
**Review of *The God Delusion*
by Richard Dawkins**

Dick Wolff, Temple Cowley United Reformed Church

A Review of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*

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In his preface, Richard Dawkins' explains that he has written his 2006 book *The God Delusion* with the aim of demonstrating four things :

- "you can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, morally and intellectually fulfilled"
- natural selection is the only single 'big Explanation' of the living world's complexity, and probably of the cosmos
- that the indoctrination of children in religion is harmful (there is no such thing as a 'Muslim child', only a 'child of Muslim parents')
- that "being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of."

In fact, he hopes that it will achieve more :

If this book works as i intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. What presumptuous optimism! Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination using methods that took centuries to mature.

p.5

Since despite being a practising Christian I have no particular difficulty accepting his first four propositions it seems unlikely that on these grounds I am going to convert! Whether other atheists would be 'intellectually fulfilled' by the quality of argument Dawkins offers is a different question, and I find the introduction of atheist 'pride' rather revealing. Why should being an atheist be a source of pride? I am not 'proud' to be a Christian since it is not a personal achievement. Richard Dawkins no doubt considers it a personal achievement to have seen through the smokescreen thrown up by organised religion that 'the (religious) Emperor has no clothes' and is proud to be a 'free thinker'. I consider myself very lucky to have been part of a movement that, throughout my life, has encouraged me to think freely. My New Testament tutor was an atheist, for heaven's sake, and Don Cupitt (a

theologian who denies the 'existence' of God) was my guiding light for a while! I have been encouraged to read Marx, Nietzsche, and many other 'death of God' philosophers – Dawkins is hardly new to the field – and I have had the economic and ideological freedom to 'jump ship' from the Church at all points along the journey. Later in the book, Dawkins informs us that Christians consider faith a 'virtue'. Protestants rejected the idea 400 years ago : faith (they said) is a mysterious gift. (That idea, of course, is a no less potentially dangerous idea which has also served the forces of domination.)

The book is clearly written for an American, not for a British readership, and there is a danger that in the different (British) context it will have an effect different from that which he clearly intends. The index is littered with names like Falwell, Robertson, Coulter and the rest of the bigoted and noxious 'American Taliban.' There is an extended section on the religion (or lack of it) amongst the Founding Fathers of the United States who – I am sure Dawkins is correct – would be horrified to see the coercive domination system that often passes for religion there. Of course, open-minded and non-dominating religion also exists in the USA with considerable adherence, but I share Dawkins' sense of urgency that it is time to stand up and challenge the tribal bigotry that is Christianity in large swathes of the United States. He reminds the reader (p.69) of the political context : "the surreal culture wars now rending America".

Here in Britain, in many of our cities Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, agnostics and atheists frequently live and work side by side despite the danger of ghettoisation. In my experience it is usually the militant anti-religionists that cause friction and division in schools : people genuinely adhering to different religions (despite a recent poll which suggests that the predominantly non-religious population of Britain believes otherwise) get on with each other rather better..

This sense of urgency explains Dawkins' pseudo-military strategy. He has no truck with what Stephen Jay Gould called the NOMA (non-overlapping magisterium) approach, that is, that science and religion are addressing different questions in the different ways appropriate to their own domain. He is not prepared to allow 'sensible' religious people (that is, religious people who accept the theory of natural selection) on to any part of the battlefield. He would rather slug it out with a creationist who knows what's really at stake (i.e. the

correct version of scientific truth) than a mealy-mouthed ‘appeaser’ who tries to calm things down by saying there’s no need to be fighting at all (but who, ‘back at home’ in his or her church, chickens out of saying that they don’t believe in the Virgin Birth as a factual event for fear of upsetting people).

It’s a ‘fair cop’ : there has been too much pussyfooting around delicate issues like miracles. Of course, the press makes it difficult for religious leaders – one important dimension of whose job it is to preserve the unity of the faithful – to be too frank about what they believe. For this reason a bishop or other person with power in a religious community is the last person you want to put up in debate. Witness the storms that the press whipped up when John Robinson published *Honest to God* (which was saying nothing that hadn’t been said in theological circles for twenty years), or the way the words of Bishop David Jenkins of Durham were twisted to say the exact opposite of what he had said.

In fact, NOMA (keeping science and religion in separate, albeit overlapping, compartments) is a false alternative – an ‘Aunt Sally’ he puts up only to knock down. No reputable contemporary theologian I can think of suggests that science and religion operate in different domains of life and thus it should remain (although I accept that this sort of thinking is still encountered ‘in the pews’). A religion is more like a language with which *all* of human experience (including the rational/scientific) is discussed, celebrated and lamented than a limited set of fixed propositions to be ‘believed in’ (as Dawkins insists).

If I appreciate the book at all it is for this : that the danger presented to the world by bad religion (particularly in some of its Christian, Muslim and Jewish forms) is very dangerous indeed, and it is becoming urgent that it is robustly challenged.

Dawkins is right (up to a point) about the “uniquely privileged respect” for and “disproportionate privileging of religion” (p.27). I have to say that as a ‘Free Church’ Christian in Britain I don’t *feel* hugely privileged. In contemporary Britain in recent years, to be a Christian has been to sense that you are an embarrassment to thinking people (who ‘know’, as Dawkins ‘knows’, all about what Christianity is) and whilst they may be wary of unwittingly causing you offence there is a tacit assumption that it is a personal weakness best kept to yourself. On the other hand, other faiths (about which people know they know nothing) are treated with the kind of cautious respect one offers to something one knows one knows nothing about. I sense the situation in

Britain is changing, and I see Jack Straw's deliberate challenging of the tragic practice of Muslim women's veil-wearing as a sign that patience is running out in high places. This, for me, is the value of the book – it's a challenge to stop pussyfooting around and come clean.

I said that he is right about religion's uniquely privileged respect 'up to a point'. I would offer two caveats :

Science at its best puts respect for 'empirically provable propositions' at the centre of everything. Since, in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins takes a largely functionalist approach when he examines what *purpose* religion might serve in the evolutionary development of humanity, it seems appropriate to quote the definition of religion developed by the father of functionalism, Émile Durkheim :

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

Religion, in other words, is about *what we collectively believe we should respect* and build our society around. (By this definition, a case can be made for Marxist atheism as interpreted by Lenin being a religion.) It is only necessary that the 'truth' we respect is not provably false. In his section on philosophy, Dawkins implies that the mediæval philosophers Anselm and Aquinas were 'proving the existence of God' and then believing. Their aim was I think rather different : to demonstrate that belief in God was not *unreasonable* in the light of classical Greek philosophy (which was atheist, in the sense that Dawkins understands the word). Their achievements – which Dawkins mistakenly and arrogantly describes as "easily exposed as vacuous" – last to this day. Dawkins would do well to accord Aquinas a bit more respect, since a case could be made that Aquinas' development of 'Natural Theology' is the true precursor to the Science that Dawkins is so moved by. Since religion is precisely about 'what whole communities respect' it is right that we tread carefully – it is not 'free-standing truth' but 'stories, metaphors (and, yes,

community’ – myths (with many possible interpretations) around which that community coheres.

On the other hand, this is precisely why *bad* religion is so potentially dangerous and why it is so vital to protect the ‘voice of the prophet’ who challenges the religious tradition from within or without.

The weakness of Durkheim’s proposal for the function of religion is that it fails to take account of the ability of religion to marshal the forces of opposition to domination and oppression, and *break* community coherence when it has become ideological slavery. The fact that the world faiths have managed to survive and adapt for between 400 (in the case of Sikhism) and 3,000 years is testament to the fact that they must have their own internal critical, adaptive and reforming mechanisms. Dawkins regrets this, because so often those internal reformations have involved bloodshed, and because he believes those religious ‘memes’ have served their purpose in human history. However, if there *is* anything in his suggestion of ‘memes’ (a sort of God virus that is playing with us) – and there probably is, although if you substituted the word ‘gods’ for ‘memes’ you might be more accurately describing what’s going on here – it suggests that religious faith is not going to melt away in the foreseeable future. Therefore, given their destructive power, Dawkins might try respecting his gods/memes more. The aggressiveness of his reactions suggests they might have got more of a hold on him than he thinks. As the apostle Paul noted, “we’re contending not against human agents but against the principalities and powers . . . in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6 : 12) – the heavenly places meaning not the ‘otherworldly’ (‘whatever that means’, as Dawkins would say) but the ‘interiority’ of the physical reality we encounter.

As an aside, one might wonder (given Dawkins’ concern about the *purpose* of religion) what he thinks the purpose of poetry is in the evolutionary scheme of things, and whether it has any function except to amuse. Maybe he would put poetry in a separate, non-overlapping compartment . . .

My second reason for maintaining ‘respect’ for religion in society is a very twisted one. Dawkins wonders why in the States, where both State and schooling is supposedly secular, religion has become such a powerful force for intolerance, bigotry and hatred (with a hotline to the Oval Office), whereas in England, with our Established Church, faith schools and the rest, the Christian voice struggles to be taken

seriously. His somewhat puzzled suggestion (quoting Anglican priest and philosopher Giles Fraser, almost certainly out of context) is that “The establishment of the Church of England took God out of religion”. I have to say, that is not my experience of the Church of England, unless the God you are thinking of is the God Dawkins doesn’t believe in (who by his own admission is rather smaller). A more likely argument, it seems to me – and my reason for believing that all State-sponsored religious institution-affiliated schools should be secularised – is that faith schools and churches have done a marvellous job of inoculating people against religion. Dawkins rails against the religious indoctrination of children, but I would have thought that a far better strategy than lecturing to them about the evils of religion (guaranteed to arouse interest, especially if the one lecturing is in a position of authority) would be to insist that teachers with limited theological understanding and no real religious conviction go through the motions of passing on religious faith because they’re obliged to. Children may be vulnerable, but they can smell hypocrisy! Faith schools have done a marvellous job of conveying the bankruptcy of religion to generations of British children. Richard Dawkins is himself, it seems, a product of such ‘indoctrination’, which demonstrates how effective it is. He is proud that he has seen through it and shaken off his shackles, but my guess would be that 90% of his fellow-indoctrinees have likewise rejected the ‘objective omniscient omnipotent omnipresent God hypothesis’.

However, Dawkins is right in this : there certainly are communities in which religion, defined in a self-deluding, bigoted, irrational and anti-scientific way, demands not only respect but control, and is prepared to use threat and violence to achieve it. The key issue here, which Dawkins does not address adequately, is not what people believe and what respect they are accorded but how power is being distributed and held to account. Unfortunately it is true that a marginal, powerless, deluded suicide bomber can short-circuit the whole power-and-accountability process, and ideologues do well to consider the unpredictable consequences of inflammatory speeches and writing.

Dawkins wants to fight this battle on a battlefield of his choosing – a battlefield where the ground under his feet is firm and he has a height advantage. No one could blame him for that, provided you accept that there’s a war on. Scientific reason is the battleground,

the holy territory to be defended, and the chief (and superior) weapon is the theory of natural selection. Certainly the strongest sections of his book are those where he knows what he's talking about.

The weakest are those where he doesn't.

His section on philosophy would get him a reasonable grade at GCSE A-level Philosophy of Religion (recognising that the A-level syllabus stops at the end of the 19th century), provided he could resist the temptation to call Anselm's ontological argument 'infantile', or to refuse to give Anselm any credit for trying to do the impossible. (Even Anselm, as I recall, wasn't convinced by the argument!) But then Dawkins doesn't have much time for philosophers anyway – he's an empiricist who belongs to the 'logical positivist' school of philosophy. Logical positivism finally sank below the philosophical waves a couple of decades ago, not so much because the boat was full of holes as because of the rocking of the boat by its own crew as they fought over the definition of the 'Verification Principle'. (Positivists can only ascribe value and meaning to that which can be objectively verified . . .)

With theology he does not even try to engage – it is a non-subject that has "nothing to contribute to human wisdom" (p.56). Somewhat ironic since this book is essentially a philosophical and theological tract. Given that in the entire book there are no references, even in footnotes, to any theologian later than the mediæval anti-semitic ayatollah Luther (other than a few shady, unnamed 'theologians' he has encountered in a couple of seminars – most of whom, it would seem, come from the evangelical wing of the Church of England) I think, to be generous, you have to draw the conclusion that thinking religious people are a distraction from his main purpose – war on religious bigotry. What was the Arian controversy about? "Splitting hairs". "No man ever had a distinct idea of the Trinity". Well I do, and it not only meets all his criteria for economy and clarity of thought (in such a way as to make perfect sense of natural selection) but offers a *way of life* that works against bigotry and for peace – something which natural selection doesn't, particularly in its now-discredited and thoroughly nasty 'science' of eugenics – proof, if ever there was, that if you want to use science to bolster the forces of domination and oppression you can find a scientist to oblige. Fortunately, like religion, science has its own internal correction mechanisms – but a lot of lives can be lost while the pendulum swings. The theologians he is dimly

aware of are those who he has met personally or whose writing has impinged on his chosen battleground to some extent. He mentions in passing (usually favourably, with the exception of Polkinghorne)

- John Polkinghorne (an ordained scientist whose writing has never made much sense to me)
- Keith Ward
- Alister McGrath, who he has to deal with to some extent since he has written two reasonably successful books attacking Dawkins' thinking
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who ironically (whether Dawkins knows this or not I don't know) wrote *Religionless Christianity*, and
- Richard Swinburne
- He doesn't see Bishops John Spong and Richard Holloway as enemies . . .

. . . but he is basically not interested in thinking Christians, because "ultimately a religious evolutionist is a hypocrite". So that's cleared that up, then.

His military strategy is to recruit to the flag all those who reject and oppose religion in all its forms, and to purify his élite troops by weeding out all those thinking religious people who he doesn't think will stand the test when the going gets really tough. Or perhaps he fears that these 'sexed-up atheists' might undermine the 'true (secular) faith' of his followers by whispering amongst themselves in religious language which might confuse. It's an interesting strategy, and I think he sees himself as a proud hero David fighting the Goliath of pernicious 'superstition' with his small but deadly rock of 'natural selection'.

In some parts of the States, 'atheist David and Christian Goliath' may not be a fanciful metaphor, given the way political power seems to be operating. The trouble is, as the Bible story runs, once David's son Solomon gained power he 'put God in a box' (the Temple, i.e. religion) and became a tyrant. And so the wheel turned . .

Marxists brought disrepute to the great atheist thinker Marx and some seventy million Russian and Chinese people died in 'peacetime' at the hands of Stalin and Mao as a result — many of them as a *direct*

result of anti-religious purges contrary to Dawkins' argument that these people were collateral damage in the Marxist project. As if that should be a consolation. Calvinists brought Calvin's thought into disrepute. Jesus wouldn't recognise most of his disciples, I suspect (as Dawkins himself recognises). Already there are signs in British society that Dawkins' troops may not be as fair-minded and interested in truth as Dawkins himself claims to be. He acknowledges that his enemy is prepared to "fight dirty" and there will be many who take his writing to be a licence to do the same. He is knowingly turning up the temperature. He peppers the book with words of humiliation and ridicule ('vacuous', 'infantile', 'vice', 'delusion' etc.) – words which use emotive language to close down debate – and then claims (p.281) that "confrontational debate" is not his style and not well designed to get at the truth!

I suppose, if you're wanting to go to war, there's no point writing an intellectual treatise because, in an age where the masses are kept happy by the more accessible controversies of *East Enders*, *Big Brother* and *Deal or no Deal*, it will excite no interest. In particular no one will buy it, and then talk about it. Besides, Dawkins' main contribution to intellectual debate has basically been made – and largely accepted (except by certain religious groups) – many years since. Now he is going to war, and proper discussion based on listening is simply a distraction to amuse the chattering classes. You have to write a provocative recruiting tract, start building a resistance movement, and that, essentially is what this book is – a sophisticated tract. I recognise the inevitability of this, and to some extent welcome the fact that someone is prepared for all-out confrontation with the forces of religious bigotry and is not afraid to attack the beliefs that lie at the very heart of it. In terms of what Dawkins sets out to achieve, and judging by the sales of the book, it could be counted a success. It is a book designed to get out there and get people talking about a very important issue, and the fact that I have felt it necessary to write a review is evidence that it has worked.

His is a very focussed attack – focussed on a particular sort of proposition-based dualist religion. He claims that all religion is of this type but demonstrates no real interest in proving this. (He's wrong, as I will argue below). As long as he hits his main target he is not too bothered about those religious people (like myself) who resent being lumped with the creationists and other conservative religious groups, not least because we are also under attack from them. He is not much

interested in us – in fact he is not much interested in the last century’s worth of theological writing – and is content either to insult us by calling us hypocrites or patronise us by calling us ‘sexed-up atheists’. Pretty much what the conservative Evangelical Christians do, albeit usually more politely.

This may yet prove to be a tactical mistake on Dawkins’ part, especially if the tone of his book (and its popularity) force us to really ‘break ranks’ and put our heads over the parapet.

Suppose you tell your audience that all religious people believe X, Y & Z. Suppose they then decide to test the theory and find that the majority of religious people they actually ask believe *neither X, Y nor Z*. Where does that leave your credibility, at least with regard to your supposed knowledge of religion?

Of the eight religious ‘memes’ he offers on p.199 I, as a religious person (with some behavioural evidence to demonstrate that I am genuinely religious and not just faking it) would vehemently reject seven on religious grounds. The remaining one (“you will survive your own death”) I would surround with qualifiers :

- I don’t believe in immortality (if that means automatic personal survival after death). Resurrection is a different issue. You don’t have to believe in *God* to believe that you will survive death. Of the hundreds of poems and tributes laid at the site of a fatal car crash in Oxford a couple of years back, most presumed the survival after death of the victims; not one referred to God.
- What do you mean by “you”?
- What do you mean by “survive”?
- Why should my own survival be so important when the gospel says that those who seek to save their life will lose it?

In order to prosecute his case, Dawkins defines religion in a limited and careless way. He says that for the purposes of his argument Islam, Christianity and Judaism are indistinguishable; and he’s not concerned with Buddhism at all. Not surprisingly, perhaps, since Buddhism (which is clearly a religion, although for the sake of his argument he chooses to deny this) has no concept of an intelligent divine designer outside the universe. On page 36 he writes :

This is as good a moment as any to forestall an inevitable retort to the book, one that would otherwise — as sure as night follows day — turn up in a review: ‘The God that Dawkins doesn’t believe in is a God I don’t believe in either. I don’t believe in an old man in the sky with a long white beard’. That old man is an irrelevant distraction and his beard is as tedious as it is long. . . I know you don’t believe in an old bearded man sitting on a cloud, so let’s not waste any more time on that. I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.

If he thinks that this even begins to forestall the retort he is living a delusion. The charge will indeed follow in this review and most others, ‘as sure as night follows day’, until he deals with — even shows signs of *trying* to deal with — the criticism. The ‘irrelevant distraction’ of the old man on the cloud is being set up by him, certainly not by me. Even on good old-fashioned positivist grounds, his assertion that I and others believe in the ‘supernatural’ is demonstrably false because I declare that have no more idea what the ‘supernatural’ is than he has, and yet I worship God. The only way he can deal with this awkward measurable fact is

- by simply ignoring the evidence and concentrating on those forms of religion that *do* declare a belief in the ‘supernatural’ (whatever that is)
- by calling us hypocrites — in other words ‘liars’ (with the allowance for the possibility we may not realise we are).

This is a reasonable demonstration of the fact that even a rational scientist can bend his/her facts to fit their theory.

Religion is too slippery a thing to define and discuss in these crude terms. I believe my own model, offered above, of religion as a *language* is (although limited) considerably more true to the observable data than Richard Dawkins’ suggestion of ‘one or two philosophical propositions passed on by indoctrination like a virus’. A language is a highly complex network of interlocking concepts describing all the human æsthetic, emotional, intellectual, social, physical and (for want of a better word) ‘spiritual’ experiences. It

evolves by a subtle, complex and continuously dynamic collaborative process over long periods of time. It can be used to exclude and divide – indeed, language is a major cause of social division (as the myth of the Tower of Babel portrays) – but its obvious essential function is to enable human beings to communicate. *What* they communicate – whether it be lies or truth, love or hatred – is a product of forces wider than language, although language is not entirely a neutral canvas and has the power to amplify whatever people express through it to destructive effect, as the writer of the Epistle of James reminds us.

Dawkins, by analogy with his treatment of religion, would see language merely as a set of definitions set down in a 'holy book' – a dictionary and grammar – then forced to children to ensure – well, to ensure *what*, exactly? That they toe the line, that they can understand (and gullibly follow) orders? Or that they can communicate, be creative and contribute to society? Or that they can understand their oppression and alienation and break free from it? All three are true, but again, *how* language (or religion) is used is governed by forces much wider than language itself. George Orwell charted some of the complexity of this process in his book *1984*, in which words, subverted by tyrannical power, are used to mean the exact opposite of what they purport to mean.

To some extent Dawkins points out the contradictions in the religious writing of the Bible, but wisely doesn't push it too far. If he took it to its conclusion he would have to recognise that the Yahweh God he so despises –

a petty, unjust control-freak; a vindictive bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully

– is also portrayed as a tender mother, a lover, healer, rescuer, freedom-giver who rejects the need for sacrifice, accepts the worship of other gods (provided they don't involve temple prostitution or child sacrifice – the Isaac story which Dawkins recoils from is a curious story of Yahweh's *rejection* of the sacrificial practice of surrounding cults) and can work as easily through other nations as through those that invoke the name of Yahweh, who requires only that people "seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly

with their God”, seek the welfare of the alien in their midst without requiring their submission, “love their neighbour as themselves” and so on. And that’s before you get to the New Testament. A demonstration, if anything, that religious thought is more like a language than a unified and coherent set of propositions.

However, both Dawkins and the religious extremists he is going to war with prefer to be selective in their reading, and choose the interpretation of those few passages that best suit their purposes to the exclusion of others. Fundamentally the only way they can cope with complexity and contradiction is by trying to resolve it into a few clear and intellectually neat propositions. Dawkins, with natural selection, does a far better job than his opponents of providing a ‘single theory of everything’ since (as he unsuccessfully attempts to demonstrate in this book) his theory can ‘explain’ religion, but theirs can’t satisfactorily explain the scientific evidence. Which indeed they can’t.

However, he is also selective in his appreciation of Natural Selection. He portrays it as a concept of beautiful simplicity and majesty, a source of inspiration and wonder whose “dazzling novelty, and power to uplift the human spirit, perhaps had no precedent”. No doubt it is. But it could also be presented – and has been – as a heartless tyrannical force that casts life aside (filicidally, genocidally, pestilentially . . .) as easily as it throws it up. Natural selection is pretty good at demanding child sacrifice, too. “Nature is cruel, therefore we too can be cruel”, as Adolf Hitler famously said. One of my own ancestors, who had some sort of mental infirmity, was taken away and liquidated by the Nazis in 1940. The “survival of the fittest” model that many of Hitler’s generation of scientists understood as the “survival of the most aggressive” (which encouraged him to liquidate homosexuals as an unwanted virus in the gene pool) is now discredited, not least by Dawkins himself. Nonetheless, a little humility on his part in the face of the contribution some of his own predecessors made to human misery wouldn’t go amiss, instead of trying to palm Adolf Hitler off as a pseudo-Catholic.

And besides, shouldn’t he give religion at least some credit for recognising the truth that Nature is every bit as malevolent as he himself claims it is? Except, of course, he wouldn’t ascribe pseudo-human motives to Nature as religion inevitably does since, unlike rationalist science, religion embraces metaphor and poetry as

something real rather than an amusing curio that doesn't quite fit the pattern of gene survival because it has no apparent *utility*.

The 'God delusion' that Dawkins ridicules is just one part of the spectrum of philosophical propositions that together form *part* of the background to religion. He maps out the territory (in order to exclude most of it so he can focus on his chosen battlefield) thus :

- there is 'theism', which is belief in an existent, designer god - omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, interventionist in response to prayer, needing to be appeased and humoured with sacrifice etc.
- there is 'deism', a watered down version of theism, in which God is the First Cause and designer, who having set the wheels of the universe in motion has no further relationship with it.
- and there is 'pantheism', which sees God as 'the universe writ large', in its totality. This God is therefore not 'outside' the universe (whatever that might mean – the idea of a God 'outside' the universe is as meaningless to me as it is to Richard Dawkins). Therefore Dawkins calls this 'sexed-up atheism.'

This seems a neat filter through which to view religion, except that those who know a bit about religion know that in fact it's rather like a tea strainer full of large holes : not 'fit for purpose'.

Related to this, and further on, he proposes another religious typology : that of dualism and monism.

A dualist acknowledges a fundamental distinction between matter and mind. A monist, by contrast, believes that mind is a manifestation of matter - material in a brain or perhaps a computer - and cannot exist apart from matter. A dualist believes the mind is some kind of disembodied spirit that inhabits the body and therefore conceivably could leave the body and exist somewhere else . .

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Dawkins considers himself a 'dyed-in-the-wool monist'. A pity, then, that he chooses not to mention that the greatest theological struggles of the early Church were precisely *against* dualism, particularly in the form known as gnosticism. The theological

wrestling is visible for all to see in the gospel of John, in some of the apostle Paul's letters and elsewhere in the New Testament. Dawkins refers to the other gospels that didn't make it into the New Testament canon and suggests that they were rejected on the grounds that they were

even more embarrassingly implausible than those in the four canonical ones

p.96

It's a ridiculous suggestion – these are people who accepted the Revelation of John into the canon. The real reason was that they were scriptures favoured by the dualists and gnostics..

Influential American theologian and pacifist Walter Wink, in his trilogy on the New Testament writers' understanding and treatment of 'the invisible forces that determine human existence' articulates particularly clearly the inseparability of the inner and outer dimensions of material reality. Whatever God is, God is something to do with the 'interiority' of *this* universe, not some other – even if (as Dawkins goes on to describe) it is physicists (not theologians) who are currently having to posit parallel, unobservable universes in order to make their theories fit the observed data! Nor does Dawkins really address the 'chicken and egg' dimension of 'mind and matter'. If mind and matter are inseparable (as both he and I believe they are) does it follow that 'mind' is a secondary *byproduct* of matter? It depends what one counts as 'mind' – a question that greatly exercised Plato, the writer of the Prologue to John's gospel, and the disputants in the Arian controversy.

Isn't the struggle for a 'single theory of everything' the contemporary equivalent of the struggle against dualism? Richard Dawkins is right to suggest the struggle is necessary, because once you get lazily tolerant of parallel worlds that only a few people can understand (whether you describe them in terms of 'spirit worlds' explored by shamans or mediums – or, for that matter, 'theories of physics' proposed by physicists) you are on the slippery slope to chaos, where every 'spirit-filled' person or theoretical physicist is an expert that can't be challenged. (I'm intrigued that Dawkins chooses to end his book where he does – with an account of the puzzle of 'multiverses' thrown up by contemporary physics). Even the Greek gods (and Greek thought was the primary source of gnostic ideas in the first century CE) lived on top of a real mountain; they could be demoted to mortal status and mortals

could be promoted to divinity, as the story of Paul and Silas being feared as gods in Acts describes. *Gods do not have to inhabit other universes.*

Dawkins' model of religion, according to a sociological study by Robert Towler, lumps at least two fifths of the religious people in the world in the category 'pantheist/monist' which, by his uniquely strange definition, means atheist. Towler's study *The Need for Certainty : a sociological study of conventional religion* originated in a theological controversy of the early 1960s. Bishop John A T Robinson had published *Honest to God*. It was essentially the presentation, in a more digestible and economical form, of one half of a theological debate that had been going on for the previous twenty years and more. God was presented, not as some mysterious intelligence from some other world, but as 'ground of being'. (In this line of thought, it really doesn't make much sense to speak of God 'existing', which is one reason why this strand later took on forms that became labelled the 'Death of God' school – an epithet gladly accepted by some of the theologians on the fringe). Robinson received a huge mailbag from religious people – some appalled, others heartened by his book. Towler chewed through this mailbag many years later, looking for patterns, since virtually every letter writer could not resist stating what and how they believed.

Towler identified five strands in religious belief – strands which were in many ways mutually contradictory. Nonetheless, he argued, people were perfectly capable of resonating to more than one of these strands simultaneously. In fact, he recognised (somewhat to his disappointment) that each of these strands, taken exclusively and to their logical extreme, were recognisable as the well-charted 'heresies' of various types that have cropped up in various guises throughout Christian history. He proposed that mature religion, held together by the fifth strand he called 'traditionalist' ("we do this because we've always done it, and though I don't know what the answers to the meaning of life are I trust that they are undoubtedly there in the tradition, and that's enough for me") holds all five in equal balance despite the contradictions. This is what Dawkins calls 'taking God out of religion'. Apart from the Traditionalist, the other four strands are :

Conversionist. This is the 'born again' school, the 'washed in the blood' school, conscious of the original sinfulness of the human

condition and personally released by an act of God. Whether prompted by a religious experience or not, the conversionist cannot recognise as one of the saved anyone who cannot (like them) point to a particular conscious moment when they passed from the 'unsaved' to the 'saved' condition. The experience of conversion is usually interpreted in terms of the traditional 'conversionist' texts within scripture, which concentrate on 'salvation'. Religion, in its organised form, is a 'community of the saved' which is quite important to conversionists, who can be dismayed by the apparent presence of the 'unsaved' in that community.

Gnostic. This is the classic 'two worlds' dualist strand, though it would be narrowing the field down too much to restrict it to those who hold to 'disembodied spirits in a parallel world'. Talk of God is a cipher for the 'other world' – which is the only really real, eternal, world. God is not necessarily personal, or omniscient, or even really much interested in what happens 'this side of the curtain'. My grandmother described herself as an atheist, but was convinced she had a guardian angel.

Theist. The theist is the most likely to subscribe to 'intelligent design' thinking, since it is a religiosity inspired by the natural order, but the God of the theist is not necessarily 'personal'. Neither is this God necessarily 'other-worldly' – the theist is perfectly capable of being a monist. A theist Christian may be puzzled by all the emphasis on Jesus, the idea of a unique Son of God may be an embarrassment, and organised religion a bit of an irrelevance. Eternal life is not necessarily about personal survival. My mother was a theist – "I'm a God-ist, really" (rather than a Christian) was the way she put it.

Exemplarist. On the contrary, the exemplarist has his or her feet on the ground. Talk of other worlds is meaningless, and of life beyond death rather pointless speculation. Even God holds no great fascination. "It's about Jesus, stupid". Jesus Christ is the great moral example and inspiration. If organised religion has a purpose, it's about living that out in the world. My father used to say, "Religion's not something you talk about – it's something you *do*". And he did it, through a lifetime of humble service.

Towler's thesis rings true. Certainly it rings true in my own experience of people's religion as I have encountered it. I recognise all five strands in my own belief, and I live the contradictions, which are

energising not disabling. But it also explains why Dawkins attempt to force religiosity into a single narrow category that excludes all others is so deeply unconvincing. It explains why his suggested 'memes' of religion just don't describe the facts of religion as it is, except the extreme narrow religion of a few. Unless, that is, you include 'memes' that apparently contradict each other. The problem is that, unlike Towler's thesis, Dawkins' 'memes' are not based on properly observed data.

It also suggests that, as a single-dimensional thinker, his dream of religion fading away under the rationalist onslaught is a delusion. He is tilting, not at windmills, but at clouds.

That is not to say that in those clouds there are no windmills, in the form of good old-fashioned heresies, which need not only tilting at but dismantling. Conservative, 'born again', literalist, creationist Christianity based exclusively on the 18th century divine child abuse theory of 'penal substitutionary atonement' is a heresy — let's be blunt about it. Its claims to be based in scripture (let alone being the 'full gospel' as its proponents sometimes irritatingly call it) do not hold water. Normally it would be absorbed back into the cloud and held in balance. Unfortunately, for many reasons that require another book to explore, holders of this particular heresy have in some places have attracted to themselves immense power, fed by both the gullible, the intellectually lazy, and the cynical. Once people in power surround themselves with other powerful people with similar narrow and exclusive views they become corrupted by that power. Such has it always been. Dawkins is quite right that the time has come to 'prick the bubble'.

So we return to the strategy implicit in this book.

Sensing the isolation and fear of many atheists in the United States; and sensing (probably correctly, in view of the power thesis outlined above) that many of these people are not even aware that atheism is a possibility, Richard Dawkins is moving to prick the bubble of the abuse of heretical religion by conscientising the potential forces of revolution. Nothing wrong with that, particularly, although offering them only one way out of their oppression — atheism — is a bit mean-spirited.

However, he is seeking to do more than that. It is not enough for him to challenge what passes for the Christian religion in these places as

heretical (which it is) – why should he, when he’s not a Christian? He wants to mobilise a movement that would pull down the whole damnable edifice of religion. There’s even something Messianic about it – he believes that religion has served its purpose in the process of human evolution and will disappear, anyway, in the not-too-distant future. Some hope, given the way things seem to be going – although perhaps he holds to the apocalyptic view of the writer of the Book of Revelation : that before the final collapse of the Great Satan things are going to get worse.

There is no room for half-hearts or woolly agnostics in this mission. The fact that at least two-fifths of the religious people in the world, if pressed, actually meet his criteria for ‘sexed-up atheists’ is a distraction.

Dawkins himself has a burning ‘need for certainty’. That’s why he’s an old-fashioned logical positivist. As he says himself, an unresolved question, an apparent contradiction, is the primary challenge, the meaning and purpose of life for a scientist. It’s the mountain-top to be scaled, it’s the itch that must be scratched. The most economic and beautiful explanation of the puzzle is the goal, and the Single Theory of Everything (on which he ends the book) is the Holy Grail.

Others of us, more woolly perhaps (as people with a burning ‘need for certainty’ would see it), more willing to tolerate contradiction, more sensitive to the big cloudy picture, are less convinced that a Single Theory of Everything is the Holy Grail. That (in time) all things will be reconciled I have hope, and by that hope I live, but I recognise that that time may be *geological* time, and in the meantime there are issues of justice, peace and global warming to be addressed. Richard Dawkins may call this ‘taking God out of religion’. Well, so be it. I lead worship, I pray, I use religious language – it doesn’t *feel* like I’ve taken God out of my religion. For Dawkins, talk of ‘mystery’ – which implies some sort of acceptance that our world is paradoxical and full of apparent contradictions despite somehow holding together – is a disabling and corrupting ‘cop-out’. A mystery is a temporary phenomenon, there to be explained away. For me, inasmuch as I dwell on ‘mystery’ at all, it is as much a challenge to an enquiring mind as it is for Richard Dawkins.

To Richard Dawkins I would be a hypocrite, preaching stuff that, if I were honest, I don’t really believe.

Politicians, religious or community leaders are put in the position of working for unity – holding people of diverse attitudes and ways of thought together, yet simultaneously offering leadership, challenging weak and/or dangerous ideas, offering new syntheses of vision. There's an element of keeping the community 'on message' which, it is true, can lead to you being less than frank about your personal beliefs and views in the interest of the community's coherence and unity. I accept Dawkins accusation that there is too much pussyfooting around delicate issues that risk causing upset, but increment by increment new syntheses do emerge, just as they do in the scientific community. The United Reformed Church, emerging as it did out of the terrible experiences of the Reformation where religious ideology and political power became diabolically entwined, has a highly developed structure for providing checks and balances, and preventing the abuse of power. Even so, it's amazing how often it fails. The Founding Fathers of America shared those concerns about religion and power, and (Dawkins is right to point it out) a powerful section of the church in America has ignored it.

Dawkins, flying a solo course with no party line to toe, is spared the task of fostering the unity of a community, because there is no real atheist community to serve. I think he would like to build a movement (if not a community) – the back of the book has many organisations and websites for newly-converted atheists to join.

To build a coherent movement, however, you need a coherent idea. Coherent doesn't *have* to mean non-inclusive, although for Dawkins it does (and given his American context, one can see the reasons). The Darwinian theory of natural selection is the Big Coherent Idea, the flag to which he rallies the troops, but unfortunately for him it is not enough. Why? Because there are too many *religious* people who also find it a powerful, economic explanation of life's diversity. On its own it confuses what Dawkins wants to keep a simple issue.

So to keep it simple and focussed, the other 'driver' for this movement is exclusive 'atheist pride' : what must be *excluded* is all talk of gods, except for amusement in works of literature. 'Natural Selection' is the positive that we must believe in; 'God and gods' is the negative that we mustn't.

But there are tactical problems on both sides of this equation.

On the 'positive' side – what sort of a vision for society is Darwinian natural selection? For Richard Dawkins it has the "power to uplift the spirit" but is that any more than a rather conversionist sense of "I once was deluded (by God) but now I see"? A movement based around 'natural selection, not God' is a movement that's a hostage to fortune – certainly no *less* dangerous than religion. What is the blueprint for the Kingdom of Natural Selection? What scientific principles and processes will govern human society, and who will be their 'priests' and 'bishops'? Wasn't Marxism the scientific vision for a fulfilled human society in which religion had faded away because it had served its purpose? Given that *that* wasn't a sparkling success, quickly corrupted by despots and disabled by a rigid Unitary Theory that would brook no contradiction, why should anyone have any more confidence that a Darwinian vision (one version of which has already been given a horribly disastrous trial – I write in the week that Britain eventually paid off its war debt to the USA and Canada, 61 years on) would deliver anything better? An 'explanation', however majestic, is not a 'vision'.

On the 'negative' side : it is difficult to rally people around a negative (i.e. just opposing something, or in this case not believing in something), although that is what a revolutionary movement sometimes does, and given the dangerous threat represented by the powerful fundamentalist heresies in our world the sales of Dawkins' book are not a surprise.

However, once a revolution succeeds, once the enemy is overthrown and the negative is resolved, *then* what? That's when the 'positive', visionary aspect of the campaign becomes all-important. All too often, tyrants with no vision other than of their own predominance rise to power on the wave of revolution, and then once they have seized power they end up (in the absence of a genuine coherent, worked-out, lived-out vision for a better future) replicating the oppression. I'm not sure what Dawkins' perfect world would look like, but on the basis of this book I've a feeling it would be a difficult world in which to entertain 'religious' thoughts, especially if the religion that survived was seen as some sort of memetic throwback that stood to undermine human progress.

I cannot criticise *The God Delusion* on these grounds, because the book has a more limited purpose. But I hope that those who, on reading it, leap joyfully to their feet casting aside the shackles (or burkha) of religion and breathing the bracing fresh air of atheism, do not wait too

long before seeking to develop something as equally sophisticated and subtle as religion, something that can gather into a coherent unity every aspect of human experience, something with its own internal checks and balances on power, and something grounded in reality that offers a hope for all to live by. If they don't, the battleground that Richard Dawkins has chosen for the final assault on the religious powers of darkness may turn out to be a minor skirmish on the fringes of the real action.

Dick Wolff
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