

# 'I don't mind ridiculing people's beliefs'

9 June 2011 John Holden



Science's outspoken envoy Richard Dawkins came to Dublin last week to participate in the first ever World Atheist Convention. His revulsion to the irrational is as fervent as ever. **John Holden** reports.

Richard Dawkins has a lot of enemies. As a consequence of his outspoken views on the perils of religious belief he has had to put up with hate mail, death threats and worse for decades.

But, as was clearly illustrated in Dublin's Alexander Hotel last weekend, he has a lot of supporters too (one of the other speakers at the event, US blogger Rebecca Watson, admitted that the ring tone on her phone was an audio recording of Dawkins reading out his own hate mail). The three-day event was completely sold out and the crowd definitely didn't pay 100 euro per ticket to heckle the speakers.

This was an exercise in preaching to the converted. It could never have been anything else really. But it made a mark and the presence of the most outspoken atheist of them all, Richard Dawkins, was surely a great help to the cause.

In essence Dawkins is another scientist who has written some science books. However, he is a superb communicator (he held the Charles Simonyi Professorship in the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University until 2008) and as an evolutionary biologist his subject matter, areas of research, and ultimately, opinions of the world have made him a household name among those who wouldn't ordinarily know one scientist from Beaker of 'Muppets' fame.

Was he surprised that the World Atheist Convention was being held here in Ireland rather than some other bastion of rational, secular thinking like France or Scandinavia? "Not really," he says. "The most well received talks I've given have often been in places like the Bible Belt of the Deep South in the US rather than in more tolerant societies. Besides it's better for a convention of this kind to take place in locations where it is needed more."

Those places, he believes, are everywhere around us. The threat of religion to scientific and rational thought is still strong and must be tackled head on, he says. While other contributors at the

## More on Politico

[Sex at the Margins: Interview with Laura Agustín](#)



Laura Agustín is renowned for her ground-breaking research, writing and advocacy on migration, se

[Equal right to life of the unborn is a nonsense](#)



The idea, now enshrined in our Constitution, that there is an equal right to life of the unborn c

[Of horseburgers and income inequality](#)



The controversy over horse DNA found in beef burgers should be put in its proper context - tha

[Ireland and the presidency of the EU - Instability, unemployment, recession](#)



The Irish political establishment will no doubt use its presidency of the EU to paint a rosy pict

[A really really special case requires a really really special solution](#)



convention would have advocated a more tolerant approach to the religious in society, Dawkins argues that their views should be ridiculed. "I don't call people idiots, but I do think people's views are idiotic," he says. "And I'm trying to influence all those people sitting on the fence out there, of which there are many. In the southern states of the US, for example, there are those who haven't even met with the idea that it's possible to not believe in God. They are the target audience.

"I would never advocate violence towards others but I don't mind ridiculing people's beliefs. It's a fine weapon, a more subtle weapon. It probably won't change the minds of those being ridiculed but it will influence those sitting on the fence. You don't have to use violent language: use wit and sarcasm. Ridicule using the scalpel rather than the baseball bat."

Scientists, Atheists, Humanists, Secularists and Rationalists were all represented at the Convention. For Dawkins, they are all in the business of 'consciousness raising'. "Old terms like 'one man one vote' for example, are sexist and are deliberately used to provoke," he says. "We need to change atheist language in a consciousness raised way at all levels. The term itself 'atheist' is considered too negative. Well its only negative because the other side made it that way."

Challenging religious dogma starts early on. "The main obstacle to the spread of atheism in the modern world is the religious indoctrination of children," he says. "The labelling of children is the key to religious ambition. Children are labelled with the religion of their parents. But there is no such thing as a Catholic child and people should not acknowledge this presumption - just a child of Catholic parents. In the same way we would think it bizarre to refer to a child as a 'post modernist child' or a 'Marxist child', we shouldn't accept a religious label either.

"That's why the Church are keeping their claws firmly hooked in to primary education here," he says. Does he have any advice for Minister for Education Ruari Quinn in his efforts to take 50% of primary school patronage out of the hands of the Irish Catholic Church? "All I can say is good luck to him. I wish him every success."

*Image top: [sentxd](#).*

---

Copyright © 2016 Politico.ie. All Rights Reserved.

Email here / Tel: +353-1-4433342 / Mobile: +353-87-7754269 / @politico\_ie / Politico on Facebook.