

Why Atheists Are Finally Turning on Richard Dawkins

Late last month, two heavy-hitters within organized atheism, activist Ophelia Benson and scientist Richard Dawkins, reached a detente of sorts about online debate and posted it on their separate websites.

“Disagreement is inevitable, but bullying and harassment are not,” the statement reads. “If we want secularism and atheism to gain respect, we have to be able to disagree with each other without trying to destroy each other.”

Before the virtual ink was dry, Dawkins had stepped in it again.

“Date rape is bad. Stranger rape at knife-point is worse,” Dawkins said on Twitter, where he has almost 1 million followers. “If you think that’s an endorsement of date rape, go away and learn how to think.” Another tweet applied the same logic to “mild date rape” and “violent date rape,” and still another compared “mild pedophilia” and “violent pedophilia.”

The reaction was swift and severe. Some defended Dawkins, saying he was merely engaging in a thought experiment, while others decried another eruption of what they see as chronic insensitivity and misogyny and flimsy “I’m sorry but ...” apologies for repeat offenses.

Atheists say controversial things online every day. But Dawkins’ position as the godfather of the modern atheist movement has revived a question that’s been percolating for at least three years: Has the famous scientist become more of a liability than an asset for the movement he helped create?

“Regretfully, I think Richard Dawkins has become a liability,”

atheist activist and author Greta Christina said in an email. She has shared a podium with Dawkins at two high-profile atheist events, including 2012's Reason Rally in Washington, D.C., which attracted tens of thousands of people.

Many credit Dawkins' 2006 best-seller *The God Delusion* with swelling the ranks of atheism. His Richard Dawkins Foundation supports dozens of atheist organizations with its annual budget of \$800,000.

"He is the reason I call myself an atheist, and he's a big part of the reason I became an atheist activist," Christina said. "But the unfortunate reality is that newspapers and other big media outlets have been making him into the major face of organized atheism – and it's creating an image of us that turns a lot of people off."

Dawkins seems to embody everything that people dislike about atheists.

Dawkins declined to be interviewed for this story, and a representative for his foundation said a statement he made on its website would be his final word on the subject.

Yet the current dust-up may have served as a wake-up call. On Wednesday, presented with criticisms collected for this story, Dawkins added to an existing post on his foundation's website.

"There should be no rivalry in victimhood," the addendum to the post reads, "and I'm sorry I once said something similar to American women complaining of harassment, inviting them to contemplate the suffering of Muslim women by comparison. But maybe you get the point? If we wish to insist ... that all examples of a sexual crime are exactly equally bad, perhaps we need to look more carefully at exactly who is belittling what."

Dawkins was a famous evolutionary biologist before he touted atheism. His 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, bridged the gap

between academic writing and popular science and became a rare best-seller. In it, he outlined his theory of “memes”—ideas that travel within a culture through discussion, writing or images—which spread far beyond academia and into popular culture.

But it was 2006’s *The God Delusion* that many credit with sparking a growing interest in atheism in the U.S. Along with best-selling books by the other members of the “Four Horsemen” of atheism—the late Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett—Dawkins’ rising star mirrored the growth of atheism in the last decade.

In 2012, the Pew Research Center found 5.7 percent of Americans identified as either atheist or agnostic, up from 3.7 percent in 2007.

“Richard Dawkins has done a lot to bring atheism to a whole new generation,” said Phil Zuckerman, a sociology professor who studies atheism and who also credits Dawkins with speaking out against the pedophilia scandal within the Catholic Church. “On the other hand, Dawkins seems to embody everything that people dislike about atheists: He is smug, condescending and emits an unpleasant disdainfulness. He doesn’t ever seem to acknowledge the good aspects of religion, only the bad. In that sense, I think he doesn’t help atheism in the PR department.”

‘For Goodness Sake Grow Up’

One of Dawkins’ biggest missteps came in 2011, when he blasted Rebecca Watson, a young atheist activist who wrote about feeling sexually harassed at a free-thought conference. In a now-infamous series of comments posted to the blog Pharyngula, Dawkins wrote in a message titled “Dear Muslima,” “Stop whining, will you? ... For goodness sake grow up, or at least grow a thicker skin.”

That incident—and others that did not involve Dawkins—led

several atheist groups to include sexual-harassment policies at conferences and many say it swelled interest in the newly founded Women in Secularism conferences in 2012.

"My life was already negatively affected by his 'Dear Muslima' statement," said Amy Davis Roth, president of a Los Angeles women's atheist group and a speaker at Women in Secularism conferences. "In that statement he told one of my co-bloggers to essentially get over sexism and sexual harassment that she experienced because women have it worse elsewhere. His seemingly ignorant yet authoritative statements unleashed a barrage of online harassment directed at our blog and its contributors that has yet to cease to this day."

There have been other online eruptions as well. Last year, he garnered negative attention with a tweet some called racist. "All the world's Muslims have fewer Nobel Prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge," he tweeted last August. "They did great things in the Middle Ages, though."

Amanda Marcotte, an atheist activist, blogger and freelance journalist who has been critical of Dawkins, said comments like that keep unbelievers from joining atheist groups or supporting its causes.

"A lot of close friends of mine do not believe in God and they see his (Dawkins') Islamophobia, they see his sexism, they see his unwillingness to engage with people who don't come from a white man's perspective and they are done," she said. "They have no interest in that. Zero."

So when his recent tweets about rape and pedophilia hit the Twittersphere two days after the release of the civility agreement with his longtime critic, the debate started anew.

"Perhaps he was testing it," Benson said of the agreement, which she characterized as a positive step in repairing a rift over feminism within atheism that she traces to Dawkins' "Dear Muslima" comment.

Benson said Dawkins attracts people to the movement with his well-reasoned arguments against religion and superstition. But he then repels them with what many see as an unwillingness to listen to ideas other than his own.

“In his two or three recent Twitter combats, the most striking thing is he does not listen to anyone except his fans, no matter how reasonably things are put,” she said. “I don’t think that’s a good way to represent long-term, healthy atheism.”

And it isn’t only women atheists whom Dawkins upset. Writing on The Friendly Atheist, Hemant Mehta said: “I’m a fan of Richard Dawkins. I know he means well. But ... it’s annoying having to defend him. More importantly, I shouldn’t have to!”

Adam Lee, who blogs at Daylight Atheism, said: “I don’t think [Dawkins] has done more harm than good to the atheist movement, but the balance has been shifting toward harm. He has made comments about women and minorities that give people a bad impression of what atheism stands for. I wish he would stand back and let other people add their voices to his.”

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