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Darwin's Cathedral

God is everywhere. We are confronted by the results of spiritual belief on the news, in our schools, and most certainly in our interactions with other people. In the news we are brought 24-7 live information on the latest bombings in Afghanistan or Iraq. In our schools we are constantly reminded that certain subjects are off-limits, and our interactions with other people are often limited to subjects that will not offend either party. Not only is religion everywhere, it is everywhere of considerable importance. A demonstration of this importance can be found in our elected representatives. Of the 535 members of the Senate and House of Representatives whose job it is to represent this nation, there is not a single individual who identifies him or herself as atheist (Dawkins 45). In our current political climate, acknowledging a lack of religious belief is political suicide. In fact, according to a recent Gallup poll atheists are the most unpopular minority group in the country, upending such traditionally discriminated-against groups as homosexuals, Mormons, Hispanics, and women. Most revealing is that while 38% of the American population was categorically unwilling to support a Muslim candidate, fully 53% of Americans found a well-qualified atheist candidate insupportable (Somin 1).

Despite the enormous social cost of atheist belief, a significant subset of the global population does not believe in God. This idea *should* strike one as unusual and even bizarre. Given the historically omnipresent face of religious belief, how is it possible that some division of humans can go through life holding this decidedly negative view? I propose that atheists are not as deviant as they may originally seem. As a result of their shared moral intuitions, many of those who are categorized as atheist have not altogether forgotten spirituality. In many of these

individuals a religion based in natural law has evolved. This belief has taken the place of the more traditional belief in God. In many ways, this belief in the natural laws of science is more akin to traditional religion than one might at first assume.

What exactly is meant by the notion that science is a religious belief? In fact, what is religious belief in the first place? In response to this query we turn to the Durkheimian definition of a religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim quoted in Wilson 47). From this description we can readily categorize most belief systems traditionally viewed as religions. Taking the Catholic Church as an example, we see a group unified by a system of beliefs and practices (the Catechism, or the Bible from which it was compiled), relative to sacred things (the Catholic Church holds innumerable items as sacred) which unite into one single moral community called the church (The Roman Catholic Church), all those who adhere to them (perhaps historically more truthful than in modern times, but this can be said to be true.) Unsurprisingly, Catholicism fits the mold. In fact religions as dissimilar as Buddhism and Scientology also readily fall into place. We easily recognize each of these as religious belief. What then occurs when we attempt to place science in this cast?

To begin, we must find a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. While a great many works may rightfully be considered scientific analogs to the bible, Francis Bacon provides us with an excellent example in his New Organon. In this momentous book Bacon seeks to establish a new order of scientific inquiry, completely disparate from the historical and Aristotelian natural philosophy. He advocates the removal of all current scientific knowledge, creating a clean slate upon which to base all proceeding scientific discoveries. Without delving too deeply into his rather verbose arguments, Bacon’s gripe with the state of

natural philosophy is that it is corrupted by our preconceptions especially those based on church dogma. In many ways, Bacon could be considered the Martin Luther of Science, inspiring the reformation of the old scientific practices. To quote Bacon, “The logic now in use serves rather to fix and give stability to the errors which have their foundation in *commonly received notions* than to help the search after truth. So it does more harm than good” (Bacon 41). During the time of Bacon, scientific discoveries were regularly infused with metaphysical ideas based largely in religious beliefs. The result of this corruption was a science that was resistant to change, and often unnecessarily complex. In answer to these problems, Bacon creates a new frame for scientific inquiry, which will later be realized as the scientific method. The purpose of this method was to properly evaluate experimental data without attempting to reconcile it with ones personal beliefs. This scientific method can be considered the practices of scientific atheism, akin to practices of other religions. In some ways, the New Organon can be viewed as a catechism of science. The beliefs gleaned through its use parallel religious axioms. However, we still find ourselves in want of sacred “things.” Bacon provides an answer to this problem as well, though many scientists and individuals arrived at the same conclusion. “Man, being the servant of Nature, can do and understand so much and so much only as he has observed in fact. ... Beyond this he neither knows anything nor can do anything” (39). The unusual use of capitalization for the word nature occurs throughout his work, and reveals what Bacon holds most sacred: natural law. Just as a devout Jew might acknowledge subservience to the laws of his or her faith, we find in these laws the sacred tenants of scientific atheism.

In addition to fulfilling the first three requirements of religious belief, scientific societies akin to religious organizations are also formed. The more important of these communities date back to the period shortly after the scientific revolution, though innumerable modern versions

exist. The earliest societies were generally comprised of a small group of likeminded individuals who met to share scientific discoveries and perform experiments. Their meetings functioned as both a place to practice their beliefs as well as means by which the members could come to a greater understanding about the world in which they lived. In this way, meetings were very much like the mass of the Catholic faith, or temple for Mormons or any number of other religious ceremonies. The societies also functioned to publish scientific works and attempted to spread the knowledge gained through their labors. At first this information was produced solely for the learned elite, as it was largely written in Latin and published in expensive books. However, later the trend became to publish the results of experimentation in the local tongue so as to make them available to the public as a whole. The trend toward the globalization of scientific knowledge began to occur exactly during the scientific revolution, during the time of Bacon and many of the most revolutionary scientists of our age. An unintended consequence of this popularization is that it even serves as an analog to religious evangelization, thus furthering the parallels between science and religion.

It is thus clear that science provides a surprisingly good analogy to religious organization. Its methods and answers can be viewed as religious practices and beliefs, and its universal laws are synonymous with the sacred tenants found in many world religions. Even the globalization of scientific ideas can be seen as similar to scientific evangelization. The science of natural philosophy clearly fulfills the Durkheimian definition of a religion. Accuracy in definition, however, is only one part of the evidence illustrating the religion of science. A more complete understanding of the science of religion requires that we take at least a cursory examination of religion in our evolutionary history before we examine how these beliefs are manifested in modern society. Through this we will better understand the powerful desires that humans have

to form tight-knit moral communities called religions, and why it is very likely that science is an example of just such a community.

“Every society, from hunter-gatherers to postindustrial democracies, has had some form of religious belief” (Hamer 141). Evidence exists that extends the human tendency toward religious belief to over 60,000 years ago during the time of the Neanderthals (45). Since that point we have witnessed a dizzying variety of religious beliefs. From continent to continent and literally everywhere that humans have migrated since their realization as a species, we find spiritual beliefs. The ubiquity of religious thought leads one to a number of interesting conclusions while also raising many questions that have yet to be answered. The first conclusion is that religion must have played an extremely important role in our evolutionary history. Some have suggested that this spirituality must certainly have a genetic component. In his book, The God Gene, Dean Hamer explores this idea and comes to the conclusion that there is almost certainly a genetic basis for spirituality, and that this spirituality can vary greatly from person to person. E.O. Wilson also provides evidence for this genetic predisposition to religious belief in his book On Human Nature. According to Wilson, theories as to what particular evolutionary advantage was provided by a readiness to accept omniscient and ethereal beings vary greatly. A large number of individuals believe that religion served to strengthen the bonds between a group sharing similar moral structure. In fact many modern studies have shown that those who form together in such groups are significantly less likely to commit suicide (Haidt and Graham 6). While this is an extreme social metric, it serves to vividly demonstrate that group bond strength may have given those who believed in a creator some evolutionary advantage. Admittedly this view is not universal. In fact, Richard Dawkins has gone so far as to suggest that religious belief was never an advantage at all, but rather the (unfortunate) byproduct of genetic cultural evolution

(Wilson 45). Though a complete examination of this subject is too large a task to complete here, one can clearly see that those who formed spiritual or religious belief structures must have been provided at least some form of evolutionary advantage.

If forming together as groups through spirituality provided an adaptational advantage, where exactly did our beliefs come from? An excellent guess would be our conserved moral intuitions. It is for this reason that we find the golden rule in so many religious belief structures. In most cases we find that man has formed these religious ideals as representations of his intuitive morality. “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that *he himself* has spun” (C. Geertz qtd in lecture, emphasis added). This quote accurately represents the idea that man, whether divinely inspired or otherwise, creates religion. The gathering together of followers, and the definition of a set of moral ideals that will be conserved among the members of the religion, must be carried out by humans. If the Gods that the religious worshipped physically came down to run the church there would be little need for faith in the first place. Thus many religions are structured so that men are the spokespeople for God, or his scribes, or are otherwise inspired by God to run his church. While this formation of religion has traditionally been concerned with supernatural beings, we should not limit ourselves to thinking in this frame. The systematization of our moral intuitions may be served as well by religion as by science. Our genetic and psychological predisposition to religion may also allow some to gather in belief of natural law. Thus the answer to the question of how some can simply flout their evolutionary and likely even genetic predisposition to religion is that they are not abandoning it at all. Rather in place of a sky-god they have a faith in science as the ultimate explanation for the world. While this view is interesting in theory, it remains to be shown how this system

works in reality. In other words, were we to establish a unified church of scientific atheism, how many of those who self-identify as atheist would show up?

The short answer to the above question is rather predictably, not everyone. It is important to note here that holding an atheist viewpoint is not perfectly correlated with placing ones faith in the laws of science. Atheism, or the belief that there is no God, is not necessarily the same sort of belief as the belief held by devout Christians that there is a God. It is probable that some atheists are atheists because they are apathetic about all of the questions that religion attempts to answer. As a result, this group will be apathetic toward all forms of religious or spiritual belief, organized or otherwise. Certainly this group would not be regular attendees at any church, let alone Darwin's cathedral. This was one of the main conclusions of Hamer's work. The variability in spirituality among different individuals results in some individuals who are complacently apathetic toward all forms of religious belief. As a result, these individuals are not interesting for this analysis. What are needed are individuals who feel strongly about spirituality, and yet do not find the answers they seek in any traditional religious doctrine.

One need not look far for such individuals as many of our most famous predecessors in science will easily find themselves in this category. Often, as did Bacon, they speak in such a way as to be thought religious. For example, Einstein found great consternation in the fact that many of his quotes were used to demonstrate his "deeply religious views" (Dawkins 15). In response to questions about his personal God, Einstein wrote "If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it" (Einstein qtd. in Hamer 15). While no formal church was established on the basis of Einstein's beliefs, it is clear that he was not devoid of spirituality. Einstein, though an excellent example, was not alone.

Perhaps the most ironic part about the religiosity of this country is that a great many of our founding fathers were either atheists deists, or otherwise not within the folds of the more traditional religious circles (Dawkins 40). Thomas Jefferson was almost certainly an atheist, while Benjamin Franklin too found little practical use for religion, citing “Lighthouses are more useful than churches” (Benjamin Franklin qtd. in Lofton). Take special note of the importance of this fact in combination with our earlier revelation that nearly over half of current Americans would not even consider these individuals for office were they running in the upcoming presidential elections. Our founding fathers, creators of this country, would be inherently unelectable today. Moving from politics to the area of science and religion, it is impossible not to include the story of Charles Darwin. There is more than a little irony in the fact that Darwin was himself headed for the Clergy, believing that life as a country parson would give him ample time to study his beetles (Dawkins 30). Instead, one voyage on the Beagle, and many years of contemplation later, Darwin announced what would come to be the greatest single strike against organized religious belief in recent history. Though Darwin himself was more or less a religious man throughout his life (only losing his faith following the untimely loss of his daughter Annie), his theory of natural selection gave real explanation to some of the most difficult to explain natural phenomena. He discovered, for example, how humans had arrived at their present state, directly contradicting the biblical teachings on the matter. Darwin was supremely cognizant of the fact that some would likely find his work heretical. However, despite its relative incompatibility with traditional religious thought, Darwin’s theory paved the way for a religion based on science and reason, Darwin’s Cathedral.

In comparison with traditional religious belief, what moral intuitions do these scientific atheists share? For comparative purposes we need to find an atheist who feels strongly about his

convictions but at the same time is convinced that he has no use for religion. It would be difficult to find a more widely recognized or outspoken atheist than Richard Dawkins. His most recent book, titled The God Delusion, contains with the following quotation, immediately prefaced by a promise to be fair and evenhanded in his dealings with religion:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (31)

These are strong words for even the most outspoken of atheists. Dawkins here demonstrates both his atheist beliefs as well as his penchant for the dramatic. In this fashion, he serves as the ideal for an examination of the moral matrix of the scientific atheists. He is considered by many to be the greatest atheist evangelical of our times. However, upon closer examination we begin to see some themes very common to religious individuals in his speeches and mannerisms.

To begin, let us examine how we would classify Dawkins. He is undeniably atheist, however he often chooses to refer to himself as “a Darwinian” (helping to inform the title of this paper) (“What Use is Religion”). In the context of the phrase he uses the term to defend his belief in evolution and the science brought forth by Darwin. Just as many Christians would see God as the ultimate explanation for their existence, Dawkins views Darwin, or rather the science informed by him, as the ultimate rationale for his world. As he views science as the ultimate rationale for his existence, he fulfills the first requirement mentioned above for inclusion into the sect of scientific atheism. The remaining point is that he should feel passionately about his beliefs. In fact it would be different to argue otherwise given the time and effort Dawkins has put in to spreading just those beliefs. But, were in need of further credentials, Dawkins has even started a foundation whose purpose it is to ensure the fair teaching of science and reason in

British schools. In this capacity, he has ironically been referred to by many religious titles. He has been called both “a moral crusader” as well as “a prophet of science” as well as a great number of descriptors both negative and positive (Holloway). Those that refer to him by these names may be much closer to the truth than they assume. But if Dawkins is really a moral crusader, then what morals will he crusade for?

A helpful tool in this analysis is provided by work done by Haidt and Graham on the five foundations theory of intuitive ethics. Within this framework we can construct a picture of both Dawkins and his confederates to compare with that of more traditional and religious thinkers. Let us first construct what many could agree would be the intuitive moral picture of the traditionally religious individual. For this example I have chosen the religious archetype to be Christian, in part because this is the denomination Dawkins most often attacks but also because it is the religion that I am most familiar with. Certainly it is very possible or even probable that an examination of other religious would yield different results, but I hope that this will serve as a reasonable approximation. To begin, we examine the extent to which religious individuals find purity important. Certainly purity rates very highly within the religious community. There are many ceremonies that involve cleansing ones sins and becoming pure, as well as the strict rules on those things that one is and is not allowed to eat on a given day. In addition to a high score on purity, Christianity in particular would rate very highly on authority. It is God’s authority that is most important of all the moral intuitions. Finally, the last of the categories to receive a high rating is in-group loyalty. To speak to this intuition one need look only as far as the nearest church. The most important thing about being part of such a community is that it is a community. We turn now to those moral intuitions which Christianity would rate of lesser importance. These moral intuitions are fairness and harm. Concerning fairness, many church

teachings make it clear that what is fair will not necessarily come to pass. The God at least in the Christianity often asks individuals to bear seemingly unfair burdens for their faith. These burdens of faith are often harmful to the individual; however this aspect is downplayed in relation to the importance of being a follower of God. Thus in a moral intuitive hierarchy, both harm and fairness fall beneath the other three moral intuitions. The authority and purity of spiritual belief, and the religious community as a whole are more important than are the relative harm or fairness of an individual. While admittedly this binary classification system is crude, it is necessary in order to contrast the beliefs of traditional religion with those of scientific atheism to which we now turn.

In attempting to classify the views of scientific atheists, we run into difficulty. How is it possible to classify the moral intuitions of a group that has not created some formal moral doctrine? While it is true that there is no book of atheism, Dawkins as well as many of others who I feel fall into this category to share some common characteristics. Foremost of these is the tremendous emphasis these individuals place on individual reason. Dawkins in particular will tolerate no viewpoints aside from his own, which is in large part the reason that he wrote The God Delusion. The book is not really an examination of both sides of an argument; rather it is a violent attack on religious belief. This adherence solely to one's rational capacity results in a very low priority for authority in this moral system, most especially any divine authority. Purity too is de-prioritized. Concerning in-group loyalty, Dawkins considers himself "an oasis of reason" (RichardDawkins.net). As such he places little value on group adherence, and seems unquestionably more interested in destroying groups than forming them.

In terms of both harm and fairness, Dawkins also has a great deal to say. He is especially concerned with the harm caused by religious or other specious beliefs. Dawkins regularly cites

atrocities brought forth for religious reasons, which are far from in short supply today. While it was theoretically possible for Dawkins' enormous ego and religion to coexist, one of his primary arguments against faith is that it has been responsible for far more harm in the world than good. Though often it seems as if he uses such unfair and harmful examples simply to reinforce his notion that religion is useless, at the very least one can say that he finds these two moral intuitions more important than the other three.

	Harm	Fairness	In-Group	Authority	Purity
Catholic	Low	Low	High	High	High
Atheism	High	High	Low	Low	Low

The generation of this moral profile does much to demonstrate why the scientific atheists and traditional religions do not mix well. They are exactly opposite on each count of moral intuition. However, this is not cause to believe that those who consider themselves atheist have no use for religious belief. Those who find themselves sharing many or all of their moral intuitions with Dawkins still have the very same predisposition to religious belief explained earlier. Many of these individuals will seek ultimate cause in the universe but be turned off to more traditional religions. That they cannot find what they seek in traditional religions does not simply mean that they will cease their search and give up on that aspect of their psychology. Instead they may begin to think, as Dawkins does, that science will provide the ultimate answers to their questions. An example of this comes in the form of a debate between Richard Dawkins and David Quinn, with Dawkins on the side of atheism and Quinn a spokesperson for religion. At one point in the debate, the question of ultimate existence is brought up. Quickly Quinn jumps in to say that the God was the cause for the universe. Dawkins believes exactly the

opposite, suggesting that science is working on that explanation. On this point, as you can easily imagine, they reach a stalemate. Neither party is able to move forward. However, what was most interesting about this debate were the comments in response at the bottom. There was a clear split, with most individuals believing that one or the other debater had won handily.

Religious believers saw Quinn as the clear victor, while many others thought that Dawkins was the undisputed winner. Each of these two groups had their faith invested in a different source, though the way in which those beliefs were manifest was identical. That is to say, those believing in the science of atheism and those believing in God both expressed their views with the same amount of faith and conviction. In this we find that science is not so unlike religion.

Undeniably something must have occurred that allowed both sides to come out claiming victory. I suggest that the culprit for this outcome was a tactful use of framing. Dawkins uses a considerable amount of framing in order to spread his message. Foremost in any consideration of Dawkins' language, we must consider the title he has selected for his most recent work: The God Delusion. The selection of the title was an undeniable attempt to frame the debate between the religious and those who do not believe in God. Dawkins suggests that those who believe in religion are delusional, at the opposite end of rationality. This book is not to be a discussion about the implausibility of God, but rather a violent assault on the possibility of such an occurrence. In his defense of the title, Dawkins suggests that a population believing in god was equivalent to a belief that a population "had been abducted by flying saucers" (Debate). Given the rather low level of credibility afforded those who claim to have been abducted by flying saucers, Dawkins point is made very clear. A belief in God is silly, foolish, and no rational individual would ever consider such nonsense. Of course, those who do not believe in God would love such arguments. As mentioned above, the scientific atheists place a great deal of

importance on their own reasoning capacity. A belief that they are rational while the religious are irrational fits in perfectly with their frame of mind.

A point that is not made terribly clear however, is that Dawkins' assault on religion is really an assault on a specific form of religion. He frames his debate and malcontent on a specific version of God as a white bearded man in the clouds who listens to your prayers and performs miracles on command. He bases much of his religious criticism on provably false religious texts. His violent quote above is an excellent example of this, taking the God of the Old Testament and equating it with any God within any religion. In doing so, Dawkins is responding to a form of religion that is far from universally accepted. Those who believe in God will not be swayed by these arguments, as many of them have a radically different idea of what God really is. In fact, such arguments may sway them farther towards religious belief than away from it. In framing religion as specifically the demonstrably false passages of the Old Testament, Dawkins succeeds in reinforcing all sides of opinion.

Thus it becomes clear that in many ways atheism of science is very like a religious belief. The result of this conclusion is that much of the turmoil in this country over the representation of religious beliefs within the state amounts to an entirely religious struggle. This struggle must be taken seriously, for the views of every citizen must be taken into consideration when policy decisions are enacted. Without adequate representation in government or a society that is willing to accept different forms of belief, religious unilateralism in our government has resulted. In fact, traditional religions have become an almost universally accepted position for political action.

I never want to impose my religion on anybody else. But when I make decisions I stand on principle. ... That's manifested in public policy through the *faith-based initiative* where we've *unleashed the armies of compassion* to help heal people

who hurt. I believe that God wants everybody to be free. That's what I believe.

(George W. Bush qtd. in *On Faith*, emphasis added)

The quote above, taken from our current President during his time in the White House, exemplifies the extent to which traditional spiritual reckoning has been used, and continues to be used, as justification for political action that affect every citizen of the United States as well as millions of others worldwide. Our president in particular has used religious justification for the war in Afghanistan; as well as has been quoted saying that he believed God wanted him to invade Iraq (*On Faith*). Our nation, though purportedly founded on the principle of religious *toleration*, might better be characterized as one of traditional religious *eminence*. If, as I hope I have demonstrated, atheism is very similar to religion, it is perhaps time that we reexamine our treatment of them within this country. Examples of both atheistic discrimination as well as religious favoritism abound, from cases where individuals have attempted to place the Ten Commandments up inside courthouses to outright discrimination against atheist protests (Dawkins, 10). Are not the views of atheists also to be tolerated? Einstein perhaps summed it up best when he wrote: "All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling a man's life, lifting it from the sphere of mere physical existence and leading the individual towards freedom" (Stark 1).

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