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## **Doubt, Deception, and Dogma: Science and Religion in Film**

**JOSHUA M. MORITZ**

Even if you haven't been paying very close attention lately, the chances are that you could not help but notice the increasing degree to which the relationship between religion and science is being featured in recent popular films. As a scholar in the field of theology and science I wish I could say that these were all positive developments, but the unfortunate reality is that the highest profile of these productions are nothing short of a repristination of the Draper-White thesis that Science and Religion have been engaged in a bitter conflict from the beginning and that the Christian Church in particular is and always has been the enemy of scientific reason.<sup>1</sup> At its best—so the story goes—religion gets in the way of scientific discovery, innovation, and human progress. At its worst, religious belief may ultimately lead to the cataclysmic and violent destruction of all life on planet earth. Over the past few weeks, three such films proclaiming precisely this message have caught my attention: Richard Dawkins' sobering documentary *The Root of All Evil?*, Bill Maher's searching documentary with a comic twist, *Religulous*, and the feature-film mystery thriller based on Dan Brown's bestseller, *Angels and Demons*.

All three of these films feature a man—Richard Dawkins, Bill Maher, and Robert Langdon, respectively—on a quest for rational truth which leads each of them into the inner sanctums of both science and religion, from CERN and the Human Genome Project to the Vatican and Jerusalem. Throughout their individual pilgrimages they are each portrayed as honest skeptics looking for answers anywhere that they may be found. While the exact natures of their journeys differ, what resounds through each is a desire to expose religion for what it truly is. This exercise of exposing religion in the name of "honest skepticism" is coupled with a dramatic call to action for people of reason and science to rise up and stop this madness called "faith". Dawkins, Maher, and Dan Brown's protagonist, Langdon, see themselves as uncovering key clues in a mystery that will shed the light of truth on the real nature of religion and illuminate the dark and disturbing irrational reality that lies beneath the quaint veneer of faith. In their seeking of truth through "sincere scientific uncertainty," however, the creators of these three films ironically fall woefully short in terms of their honesty, integrity, and disinterested application of the scientific method to the question of religion.

In *The Root of All Evil?*, Richard Dawkins is introduced as an objective man of science who is on a mission to uncover what lies at the heart of religious belief. As the documentary begins, Dawkins, overlooking Jerusalem, narrates: "I'm a scientist and I believe there is a profound contradiction between science and religious belief. There is no well-demonstrated reason to believe in God, and I think the idea of a divine creator belittles the elegant reality of the universe." A few moments later he continues:

People like to say that faith and science can live together side by side. But I don't think they can. They're deeply opposed. Science is a discipline of investigation and constructive doubt, questing with logic, evidence and reason to draw conclusions. Faith, by stark contrast, demands a positive suspension of critical faculties. Science proceeds by setting up hypotheses, ideas or models, and then attempts to disprove them. So a scientist is constantly asking questions, being skeptical. Religion is about turning untested belief into unshakable truth through the power of institutions and the passage of time.

One would expect that Dawkins, after elaborating such an inspiring description of the analytical and objective ideals of scientific investigation, would proceed with his study of religion by forming a certain set of hypotheses about the nature of religious belief and then attempt valiantly and systematically to falsify them. One might also suppose that Dawkins—ever the enlightened man of reason and defender of science—would gather the best possible evidence to support his conclusions. Unfortunately, however, Dawkins' method in assessing religion's intellectual mindset and core values is anything but scientific. Viewing *The Root of All Evil?*, one might suspect that Dawkins even goes out of his way to find religious believers off the beaten path who fit a certain preconceived notion about religion—namely, the notion that religious belief is antithetical and even hostile towards science.

For example, as Pastor Ted Haggard of New Life Church is interviewed by Dawkins, a religiously uncommitted yet scientifically informed viewer might gasp in silent shock as Pastor Ted (as his congregants call him) denies that the Earth is billions of years old, and yet informs Dawkins, "We fully embrace the scientific method, as American Evangelicals. And we think, as time goes along, as we discover more and more facts, that we'll learn more and more about how God created the heavens and the earth." What the uninitiated viewer might not realize, however, is that Pastor Ted Haggard, though a popular evangelical preacher at the time of the interview, is hardly an authority who is qualified to speak in an informed manner on the interaction of Christian theology and the natural sciences. In fact, Haggard, as one having no formal theological education (though he has received two honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees), is not the best person to talk to about regarding what standard ecumenical or historical Christian theology says about any given topic. And yet he is held up by the documentary as a sort of centerpiece of Christian theological orthodoxy.

As the documentary progresses, the interviewees chosen become less and less qualified to speak on their given subjects and less representative of the larger Christian faith. Dawkins centers attention on extremists and fundamentalists such

as Pastor Keenan Roberts of “Hell House Ministries,” Adrian Hawkes, principal of a young earth creationist secondary school in London, and Michael Bray, an American pro-life activist who had been criminally convicted of conspiracy in relation to ten bombings of women’s health clinics and the offices of liberal advocacy groups in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. These are hardly your usual suspects found in a sample from a randomly chosen Christian church on any given Sunday morning. To be fair, the one notable exception to the right-wing and extremist believers that Dawkins interviews is his friend the former Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries. Harries agrees with the majority of what Dawkins maintains, and is similarly against teaching children Young Earth Creationism as science. Dawkins concludes however that Harries, being sensible and rational, is an anomaly among religious believers. Instead, Harries is the exception that proves the rule of Dawkins’ method. Mistaking the statistical outliers for the mean, Dawkins makes the anomalies the norm. There is a good reason that the types of people on whom Dawkins focuses are called religious *extremists*, but somehow in this case Dawkins is uncharacteristically unattuned to the subtleties of the English language as he allows his faith in presuppositions to blind him to the obvious empirical reality. Indeed, there is no shortage of sensible religious believers among the faculty in both the humanities and the natural sciences at Dawkins’ own Oxford University, but instead of engaging with scholars who are an authority on the topic of his documentary, Dawkins cherry-picks people who will prove his preconceptions.

Agnostic comedian Bill Maher likewise puts on the mantle of the supposedly sincere skeptic as he seeks answers to the “big questions” about life in his well-received comic documentary *Religulous*. Speaking in his characteristically casual and colloquial style, Maher explains his position to his viewers: “My big thing is, I don’t know. That’s what I preach. I preach the Gospel of ‘I Don’t Know.’ That’s what I’m here promoting: Doubt. That’s my product. The other guys are selling Certainty. Not me, I’m on the corner with Doubt.” As in Dawkins’ documentary, in *Religulous*, reason and science are again juxtaposed to irrational religious belief. Maher’s impartiality is much more convincing to the viewing public than Dawkins’, though, and as a result reviewers have judged Maher’s search for meaning as an honest quest for truth. In reality, however, Maher’s method is even less scientific than Dawkins’ and his product is doubly devious and deceptive.

In addition to engaging in the same type of cherry-picking that stains the scientific hands of Dawkins,<sup>2</sup> Maher obtains many of his interviews under entirely false pretenses and then relentlessly edits them so any potentially worthy counterparts appear confounded and befuddled. For example, after representatives from the young earth creationist organization Answers in Genesis (AiG) expressed no interest in being interviewed by Maher, his team contrived a false front, First Word Productions, and sent AiG’s president Ken Ham a letter stating that “photos of the museum on your website are awe-inspiring and we feel that showcasing this amazing museum to a broad audience would add to spreading the word of Answers In Genesis.” They further stated that “our documentary seeks to explore the cultural landscape of the United States through highlighting

religious centers, historical sites and key religious experts," and so concealed the true nature of the production. Fake interviews—without Bill Maher present—were staged to establish a level of comfort with AiG and at the last minute Maher snuck into a side door of the museum (they even caught him on a security camera) and slipped into Ken Ham's office for an interview without ever identifying who he really was.<sup>3</sup> Similar false pretenses were devised in order for Maher to obtain an interview with the well-known Christian geneticist Francis Collins. The letter Collins received expressed that the interview had "decided to focus on *The Language of God*," that the filmmakers "are approaching this project as a journey toward understanding during which it is crucial to consult experts from a variety of fields" and that "Dr. Collins' explanation of the human genome and its relationship to his faith will express a key point of view on the subject." Instead of discussing these aforementioned topics, Collins explains, "Maher migrated into other territory where I am hardly an expert (like the historicity of the Gospels). As you could see, that was the part he chose to include, though he presented a very limited excerpt."<sup>4</sup>

In the part of the interview with Collins that is aired, Maher, using phrases such as "You are the one scientist...the one *famous* scientist, anyway, who's also religious" gives the viewer the impression that the religiously believing scientists is a statistical anomaly. But even then, Maher does not ask Collins about his area of expertise, and instead reserves all his questions about science and religion for those interviewees who have not been formally trained in the natural sciences. Nor did Maher take Collins's advice that he should speak with someone like N.T. Wright about the authenticity of the New Testament accounts rather than someone who is not an authority on the matter. Nor, for that matter, does Maher interview a single formally trained philosopher of religion or theologian. Is Maher employing honest skepticism? I am sincerely doubtful.

The third recent occasion of religion and science in the movies that couldn't help but catch my attention pertains to the 2009 summer blockbuster starring Tom Hanks and directed by Ron Howard, *Angels and Demons*. While *Religulous* and *The Root of All Evil?*, as documentaries, appeal to a limited, older, and most likely more educated segment of the population, *Angels and Demons* is being marketed to a diverse audience of millions across the globe. And to an even greater degree than the other two movies, this film has as its central core the historical conflict thesis of Draper and White. Like Dawkins and Maher, the hero of *Angels and Demons*, Robert Langdon, is cast as a religiously disinterested and somewhat skeptical art history scholar who is thrust into the midst of a murder mystery that begins at CERN and ends at the Vatican. The skeptical mindset of Langdon is made explicit when an agnostic or atheistic CERN physicist (Kohler) mentions the word "miracles."

Langdon, giving Kohler a questioning look, repeats "*Miracles?*"

"You sound skeptical," says Kohler, "I thought you were a religious symbolologist. Do you not believe in miracles?"

"Let's say that I'm undecided on miracles," responds Langdon.

"Perhaps *miracle* is the wrong word. I was simply trying to speak your language," offers Kohler.

Agitated, Langdon exclaims, "I study religious *symbolology*, Mr. Kohler, I'm an academic, not a priest."

Suddenly, a bit more congenially to Langdon, Kohler apologetically submits, "Of course. How simple of me. One does not need to have cancer to analyze its symptoms."

A few moments later, Langdon and Kohler are poised over the body of a murdered scientist who was also a priest. Kohler requests that Langdon shed some light on the crime scene and in response, Langdon establishes the presupposition of the ensuing plot.

"Since the beginning of history," Langdon explains, "a deep rift has existed between science and religion. Outspoken scientists like Copernicus—"

"Were murdered," Kohler interjects. "Murdered by the church for revealing scientific truths. Religion has always persecuted science."

"Yes," affirms Langdon, "but in the 1500s, a group of men in Rome fought back against the church. Some of Italy's most enlightened men—physicists, mathematicians, astronomers—began meeting secretly to share their concerns about the church's inaccurate teachings. They feared that the church's monopoly on 'truth' threatened academic enlightenment around the world. They founded the world's first scientific think tank, calling themselves 'the enlightened ones.'"

"The Illuminati!" declares Kohler.

Langdon nods and further explains, "The Illuminati were hunted ruthlessly by the Catholic Church. The scientists stayed safe through rites of secrecy. Word spread through the academic underground, and the Illuminati brotherhood grew to include academics from all over Europe. The scientists met regularly in Rome at an ultrasecret lair they called the *Church of Illumination*."

One of the most well-known members of the Illuminati, continues Langdon, was Galileo Galilei. Galileo "tried to soften the church's position on science by proclaiming that science did not undermine the existence of God, but rather reinforced it." But, "unfortunately," says Langdon, the unification of science and religion was not what the church wanted." Kohler, affirmingly, exclaims: "Of course not. The union would have nullified the church's claim as the sole vessel through which man could understand God. So the church tried Galileo as a heretic, found him guilty . . ."—and the rest, as they say, is history. The fact that it is a version of history that has been so thoroughly discredited that no serious scholar would consider espousing it today is of no concern to director Ron Howard or author Dan Brown. Brown, like Dawkins and Maher, presumes to defend an honest skeptical inquiry. Tragically, though, in the zeal of their supposedly scientific war waged against religion, truth is the ultimate casualty.

## Endnotes

- 1 This historical “conflict thesis” was put forth in two extremely influential works of the nineteenth century: John W. Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874), and Andrew D. White, *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). Since then, this “warfare” understanding of the relationship between science and religion has been largely discredited. For a thorough critique of this thesis, see John H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Ronald Numbers and David Lindberg, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
- 2 Among Maher’s “experts” in religion are the attendees of the Trucker’s Chapel, the actor who plays Jesus at the Holy Land experience in Orlando Florida, a man who believes he is the second coming of Jesus Christ, and a random renegade priest loitering in the courtyard of St. Peter’s Basilica.
- 3 For a copy of the letter and a full discussion of this incident, see Steven Waldman, “Religulous—Deceiving Its Way into the Creation Museum,” <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/10/religulous-use-of-deceit-in-ge.html>.
- 4 Francis Collins, quoted in Steven Waldman, “The Case Against *Religulous*—The Misleading Francis Collins Interview,” <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/10/the-case-against-religulous-th.html>.