directly, neither as a dogma nor as an allegory, has religion yet held
any truth

Friedrich Nietzsche

Every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may
be sure that the explanation is false

Emile Durkheim, *The Rules
of the Sociological Method*
pp103-106.

Polarisation

The polarisation that now pertains between religion and science, and between religion and philosophy, and no less so between religion and history, is no better exemplified than in books published one year apart by Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens, books that excoriated Christianity in particular, but which apply to all forms of religion promoting belief in God. These books were of course *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (2006), and *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchen (2007). As a result of their efforts, both authors have been nominated public intellectuals, Hitchen's in the top one hundred by *Foreign Policy* and Britain's *Prospect* magazine, Dawkin's in the top three by *Prospect* alongside Umberto Eco and Noam Chomsky. Whatever one thinks of the ratio, there is no doubting the effect these writer/thinkers have had on Western society; they have become the catalyst in a wide-ranging debate to do with the nature of reality and the irrationality of religion in relation to that reality.

These are angry men; their rage is almost palpable. Their determination to bring religion's house down about its ears is the equivalent of a carefully orchestrated vendetta. Sounding not unlike Old Testament prophets - an irony that has not escaped notice - they have thundered against a host of similar issues, their intelligence and wit making short work of contrary opinion, their grasp of science and philosophy functioning like a battering ram against a flimsy door. Religion has been put on notice: you have been found wanting; there is no place left in which to hide.

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I have great sympathy with the tack taken by these authors; they've done their homework and deserve to be taken seriously. But as I listen to them I feel uneasy in relation to their certainty that everything to do with reality is, or will be, explicable in scientific/intellectual terms, and that there is nothing at all of consequence in religious experience except the socially useful aspect of crowd control. As with Durkheim's contention that social phenomena cannot be explained by way of psychological phenomena (see 3rd opening quote) - a claim I agree with in relation to the conscious ego - the claim made by Dawkins and Hitchens that all religious belief and experience is in essence an abuse of the mind does not sit easily with me. In terms of "belief" I take their point; in terms of "experience" I have my doubts. Religious beliefs can of course lead to wish-fulfillment projections, but experiences not reliant on religious beliefs that challenge the now prevalent physicalist conception of reality should not be placed in the same category. Something is going on behind the facade of the conscious mind that is not always explicable in strict physicalist terms, and that subjectively sensed something can on occasions resonate with objective reality in ways that are quite surprising. Which takes us back to Durkheim's quote, for it may well be that our attempts to explain all so-called religious phenomena in scientific/intellectualist terms is as egregious a mistake as attempting to explain social phenomena by the rules of individual psychology.

There is no doubting that religion is a socially cohesive force, but as inferred by Dawkins and Hitchens and many another, at what price is this cohesion elicited? Western democracy gratefully receives the social benefits of Christianity's influence, but as is obvious from the above atheist-driven dog-fight, there is now a limit to what intelligent human beings are willing to put up with - we are now too individualistic to be dictated to by anyone. Faith claims that flatly contradict commonsense, never mind science and history and daily experience in an informed world, can no longer expect elbow room. The world has grown up, matured, come to its senses and shrugged off the superstitions of millennia; we are on our way to, well, we're not exactly sure what, but it has to be better than what went before. Is that not always the case, give or take the odd situation where it is not the case? Those are the risks we have to take if we want to progress, if we want the world to become a coherent whole. So why isn't the world responding? Why is it currently back-tracking in terms of civilised behaviour? Why such a fuss from fundamentalist this and fundamentalist that? Religious maniacs seem to be behind every bush, their incomprehensible demands and assertions the tenor of every other broadcast. We are under siege, it seems, and there is little we can do about it except offer a grimace. Or, if we happen to be a Dawkins or Hitchens

advocate, attempt to wrestle these benighted minds towards something resembling sanity - a dull prospect at any time.

Question: What exactly is it that's being encountered when religious views of an extreme type challenge society to rethink its values, or its lack of values? What exactly is challenging what? And that, I think, is the correct question to ask, not "who", but "what". For there is, it seems to me, actually no "who" operative in most of these confrontations, more a "what" in terms of religious or social group turned hard-line. Which brings us to the standard sociological approach where, according to Durkheim, religion derives from the individual's need to "understand" embedded in sociability. But not in that order, he argues. We should invert these factors and make "sociability ... the determining cause of religious sentiment",¹ which, he adds, is actually social sentiment on two levels of expression: (1) the day-to-day relationship an individual has with his/her community; and (2) the relationship that community has with society as a whole.²

Not everyone agreed with this twist; there were those who saw personal understanding as the primary need, sociability as a secondary factor. Durkheim refers to such thinking as "intellectualist", and proceeds to explain the facts of social life not in terms of the individual, but in relation to tribe, clan or family groups.³ In primitive societies the gods were never the protector or enemy of individuals, but of the group; individuals reaped benefit (or otherwise) only in terms of the group they belonged to. Everything was experienced as a by-product of the collective, an individual's relationship with the god as impersonal as their relationship to thunder and lightning.⁴ In this sense it was "the inter-social factors which [gave] birth to the religious sentiment",⁵ personal understanding in today's sense of "personal" was a long, long way off.

Today's Western sense of personal, private, inner religious experience took a long time to develop, and in doing so inadvertently helped lay the foundation for the kind of rampant individualism now taken for granted throughout Western society. Martin Luther should be thanked for this transition; his opposition to Catholicism's extravagances helped generate the Reformation, which in turn spawned the Protestant movements and a conception of religious truth based on the salvation of individuals by faith, a move that loosened, then annulled, dependence on Catholicism's collectivist attitude. Freed from the dictates of collectivist thinking, individuals began to act like individuals, their sense of personal worth steadily strengthening their perception of self, other and world - the Renaissance, already underway, had an unexpected ally in a blossoming Christian humanism.

Luther's contribution did not continue, however; as the result of a near-miss lightening strike, he developed a whole new breed of bigotry and resorted to "railing murderously against Jews, screaming about demons, and calling on the German principles to stamp on the rebellious poor."⁶ This tells us that superstition was alive and well, and that it would continue alongside a developing humanism in its old and new religious forms. But things had changed; the impersonal God was now a personal possession, of sorts, and as such subject to the vicissitudes of the human imagination.

Why then the present reversal to collective religious sensibility, to a primitive and often imbecilic reaction to the educated, secular world? Well, fear, of course; such individuals are, deep down, afraid of their own shadows, and psychologically their shadows carry not individual fears, but collective fears generated by religious communities under stress - the stress of a world threatened by secular society's vision of reality turned manically certain. Or simply rubbished in a flood of mindless, sometimes life-degrading, entertainment that for some makes religion the only show in town. Which in turn makes secularism and everything it stands for the "devil" in tangible form, the Great Beast of the Eastern imagination let loose in terms that everyone can perceive and understand. As such we westerners are a contagion that must be stamped out by whatever means possible.

This complex picture of fear and loathing is in many ways my own "unease" with physicalist doctrine inflated to unimaginable proportions, my suspicion that we may have gone too far in our intellectual dumbing down of reality transformed into a rising tide of resentment and violence. As a thinking individual I can handle the discomfort I feel; in terms of thinking individuals embedded in deeply conservative religious communities where humanistic values have only tenuously taken root, the case is altogether different. Bolstered by a collective fear of the unknown, such individuals react out of a combined psychological stress that overpowers individual conscience. In this way are the walls of commonsense and decency breached, and Christianity is not the innocent bystander it assumes itself to be. It, too, has contributed its fair share of nonsense to the present debate about reality. Were it not for the separation of Church and State we would, I suspect, be just as embroiled in Christian tomfoolery as we are with Christianity's hard-line Islamic and Jewish counterparts. True as it is that Christian-based acts of violence are generally perpetrated by unhinged individuals in relation to specific issues such as abortion, the same cannot be said for the often embarrassingly antiquated, medieval-type notions promulgated by high-ranking Catholic and Protestant clergy who ought to know better.

Self-forgetfulness and the Social Contract

To understand the root nature of the above dilemma requires an analysis of Durkheim's thinking in relation to that of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, an analysis which, as we shall see, produces some unexpected twists and turns in relation to perception, history and tradition. In Gadamer's approach, "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) is *prior* to "accumulated experience" (*Erfahrung*). In contrast to this, Durkheim's insistence is that "sociability" came before "understanding": everything thought or understood is generated through human interaction in a social context - it is a form of cultural hypnosis. For Gadamer, things are more complex, but in the end not all that different. We are, it seems, perpetually in danger from *participation mystique* on two levels: social-absorption and self-absorption. In social terms we disappear into the groups needs, hopes and desires, whereas in self-absorption we become submerged in the forgetfulness of self that accompanies all forms of mental engagement.⁷ In both instances the journey we engage in ends up as a journey without a journeyer. Even mental engagement isn't private according to Gadamer⁸ - all states of mental engagement are socially interactive by definition.

The interstices point between self-absorption and social-absorption is our ability to "think", an act reduced in importance through physicalist theory to the level of neurons firing in the brain. Governed by external factors thoughts flare into existence and splutter out like spent fireworks. But what if thought, as it is expressed in language "[is] both non-physical and independent of the human minds that grasp them"?⁹ What then? What effect would that have on the notion of self-absorption and social-absorption being inescapable mental states? Would such independence constitute a way out of the problem of our being biological robots? Would an *intentional* withdrawing from mental engagement change our deeply socialised and mentally engaged state of mind into a more profitable state? Would we in such a moment cease to be submerged beings and become, if only for an instant, a private being? This is to ask if we can in fact "wake up" out of our submerged state and re-engage with self, other and world in a different manner.

Coming from a different perspective, but nevertheless apropos to our subject, the philosopher Gottlob Frege postulated the existence of an experiential "third realm", a dimension of experience where thoughts are grasped rather than generated, his reason for doing so based on the nature of "truth" and its *arising*.¹⁰ The more important question for Frege was: How do we determine the truth of what we determine to be the truth in the face

of a conditioning that runs so deep? Perceived as no more than social conditioning, truth becomes hit-or-miss and dependent on the vicissitudes of the conditioned mind. Make thought nonsensible, or suprasensible, and "truth", like "meaning", changes into a factor in relation to *quality* of awareness. In Frege's definition of truth, thoughts should be distinguished from ideas and mind from consciousness. Perceived as a "dimension of being" over and above that of mind, thoughts became bearers of possible truths.¹¹ Mind hemmed in by socially generated beliefs and traditions all but cancelled out the possibility of encountering the larger truths of existence.

The remembering of self as "being", or *being ourselves wholly*, is however counterintuitive; we are perceptually as well as socially conditioned to remain submerged in mental engagement, and are mostly unaware of where our creative insights or intuitions spring from. So Durkheim is basically correct in his assessment of understanding being secondary to sociability – we are, on the whole, usurped in our thinking and knowing through socio-cultural engagement, the current notion that "thought" *is* language and therefore socially conditioned a rational intensification of our submerged conscious state.

The Death and Replacement of Religion

Emile Durkheim picks up on the theme of intellectual growth and maturity in his essay 'Secularisation and Rationality'¹² where he discusses the development of Christianity and the persistence of religious experience beyond any particular set of symbols. There is, he tells us, "something eternal about religion which is destined to survive",¹³ but it is something that will change as society changes. Or shrink, as is the case with Christianity's influence in the West. Christianity had once pervaded all levels of society, but as political, economic and scientific institutions freed themselves from its control, the God of Christianity receded in the public imagination, so allowing for a greater play of human imagination and ingenuity.¹⁴ But as Christopher Dawson shows in his study of religion and medieval culture, Christian beliefs left an indelible imprint on the new society that emerged, and that in spite of the humanist reaction against medieval culture and religion during the overlapping Renaissance and Reformation period.¹⁵ To the humanist reformers the Middle Ages were "a 'dark age' of Gothic barbarism ... hardly deserving to be called Christian at all",¹⁶ Christianity's past influence a thousand years of spiritual darkness and superstition that had to be jettisoned in favour of classical culture and primitive Christianity.¹⁷ Classical culture would help form

aspects of the sophisticated Renaissance mind, naive conceptions of primitive Christianity underpin the divergent views held by Protestant reformers.

There is no doubting that God, in the Christian sense, has now receded in the public imagination “and abandoned the world to men and their disputes.”¹⁸ Christianity can no longer enforce its views on individuals or on the collective; God is now an intellectual abstraction dismissed by the postmodern mind, or all but replaced by Jesus Christ in the evangelical or fundamentalist imagination. For unbelievers, God has ceased to exist, Jesus ceased to matter; for believers (Catholic or Protestant), God has transformed himself into a human being, entered history and become both comprehensible and approachable. In this sense the Christian religion has both evolved and contracted in its ability to influence public affairs, an expansion and regression “linked to the fundamental conditions of the development of societies [and the] decreasing number of collective [religious] beliefs and sentiments” held by a society.¹⁹ True as all of this is, however, it is Durkheim’s observation that religion is destined to survive the symbols in which it successively envelopes itself that I find interesting, for although he equates this with “moral reconstruction” in relation to individuals coming together to “affirm in common their common sentiments” through sociability, and tells us that this is no different from “properly religious ceremonies” in either object or result, he overlooks what is perhaps the more important factor: the numinous experience which all religions carry at their core. Recognised by the Church, and incorporated into its theology as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (what is apprehended in experience as an awe-inspiring and fascinating mystery), this experience nevertheless transcends all religious forms and should not be appropriated to any particular religious tradition. Here then is the fundamental reason for religion’s ability to persist; there is at its heart something that transcends religion itself.

So thought Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), and as a Christian philosopher influenced by Kant, he concluded that it was from experiences of the numinous that our conception of the “holy” had arisen, a factor apparently overlooked by Kant.²⁰ Such experiences were for Otto non-rational and only later expressed in symbols held to be indicative of some particular religion’s efficacy. But more important was his notion of numinous experience replacing philosophical ideas such as Prime Mover or Necessary Being, the great intellectual abstractions that had replaced “God” and helped render void the numinous experience at Christianity’s core.²¹ In this sense religious experience was autonomous, and in being so was beyond the auspices of science or philosophy to meaningfully categorise or explain. Religion

had its own inner logic, its own peculiar and special structure and could not be reduced to other forms of discourse.²² So writes Dawson, but he is well aware of the problems this kind of approach houses, for he says next that “attempts to reduce faith to belief in a number of metaphysical propositions about the ground of the cosmos ... must always be unsatisfactory.”²³ God cannot be explained on the grounds of metaphysical inference, for this inferred God is not the God of actual religious experience.

The God of mystical, numinous experience, transcends categories such as holy, or unholy, and in doing so transcends even the notion of God as developed in Christian theology. This is an obstacle, for the conception of God as developed by Christianity in relation to Jesus Christ is founded on the idea of “goodness” as ultimate category, so making morality the basis of religion, and it was this very factor in Kant’s philosophy that Otto eventually jettisoned.²⁴ Morality and the holy were not the same thing for Otto; they were distinct categories of experience, one mundane, the other transcendent. In this sense the Church was Kantian in its approach to ultimate reality, for it perceived everything through the lens of moral categories because its notion of the holy as wholly other had resulted in an inferred separation of the human from the divine that could not be breached. Human nature was, by definition, sinful, and as such could not traverse the gulf across which the holy beckoned. Any attempt to traverse this gulf was therefore suspect, mysticism as a sophisticated contemplative technique viewed by the religious establishment with alarm and distrust.

Emile Durkheim’s notion of moral reconstruction being the pivotal factor in human beings getting together reflects elements of the above, and it may well be that his sociology carries deeply ingrained elements of Christian thinking. As Dawson observes, Christendom was a socio-religious unity underpinning Europe and the birth and rebirth of Western culture, a unity that subtly infused that culture with “Christian moral and intellectual standards.”²⁵ There was no escaping the previous one thousand years of society’s interaction with Christian teaching; sociology’s fast-developing pragmatism was just as dependent on the past as humanism had been on classical culture. There would arise one major point of difference, though, and that difference would lie in how society viewed, and related to, the arts; that would change in a most remarkable fashion and help initiate - quite literally “initiate” - an encounter with reality verging on the numinous as a category of life-transforming experience in its own right. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the door to transcendent experience opened through the experience of artistic genius: the arts were about to turn into

a quasi form of religion, the artist into a species of priest.

The Domain of the Unreal

Anything created via learning and methodical calculation is, according to Kant, not an act of genius; only art works marked by inspiration and *inventio* deserved such acclaim. The important thing is *ingenium*, genius,²⁶ and genius is "spirit" in the sense of something that elevates a work of art beyond the banality of mere construction. A work of art either has spirit, or it is spiritless. So also with the act of judging a work of art, for "without genius not only art but also a correct, independent taste in judging it [is] not possible."²⁷ Taste in relation to an appreciation of art requires not only that the work of art reflect spirit in the sense of an inherent luminosity, but also that the viewer be sufficiently *inspirited* to determine whether a work of art is itself so inspirited. Taste in the usual sense of *opinion* "loses its significance if the phenomenon of art steps into the foreground."²⁸ So says Gadamer in his assessment of Kant's aesthetic. In other words, art functions as an indescribable quality unconsciously produced by the artist and unconsciously appreciated by the viewer. Something is in communication with something, but the thing communicated is not *information*. Art, real art, pertains to the self's authentic expression of reality in relation to its own authentic core, artifice to the likes and dislikes of the human mind in relation to the vicissitudes of fashion. Which, in essence, contradicts Durkheim's notion that being "part of the universe" is no different from being "part of society", for in being part of the universe we are an expression of universal complexity held within the mesmerising confines of social convention and capable of experiences that reflect our cosmic origins. In this sense "physicality" is not a limitation, it is, rather, a potential route beyond limitation because of its very nature. Yes, we are part of a whole, but that "whole" changes in relation to our quality of awareness - it is "quality of awareness" that inflicts limits, not our intrinsic nature.

In this sense Durkheim's assessment of art is again simultaneously mistaken and correct, for it is in art that we glimpse the possibility of transcendent experience, and it is in art that we witness fashion and taste and opinion driven to extremes. But it is Kant (Otto's philosophical mentor) who perhaps edges closest to what is at stake here, for he equates genius in art with "moments lived in full immediacy", and in doing so captures something of the artists quality of mind. Gadamer approaches this question from a different perspective: "the 'science of art' is aware from the start that it can neither replace nor surpass the

experience of art"²⁹ Truths are available in art that are not available by other means, so making "the experience of art ... the most insistent admonition to scientific consciousness to acknowledge its own limits."³⁰ Something is going on in art, real art, that conveys "truth" to the world, problem is, what is the nature of this truth, and by what means does the artist intercept it if it is not in some sense self-consciously propositional? And anyway, what is "understanding" in itself? Gadamer answers this question via the philosopher Martin Heidegger: "understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject but the mode of being of *Dasein* itself." This is to say that we do not have moments of understanding, but that we *are* moments of understanding, that we do not house meanings within the self, but that the self is meaningful in its own right. To "understand" is to be meaningfully one's self, it is to *be*. To be or not to be really is the question, our coming into existence dependent on moments lived in full immediacy just as Kant suggested.

Artist and Mystic

There is a curious similarity between artist and mystic; both are outsiders difficult to measure by the standards of public morality. Gadamer actually says this of artistic consciousness,³¹ but it also applies to mystical consciousness, there being many fascinating crossovers between such individuals, crossovers reflected in the thinking of Schelling, Holderlin and Hegel. Referring to the artist as "secular saviour", Gadamer sums up the public conception of the artist as someone whose "creations are expected to achieve on a small scale the propitiation of disaster for which an unsaved world hopes."³² Then, as if quoting Stephen Katz, he adds: "This claim has since defined the tragedy of the artists in the world, for any fulfillment of it is always only a local one, and in fact that means it is refuted." And what exactly are the public after? They are after "new symbols or a new myth" that will unite everyone,³³ which for Gadamer is an unattainable condition. Why so? Because "a cultured society that has fallen away from its religious traditions expects more from art than aesthetic consciousness and the 'standpoint of art' can deliver."³⁴

Fine, but what of Otto's insistence that it is numinous experience that defines authentic religious experience, not religious beliefs, traditions or myths. Myths, unlike most beliefs or traditions, may well have substance in relation to experiences of the numinous had by others, but even myths can degrade into traditions and beliefs lacking in substance.

Which tells us that much of religion may not actually be religious at all, and should not be used as a yardstick to judge this falling away towards art described by Gadamer. This "falling away" may not be the result of the separation of cultured consciousness from religion, more the result of religion having traded in its numinous core for a grocery list of paltry, substandard spiritual notions. In this sense, religion, on the whole, is not properly religious, whereas art, authentic art, carries the subtle energy of numinous experience into the public domain that religion lacks. Yes, all art is in a sense "local", but at its most profound it carries *universal* implications in relation to how each given moment of existence is perceived, or registered. The poet Rilke put it best. "I am learning to see; it goes badly."³⁵

For Gadamer, "seeing" automatically means articulating, and that is exactly what Rilke means when he says *it goes badly*. To "see" in Rilke's sense of seeing is to avoid falling into articulation; it is, as it were, to step into the spaces between words and experience the subtle, beckoning energy of creation. For a moment, a momentless moment, mental engagement ceases and is replaced with the emergence of self, other or world without attachment. Enter the artist as mystic, as seer, as prophet – the numinous is on the loose. What then is the numinous? Well, that's where we hit a brick wall; *that* is a question that cannot be answered, and that is its strength. All that can be said about the numinous is that it is not God in any shape or form; it transcends *articulated notions of God* just as silence transcends noise. You can call it "God" if you like – Eckhart called it "the God beyond God" - but you can't put it in a box and claim it as your own. It's free of all religious machinations, free of our needs, desires, and prejudices, our hopes and ambitions, our prayers, praises and salutations. It is itself, whatever that might mean. It arises when least expected, and it remains hidden when most needed. It is a mystery, a mysterious no-thing, but it is a no-thing that can register on us with the force of a tornado, a life-changing experience that cannot be narcissistically sought after, but which can be courted in silence and emptiness.

And sometimes found staring out of the pages of a good book, a poem or painting, in an architectural construction or in the beauty of the male and female form. There are no appropriate places or occasions within which the numinous is more likely to turn up; it has no preferences, because it has no mind. This is the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* up close and personal, an experience that transcends all religious forms and should not be appropriated to any particular religious tradition. As such it is the fundamental reason for religion's ability to persist; there is at the heart of religion something that transcends religion itself.

References and Notes:

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