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Book Review

Deluded about God?

A reflection on Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion*

RICHARD DAWKINS

The God Delusion

London: Bantam, 2006.
£20.00

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Atheism seems to have run out of intellectual steam of late. Richard Dawkins' astonishing Channel 4 programme 'The Root of All Evil?' (2006) generated a lot of discussion. I very much doubt that it was the kind of debate that he had hoped for. Christians generally found the programme difficult to take seriously, on account of its sweeping overstatements about religion, its highly dogmatic language and tone, and its ludicrous attempts to present religious fanatics or fools as if they were typical. It was, as Madeleine Bunting commented in *The Guardian*, 'a piece of intellectually lazy polemic.' Anyone can make a movement look ludicrous by presenting the pathological as if it is normal. The difference this time was that hardly anyone was taken in.

Much more interesting, however, was the reaction of my atheist friends in Oxford and elsewhere. They were appalled. As Dawkins presented it, atheism came across as resting on childish arguments, hopelessly outdated stereotypes of religion, and as being totally uncomprehending of why anyone should want to be interested in religion. As one atheist colleague of mine groaned in near-desperation, Dawkins' programme 'made atheism sound like some kind of half-witted fundamentalism.' Another reckoned the programme would just add more fuel to the flames of religious revival he saw all around him. A third pleaded with me not to 'judge the rest of us by this pseudo-intellectual drivel.' It was, in their view, a public relations disaster for atheism, in which Dawkins preached to his God-hating choir, while everyone else looked on in disbelief.

Yet we find the same bizarre approach set out in Dawkins's recent book *The God Delusion*. Though clearly written in some haste, the book has established Dawkins as the world's most high-profile atheist polemicist, who directs a withering criticism against every form of religion. He is clearly out to convert his readers in this perplexingly dogmatic manifesto of atheist fundamentalism. 'If this book works as I intend,' he tells us, 'religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.' Not that he thinks that this is particularly likely; after all, he suggests, 'dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument.' I don't think it's particularly likely either. But my reasons for doubt have to do with the weak, recycled and stale arguments I find within its pages, most of which seem to be hand-me-downs from the late nineteenth century.

Along with Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris, Dawkins directs a ferocious tirade of criticism against religion in general and Christianity in particular. In this review article I propose to explore two major questions. First, why this sudden outburst of aggression? Second, how reliable are Dawkins' criticisms of religion?

Why this aggressive outburst?

Let's begin by looking at the first question. Every worldview, whether religious or not, has its point of vulnerability. There is a tension between theory and experience, raising questions over the coherence and trustworthiness of the worldview itself. In the case of Christianity, many locate that point of weakness in the existence of suffering within the world. In the case of atheism, it is the persistence of belief in God, when there is supposedly no God in which to believe.

Until recently, western atheism had waited patiently, believing that belief in God would simply die out. But now, a whiff of panic is evident. Far from dying out, belief in God has rebounded, and seems set to exercise still greater influence in both the public and private spheres. *The God Delusion* expresses this deep anxiety, partly reflecting an intense distaste for religion. Yet there is something deeper here, often overlooked in the heat of debate. The anxiety is that the coherence of atheism itself is at stake. Might the unexpected resurgence of religion persuade many that atheism itself is fatally flawed as a worldview? It's not just that religion is the 'comeback kid'. It's that this has raised serious questions about the credibility of atheism itself. Scientific and technical advance simply has not led to the secular paradise that many dreamed about back in the 1960s.

And that's precisely what Dawkins is worried about. The shrill, aggressive rhetoric of his *God Delusion* masks a deep insecurity about the public credibility of atheism. *The God Delusion* seems more designed to reassure atheists whose faith is faltering than to engage fairly or rigorously with religious believers, and others seeking for truth. (Might this be because the writer is himself an atheist whose faith is faltering?) Religious believers will be dismayed by its ritual stereotyping of religion, and will find its manifest lack of fairness a significant disincentive to take its arguments and concerns seriously. Seekers after truth who would not consider themselves religious may also find themselves shocked by Dawkins' aggressive rhetoric, his substitution of personal credal statements for objective engagement with evidence, his hectoring and bullying tone, and his utter determination to find nothing but fault with religion of any kind.

It is this deep, unsettling anxiety about the future of atheism which explains the high degree of dogmatism and aggressive rhetorical style of this new secular fundamentalism. The dogmatism of the work has been the subject of intense criticism in the secular press, reflecting growing alarm within the secularist community about the damage that Dawkins is doing to their public reputation. Many of those who might be expected to support Dawkins are running for cover, trying to distance themselves from this embarrassment. To judge by the reviews in the secular American press, *The God Delusion* has caused serious cultural and intellectual discomfort to the secular left. Is the case against God really that bad?

Even in England, the reaction of the secular world has been decidedly muted and guarded. An intriguing example may be noted here. *The God Delusion* trumpets the fact that its author was recently voted one of the world's three leading intellectuals. This survey took place among the readers of *Prospect* magazine in November 2005. So what did this same *Prospect* magazine make of the book? Its reviewer was shocked at this 'incurious, dogmatic, rambling, and self-contradictory' book. The title of the review? 'Dawkins the dogmatist'.

Dawkins' criticisms of religion

But what of the arguments themselves? *The God Delusion* is often little more than an aggregation of convenient factoids, suitably overstated to achieve maximum impact, and loosely arranged to suggest that they constitute an argument. This makes dealing with its 'arguments' a little problematical, in that the work frequently substitutes aggressive, bullying rhetoric for serious evidence-based argument. Dawkins often treats evidence as something to shoehorn into his preconceived theoretical framework. Religion is persistently and consistently portrayed in the worst possible way, mimicking the worst features of religious fundamentalism's portrayal of atheism.

For this reason, I think we are justified in speaking of an 'atheist fundamentalism'. Fundamentalism arises when a worldview feels it is in danger, lashing out at its enemies when it fears its own future is threatened. We saw this happening in North American Protestantism when confronted with American secularism, and in Islam confronted with western expansionism. Now we're seeing it happen with atheism as well.

Space is limited, so we have time to look only briefly at two of Dawkins' core arguments – that religion can be explained away on scientific grounds, and that religion leads to violence.

Religion, Science, Evidence and Trust

Dawkins dogmatically insists that religious belief is 'blind trust', which refuses to take due account of evidence, or subject itself to examination. So why do people believe in God, when there is no God to believe in? For Dawkins, religion is simply the accidental and unnecessary outcome of biological or psychological processes. His arguments for this bold assertion are actually quite weak, and rest on an astonishingly superficial engagement with scientific studies.

For example, consider this important argument in *The God Delusion*. Since belief in God is utterly irrational (one of Dawkins' core beliefs, by the way), there has to be some biological or psychological way of explaining why so many people – in fact, by far the greater part of the world's population – fall victim to such a delusion. One of the explanations that Dawkins offers is that believing in God is like being infected with a contagious virus, which spreads throughout entire populations. Yet the analogy – belief in God is *like* a virus – seems to then assume ontological substance. Belief in God *is* a virus of the mind. Yet biological viruses are not merely hypothesised; they can be identified, observed, and their structure and mode of operation determined. Yet this hypothetical 'virus of the mind' is an essentially polemical construction, devised to discredit ideas that Dawkins does not like.

So are all ideas viruses of the mind? Dawkins draws an absolute distinction between rational, scientific and evidence-based ideas, and spurious, irrational notions – such as religious beliefs. The latter, not the former, count as mental viruses. But who decides what is ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’? Dawkins does not see this as a problem, believing that he can easily categorize such ideas, separating the sheep from the goats.

Except it all turns out to be horribly complicated, losing the simplicity and elegance that marks a great idea. For instance, every worldview – religious or secular – ends up falling into the category of ‘belief systems’, precisely because it cannot be proved. That is simply the nature of worldviews, and everyone knows it. It prevents nobody from holding a worldview in the first place, and doing so with complete intellectual integrity in the second. In the end, Dawkins’ idea simply implodes, falling victim to his own subjective judgement of what is rational and true. It’s not an idea that is taken seriously within the scientific community, and can safely be disregarded.

Religion and Violence

The main argument of *The God Delusion*, however, is that religion leads to violence and oppression. Dawkins treats this as a defining characteristic of religion, airbrushing out of his somewhat skimpy account of the roots of violence any suggestion that it might be the result of political fanaticism – or even atheism. He is adamant that he himself, as a good atheist, would never, ever fly airplanes into skyscrapers, or commit any other outrageous act of violence or oppression. Good for him. Neither would I. Yet the harsh reality is that religious and anti-religious violence has happened, and is likely to continue to do so.

As someone who grew up in Northern Ireland, I know about religious violence only too well. There is no doubt that religion can generate violence. But it’s not alone in this. The history of the twentieth century has given us a frightening awareness of how political extremism can equally cause violence. In Latin America, millions of people seem to have ‘disappeared’ as a result of ruthless campaigns of violence by right wing politicians and their militias. In Cambodia, Pol Pot eliminated his millions in the name of socialism.

The rise of the Soviet Union was of particular significance. Lenin regarded the elimination of religion as central to the socialist revolution, and put in place measures designed to eradicate religious beliefs through the ‘protracted use of violence.’ One of the greatest tragedies of this dark era in human history was that those who sought to eliminate religious belief through violence and oppression believed they were justified in doing so. They were accountable to no higher authority than the state.

In one of his more bizarre creedal statements as an atheist, Dawkins insists that there is ‘not the smallest evidence’ that atheism systematically influences people to do bad things. It’s an astonishing, naïve, and somewhat sad statement. The facts are otherwise. In their efforts to enforce their atheist ideology, the Soviet authorities systematically destroyed and eliminated the vast majority of churches and priests during the period 1918-41. The statistics make for dreadful reading.

This violence and repression was undertaken in pursuit of an atheist agenda – the elimination of religion. This doesn't fit with Dawkins' highly sanitised, idealized picture of atheism. Dawkins is clearly an ivory tower atheist, disconnected from the real and brutal world of the twentieth century.

Dawkins develops a criticism that is often directed against religion in works of atheist apologetics – namely, that it encourages the formation and maintenance of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. For Dawkins, removing religion is essential if this form of social demarcation and discrimination is to be defeated. But what, many will wonder, about Jesus of Nazareth? Wasn't this a core theme of his teaching – that the love of God transcends, and subsequently abrogates, such social divisions?

Dawkins' analysis here is unacceptable. There are points at which his ignorance of religion ceases to be amusing, and simply becomes risible. In dealing with this question he draws extensively on a paper published in *Skeptical* magazine in 1995 by John Hartung, which asserts that – and here I cite Dawkins' summary:

Jesus was a devotee of the same in-group morality – coupled with out-group hostility – that was taken for granted in the Old Testament. Jesus was a loyal Jew. It was Paul who invented the idea of taking the Jewish God to the Gentiles. Hartung puts it more bluntly than I dare: 'Jesus would have turned over in his grave if he had known that Paul would be taking his plan to the pigs.'

Many Christian readers of this will be astonished at this bizarre misrepresentation being presented as if it were gospel truth. Yet, I regret to say, it is representative of Dawkins' method: ridicule, distort, belittle, and demonize. Still, at least it will give Christian readers an idea of the lack of any scholarly objectivity or basic human sense of fairness which now pervades atheist fundamentalism.

There is little point in arguing with such fundamentalist nonsense. It's about as worthwhile as trying to persuade a flat-earther that the world is actually round. Dawkins seems to be so deeply trapped within his own worldview that he cannot assess alternatives. Yet many readers would value a more reliable and informed response, rather than accepting Dawkins' increasingly tedious antireligious tirades. Let's look at things as they actually stand.

In the first place, Jesus explicitly extends the Old Testament command to 'love your neighbour' to 'love your *enemy*' (Matthew 5:44). Far from endorsing 'out-group hostility', Jesus both commended and commanded an ethic of 'out-group affirmation'. As this feature of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is so well-known and distinctive, it is inexcusable that Dawkins should make no mention of it. Christians may certainly be accused of failing to live up to this demand. But it is there, right at the heart of the Christian ethic.

In the second place, many readers would point out that the familiar story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) makes it clear that the command to 'love your neighbour' extends far beyond Judaism. (Indeed, this aspect of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth seems to have resulted in people suspecting Jesus of actually being a Samaritan: see John 8:48). It is certainly true that Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, gave priority to the Jews as God's chosen people, but his definition of who was a

'true Jew' was radically broad. It included those who had excluded themselves from Judaism by intimate collaboration with Roman occupying forces. One of the main charges levelled against Jesus by his critics within Judaism was his open acceptance of these out-groups. Indeed a substantial part of his teaching can be seen as a defence of his behaviour towards them. Jesus' welcome of marginalised groups, who inhabited an ambiguous position between 'in' and 'out', is also well attested in accounts of his willingness to touch those considered by his culture to be ritually unclean (for instance Matthew 8:3, Matthew 9:20-25).

Conclusion

So what are we to make of this shrill and petulant manifesto of atheist fundamentalism? Aware of the moral obligation of a critic of religion to deal with this phenomenon at its best and most persuasive, many atheists have been disturbed by Dawkins' crude stereotypes, vastly over-simplified binary oppositions ('science is good, religion is bad'), straw men, and seemingly pathological hostility towards religion. Might *The God Delusion* actually backfire, and end up persuading people that atheism is just as intolerant, doctrinaire and disagreeable as the worst that religion can offer? As the atheist philosopher Michael Ruse commented recently: '*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist'.

Dawkins seems to think that saying something more loudly and confidently, while ignoring or trivializing counter-evidence, will persuade the open-minded that religious belief is a type of delusion. For the gullible and credulous, it is the confidence with which something is said that persuades, rather than the evidence offered in its support. Dawkins' astonishingly superficial and inaccurate portrayal of Christianity will simply lead Christians to conclude that he does not know what he is talking about – and that his atheism may therefore rest on a series of errors and misunderstandings. Ironically, the ultimate achievement of *The God Delusion* for modern atheism may be to suggest that it is actually atheism itself which may be a delusion about God.

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