

How to Counter Religion's Toxic Effects
- A Challenge to Humanists -
Fred March

Some Radical Propositions

Edward O. Wilson and Daniel Dennett advocate new ways to think about religion that can have a profound impact on how we as humanists dialogue with each other, how we define our ideology, and how we strengthen our public influence. These honored humanist philosophers believe that we need to ground our thought and action on a scientific understanding of religion. In *Breaking the Spell – Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* Dennett specifically challenges us to find ways to use science in helping us deal with what he calls “toxic religion.” He is concerned that if science does not deal with it, toxic religion will increase the “occurrence of holy wars, inquisitions, persecutions, and all the wretched abuses of superstition and theocracy.” In addition to these historical “wretched abuses” toxic religion today threatens secular society by seeking to control our “moral” behavior – denying access to contraception while outlawing termination of pregnancy, criminalizing sexual acts between consenting adults, banning stem cell research, refusing the terminally ill access to assisted peaceful death, preventing inoculation of young girls against cervical cancer, and degrading science education with religious doctrine. Dennett concludes: “So in the end my central policy recommendation is that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives.”

Wilson’s classic *On Human Nature* challenges the world’s science enterprise to explore the underlying genetic and cultural determinants of religion. He argues that the mental processes of religious belief are the products of genetic and cultural evolution. “As such they are powerful, ineradicable and at the center of human social existence.” Wilson also advocates a strategy for countering toxic religion based on this insight: “The mind will always create morality, religion and mythology, and empower them with emotional force. When blind ideologies and religious beliefs are stripped away, others are quickly manufactured as replacements...it (the mind) will reorder all that into some form of morality, religion and mythology.” Wilson’s strategy is to: rationally harness what he calls the “mythopoeic drive” to inspire humanistic social outcomes; and to “concede that scientific materialism is itself a mythology defined in the noble sense.” E.g. the evolutionary epic serves as a “noble myth”

Wilson’s newest book, *The Creation: A Meeting of Science and Religion* illustrates a way to harness the “mythopoeic drive.” The book takes the form of a letter to an imagined Southern Baptist preacher from whom he seeks cooperation on dealing with global environmental threats. His strategy here makes no attempt to change the pastor’s commitment to God’s revealed word. Rather, he redirects the pastor’s understanding of scripture as creating a duty to save humanity from global warming. The implied logic here is that God loves humanity and wants us to save ourselves from self-created threats. But to earn the preacher’s trust Wilson must concede that he too shares the “mythopoeic drive.” To cooperate he and the pastor must learn to understand and tolerate the fact that each must make decisions that align with their respective mythic frameworks. Thus Wilson reduces the philosophical chasm to a routine matter of religious tolerance in a pluralistic society. He is then able to say to the pastor that “You and I are humanists in the broadest sense: human welfare is at the center of our thought.” And while the book is Wilson’s monologue, we can imagine the pastor responding that “You and I are God-fearing in the broadest sense because we care about humanity’s future.”

At this point some readers may wonder: “What in the world is going on here?” Does Dennett really believe that the scientific study of religion will empower us to make secular humanists out of committed Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Moslems – however “gently and firmly?” Does Wilson really believe that science has mythic premises, and that his Baptist pastor is a humanist? Have these honored senior humanists somehow lost their way down a primrose path?

Before I address these questions, let’s consider the voices of a vocal minority of scientists at a recent forum at the Salk Institute who raised concerns about the ways many of our science-minded humanists deal with religion. (See The New York Times, Science Times, November 21st: *A Free-for-All on Science and Religion* by George Johnson. A report on *Beyond Belief - A Conversation* at the Salk Institute,” November 5-7, 2006)

Anthropologist Andrew J Konner dissented from what he felt was the overall forum view: “With a few notable exceptions the viewpoints have run the gamut from A to B: Should we bash religion with a crowbar or only with a baseball bat? **Physicist Lawrence M. Krauss**, known for his staunch opposition to teaching creationism, said: “Science does not make it impossible to believe in God. We should recognize that fact and live with it and stop being so pompous about it.” But **Richard Dawkins** was not convinced: “I am utterly fed up with the respect that we – all of us, including the secular among us – are brainwashed into bestowing on religion.” **Astrophysicist Neil de Grasse Tyson** boldly confronted him saying: “Persuasion isn’t always ‘Here are the facts – you’re an idiot or you are not.’ I worry that your methods (how articulately barbed you can be) end up simply being ineffective, when you have much more power of influence.” **Dawkins** graciously replied, “I gratefully accept the rebuke.”

So in addressing our need to be more effective, I return to my above questions about the Wilson and Dennett’s strategies. No, Dennett does not believe we can convert people to secular humanism. Nor does Wilson believe that his pastor is a secular humanist. Dennett wants people to learn from science why religion produces toxic effects – and to apply it. Wilson draws on his powerful scientific understanding of human genetic and cultural evolution as helping both science and religion to (1) recognize that even atheists have genetically programmed religious impulses; and, (2) that even theists have rational (if not always scientific) impulses, and depending on their intellectual flexibility, share some of our key ethical values. Assuming one agrees with these minority voices, where do we go from here?

Genetic and Cultural Religious Impulses: Awe, Wonder and Myth

Wilson would have us recognize that our shared genetic/cultural impulses of awe, wonder and myth are actually our most valuable assets. When Wilson asserts, “scientific materialism is itself a mythology,” he does not imply that science is a false pursuit or that awe and wonder are mystical experiences. For him “myth” is not the same as mysticism or factually false beliefs. What he means is that myth is any story, factual or not, that motivates thought and action. Myth employs stories that embody metaphors about why things are as they are. Mythic metaphors symbolize the beliefs and ideas that unite a people, sanctify their social order and define right and wrong. Myths are not merely stories about gods and spirits. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and John F. Kennedy are real people whose stories stimulate the mythic imagination.

We all use metaphors that translate the mind's experience into mythic language. Awe and wonder is an emotional response to a sense of deeper meaning behind certain experiences that overwhelm our logical mind's ability to fully comprehend them with logic and reason. Even Richard Dawkins, in *The God Delusion*, acknowledges from personal experience that a "quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief." Dawkins is content to just leave it at that – as having no connection with supernatural belief. But for Wilson and other scientists, the study of human nature itself inspires awe and wonder that challenges us to understand our own humanity.

Joseph Campbell, the preeminent scientist of human mythic behavior put it this way in *Myths to Live By*: "We must now ask whether it is now possible to arrive scientifically at such an understanding of the life-supporting nature of myths, that in criticizing their archaic features we do not misrepresent and disqualify their necessity – throwing out, so to say, the baby (whole generations of babies) with the bath." Although mythic stories such as the Genesis account of God's creation of the world and its early people are fictional, Campbell informs that such universally cherished figures of the mythic imagination must represent facts of the mind.

So where do science-wise humanists go from here? Do we express our feelings for awe and wonder by imitating the cultural infrastructure of conventional religion with rituals, prayers, dogmas and doctrines? Of course not! But we need to understand that even respected scientists may express their mythopoeic drives through conventional religion. They do this for reasons of personal, family, and community identity. Without exception, my rational but conventionally religious friends do not accept supernatural beliefs as empirical facts, but as metaphors, as symbols of a state of mind that encompass awe and wonder. As such they are natural allies of the humanist cause through organizations such as the Network for Spiritual Progressives.

Science-wise humanists like Harry Willson (publisher of Amador Books) advocate that we explicitly express our own feelings of awe and wonder. In his book *Freedom from God – Restoring the Sense of Wonder* he explains that he left the Presbyterian ministry not only for its ethical lapses, but for its suppression of the impulse for awe and wonder: "Religions may not be much help in the wonder department even though that's what they pretend to be all about...The sense of wonder...could make our lives so exciting, so vibrant, that it would become unthinkable that we would permit the life-hating forces and powers of religion to spoil everything."

What do Wilson, Campbell, and Willson's views of myth have to do with toxic religion? To effectively deal with religion's toxic effects, we need to focus on influencing the thought and action that the myth inspires – not on the myth's scientific validity. By expressing the deep emotional experiences at the heart of being human, we evoke the common core of our shared humanity. This helps us establish the mutual trust with movements such as the Spiritual Progressives in their efforts to detoxify literal scriptural religion. It provides a friendly starting point for dialogue, without having to prove or disprove theological or biblical claims. It helps us define a common ethical human agenda for relationships within our own families, and in our social and political lives. This is precisely the premise of Wilson's *The Creation*.

A Matter of Attitude

My concern is that most of us indeed have a limited understanding of how science and religion actually operate in the world. For example, we tend to think of science and religion as separate

ways our brains deal with experience. But Wilson and others maintain that religion and science have a common cognitive origin in humanity's cultural evolution and struggle for survival. By not accounting for those common cognitive origins, we fail to focus on root causes. We talk to each other about religion's toxic effects but no one else takes us seriously. Atheist reviewers of Richard Dawkins' recent book, *The God Delusion* on the Amazon website, who rated it at five stars, echo the Salk forum comments: "While Dawkins is clearly out to change minds here, unfortunately, for most of his readers, he is only preaching to the choir...For a scientist who criticizes religion for its intolerance, Dawkins has written a surprisingly intolerant book, full of scorn for religion and those who believe".

Dawkins represents core strength of the humanist movement – its traditional focus on the false claims of religion and its social damage. Historically, Baruch Spinoza and David Hume addressed toxic religion in the 17th and 18th centuries. William James, Erich Fromm and Carl Jung addressed it in the 19th and 20th centuries. Modern researchers like Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, William Paden and others have added additional scientific method to their legacy. Contributors include many atheists and agnostics, but also "religious" intellectuals like James Carroll, John Cornwell and Kevin Phillips who share our misgivings about the adverse consequences of historical religion. But when we contemptuously attack "religion" as if it were ideologically homogeneous, instead of learning the whys of its toxic effects, we can't expect our natural allies to respond warmly. Such attitudes breed bad manners, producing ineffective strategies at best and hostile responses at worst. Edd Doerr, past AHA president and current board member puts it more bluntly in his letter to the New York Times on November 27, 2006: "Just as there are obnoxious Protestant, Catholic, Muslim and other fundamentalists at one end of the spectrum, so, too, are there obnoxious atheists at the other."

How humanists can help detoxify religion

We humanists differ in our personal attitudes towards religion. Some of us believe in God in a deistic or pantheistic way. Some of us want no part of anything that smells like God. Some of us are suspicious of what we regard as sneaking mysticism into humanism through the back door by invoking the "spiritual" language of some scientists. Some of us believe that all ways of believing in God must be expunged if religion is to lose its toxicity. Some of us can accept Wilson's view of science as myth in its evocation of awe and wonder, and some of us cannot.

But I am not alone in believing that religion's toxicity has nothing to do with God-belief per se. Much of it stems from genetically endowed aggressive instincts rooted in our hunter-gatherer ancestors. These instincts harness the whole spectrum of beliefs about God, including atheism and agnosticism for violent control, of which there is ample evidence from science and history – well beyond the scope of this article. This is the conviction behind the following suggestions for the humanist movement to more effectively combat specifically toxic religion, while not wasting our limited energies on its benign effects.

- Stress the ways that humanism as a philosophy offers a more fruitful pursuit of the emotional responses to existential experience, for which conventional religions provide only dogmatic, less effective, and often harmful solutions.
- Express our shared experience of awe and wonder to establish rapport with persons of varying theological outlooks who share our societal ethical concerns.

- Get beyond our dominant messages about supernatural religion – how its erroneous and superstitious premises are harmful to humanity as a whole – and seek to truly understand its complexity and contradictions, including the historically humanistic movements and tendencies within its traditions. For example see The Humanist Institute’s Curriculum Session 3: Humanist Ideas in World Religion.
- Convey a sympathetic understanding for the humanistic side of religion, while avoiding mutual proselytizing or compromise of our humanist principles. Communicate our concern for the wellbeing of all humanity, including those still wedded to ancient metaphysical beliefs that we no longer find useful.
- Ensure that our local chapters are comfortable places for all humanists concerned with religion’s toxic effects, including deists and pantheists (who accept scientific philosophy as their primary “mythic” framework), and even some ethical theists who do not.
- Constructively engage in inter-faith dialogue and coalitions grounded on our shared capacity for awe and wonder, ethical concerns, and our mutual interest in human survival.
- Enhance educational programs at all levels of organized humanism (using classes, books, videos, internet) in pursuit of Dennett’s urging that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives.

To develop the individual skills and confidence needed by our movement:

- Focus on strategies for coping with toxic religion at all levels in the humanist movement.
- Learn from the cumulative wisdom of the many wise and thoughtful humanists who cherish humanity, science, the rational mind, a sense of mystery about existence, and a passion for justice, to discover the human roots of what makes religion toxic vs. benign.
- Learn to engage, respect and encourage people whose religious beliefs, however supernatural, inspire positive social effects.
- Gain the confidence to teach humanism in classrooms, articles, books, in conversations with our families and friends, and in political and inter-faith discourse.
- Read George Lakoff’s *Whose Freedom?* Especially Chapter 10: *Religion and Freedom*.

These are useful pursuits for the humanist movement. They foster realistic models of religion, based on scientific studies. They support our confidence to counter its toxic effects in the personal, social and political arenas. They motivate effective approaches that leverage our efforts through political and social alliances. I welcome readers with other ideas to share them with the Humanist or directly with me at fmarch@thinkwellassociates.com.

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