

Einstein letter sold for record sum—Part 1

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This is the first of a two-part article on Albert Einstein and his views on religion.

A previously unknown letter of Einstein's recently came up for sale at auction. It is a remarkable document because it contains the great physicist's candid comments on religion.

Einstein wrote that "the word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish."

The opinions he expressed in this new letter run entirely contrary to the remark that is often quoted to sum up Einstein's views on religion. "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

This famous remark seems to suggest that Einstein thought that science and religion were compatible and is often quoted by those who want to claim Einstein for the religious lobby.

The letter had been expected to sell for about \$16,000, but it eventually went for \$404,000 after what was described as "frenetic" bidding. "This extraordinary letter seemed to strike a chord, and it gave a deep personal insight into one of the greatest minds of the 20th century," said Rupert Powell for Bloomsbury Auctions.

He refused to name the successful bidder who wished to remain anonymous. But one of the unsuccessful bidders was Richard Dawkins, the biologist and outspoken opponent of religion.

The price gives an indication of just how significant this document is. Potentially it casts a new light on Einstein's views on religion and the development of his ideas. It is likely that this important letter will now disappear from public view. It has been in private hands since shortly after it was written and was unknown to scholars.

Under the circumstances it might be thought that the media would have expressed a lively interest in the letter. Einstein is an iconic figure. Revelations about his love life evoked considerable media attention and attempts by feminist historians to demonstrate that it was his first wife, Mileva Maric, who discovered the theory of relativity were given far more attention than they deserved.

The centenary of Einstein's *annus mirabilis*, in which he published five ground breaking papers which fundamentally altered our understanding of nature and brought about a technological revolution later in the century [1], excited some interest but the new letter has gone almost unreported. The two papers that devoted most attention to the letter—the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*—both made reference to Einstein's supposed antipathy to atheists as though the ghost of the great man was wagging a finger at the atheist and unsuccessful bidder

Richard Dawkins from beyond the grave.

What is expressed here is strong desire among sections of the intelligentsia on both sides of the Atlantic to downplay Einstein's views on religion because they run counter to a cowardly effort to reconcile religion and science. There is certainly a reluctance to give space to views that might be regarded as critical of Israel. Neither the *Guardian* nor the *New York Times* were prepared to discuss the implications of the Einstein letter which dismissed conventional concepts of religion, praised the seventeenth century materialist philosopher Spinoza and rejected the belief that the Jews were a "chosen" people.

Einstein wrote the letter on January 3, 1954. It was addressed to the Jewish philosopher Eric Gutkind, who had sent him a copy of his book *Choose Life: The Biblical Call to Revolt*. An uncorrected translation of part of the letter appeared in the *Guardian* [2]. It is thoroughly unsatisfactory, but it is all that we have of this unique document. It is reproduced below:

... The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honourable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this. These subtilised interpretations are highly manifold according to their nature and have almost nothing to do with the original text. For me the Jewish religion like all other religions is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions. And the Jewish people to whom I gladly belong and with whose mentality I have a deep affinity have no different quality for me than all other people. As far as my experience goes, they are also no better than other human groups, although they are protected from the worst cancers by a lack of power. Otherwise I cannot see anything 'chosen' about them.

In general I find it painful that you claim a privileged position and try to defend it by two walls of pride, an external one as a man and an internal one as a Jew. As a man you claim, so to speak, a dispensation from causality otherwise accepted, as a Jew the privilege of monotheism. But a limited causality is no longer a causality at all, as our wonderful Spinoza recognized with all incision, probably as the first one. And the animistic interpretations of the religions of nature are in principle not annulled by monopolisation. With such walls we can only attain a certain self-deception, but our moral efforts are not furthered by them. On the contrary.

Now that I have quite openly stated our differences in intellectual convictions it is still clear to me that we are quite close to each other in essential things, i.e. in our evaluations [sic] of human behaviour. What separates us are only intellectual 'props'

and 'rationalisation' in Freud's language. Therefore I think that we would understand each other quite well if we talked about concrete things.

With friendly thanks and best wishes

Yours, A. Einstein.

Even in this unpolished form the content of the letter is clear. The author of these words dismisses the "word of God" as the "product of human weaknesses," describes the Bible as a series of "primitive legends," identifies all religions, including the Jewish religion, as "childish superstitions" and proceeds to praise Spinoza for his refusal to place any limitation on causality. Spinoza's commitment to determinism and his rejection of human free will was the clearest indication for his contemporaries and his subsequent critics that he was an atheist. For Einstein he was "our wonderful Spinoza." Those words alone would under normal circumstances be enough to identify Einstein as an atheist.

But both the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* manage to convey the impression that the author of this letter is not an atheist. Both refer to a letter that Einstein wrote in 1941 in which he discusses the response to an article he had written the previous year that had been criticised by religious fundamentalists and praised by atheists. The letter expresses the views of a complex and subtle thinker to a particular situation.

"I was barked at by numerous dogs," Einstein wrote, "who are earning their food guarding ignorance and superstition for the benefit of those who profit from it. Then there are the fanatical atheists whose intolerance is of the same kind as the intolerance of the religious fanatics and comes from the same source. They are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains which they have thrown off after hard struggle. They are creatures who—in their grudge against the traditional 'opium for the people'—cannot bear the music of the spheres. The Wonder of nature does not become smaller because one cannot measure it by the standards of human moral and human aims." [3]

Einstein's 1941 letter is not a condemnation of atheists and atheism in general, but of a particular kind of atheist whose atheism took an intolerant and dogmatic form. His reference to "opium for the people" suggests that those he had in mind were Stalinists who had a mechanical view of nature. As a man who had just advanced the frontiers of human knowledge into new and little understood territory, Einstein had a healthy respect for the wonder of nature. His entire life's work was a testament to it. But his refusal to measure that wonder by "human and moral aims" puts him firmly in the camp of atheism. There was no personal deity for Einstein. He had turned his back on such childishness long ago and preserved that outlook to the end of his life as the new letter shows. The 1941 letter and the new 1954 letter are in that sense entirely consistent.

Dennis Overbye has written a sympathetic biography of Einstein that takes into account some of the wealth of material on his personal life now available [4]. His *New York Times* article on the new letter was too brief to do justice to its full significance and even he seems to have felt duty bound to drag in an extract from the 1941 letter in which Einstein criticises atheists.

The *Guardian* article was far more disingenuous. James Randerson, the *Guardian* science correspondent, has relied heavily

on John Brooke of Oxford University who is cited as a leading expert on Einstein. Brooke claims that "Einstein became angry when his views were appropriated by evangelists for atheism" and that he was "offended by their lack of humility."

But Randerson neglects to tell us that Brooke is Professor of Science and Religion in the Faculty of Theology at Oxford and that he has a long association with the Templeton Foundation. He is co-director of the Templeton Science and Religion in Schools project. Founded by the wealthy Templeton family, the foundation gives grants to those bringing together science and religion as well as developing free-market initiatives against poverty. In the words of the Templeton Foundation, "The Templeton Prize honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works." It "aims...to identify 'entrepreneurs of the spirit'." [5]

The Templeton Foundation is said to have been associated with right-wing causes and a number of science journalists and leading scientists have criticised it. Richard Dawkins commented that the Templeton Prize was "a very large sum of money given... usually to a scientist who is prepared to say something nice about religion" [6]. The *World Socialist Web Site* has criticised Dawkins on philosophical and political grounds, particularly for his tendency "to adopt a contemptuous attitude toward the religiously-minded population, which is still a majority of the working class around the world" [7]. But his attitude toward the Templeton Prize is nothing but commendable.

Brooke has a professional interest in denying that Einstein was an atheist or materialist. For the *Guardian* to cite him as an expert on Einstein without further comment is tendentious and misleading. It is an attempt, despite the clear statement of atheism in the new letter, to continue to present Einstein as a witness for the compatibility of science and religion.

To be continued

Notes:

- [1] "One hundred years since Albert Einstein's annus mirabilis," by Peter Symonds, WSWWS, July 11-14, 2005
- [2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/may/13/peopleinscience.religion>
- [3] *Einstein and Religion* by Max Jammer, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 97
- [4] *Einstein in Love, A Scientific Romance* by Dennis Overbye, Penguin, 2000
- [5] <http://www.templeton.org/>
- [6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Templeton_Foundation
- [7] "Science, religion and society: Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*," by Joe Kay, WSWWS, March 15, 2007



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