

A Superscientific Definition of ‘Religion’ and a Clarification of Richard Dawkins’ New Atheism

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Introduction

In discussions with colleagues and through reading various articles – scholarly and popular, by believers and non-believers – it is clear that Richard Dawkins, and New Atheism in general, is perceived as being anti-religious. For this to be a fair charge, critics must first determine what it is to be anti-religious. Furthermore, the term ‘religion’ must necessarily be defined. No one is better placed to define, and understand the complexities and challenges in attempting to define, such a controversial and often emotive term, than the Religious Studies scholar. Suspecting that Dawkins’ views have been misunderstood and misrepresented, on this and other issues, I felt it pertinent to attempt to clarify what it is that Dawkins actually espouses, and to determine if this, and related criticisms, are warranted.

During Richard Dawkins’ visit to Australia in December 2014, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to interview him, with the appropriately naturalistic aesthetic of the Blue Mountains surrounding us.¹ After forging yet another definition of ‘religion’, I use excerpts from our discussions, as well as Dawkins’ writings, to contest the notion that Dawkins is anti-religious, and to further show that associated criticisms – of himself, and the so called New Atheism – are unjustified or unnecessary.

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¹ Thanks are due to Michael and Robyn, for graciously arranging our interview, particularly when Dawkins had refused all televised and other interviews that deviated from his official tour, and also to Sarah, Connor, and also Chris Sharples, for their assistance on the day. I extend special thanks to Renee Lockwood, who kindly offered constructive criticisms, and Richard Dawkins, who agreed to be interviewed and later provided further clarifications.

What is Religion?

It is a crucial question, particularly to Religious Studies scholars, that has never been resolved, and probably never will be. Purely substantive or essentialist definitions might satisfy some adherents of the 'Western' religions, but naively ignore the importance of orthopraxy. However, purely functional definitions, such as Paul Tillich's,² seem to render the term almost useless, in allowing any mundane practice to be labelled 'religious'. Indeed, such a definition would immediately refute the charge that Dawkins is anti-religious, as he would easily – and eagerly, by some critics and/or Religious Studies scholars³ – be found to be religious himself. Purely functional definitions also relegate the importance of orthodoxy, of beliefs, which often greatly affect certain pragmatic aspects of religion. It is worrying that so many scholars of religion seem eager to discount the role of beliefs in shaping the pragmatic aspects of adherents' practices. For example, the Baptist who willingly lets another submerge them in water really does believe that this is what God wants for/from them. The Mahayana Buddhist who shuns material wealth really does believe in reincarnation. Logic dictates that a dithetic or mixed definition might be ideal, which is the path chosen by analytic philosopher of religion Kevin Schilbrack.

He notes that, in this way, atheistic Buddhism – the litmus test for all good definitions of religion – need not be excluded, as, despite the lack of belief in god/s, it does entail peculiar beliefs about how the world works.⁴ Before arriving at his own definition, Schilbrack handily considers earlier attempts to define religion; one is the Augustinian attempt to define religion as "the reality of the Christian God"; another is Edward Herbert's attempt to stretch the definition to include the "supreme deity" of non-Christians; there is also the more inclusive "belief in Spiritual Beings", as

² See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

³ For example, see Cale Hubble, 'The Sacred Things of Contemporary Anglophone Atheism: Celebrities, Books and Values', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2013), pp. 81-112.

⁴ Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), p. 128.

championed by Edward Tylor.⁵ Seeking to make such a definition even broader, Schilbrack seeks to include beliefs in “religious realities that are not theistic” and “nonpersonlike religious forces”, which leads him to a definition that concerns “a level of reality beyond the observable world known to science”.⁶

Seeking to avoid the highly problematic term ‘supernatural’, which – among other things – assumes dualism (which excludes pantheists and other monists, who could well see their ‘god’ as ‘natural’), Schilbrack settles on the involvement of the ‘superempirical’.⁷ Seemingly influenced by the work of William James and Christian Smith, Schilbrack defines religion as “forms of life predicated upon the reality of the superempirical”.⁸ This is certainly a very useful definition that inadvertently incorporates what most laypeople consider religion to be, and, satisfying ‘alternatives’ and critical scholars alike, includes the likes of Buddhism and Daoism. It also allows scholars to hypothesise about secularisation (which is essentially impossible with a purely functional definition of religion), and further avoids the futility of labelling many ordinary tasks as religious; as Martin Riesebrodt earlier observed, if soccer is seen as religious and Buddhism is not, ‘something has obviously gone wrong’.⁹

However, this definition is not without its problems. For example, this sort of religion relies purely on faith, and can thus be seen as irrational. As Schilbrack says, studying religion may be an attempt to “make sense out of nonsense”.¹⁰ He attempts to defend his definition and the study of this sort of religion against the empiricist rejection, that religion is cognitively meaningless on account of its relying on the superempirical, by appealing to the possibility of non-empirical evaluations and the fact that many other

⁵ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, pp. 129-132. Regarding the involvement of ‘spiritual beings’, cf. Spiro’s preference for the involvement of ‘superhuman beings’, in Melford E. Spiro, ‘Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation’, in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), pp. 85-126.

⁶ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, p. 133.

⁷ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, p. 134.

⁸ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, pp. 135-136, 145-146.

⁹ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, pp. 139-141.

¹⁰ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, p. 153.

disciplines employ non-empirical approaches.¹¹ My additional defence of these challenges revolves around the fact that many religious claims, while ultimately appealing to superempirical realities, are actually empirical (though the link may be unprovable), and can actually be judged as such.

Consider an argument that God created the universe 6,000 years ago. This contains an empirical claim; the proper evaluation of which effectively refutes the empirical claim regarding the universe's age *and* the overall superempirical argument that God created a universe that is now only 6,000 years old. The latter work would undoubtedly be meritorious, particularly in countries where sound science education is under attack.¹² Whilst overlooking the fact that many adherents do make empirical claims, useful as it is, Schilbrack's definition also has the air of naturalistic assumption about it, and could fail if one of the examined religions can be observed as being 'true'. If this were to occur, then it would strangely cease to be a 'religion'. This may not be considered critical to secular scholars, but is not inclusive of those who do hold religious beliefs, and could, in principle, be crucial in future. If God were to reveal herself to our senses in the near future, as has been claimed throughout history, then Schilbrack's definition falls flat.

However, I believe that this definition can be improved by simply replacing the term 'superempirical' with 'superscientific'.¹³ In this altered definition, it is acknowledged that, while current scientific knowledge does not confirm the existence of gods/God/divine forces, such things might actually exist, and may or may not be confirmed in future. This definition thus does not unjustly rule out the possibility that what is currently

¹¹ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, pp. 192-193.

¹² For some resources on the creationism in schools debate, see Marjorie George, 'And Then God Created Kansas? The Evolution/Creationism Debate in America's Public Schools', *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, vol. 149, no. 3 (2001), pp. 843-872 and Robert T. Pennock, 'Should Creationism be Taught in the Public Schools?', *Science & Education*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2002), pp. 111-133.

¹³ Other scholars agree that while the term 'superempirical' is useful, it is still problematic, such as how it seems to ignore that many religious adherents make empirical claims. See James McLachlan, 'Kevin Schilbrack on Defining Religion and the Field of the Study of Religions', *Sophia*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2014), pp. 379-382. Schilbrack responded to this, unconvincingly I feel (such as by denying that certain religious claims are empirical, which seems far-fetched), and indicated that perhaps another scholar will find "better solutions to this problem", which is precisely what I hoped to achieve. See Kevin Schilbrack, 'The Future of Philosophy of Religion', *Sophia*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2014), pp. 383-388.

considered a 'religion' might be 'true', though it would still entail a different classification if it were. And while the former definition assumes that all elements of religion are beyond our senses, this altered definition allows that they might not be. This superior definition recognises that the substantive aspects of religion can indeed be empirical, and can indeed be, in principle, correct.¹⁴ Religion is a form of life predicated upon the reality of the superscientific. While a little more advantageous, my definition is still not without its problems. It still entails that, if scientifically proven to be veridical, a religion is no longer a religion. This issue for both definitions may be less important for many critical scholars who find notions of truth in the examination of religions to be beside the point, but it cannot be denied that a large proportion of believers do place great importance on religious claims to truth.¹⁵

Both Schilbrack's definition and mine own also allows not only for classification but the evaluation of various religious traditions, which can no longer be seen as *anathema* to critical scholars of religion. The focus on science makes it unavoidable that some scholars will invoke social scientific evidence to deal with questions about which religions are more likely to generate and disseminate ideas that result in certain pragmatic outcomes. For example, "Do pantheistic religions foster a more green and sustainable culture?" And, "Do monotheistic/theistic faiths encourage religious violence?"¹⁶ It also allows us to 'rank' religions based on the extent to which they are superscientific. For example, again referring to the great differences between classical theism and pantheism/monism, and appealing to the natural sciences, "Would the idea of 'supernatural' beings or the idea of a conscious/divine universe be more in accordance with current scientific evidence?"

¹⁴ This appears to refute the oft-made charge against me that somehow my own work, which questions the historicity of Jesus and refutes the philosophical arguments for God's existence, is anti-religious.

¹⁵ Or even scholars in general, especially scientists, who might see a 'true religion' as just being factual information about the world. For example, that a molecule of water contains three atoms is not a religion. Perhaps it is unavoidable, at least to some extent, that a good definition of religion assumes that it is 'not true'. It might be true, but then, when demonstrated as such, it is no longer a religion.

¹⁶ For a treatment of religious violence, see Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

While certainly more inclusive, and retaining the benefits of Schilbrack's definition, an objection could arise, ironically appealing to my own example about the Earth's age, that some religions actually do, at present, make scientific claims. That is correct, but my definition relies on sound science, not mere claims and pseudoscience. Even many religious adherents would admit that science has certainly not yet validated the claims made by their holy texts, and their overeager brethren.¹⁷ Such believers – and also secularists – might even try to argue that religion need not be validated by scientific methods, and perhaps that religion and science are non-overlapping magisteria,¹⁸ which would lend support to my definition. Interestingly, while my definition is more inclusive and respectful of religious beliefs than is Schilbrack's, it still entails that being 'anti-religious' to some extent is certainly no crime. Now equipped with my own definition of religion, and also many others', we can try to ascertain if Richard Dawkins is anti-religious, to what extent he is anti-religious, and, perhaps, whether his anti-religion is justifiable and even beneficial.

Dawkins' Position and Mischaracterisations

While it may be expected for religious adherents – especially those among lay audiences – to perceive Richard Dawkins as being anti-religious, this is also a perception among scholars; and secular scholars at that. For example, sociologist Elaine Ecklund indicates that Dawkins considers himself and his scientific colleagues to be generally "anti-religion",¹⁹ while Dawkins' fellow scientist, Peter Higgs, also an atheist,²⁰ criticises Dawkins, declaring that "What Dawkins does too often is to concentrate his attack on

¹⁷ An exemplar would be Bishop Spong, who has written much on such topics. For but one example of his liberal work, see John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

¹⁸ Cf. Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

¹⁹ Elaine Howard Ecklund, 'Religion and Spirituality Among Scientists', *Contexts*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2008), p. 12.

²⁰ In fact, Higgs has expressed his dismay that the Higgs boson is often given the moniker, the 'God particle', as he is an atheist. See *The Telegraph*. 'Prof Peter Higgs: Atheist scientist admits he doesn't believe in 'god particle'', accessed 24/02/2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/9978226/Prof-Peter-Higgs-Atheist-scientist-admits-he-doesnt-believe-in-god-particle.html>.

fundamentalists. But there are many believers who are just not fundamentalists".²¹ Higgs inadvertently brings up an interesting point that perhaps Dawkins is not as anti-religious as is commonly perceived, which we shall later address. But there are more examples. Dawkins has no shortage of critics, even amongst his fellow atheistic scholars.

John Gray, a secular philosopher, characterises Dawkins as anti-religious, irrelevantly refers to his seeming lack of humour,²² and takes issue with his character, such as when he declares that "Dawkins displays no interest in the cultures of the African countries where he lived as a boy".²³ Gray also objects to Dawkins attacking literalist forms of religion, bizarrely supposing that this is a relatively new development in religion. Even if the latter is correct, that realisation should seemingly lead to approbation from the secular intelligentsia and liberal believers alike, rather than scorn and derision. There is surely nothing more offensive to the critical scholar of religion than ardent literalism. Like many other secular critics of Dawkins, including some of my colleagues in Religious Studies departments, Gray objects to Dawkins' public persona, calling him a "comic figure". Placing these tangential issues aside, Dawkins does himself no favours here. I put the question about his perceived anti-religiousness to him, directly:

I think I would think of myself as anti-religious, yes. I think that Christopher Hitchens would be anti-religious for political reasons, and I would too, but for me that's overshadowed by scientific reasons. I am passionately interested in the truth.²⁴

²¹ The Guardian. 'Peter Higgs criticises Richard Dawkins over anti-religious 'fundamentalism'', accessed 24/02/2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/dec/26/peter-higgs-richard-dawkins-fundamentalism>.

²² Many of Dawkins' supporters would disagree as evidenced by the raucous laughter generated by his comments on the usefulness of science: "If you base medicine on science, you cure people; if you base the design of planes on science, they fly; if you base the design of rockets on science, they reach the moon. It works, bitches." See Think Week Oxford. 'In Conversation with Richard Dawkins - Hosted by Stephen Law', accessed 24/02/2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvkbIEIAOqU>.

²³ The New Republic. 'The Closed Mind of Richard Dawkins: His atheism is its own kind of narrow religion', accessed 24/02/2015, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119596/appetite-wonder-review-closed-mind-richard-dawkins>.

²⁴ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

This is now, and probably already was, a very complex issue. First, it must be considered what Dawkins' critics mean, and what Dawkins himself means, when using the term 'anti-religious'. Second, it must be considered if the various interpretations are accurate, and perhaps, admirable. Thirdly, Dawkins has already provided some qualification. He stresses that his primary reasons for being anti-religious are "scientific". In light of the content of his book, *The God Delusion*, it seems obvious that Dawkins' biggest gripe against 'religion' is the involvement of scientifically unproven claims, and the harm this could do to scientific progress and education, as well as society in general. Interestingly, Dawkins' somewhat elaborated anti-religion aligns well with my own definition of religion. He is opposing views of the world that are made without, or even in contradiction with, scientific knowledge. This is certainly not unexpected of an eminent scientist, and would seem to be an appropriate position for anybody seeking to base life decisions on what can be demonstrated as being most likely true.

On my definition of religion Dawkins is most certainly anti-religious, though the term now loses much of its negative connotations, to the extent that it may be a pragmatically positive trait. Of course, if a predominantly functionalist definition of religion is preferred, then it would be completely nonsensical to think of Dawkins as anti-religious. Indeed, he would himself be religious, as some scholars have recognised, and many opponents have accused.²⁵ When 'religion' is broadened to include the liberal and ultra-liberal, it is worth noting that Dawkins increasingly refers to himself as a "cultural Christian", whilst his New Atheist alum Sam Harris would certainly be considered by most religious experts as a Buddhist.²⁶ Nevertheless, though many critics find Dawkins to be anti-religious, he himself is comfortable with that seemingly derogatory label, and he certainly is by my definition, even if it loses some of the venom that his critics intended. Seeking more clarification, I questioned him further on

²⁵ For an example, see Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (London: SPCK, 2007).

²⁶ See my earlier comments and numerous quotations in Raphael Lataster, 'New Theologians, New Atheists, and Public Engagement', *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2013), pp. 70-91. Furthermore, Dawkins revealed to me that he is not averse to calling himself "spiritual", and that some aspects of "alternative" religions like Buddhism might be "quite good".

whether his anti-religious attitudes were limited to certain faith traditions, or if they applied to all.

I am 'anti-all-religions' but some are obviously much worse than others.²⁷

While this seems decisive, I question further, to determine if he actively opposes the likes of the Buddhist and Taoist religions. Dawkins replies:

They're obviously much better, and it's hard to be very strongly 'anti them'.

It's much easier to be strongly anti Roman Catholicism and Islam, both of which are major forces for evil.²⁸

This is consistent with his earlier writings, which made clear that his disdain for religion is mostly limited to the Abrahamic faiths, with the Eastern religions generally overlooked. In a chapter that makes it obvious that his criticisms tend to be about the great monotheistic faiths, Dawkins declares, "I shall not be concerned at all with other religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism", and questions whether these are religions at all.²⁹ Clearly, he is not truly *contra* all religions, even when he is content to label himself 'anti-religious', and he is using a narrow definition of religion that many sophisticated scholars would reject. His view is either nuanced or over-simplistic, with a sort of hierarchy of religions and their potential for harm.³⁰ Furthermore, in surely what would be a lesser-known point from his *The God Delusion*, Dawkins clarifies that he is not therein opposing alternative or functionalistic religions, but supernatural religions, with his focus generally being on theism (rather than alternative God-concepts such as deism and pantheism) and the Judeo-Christian Yahweh, and that he generally uses the term 'religion' in the 'common' sense.³¹ It is worth noting that Dawkins' focussing on theism further enables him to speak with authority on such matters, despite his lack of philosophical sophistication, as not only is there a lack of evidence for the existence of anything supernatural, but even the most competent of theistic and analytic

²⁷ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

²⁸ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

²⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), pp. 37-38.

³⁰ For the scholars that find Dawkins' view of religion as overly simplistic, the discussion effectively reduces to perspective and semantics. The critical point is that he looks much more favourably upon the 'ways of life' such as Buddhism and other Far Eastern traditions. If we grant that these are also religions, then it is obvious that Dawkins is not as anti-religious as is commonly perceived. What he opposes is precisely what sophisticated critical scholars tend to unanimously oppose: extremism and violence.

³¹ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 13-20.

philosophers have failed to demonstrate that an existing god must be of the theistic-type.³²

Dawkins clearly is most concerned with certain streams of religions. If this is anti-religion, it certainly is a brand that can be shared with even the most tolerant and inclusive of secular elites, as well as more liberal believers. Indeed, even conservative and extremist believers tend to share this view, seeing as they often attack each other. Interestingly, one scholar, also a liberal Christian, whilst generally opposing Dawkins, recognises the benefits of Dawkins' efforts to "call against violence, mindless bigotry and unquestioning dogmatism, and abuse of responsibility and privilege by those who have taken up spiritual vocations".³³ On being asked why it is that he finds some religious claims to be so offensive, Dawkins' response further illustrates that he is not actually opposed to all religions:

I think it's educationally pernicious to fill children's minds up with falsehoods when the truth is so exciting, about the nature of the universe, where it comes from, things like that. We're so close to understanding it. But also, of course, religions – not all of them, but some of them – inspire people to do terrible deeds.³⁴ Because of faith, which by definition requires no evidence. It can be used to justify suicide bombings, beheading apostates, stoning people to death.³⁵

As if it were not yet clear enough, just to be sure, I ask if his attacks are generally directed at the more 'extremist' forms of religion, with Dawkins eliminating any doubt:

³² This has been demonstrated by (the relatively few) secular scholars dabbling in the Philosophy of Religion. For a particularly notable critique of Richard Swinburne's analytic case for the theistic God's existence, oft-seen as the most promising, see Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?: A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). I have also critiqued William Lane Craig's arguments for the theistic and Christian God's existence, and continue to do so. See Lataster, 'New Theologians, New Atheists, and Public Engagement' and Raphael Lataster, 'A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of William Lane Craig's Resurrection of Jesus Argument', *Think*, vol. 14, no. 39 (2015), pp. 59-71. For obvious reasons, those confessional philosophers of the Continental tradition are so far removed from the discussion concerning objective evidence that they are hardly worth mentioning.

³³ Garry W. Trompf, 'After the Dust has Settled: On Dawkinsian scholarship in *The God Delusion*', *Uniting Church Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2012), p. 39.

³⁴ This seems to align with my own position that exclusivist religions are more likely to be harmful, and that their tendency towards violence would only be justifiable if supported with good evidence. This is explored further in my doctoral thesis.

³⁵ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

Yes, and that's obviously sensible. I mean, why would one not?³⁶

A sensible approach indeed; it is hard to see how such a view could be considered noxious, particularly in a free and multicultural society. After all, the very forms of religion he opposes tend to be exclusivist, which are at odds with the liberal freedoms enjoyed in contemporary Western democracies. Unable to resist, I ask him if he agrees with the primary theme of my own religious critiques, that it is religious exclusivism that deserves most of our attention.

Yes, I do think that. It fosters outright fighting between Christians and Muslims, for example, in Nigeria, in Pakistan, Northern Ireland. Blind faith, because it's blind, justifies... In a way you can see that if you really did believe in only one truth faith, in only one true god, you might very well be intolerant of other religions or no religions.³⁷

This echoes his earlier thoughts in *The God Delusion*, where Dawkins narrows the object of his ire, and explains why he opposes such:

As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise. It teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known. It subverts science and saps the intellect.³⁸

It is all the more ironic, then, when he is accused of being a fundamentalist for atheism, or that he is arrogant in his non-belief.³⁹ In fact, while traversing the appropriately-named Charles Darwin walk before our interview in the Blue Mountains, a little dispute arose between Dawkins, and our guide, Connor. Mostly happy to rely on Connor's expertise in identifying numerous examples of native Australia flora and fauna, Dawkins asserted that one particular species was South African. Several members of our troupe consulted with the all-knowing Dr Google,

³⁶ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

³⁷ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

³⁸ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 284. Note that fundamentalism and exclusivism are very much related. It would be difficult to be a fundamentalist without also being an exclusivist.

³⁹ Many intellectuals feel this way. For a confessional perspective, see McGrath and McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?* For a secular example, see scientist Peter Higgs' comments in *The Guardian*. 'Peter Higgs criticises Richard Dawkins over anti-religious 'fundamentalism'', accessed 24/02/2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/dec/26/peter-higgs-richard-dawkins-fundamentalism>. Note also the possibility that such figures may be attributing the actions of Dawkins' followers to Dawkins himself, ironically, and possibly hypocritically, echoing atheistic declarations that Jesus and Muhammad must somehow bear the responsibility for the actions of their followers.

'Religion' and Richard Dawkins

identifying it as a *Callistemon* bottlebrush and revealing Dawkins' error. His response:

I was wrong.⁴⁰

Like any good scientist, Dawkins willingly went wherever the evidence led. That such a response might appear unexpected from this apparently narrow-minded figure, possibly reveals just how common mischaracterisations about Dawkins are. Similarly, during our interview, I informed a shocked, offended, and disbelieving Dawkins, that his beloved Oxford University held their Doctor of Divinity to be their degree of highest academic standing, outranking their Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Medicine, and yes, the all-important Doctor of Science.⁴¹ After I revealed the relevant documents, he simply accepted that he was wrong, and, rather expectedly, vowed to take some action on the issue. Furthermore, I did not see the aggressive and arrogant man that so many of his critics perceive; I saw a polite individual that apologised for minor slights, humbly poured others' drinks, courteously asked permission to deviate from the discussion, and happily changed his mind, so long as there was sufficient evidence to warrant him doing so.

With my wondering about the possibility of liberal theists, atheists, agnostics, pantheists, deists, and other alternative folk being able to live in peace and unite against the evils of (unjustified) religious exclusivism, Dawkins gave his own thoughts on whether such alliances are plausible:

Yes, I have formed alliances with religious liberals on particular issues, like, for example, creationists in schools. I formed an alliance with several bishops in England to oppose a particular creationist school, which was rather pernicious. So yes, I do think it does make sense to form alliances with liberals.⁴²

Such answers do not appear to justify the common antagonistic and divisive portrayal of the man. Perceiving that the so-called New Atheists are not necessarily very anti-religious, I asked Dawkins if he thinks there is anything new about the New Atheism, and if he is indeed a New Atheist.

⁴⁰ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

⁴¹ This is made explicit here: University of Oxford. 'Regulations for Degrees, Diplomas, and Certificates,' accessed 26/02/2015, <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/307-072.shtml>. The respect accorded to this degree is also made quite clear here: University of Oxford. 'General Regulations,' accessed 26/02/2015, http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/31-67_General_Regulations.shtml.

⁴² Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

No, I think there's nothing new, from what we glean from Russell, Ingersoll, etc. I am puzzled by that phrase, and it's a journalistic phrase. I don't object to it because it might have some sort of journalistic value, but I don't think there's the slightest difference between what I've ever said and what Bertrand Russell said, for example.⁴³

Another of the charges levelled at 'New Atheists' such as Dawkins is that they have somehow failed in disproving God's existence, as if that was their primary aim. This may be due – for some – to a misunderstanding of the term 'atheist', which at heart is simply, 'not theist', and further, a misunderstanding of Dawkins' work. Even secular colleagues of mine from Australian and British Religious Studies departments opined that Dawkins' *The God Delusion* attempted – and failed – to prove that God does not exist. In fact, Dawkins asserts therein, "there almost certainly is no God", which is a probabilistic statement (that is arguably justified via the lack of evidence and careful Bayesian reasoning) rather than a definite one, and further makes clear that he does not claim that he knows God does not exist; he is an agnostic, although only to the extent that he is "agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden."⁴⁴

And yet, this view is as pervasive as it is erroneous.⁴⁵ Andrew Linscott, for example, criticises New Atheists in general for failing in "disproving the existence of God."⁴⁶ Anthony Kenny, somewhat of a self-

⁴³ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

⁴⁴ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 50-51, 111-160. Dawkins' attempt at a formal argument against God's existence on pp. 157-158 is certainly deficient. He is not an analytic philosopher, and his book did not need this attempt. Stressing the inadequacy of this, I feel, is cavilling, as it is not crucial to his case. Dawkins also does not adequately deal with the best arguments for God's existence that sophisticated and theistic philosophers of religion produce. However, given that such arguments have failed to set the scientific community ablaze and tend to be of interest to confessional philosophers and the handful of voyeuristic critics such as myself, there is no real need. The mainstream scientific and scholarly community would also not expect Dawkins to refute the best arguments for young earth creationism or geocentricity, or to become an expert in Greek mythology so as to refute the existence of the Greek gods. Dawkins is not a professional philosopher and so should not be expected to partake in the speculative word games typically employed by such apologists. He is a scientist who deals with hard evidence. Of which there is none.

⁴⁵ I provide more quotations from other New Atheists such as Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, revealing that they are not necessarily anti-religious and certainly do not rely on the non-existence of God, in Lataster, 'New Theologians, New Atheists, and Public Engagement'.

⁴⁶ Andrew Linscott, 'The Presumption and Insight of New Atheism', *Theology and Science*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2012), p. 39.

'Religion' and Richard Dawkins

denying atheist,⁴⁷ also points to Dawkins' failure to disprove God's existence; offering up 'agnosticism' as the most rational position.⁴⁸ Again, this is simply a misunderstanding, as Dawkins *is* an agnostic. There is obviously much overlap between agnostics (those that do not know that God exists) and atheists (those that do not believe that God exists). Arguably, this is another positive element to Dawkins' work. Much like certain African Americans and homosexuals, atheists like Dawkins have reclaimed a term that carries with it so much emotional and historical baggage. Along with his colleagues, Dawkins has reminded the populace that there is nothing irrational or 'wrong' with being an 'atheist'. Interestingly, Dawkins' more polemical former colleague, Christopher Hitchens, even made the effort to clarify that he is an 'anti-theist', allowing the possibility that God actually exists, and that he would still oppose 'him' if he did.⁴⁹ Dawkins' position on the supposed need to disprove God's existence has not changed:

You can't disprove God. What a ridiculous idea. All you can say is that there is no evidence, and there is exactly as much evidence as there is for fairies, leprechauns, etc.⁵⁰

Not only does Dawkins not think that it necessary for him, his colleagues, and followers to disprove God's existence, but he thinks it is impossible to do so. It should now be quite obvious that Dawkins and his fellow New Atheists have been grossly misunderstood and misrepresented, at least when it comes to crucial issues such as the lack of evidence for many religions' supernatural claims, and supposedly anti-religious attitudes. There are, of course many tangential and irrelevant criticisms,⁵¹ which can

⁴⁷ One of many educated people who prefer the term 'agnostic', since 'atheist' apparently displays more certainty. This is unambiguously false, as 'atheist' simply means 'not theist'. Though I am not aware of any, some atheists may actively believe in or dogmatically assert the nonexistence of God; that is certainly not characteristic of all.

⁴⁸ Anthony Kenny, 'Knowledge, Belief, and Faith', *Philosophy*, vol. 82, no. 3 (2007), pp. 381-397.

⁴⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (Oxford: Perseus, 2001), p. 55.

⁵⁰ Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

⁵¹ For example, Emeritus Professor Garry Trompf objects to Dawkins' characterisation of eminent scientists as atheists and his apparent denial regarding crimes committed by atheists. See Trompf, 'After the Dust has Settled', pp. 29-40. I would agree with Trompf, however, that Dawkins' book is not an example of first-rank scholarship. Of course, it was not intended to be. Trompf's comments on creationism also seem to display an unawareness of Dawkins' alliance with more liberal believers who also oppose literalist readings of the

be easily dismissed, and which should not divert our attention from Dawkins' (and his colleagues') primary aims of noting the lack of evidence for many religious claims, and warning against the many actual and potential harms that can arise out of the beliefs in such claims. Dawkins generally agreed, being dismissive of my attempts to goad him into commenting on recent controversies, such as his thoughts on paedophilia, sexism, child rearing, and the consistency of honey. However, he was prepared to answer my question on how relevant his opinions about such matters are to his 'pro-science' and 'anti-religious' work. Dawkins made it quite clear how much importance should be ascribed to these 'other' views of his:

None at all.⁵²

Conclusion

In order to determine if certain criticisms of Richard Dawkins and some of his allies are justified, such as their apparently being anti-religious, it was necessary to consider what religion actually is. Building on Schilbrack's recent definition, I settled on religion being forms of life predicated upon the reality of the superscientific. One of the many advantages of this definition is that it aligns well with lay notions of religion, and coincidentally seems to align with the so-called anti-religious writings put forth by the likes of Dawkins. On this definition, to be anti-religious is merely to prefer that decisions be made rationally, with appeal to good evidence. I demonstrated that by this definition, Dawkins is certainly anti-religious, and that this is not necessarily undesirable; indeed, it might be applauded. I revealed that even on other possible interpretations of the term 'anti-religious', Dawkins should not be considered as such, given his focus on the worst and most harmful fruits of religious thought, which is something that should be – and is – opposed by secular elites and liberal religionists alike, and his generally overlooking of entire faith traditions such as Buddhism.

Using our interview and Dawkins' published writings, I also cleared up other misconceptions, such as that he and his colleagues need or attempted to prove that there is no god, and that somehow Dawkins is an

Bible. Hence, the point of this article. Dawkins is commonly misunderstood, even by highly sophisticated scholars.

⁵² Richard Dawkins, personal communication, December 3, 2014.

arrogant and immutable fundamentalist.⁵³ My intention is not to act as an apologist for the infallible pope of New Atheism, but to reveal that he is not deserving of all the criticisms levelled against him, and that he could feasibly be an ally to liberal believers and more nuanced secularists alike. It is my hope that this effort will persuade some of my fellow critical scholars to look upon the work of such New Atheists with renewed respect, and to identify and appreciate the positive elements of their efforts. After all, the main thrust of *The God Delusion* is that adherents of Abrahamic religions can cause great harms to society, despite many of their crucial claims being supported by little to no evidence, and also that atheists can be rational, moral, and intellectually fulfilled.⁵⁴ That is surely something that even many religionists and leftist 'Old Atheists' can agree with.⁵⁵

⁵³ A misconception concerning atheists in general is that they are 'angry', which several studies have recently disconfirmed. See Brian P. Meier et al., 'The Myth of the Angry Atheist', *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, v. 149, no. 3 (2015), pp. 219-238.

⁵⁴ In common parlance, for many, Dawkins has 'made it okay' to call oneself an atheist.

⁵⁵ Even religious conservatives and exclusivists should agree, given that they are even more strident in their criticisms of religions apart from their own.