SHOULD ATHEISTS BE AGAINST RELIGION?

Tim Crane

Tim Crane responds to the several recent attacks on religion made by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, et al.

Few people will have failed to notice the recent tide of anti-religion books that have recently flooded the bookshops. Among the most prominent of them are A.C. Grayling's *Against All Gods*, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great*. These 'new atheists' have launched an all-out attack on God and religion: religions (especially Christianity and Islam) are not just mistaken, they are irrational, silly and responsible for many of the evils of the world. Away with them all!

But is this the right attitude for an atheist to take to religion? As an atheist myself, I'd like to raise some doubts. It seems to me that many of the claims made by the new atheists are simply not true, and that their view of the role of religion in world affairs is in many ways mistaken. I will also suggest that going on in this way about religion is not a very sensible approach to tackling the problems of the world.

I should point out that I do not say these things because I think that religious beliefs (and the moral beliefs often based on them) should be respected, or because everyone is entitled to their own opinions. I don't think that everyone is entitled to their own opinions. If your opinions are wicked, then you are not entitled to them. If you think that a woman who has sex outside marriage should be stoned, then your opinion is wicked and cruel and is not worthy of respect. You would not be entitled to that opinion, full stop.

However, although we should not respect a lot of religious beliefs, that does not mean (as I shall argue below) that we should not tolerate them. Unfortunately, we are in a position where we ought to tolerate views which we do not respect. That's what I shall argue below.

I'll begin by looking at some of the claims made by the new atheists. Many of their claims are not that new (though that is

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not supposed to be a criticism). Throughout the history of the discussion of religion, anti-religious writers have often treated religion as uniquely dangerous. Here is Jeremy Bentham:

> In no instance has a system in regard to religion been ever established, but for the purpose, as well as with the effect, of its being made an instrument of intimidation, corruption, and delusion, for the support of depredation and oppression in the hands of governments.

These rather negative remarks about religion would be endorsed by many new atheists today. The popular anti-religious writer Sam Harris is an example:

> A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* p.12)

Certainly it is true that some of the worst horrors of the world have been performed by the religious in the pursuit of ostensibly religious goals. Not that the religious have been the worst, though. Claims about the damage done by religion should be put in the context of the killings of the 20th century, the largest number were carried out by the explicitly anti-religious communist regimes of Stalin (between 15 and 20 million) and Chairman Mao (an estimated 30 million) as well as in the Nazi holocaust (which was not religiously inspired either). No-one knows the exact numbers, but there is no doubt that the communists and the Nazis were the biggest mass murderers ever.

The fact that Mao and Stalin were anti-religious is not supposed to be a defence of religion; the crimes of the religious are not lessened just because anti-religious people have done worse things. My only point in drawing attention to the crimes of communism is simply to refute those who say that religion has been responsible for the worst evil and slaughter. On one

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measure of the worst – the sheer number of people killed, the gratuitous and random murder, torture and terrorisation of the population – the regimes of Stalin, Mao and Hitler are clearly way ahead.

Perversely, Sam Harris refuses to accept this point and argues that the communists were religious underneath:

> Even when such crimes have been secular, they have required the egregious credulity of entire societies to be brought off. Consider the millions of people who were killed by Stalin and Mao: although these tyrants paid lip service to rationality, communism was little more than a political religion. ... Even thought their beliefs did not reach beyond this world, they were both cultic and irrational. (Harris p.79)

The trouble with this argument is that it removes from the idea of 'religion' the other thing which these writers like to ridicule: the metaphysical belief in the transcendent reality of a God who created the world. What instead becomes essential to religion now is not the content of any belief, but simply its dogmatism: invulnerability to evidence.

Lying behind a lot of the recent anti-religious literature is the idea that its fundamental error is one of irrationality. This is what Harris says about North Korea, in defence of the implausible idea that even communism is a kind of religion:

> While our differences with North Korea, for instance, are not explicitly religious, they are a direct consequence of the North Koreans' having grown utterly deranged by their political ideology, their abject worship of their leaders ... the problem of North Korea is, first and foremost, a problem of the unjustified (and unjustifiable) beliefs of North Koreans. (Harris p.232)

What is supposed to be wrong with religion and communist regimes alike, then, is that they are irrational. I would conjecture that this is why Daniel Dennett thinks that we should

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explain religion as a cognitive *pathology*, brought about evolution, rather than simply an episode in the history of human culture.

But both Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* and Sam Harris want to link this irrationality with the wickedness that religion can bring about:

> Whenever a man imagines that he need only believe the truth of a proposition, without evidence – that unbelievers will go to hell, that Jews drink the blood of infants – he comes capable of anything. (Harris p. 85)

This gloomy view presumably has an optimistic flip side: that the more rational one is, the better a person one will be. And so, lo and behold, we find Dawkins saying in *The God Delusion* that atheists are more likely to be morally better people.

I find all this very dubious. I don't myself know whether many religious beliefs are irrational; I know a lot of them are false, but that's not the same thing. Part of the problem here, is that we lack a good account of what rationality is: as the philosopher D.H. Mellor once memorably wrote 'appeals to rationality are mostly bluff: there is no good theory of what it is or how to recognise it.'

But even ignoring this, the idea that there might be any kind of straightforward connection between people's capacity for evil and the irrationality of their beliefs strikes me as utterly incredible. Reasonable, rational people can be wicked and vicious; ignorant, irrational people can be good and kind. These are the obvious truths upon which we should start building our account of these things, rather than on the utopian fantasies of Harris and Dawkins.

To be cynical for a moment, we can see that it might appeal to academics and intellectuals to identify first, the problems of the world as deriving from religion, and second, the problems of religion as deriving from cosmological belief. They can therefore help in solving the problems of the world by pointing out the errors in these cosmological beliefs and thus help with the problems of the world by a process of rational belief

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change: something they (I should say, "we") are supposed to be particularly expert at.

Two things seem to me to be wrong with this approach:

(1) a lot of these problems have a lot less to do with cosmological belief than many 'new atheists' seem to think;
(2) even if belief were the source of the problems, it is not obvious that the right way to deal with this is to try and change people's beliefs.

In fact, it is surprisingly difficult – much more difficult than some philosophers think – to change people's beliefs. But if there is one thing which should be obvious here, it is that the way to do it is (generally) not to tell them that they are stupid, irrational or hopelessly ignorant.

In the rest of this essay, I'd like to reflect a bit on these two points: the irrelevance of belief, and the unimportance of change of belief.

The irrelevance of belief

Is it really facts about what people believe that causes them to do what they do? Are doctrinal differences the differences which make those religious people slaughter one another? Sam Harris thinks so. He says that India and Pakistan 'are now poised to exterminate one another with nuclear weapons *simply because they disagree about "facts" that are every bit* as fanciful as the names of Santa's reindeer ... *The only difference* between these groups consists in what they believe about God' (Harris, p.27; my emphasis). The idea is that they are poised to exterminate each other simply because of differences in religious doctrine.

I am not a historian and I have no specialised knowledge, so anything I say here is very speculative. (However, Harris is not a historian either: I'm sorry to say that he studied philosophy at Stanford. So we are partners in ignorance here.) But in any case, it seems to me very implausible that (a) the only relevant difference between Indians and Pakistanis – that

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is, the only difference relevant to their conflict – is 'what they believe about God'; and also that (b) these religious doctrinal differences are really the elements which form the best explanation of the conflict.

Let's take a smaller example, and one closer to home, of a supposed religious conflict – the Serb-Croat conflict in the early 1990s – to see how differences in doctrine might have had something to do with it. The Yugoslav wars left about 140,000 dead and 1 million people homeless. Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and many others have called the Yugoslav wars religious wars, presumably on the grounds that Serbs tend to be Orthodox Christians, the Croats Catholics and many Bosnians Muslims. But what actually are the differences between these different religions?

Let's concentrate on the difference between the Orthodox Serbs and the Roman Catholic Croats. The Orthodox or Eastern Church split from the Roman Church in 1054, the moment of the 'Great Schism'. Previous to this they were in communion with one another and the Eastern Church accepted the authority of the Pope in Rome. Many complicated issues led to this schism, some of them theological. One of the theological issues was the debate over the so-called *filioque* clause. This was a debate about the relative hierarchy of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ. The traditional view dating from the Council of Nicea in 325 and expressed in the so-called Nicene creed, was that the holy Spirit 'proceeded' from the Father alone. But a later tradition developed which said that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the father *and the son* ('filioque'). (Don't ask me what 'proceeded' means – let's just take it to mean 'came from'.) This was eventually adopted by the Pope as the revised version of the creed; but it was rejected by the Eastern patriarchs and led to the split between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches of the east, of which the Serbian Orthodox church is one.

It would be entirely frivolous to suggest that the filioque clause is one of the factors influencing the war between the Serbs and the Croats in the 1990s. And yet, if we are to look at the theological origins of the separation of the Roman and

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the Orthodox churches, this would have to be mentioned (among many other details of course). So if we going to give an account of the war in terms of 'what they believe about God' (in Harris's words) we would have to mention this. Yet plainly it has nothing more to do with the war than the fact that the Serbs use the Cyrillic alphabet and the Croats use the Latin alphabet.

What are we looking for when we look for causal factors? We are looking for those things such that, if they were modified, things would turn out differently from the way they actually do – holding various other background conditions constant. We are looking for things that make a difference ('difference makers'). My conjecture is that had the Serbian creed contained the filioque clause, it would have had no impact on the wars of the 1990s. It would not have been a difference maker.

My reason for saying this is that there is an alternative story, based on the known historical facts. Yugloslavia was a country invented after the First World War, made up of a number of different states with different degrees of dominance and independence. Croatia was a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire, whereas Serbia had been an independent kingdom since the early 19th century. The collapse of the country after Tito's death led to battle for territory and very different conceptions of what belonged to whom; in addition to these 'ancient hatreds' and territorial ambitions, and the felt need to protect vulnerable minorities in the different areas, we should also not ignore (as Tony Judt in *Postwar* has persuasively argued) the role of a number of ambitious and ruthless individuals. When explaining the beginning of the Serb-Croat conflict, ancient hatreds might play some role; the need for regional dominance plays a role; individual politicians play a role; but what does not play a role is the content of any of the religious doctrines which differ between Catholics and the orthodox.

The religious differences between Serbs and Croats are effects of their identifications with groups, not causes of them. I think this example shows that we should be very careful about attributing supposed religious conflicts to 'beliefs about God'.

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The unimportance of change of belief

In any case, even if belief were the cause, it still doesn't seem the right strategy to try and change people's factual or moral beliefs. Here again I find myself deeply opposed to Sam Harris, when he says:

> The appropriate response to the bin Ladens of the world is to correct everyone's reading of [the *Koran*] by making the same evidentiary demands in religious matters that we make in all others. (Harris p.35)

This is pure fantasy. The appropriate response to the bin Ladens of the world is (a) to find them; and (b) try them in a court of law, according to our laws, and (c) lock them up if found guilty. An uphill task, to be sure: but at least it's not the impossible one of making them apply the logic of confirmation to the Koran.

I have two reasons for thinking that *even if religious belief were the cause of all the problems*, we should not embark on the project of trying to change people's beliefs. The first is the one I've already mentioned: it's ineffectual. As John Gray nicely puts it, 'only a very credulous philosopher could believe that showing religion is an illusion will make it disappear' (*Black Mass* p.189).

The second reason is that I think what matters to the peace of society is regulating people's actions, not their beliefs. The fundamental problems which religion (which means, these days, with fundamentalist Christianity and Islam) arise not from people's false beliefs, but how they act on those beliefs.

I'd like to illustrate this with an analogy. It is sometimes said that racist views rest upon certain empirical beliefs, and in particular on the belief that human beings divide into 'races', biologically real distinct kinds of organism. Visible distinctions in physiognomy and skin colour were the basis for distinguishing between caucasians, negroes, mongoloid and other supposed races. It was assumed by many that these differences were underpinned by differences in some real underlying genetic or organic traits.

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As we now know, this is entirely false. There is no basis in any area of biological research for the old distinction between races. It has no basis in genetics or evolutionary biology, and those who think otherwise are completely deluded. Race is not a biological concept. Of course, it is consistent with this that racial categories might be social constructions, even of they have no biological basis, and the study of such categories is something worth doing, as Anthony Appiah has eloquently argued. But for the moment I am interested in the significance of the biological claim.

Those who think that the essence of racism rests on the false belief that race is a real biological category might think that the way to eliminate racism is to eliminate this belief. Once you have shown that there are no races, then what could racist people possibly be racist *about*? Racism could be eliminated by science.

This line of thought – which I have found is quite common among philosophers – is an example of the kind of utopianism which we saw exhibited by Harris and Dawkins earlier on. It seems to me quite mistaken. For one thing, it assumes a kind of link between theoretical and practical attitudes which is absent in most people. It says nothing against the racist who listens patiently to the scientific explanation and responds: 'I take your point about the science, but I still believe that there are black people and white people and its *these* black people, whatever you call them, who are inferior.' Such an attitude need not rest on any view about the biological essence of race.

It's perhaps worth pointing out that even if there were races, this ought to have no impact on how people are treated. Our beliefs that people count for one, that everyone is worthy of respect, that all are in some way worthy of equal treatment – these beliefs do not rest upon any scientific view about the differences between people. And they shouldn't do.

The analogy with religion here is not perfect, and it might be controversial; but I hope the main point is clear. We cannot expect to change people's factual beliefs about the world. And even if we could, this would not necessarily help. People

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with wicked views will not necessarily drop them just because they have been shown to rest on false premises. So it may be beyond our power to change people's wicked views. What society should try to do instead is to control is what people do, not what they believe.

John Gray has recently written that 'the most necessary task of the present time is to accept the irreducible reality of religion' (*Black Mass* p.207). We are not going to eliminate religion, and especially not through rational argument. The problems we are facing are practical political and moral ones, and the resources – the values and attitudes – we need to address these problems seem to me independent of the truth of any religion. (These values could be held by a liberal Anglican.) Again Gray puts it particularly well:

> It is time the diversity of religion was accepted and the attempt to build a secular monolith abandoned... A central task of government is to work out and enforce a framework whereby [religions] can live together. A framework of this kind cannot be the same for every society, or fixed for ever. It embodies a type of toleration whose goal is not truth but peace. When the goal of toleration is truth it is a strategy that aims for harmony. It would be better to accept that harmony can never be reached. (*Black Mass* p.208)

I'm not saying that I have any detailed ideas of how to achieve the kind of society Gray talks about. But we should start by having confidence in our own institutions and intellectual traditions, including the liberal tradition of tolerance. (For example, forbidding the wearing of veils, crucifixes, skullcaps etc. is not a step in this direction.) I'd like to distinguish this liberal tradition, then, from a secular tradition. The UK can hardly claim to be an entirely secular country, what with the monarch being the head of the church and all those bishops in the House of Lords. But it is a country with a tradition of tolerance and I think it is this tradition, rather than the shrill and intolerant atheism of Dawkins and Harris, which athe-

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ists should develop, as a step in the direction of achieving peace. Atheists should be anti-religion in the sense that they disagree with its main factual claims about the world. Apart from that, they should not campaign against religion. Such campaigning will achieve nothing. Religion is probably here to stay, and atheists should find a way of tolerating it, in the name of peace.

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