

NOTE

‘Is God Dead?’

R W writes :

Leading scientists and academics came together for an important conference, “Beyond Belief— Science, Religion, Reason and Survival.” The event was sponsored by the Science Network and held at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California Nov 5-7, '06. The conference website. (<http://beyondbelief2006.org/>) described the impetus for the gathering this way:

“Just 40 years after a famous TIME magazine cover asked ‘Is God Dead?’ the answer appears to be a resounding “No!”... Religions are increasingly a geo-political force to be reckoned with. Fundamentalist movements—some violent in the extreme—are growing. Science and religion are at odds in the classrooms and courtrooms. And a return to religious values is widely touted as an antidote to the alleged decline in public morality. After two centuries, could this be twilight for the Enlightenment project and the beginning of a new age of unreason? Will faith and dogma trump rational inquiry, or will it be possible to reconcile religious and scientific worldviews? Can evolutionary biology, anthropology and neuroscience help us to better understand how we construct beliefs, and experience empathy, fear and awe? Can science help us create a new rational narrative as poetic and powerful as those that have traditionally sustained societies? Can we treat religion as a natural phenomenon? Can we be good without God? And if not God, then what? This is a critical moment in the human situation.”

Among those participating in the conference was Richard Dawkins, a scientist and popularizer of the theory of evolution. Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion* has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 13 weeks in a row, and he has been getting large and enthusiastic audiences on tour in the US promoting his book. In a *US News and World Report* article (“The New Unbelievers”—Nov. 5, 2006), Dawkins commented on why he is now getting such a hearing: “Six years of Bush, which seems to be a step in the direction of theocracy, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism seem to suggest that the world is moving toward two extreme religious views.”

One main arena of controversy in the conference was whether there is an inherent conflict between science and religion. Some participants said that scientists should focus on spreading a greater appreciation and knowledge of science but stay away from a debate over the existence of God, or other things that would conflict with mainstream religious belief.

But others argued that science inevitably conflicts with religious faith. Since scientific thought and discovery is based on evidence and fact, it undermines the unfounded faith of religion—which has no basis in evidence for any of its wild claims. And religion cannot help but contest with science.

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