

Reflections on *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins

By David Atkinson, Bishop of Thetford

The God Delusion (Bantam Press 2006) has the same mixture of brilliant rhetoric, passionate anti-theism and (to my mind) faulty argument that we have come to expect from Richard Dawkins, Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford. The author of *The Selfish Gene* and other books, Dawkins established his reputation as a leading zoologist and a foremost apologist for neo-Darwinianism. But he is now at least as well known for his insistence on the irrationality of belief in God, and the great harm religion does in the world. The themes of his Channel 4 television series *The Root of all Evil?* have now been considerably further developed in this major polemic against God and against the ‘vice of religion’, and in a renewed impassioned mission to convert us all to atheism.

After an opening chapter objecting to the fact, as Dawkins perceives it, that religion is granted privileged respect in the public realm, Dawkins goes straight into the attack on God. He opens his argument on “The God Hypothesis” with the words “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction.” Then follow a whole series of derogatory adjectives (without any reference to their Old Testament sources), presumably derived from Dawkins’ reading of the scarier parts of the Pentateuch. Not a hint anywhere that Dawkins has read of the compassionate love of God in Hosea, the justice of God in Amos, the tenderness of God in the twenty third psalm, the suffering servant in Isaiah. Not a hint that Dawkins has come across the concept of progressive revelation, nor that - for a Christian - the New Testament Gospel provides an interpretative window through which the significance of the Old Testament is understood. But then he says he is not attacking any particular version of God - rather “God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural.” His handling of the New Testament is no less selective. He dismisses the question of the historicity of the Gospels, without reference to any main-stream New Testament scholars, placing them alongside the *Da Vinci Code* as “fiction”, and then offers us this remarkably odd piece of reasoning: “Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament (and obviously not the Old Testament) as a reliable record of what actually happened in history, and I shall not consider the Bible further as evidence for any kind of deity.” The NT comes in for stringent criticism later on for (Dawkins’ version of) the doctrine of the atonement – “vicious, sado-masochistic repellent, barking mad”. Extraordinarily, and to my mind most significantly, Dawkins shows minimal engagement with the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, nor with mainstream Christian understanding of his death and resurrection, nor, indeed, with mainstream Christian teaching at all.

Of course in between the excesses of polemic there are serious criticisms of many of the failings of religious people, the dangerous extremes of fundamentalisms of various sorts, the foolish experiments some people have tried to ‘prove’ the truth of religion, the damage which an unreasoning blind credulity can and does do. He can find (of course) many examples of religious fanaticism which do untold harm. He is less forthcoming on the good that religious people have done in the world, and the

harm sometimes perpetrated by atheist regimes. Throughout, however, Dawkins unfortunately seems to insist on a concept of faith defined as “blind trust in the absence of evidence”, a view which no sensible person holds. Christian faith is generally understood by Christian people to involve a conviction of the mind based on sufficient evidence, coupled with a confident trust and the consent of the will. Dawkins does express himself perplexed by the existence of reputable scientists who are people of firm religious conviction. Unfortunately they cannot be accounted for by the thoroughgoing Darwinian materialism which is the interpretative grid through which Dawkins sees the world, and remain to him a puzzle.

A chapter surveying the “arguments for the existence of God” suggests, rightly of course as most Christians agree, that they do not “prove” any thing. But then their value is not in ‘proving’ God (as if that were possible), but in exploring the rational implications of faith in terms of our experience of causality, beauty, purpose, morality and so on. But for Dawkins, the big argument, and central chapter of the book, is about probability. “Any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right. God presents an infinite regress for which he cannot help us to escape.” The argument of the central chapter is called “Why there almost certainly is no God” after which there are extended discussions exploring why religion remains so pervasive if there is no God, how goodness develops in the world if there is no God, the damage religion does, socially and especially to children, and what to make of the supposed benefits of religion if God is not there. Religion has traditionally been used to provide explanations, exhortations, consolation and inspiration. Dawkins believes he has shown that religion does not explain anything, and that it is not a legitimate source of morality, in fact that it does damage. Dawkins seems blind to the damage which the application of science itself can, unchecked by moral constraints, do to the world. Dawkins will, however, allow the religious benefits of consolation and inspiration, but these, he argues, should now be provided by other means.

It is to his central chapter that we now turn. The key points are that human beings have always had a need to explain how the complex, improbable appearance of design in the universe arises. It is tempting to attribute this appearance of design to a designer, but then we are faced with the question, says Dawkins, “who designed the designer?” If we acknowledge, as we must, that it is highly improbable that we are here at all, it is, he says, no solution to postulate the existence of something even more complex and therefore more improbable. Darwin and his followers have shown that natural selection accounts for the appearance (illusion) of design, and so we need look no further – at least in biology. In physics, he acknowledges, there are still questions, but on the basis of the argument from biology, it is clear, he argues, that God almost certainly does not exist. This argument needs careful unpacking.

There are at least two issues here where Dawkins is seriously misleading. The first is the assumption that in speaking of God we are speaking of a feature of the universe alongside other features. But the universe we experience is contingent; it did not have to be the way it is; that is part of the motivation for scientific exploration. When we speak of God, however, we are not speaking of something contingent, but of a reality which transcends time and space and which is necessarily what it is: the Self-Existent One. There is therefore no ‘infinite regress’: The God of whom we speak is a different order of being from the rest of the contingent universe. We are

talking of a Creator and of what is created. Dawkins is wanting to treat “God” as one item among many in the universe which can be subjected to scientific analysis. He seems blind to the fact which is so persuasive to theists that the emergence of life through the evolutionary processes, which has led to the existence of beings who are capable of self-consciousness and personal love, itself requires explanation. Biology can give us a description of causes, but not of meaning. Then secondly, Dawkins refers to the anthropic principle to illustrate how very improbable it is that we are here, and he believes recourse to belief in God is belief in a being whose existence must be even more complex and therefore more improbable. Note the elision from complexity to improbability - but why complexity requires improbability Dawkins does not demonstrate. And one inescapable and highly improbable fact about the world is that we are in fact here - and that requires explanation. It is at least as plausible to attribute the “apparent design” in the world to a creative Mind, as it is to attribute it to wholly materialistic natural selection. Neither faith position is required by science; both views can be (and are) held by scientists. But both are faith positions which we need to evaluate on the basis of other than scientific evidence. And for a Christian believer one major piece of ‘evidence’ is the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, which Dawkins unfortunately avoids. For a Christian a faith based on the response of mind, heart and will to Jesus Christ leads us to the conviction that the basis and source of all that exists in the universe, is personal Love. It is Love, we believe, which is itself the source of all that is wonderful about the world in its awesomeness and beauty, and in what is best and most fulfilling in human relationships and creativity. To many of us, these are not ‘delusion’, but the most significant facts about the universe and our lives.

Last year Alister McGrath published *Dawkins God (Blackwell 2005)*, sadly trivialised by Dawkins in a mere couple of lines, which takes Dawkins utterly seriously, and tackles the arguments of his previous books with careful rational engagement. Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project said of it “In this remarkable book, Alister McGrath challenges Dawkins on the very ground he holds most sacred – rational argument – and disarms the master.” It is a fine critique of Dawkins’ approach, and should be read alongside *The God Delusion* as a reminder that science itself cannot decide questions about God. Christian faith - and Dawkins’ atheism - both need to be justified on other grounds than science; with regard to the latter – in my view – Dawkins has signally failed to make his case.