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Science Fundamentalism: A Short Answer to Three Militant Atheists*

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> It is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts.
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> *Koran* 22:46
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> They reckon ill who leave Me [God] out.
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> *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (*in his poem* "*Brahma*")

Secular or atheistic fundamentalism is a reaction *par en bas* against religious fundamentalism; it is a new form of superficiality and intolerance advanced by a few anti-religious polemicists. Ideas have consequences: this is the first thing an intellectual should know. But this does not seem to be the case for men such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, or Samuel Harris.

These authors, pushing the limits of science beyond its boundaries, openly defend the "eradication" of the religious traditions of humanity. In a sense, they are only resorting to an old human instinct of blaming this or that set of ideas or groups for all the miseries of the world; this was done with the Chinese, the Germans, the Russians, the Jews, the Arabs, the religious, the makers of pizza, etc. For these superficial and inconsequential critics, it is as if it is enough to get rid of religion for the world to be a perfect paradise. The least one can say is that in the past, this kind of action did not produce good fruits! Far from it! It is a case, not of "ethnic cleansing"—now widespread throughout the world—but of "religious cleansing". In the opinion of this trio of destroyers, the religions have not brought anything positive to humanity; they are marked by intellectual insufficiency. Besides, according to them, they are a "risk" for our very existence.

Nothing positive? What to say then of Chartres cathedral, the Taj

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Mahal, the Alhambra, and the pinnacles of Buddhist sculpture? What to say of the time-honored wisdom of Lao Tzu, Shankara, St. Augustine, and Ibn Arabi? All these "monuments", intellectual and architectural, are in fact direct manifestations of a religious spirit that has never ceased to exist among all peoples. One should also remember that the positive presence of religion extends even to the more prosaic and mundane aspects of our life, such as the culture of wine and ale—which owes its present diffusion and sophistication to the work implemented in Europe by monks back in the Middle Ages. Nor must one forget the universities, the Sorbonne for instance, and the hospitals created and maintained by the Church; nor the cities which owe all their charm to the Spirit: Istanbul, Fez, Cairo, Varanasi, Kyoto, Jerusalem, Ravenna, Venice, Siena, Toledo, Ávila, and many others.

Intellectual frailty? In their "scientistic crusade" have these righteous of the lab coat never heard of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Dhammapada* of the Buddha, or the Sermon on the Mount? Do Dante and the *Divine Comedy* mean nothing to the new inquisitors of secular fundamentalism?

Irrationality? How then do they explain the genius of Pascal, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Padre Vieira? [1] What about Shakespeare, Cervantes, Calderón, Rumi, and Guimarães Rosa.[2]

Is the supreme music of Bach, Mozart, and the Gregorian chant, a "risk" for our survival? And what of the ethereal Red Indian Sun Dance and

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[1] Padre Vieira, a Luso-Brazilian master of medieval intellectuality, was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1608. He arrived in Brazil at seven years of age, in 1615. In the city of Salvador, Bahia, Vieira received his early education and later made his vows, being ordained as a priest in the Society of Jesus. Brazil was his adopted country and there he combated the Inquisition, as well as the Dutch attacks; he defended the Indians and the Negroes against slavery, and the Jews against forced conversion. For these positions he acquired many enemies, being imprisoned more than once. He died in Salvador in 1697 at the age of 89. His works include *History of the Future*, *The Art of Dying*, *On Prophecy and Inquisition*, as well as hundreds of magnificent sermons and thousands of letters.

[2] Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967) is the greatest writer in Brazil, author of the novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (translated as "The Devil to Pay in the Backlands"), which some consider as a contemporary successor to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Homer's *Odyssey.*

the ecstatic whirl of the Sufi dervishes?

Solomon was right when he said, some three thousand years ago, that there is nothing new under the sun. These polemicists believe they are propounding something original, but they do not say anything essentially different from the atheists of Greece, India, and other places of antiquity. They repeat the discourse of the Sophists of 2,500 years ago. Freud and Marx also tried to "eradicate" religion with the stroke of a pen. All of them forget that there has never been a civilization, throughout human history, without a religion. "There is no culture without cult", as T.S. Eliot said. The only element of "innovation" in the current movement of Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, et al., is the typically "modern" lack of imagination and arrogance.

These authors, moreover, exceed the proper field of science, and in practice turn it into a (pseudo-) religion; their anti-religion becomes a "new religion", much more intolerant than the ones it means to fight.

"When the finger points at the moon, the foolish man looks at the finger", says a Zen proverb. What a world without salt and charm is the one that Dawkins and comrades envisage! A world without the wisdom of Confucius, the spiritual presence and example of the saints, the temples and music of India; a world without perfume, without beauty, without virtue; even more importantly, a life without meaning and purpose. These men have spent too much time in a laboratory and have not perceived that much of the good we still have derives from the wisdom transmitted by religion. Not "religion" superficially and fanatically understood, of course, but the religion of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful about which Plato, among others, spoke.

Corruptio optimi pessima: the corruption of the best is the worst type of corruption. Politically, this adage can be applied to the so-called "religious right", with its grave errors, its narcissism, and its self-indulgence. But the polemicists we have in view are not primarily criticizing the religious right; they are proposing the wholesale destruction of religion.

Finally, one has to respond to their pseudo-arguments by pointing out that the great disgraces of the twentieth century were not caused by religion. Neither the First nor the Second World War had anything to do

with religion; Nazism and Communism were strongly anti-religious, persecuting every kind of believer. The United States president Harry Truman gave his approval to the dropping of atomic bombs upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki; nothing to do with any religion here. On the contrary, it was the fundamentalists of science and technology that produced these bombs and the unprincipled and immoral politicians that launched them.

In short, these anti-religious opportunists hide the fact that none of our recent tragedies had a religious motivation, apart, of course, from the militant religious fundamentalists. The "intelligent bombs" and the "surgical attacks" were fabricated by Dawkins' comrades. Modern dictatorships—"rational", "scientific", and violently anti-religious—persecuted and killed thousands of Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the epoch of the Soviet Union and Nazism, and millions of Buddhists and Taoists were killed in the "Cultural Revolution" of Mao Tse Tung's China. The worst kings and sultans of history were like noisy little boys when compared with these leaders of mass destruction

Did Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad, all founders of world religions, not know what they were doing? Is this faction of science fundamentalists wiser than they? Human perversion and depravation is enough to explain our miseries, as Schuon and his followers,[3] have explained in their magnificent books. And if religions are not totally innocent—remember that Christ said, "Why callest thou Me good? There is none good but God"—it is nevertheless thanks to religion and its manifold examples of wisdom and love, that the good does not vanish from the face of the earth.

[3] See especially William Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, "Frithjof Schuon and the Perennialist School".