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Just give me that old-time atheism!

"Not believing in God is no excuse for being virulently anti-religious or naïvely pro-science," says Dylan Evans, a professor of robotics at the University of West England in Bristol.

Evans has written an article for the *Guardian* of London deriding the old-fashioned, "19th-century" atheism of such prominent thinkers as Richard Dawkins and Jonathan Miller, instead proposing a new, modern atheism which "values religion, treats science as simply a means to an end and finds the meaning of life in art."

Indeed, he says, religion itself is to be understood as "a kind of art, which only a child could mistake for reality and which only a child would reject for being false."

Evans' position fits well with that of the American philosopher of science Michael Ruse, whose new book, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*, lays much of the blame for the growth of creationism in America — and for the increasingly strident attempts by the religious right to have evolutionary theory kicked off the curriculum and replaced by the new dogma of "intelligent design" — at the door of the scientists who have tried to compete with, and even supplant, religion.

A staunch evolutionist himself, he is nevertheless highly critical of such modern giants as Dawkins and Edward O. Wilson.

Evans' "Atheism Lite," which seeks to negotiate a truce between religious and irreligious world views, is easily demolished.

Such a truce would have a chance of working only if it were reciprocal — if the world's religions agreed to value the atheist position and to concede its ethical basis, if they respected the discoveries and achievements of modern science, even when these discoveries challenge religious sanctities, and if they agreed that art at its best reveals life's multiple meanings at least as clearly as so-called "revealed" texts.

No such reciprocal arrangement exists, however, nor is there the slightest chance that such an accommodation could ever be reached.

It is among the truths believed to be self-evident by the followers of all religions that godlessness is equivalent to amorality and that ethics requires the underpinning presence of some sort of ultimate arbiter, some sort of supernatural absolute, without which secularism, humanism, relativism, hedonism, liberalism and all manner of permissive improprieties will inevitably seduce the unbeliever down immoral ways.

To those of us who are perfectly prepared to indulge in the above vices but still believe ourselves to be ethical beings, the godlessness-equals-morality position is pretty hard to swallow.

Nor does the current behaviour of organized religion breed confidence in the Evans/Ruse laissez-faire attitude. Education everywhere is seriously imperilled by religious attacks.

In recent years, Hindu nationalists in India attempted to rewrite the nation's history books to support their

anti-Muslim ideology, an effort thwarted only by the electoral victory of a secularist coalition led by the Congress party.

Meanwhile, Muslim voices the world over are claiming that evolutionary theory is incompatible with Islam.

And in America, the battle over the teaching of intelligent design in U.S. schools is reaching crunch time, as the American Civil Liberties Union prepares to take on intelligent-design proponents in a Pennsylvania court.

It seems inconceivable that better behaviour on the part of the world's great scientists, of the sort that Ruse would prefer, would persuade these forces to back down.

Intelligent design, an idea designed backward so as to force the antique idea of a Creator upon the beauty of creation, is so thoroughly rooted in pseudoscience, so full of false logic, so easy to attack that a little rudeness seems called for.

Its advocates argue, for example, that the sheer complexity and perfection of cellular/molecular structures is inexplicable by gradual evolution.

However, the multiple parts of complex, interlocking biological systems do evolve together, gradually expanding and adapting — and, as Dawkins showed in *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*, natural selection is active at every step of this process.

But, as well as scientific arguments, there are others that are more, well, novelistic. What about bad design, for example? Was it really so intelligent to come up with the birth canal or the prostate gland?

Then, there's the moral argument against an intelligent designer who cursed his creations with cancer and AIDS. Is the intelligent designer also amorally cruel?

To see religion as "a kind of art," as Evans rather sweetly proposes, is possible only when the religion is dead or when, like the Church of England, it has become a set of polite rituals.

The old Greek religion lives on as mythology, the old Norse religion has left us the Norse myths and, yes, now we can read them as literature.

The Bible contains much great literature, too, but the literalist voices of Christianity grow ever louder, and one doubts that they would welcome Evans' child's storybook approach.

Meanwhile religions continue to attack their own artists: Hindu artists' paintings are attacked by Hindu mobs, Sikh playwrights are threatened by Sikh violence and Muslim novelists and filmmakers are menaced by Islamic fanatics with a vigorous unawareness of any kinship.

If religion were a private matter, one could more easily respect its believers' right to seek its comforts and nourishments.

But religion today is big public business, using efficient political organization and cutting-edge information technology to advance its ends. Religions play bare-knuckle rough all the time, while demanding kid-glove treatment in return.

As Evans and Ruse would do well to recognize, atheists such as Dawkins, Miller and Wilson are neither immature nor culpable for taking on such religionists.

They are doing a vital and necessary thing.

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