

Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching

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Review of 'The God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins

Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology. Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins, who is the nearest thing to a professional atheist we have had since Bertrand Russell, are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don't believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding. This is why they invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be. If they were asked to pass judgment on phenomenology or the geopolitics of South Asia, they would no doubt bone up on the question as assiduously as they could. When it comes to theology, however, any shoddy old travesty will pass muster. These days, theology is the queen of the sciences in a rather less august sense of the word than in its medieval heyday.

Dawkins on God is rather like those right-wing Cambridge dons who filed eagerly into the Senate House some years ago to non-placet Jacques Derrida for an honorary degree. Very few of them, one suspects, had read more than a few pages of his work, and even that judgment might be excessively charitable. Yet they would doubtless have been horrified to receive an essay on Hume from a student who had not read his *Treatise of Human Nature*. There are always topics on which otherwise scrupulous minds will cave in with scarcely a struggle to the grossest prejudice. For a lot of academic psychologists, it is Jacques Lacan; for Oxbridge philosophers it is Heidegger; for former citizens of the Soviet bloc it is the writings of Marx; for militant rationalists it is religion.

What, one wonders, are Dawkins's views on the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus? Has he read Eriugena on subjectivity, Rahner on grace or Moltmann on hope? Has he even heard of them? Or does he imagine like a bumptious young barrister that you can defeat the opposition while being complacently ignorant of its toughest case? Dawkins, it appears, has sometimes been told by theologians that he sets up straw men only to bowl them over, a charge he rebuts in this book; but if *The God Delusion* is anything to go by, they are absolutely right. As far as theology goes, Dawkins has an enormous amount in common with Ian Paisley and American TV evangelists. Both parties agree pretty much on what religion is; it's just that Dawkins rejects it while Oral Roberts and his unctuous tribe grow fat on it.

A molehill of instances out of a mountain of them will have to suffice. Dawkins considers that all faith is blind faith, and that Christian and Muslim children are brought up to believe unquestioningly. Not even the dim-witted clerics who knocked me about at grammar school thought that. For mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always

played an integral role in belief. (Where, given that he invites us at one point to question everything, is Dawkins's own critique of science, objectivity, liberalism, atheism and the like?) Reason, to be sure, doesn't go all the way down for believers, but it doesn't for most sensitive, civilised nonreligious types either. Even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason. We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain. Only positivists think that 'rational' means 'scientific'. Dawkins rejects the surely reasonable case that science and religion are not in competition on the grounds that this insulates religion from rational inquiry. But this is a mistake: to claim that science and religion pose different questions to the world is not to suggest that if the bones of Jesus were discovered in Palestine, the pope should get himself down to the dole queue as fast as possible. It is rather to claim that while faith, rather like love, must involve factual knowledge, it is not reducible to it. For my claim to love you to be coherent, I must be able to explain what it is about you that justifies it; but my bank manager might agree with my dewy-eyed description of you without being in love with you himself.

Dawkins holds that the existence or non-existence of God is a scientific hypothesis which is open to rational demonstration. Christianity teaches that to claim that there is a God must be reasonable, but that this is not at all the same thing as faith. Believing in God, whatever Dawkins might think, is not like concluding that aliens or the tooth fairy exist. God is not a celestial super-object or divine UFO, about whose existence we must remain agnostic until all the evidence is in. Theologians do not believe that he is either inside or outside the universe, as Dawkins thinks they do. His transcendence and invisibility are part of what he is, which is not the case with the Loch Ness monster. This is not to say that religious people believe in a black hole, because they also consider that God has revealed himself: not, as Dawkins thinks, in the guise of a cosmic manufacturer even smarter than Dawkins himself (the New Testament has next to nothing to say about God as Creator), but for Christians at least, in the form of a reviled and murdered political criminal. The Jews of the so-called Old Testament had faith in God, but this does not mean that after debating the matter at a number of international conferences they decided to endorse the scientific hypothesis that there existed a supreme architect of the universe – even though, as Genesis reveals, they were of this opinion. They had faith in God in the sense that I have faith in you. They may well have been mistaken in their view; but they were not mistaken because their scientific hypothesis was unsound.

Dawkins speaks scoffingly of a personal God, as though it were entirely obvious exactly what this might mean. He seems to imagine God, if not exactly with a white beard, then at least as some kind of *chap*, however supersized. He asks how this chap can speak to billions of people simultaneously, which is rather like wondering why, if Tony Blair is an octopus, he has only two arms. For Judeo-Christianity, God is not a person in the sense that Al Gore arguably is. Nor is he a principle, an entity, or 'existent': in one sense of that word it would be perfectly coherent for religious types to claim that God does not in fact exist. He is, rather, the condition of possibility of any entity whatsoever, including ourselves. He is the answer to why there is something rather than nothing. God and the universe do not add up to two, any more than my envy and my left foot constitute a pair of objects.

This, not some super-manufacturing, is what is traditionally meant by the claim that God is Creator. He is what sustains all things in being by his love; and this would still be the case even if the universe had no beginning. To say that he brought it into being ex nihilo is not a measure of

how very clever he is, but to suggest that he did it out of love rather than need. The world was not the consequence of an inexorable chain of cause and effect. Like a Modernist work of art, there is no necessity about it at all, and God might well have come to regret his handiwork some aeons ago. The Creation is the original *acte gratuit*. God is an artist who did it for the sheer love or hell of it, not a scientist at work on a magnificently rational design that will impress his research grant body no end.

Because the universe is God's, it shares in his life, which is the life of freedom. This is why it works all by itself, and why science and Richard Dawkins are therefore both possible. The same is true of human beings: God is not an obstacle to our autonomy and enjoyment but, as Aquinas argues, the power that allows us to be ourselves. Like the unconscious, he is closer to us than we are to ourselves. He is the source of our self-determination, not the erasure of it. To be dependent on him, as to be dependent on our friends, is a matter of freedom and fulfilment. Indeed, friendship is the word Aquinas uses to characterise the relation between God and humanity.

Dawkins, who is as obsessed with the mechanics of Creation as his Creationist opponents, understands nothing of these traditional doctrines. Nor does he understand that because God is transcendent of us (which is another way of saying that he did not have to bring us about), he is free of any neurotic need for us and wants simply to be allowed to love us. Dawkins's God, by contrast, is Satanic. Satan ('accuser' in Hebrew) is the misrecognition of God as Big Daddy and punitive judge, and Dawkins's God is precisely such a repulsive superego. This false consciousness is overthrown in the person of Jesus, who reveals the Father as friend and lover rather than judge. Dawkins's Supreme Being is the God of those who seek to avert divine wrath by sacrificing animals, being choosy in their diet and being impeccably well behaved. They cannot accept the scandal that God loves them just as they are, in all their moral shabbiness. This is one reason St Paul remarks that the law is cursed. Dawkins sees Christianity in terms of a narrowly legalistic notion of atonement – of a brutally vindictive God sacrificing his own child in recompense for being offended – and describes the belief as vicious and obnoxious. It's a safe bet that the Archbishop of Canterbury couldn't agree more. It was the imperial Roman state, not God, that murdered Jesus.

Dawkins thinks it odd that Christians don't look eagerly forward to death, given that they will thereby be ushered into paradise. He does not see that Christianity, like most religious faiths, values human life deeply, which is why the martyr differs from the suicide. The suicide abandons life because it has become worthless; the martyr surrenders his or her most precious possession for the ultimate well-being of others. This act of self-giving is generally known as sacrifice, a word that has unjustly accrued all sorts of politically incorrect implications. Jesus, Dawkins speculates, might have desired his own betrayal and death, a case the New Testament writers deliberately seek to rebuff by including the Gethsemane scene, in which Jesus is clearly panicking at the prospect of his impending execution. They also put words into his mouth when he is on the cross to make much the same point. Jesus did not die because he was mad or masochistic, but because the Roman state and its assorted local lackeys and running dogs took fright at his message of love, mercy and justice, as well as at his enormous popularity with the poor, and did away with him to forestall a mass uprising in a highly volatile political situation. Several of Jesus' close comrades were probably Zealots, members of an anti-imperialist underground movement. Judas' surname suggests that he may have been one of them, which makes his treachery rather

more intelligible: perhaps he sold out his leader in bitter disenchantment, recognising that he was not, after all, the Messiah. Messiahs are not born in poverty; they do not spurn weapons of destruction; and they tend to ride into the national capital in bullet-proof limousines with police outriders, not on a donkey.

Jesus, who *pace* Dawkins did indeed 'derive his ethics from the Scriptures' (he was a devout Jew, not the founder of a fancy new set-up), was a joke of a Messiah. He was a carnivalesque parody of a leader who understood, so it would appear, that any regime not founded on solidarity with frailty and failure is bound to collapse under its own hubris. The symbol of that failure was his crucifixion. In this faith, he was true to the source of life he enigmatically called his Father, who in the guise of the Old Testament Yahweh tells the Hebrews that he hates their burnt offerings and that their incense stinks in his nostrils. They will know him for what he is, he reminds them, when they see the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent empty away. You are not allowed to make a fetish or graven image of this God, since the only image of him is human flesh and blood. Salvation for Christianity has to do with caring for the sick and welcoming the immigrant, protecting the poor from the violence of the rich. It is not a 'religious' affair at all, and demands no special clothing, ritual behaviour or fussiness about diet. (The Catholic prohibition on meat on Fridays is an unscriptural church regulation.)

Jesus hung out with whores and social outcasts, was remarkably casual about sex, disapproved of the family (the suburban Dawkins is a trifle queasy about this), urged us to be laid-back about property and possessions, warned his followers that they too would die violently, and insisted that the truth kills and divides as well as liberates. He also cursed self-righteous prigs and deeply alarmed the ruling class.

The Christian faith holds that those who are able to look on the crucifixion and live, to accept that the traumatic truth of human history is a tortured body, might just have a chance of new life – but only by virtue of an unimaginable transformation in our currently dire condition. This is known as the resurrection. Those who don't see this dreadful image of a mutilated innocent as the truth of history are likely to be devotees of that bright-eyed superstition known as infinite human progress, for which Dawkins is a full-blooded apologist. Or they might be well-intentioned reformers or social democrats, which from a Christian standpoint simply isn't radical enough.

The central doctrine of Christianity, then, is not that God is a bastard. It is, in the words of the late Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe, that if you don't love you're dead, and if you do, they'll kill you. Here, then, is your pie in the sky and opium of the people. It was, of course, Marx who coined that last phrase; but Marx, who in the same passage describes religion as the 'heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions', was rather more judicious and dialectical in his judgment on it than the lunging, flailing, mispunching Dawkins.

Now it may well be that all this is no more plausible than the tooth fairy. Most reasoning people these days will see excellent grounds to reject it. But critics of the richest, most enduring form of popular culture in human history have a moral obligation to confront that case at its most persuasive, rather than grabbing themselves a victory on the cheap by savaging it as so much garbage and gobbledygook. The mainstream theology I have just outlined may well not be true; but anyone who holds it is in my view to be respected, whereas Dawkins considers that no religious belief, anytime or anywhere, is worthy of any respect whatsoever. This, one might note,

is the opinion of a man deeply averse to dogmatism. Even moderate religious views, he insists, are to be ferociously contested, since they can always lead to fanaticism.

Some currents of the liberalism that Dawkins espouses have nowadays degenerated into a rather nasty brand of neo-liberalism, but in my view this is no reason not to champion liberalism. In some obscure way, Dawkins manages to imply that the Bishop of Oxford is responsible for Osama bin Laden. His polemic would come rather more convincingly from a man who was a little less arrogantly triumphalistic about science (there are a mere one or two gestures in the book to its fallibility), and who could refrain from writing sentences like 'this objection [to a particular scientific view] can be answered by the suggestion . . . that there are many universes,' as though a suggestion constituted a scientific rebuttal. On the horrors that science and technology have wreaked on humanity, he is predictably silent. Yet the Apocalypse is far more likely to be the product of them than the work of religion. Swap you the Inquisition for chemical warfare.

Such is Dawkins's unruffled scientific impartiality that in a book of almost four hundred pages, he can scarcely bring himself to concede that a single human benefit has flowed from religious faith, a view which is as a priori improbable as it is empirically false. The countless millions who have devoted their lives selflessly to the service of others in the name of Christ or Buddha or Allah are wiped from human history – and this by a self-appointed crusader against bigotry. He is like a man who equates socialism with the Gulag. Like the puritan and sex, Dawkins sees God everywhere, even where he is self-evidently absent. He thinks, for example, that the ethno-political conflict in Northern Ireland would evaporate if religion did, which to someone like me, who lives there part of the time, betrays just how little he knows about it. He also thinks rather strangely that the terms Loyalist and Nationalist are 'euphemisms' for Protestant and Catholic, and clearly doesn't know the difference between a Loyalist and a Unionist or a Nationalist and a Republican. He also holds, against a good deal of the available evidence, that Islamic terrorism is inspired by religion rather than politics.

These are not just the views of an enraged atheist. They are the opinions of a readily identifiable kind of English middle-class liberal rationalist. Reading Dawkins, who occasionally writes as though 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness' is a mighty funny way to describe a Grecian urn, one can be reasonably certain that he would not be Europe's greatest enthusiast for Foucault, psychoanalysis, agitprop, Dadaism, anarchism or separatist feminism. All of these phenomena, one imagines, would be as distasteful to his brisk, bloodless rationality as the virgin birth. Yet one can of course be an atheist and a fervent fan of them all. His God-hating, then, is by no means simply the view of a scientist admirably cleansed of prejudice. It belongs to a specific cultural context. One would not expect to muster many votes for either anarchism or the virgin birth in North Oxford. (I should point out that I use the term North Oxford in an ideological rather than geographical sense. Dawkins may be relieved to know that I don't actually know where he lives.)

There is a very English brand of common sense that believes mostly in what it can touch, weigh and taste, and *The God Delusion* springs from, among other places, that particular stable. At its most philistine and provincial, it makes Dick Cheney sound like Thomas Mann. The secular Ten Commandments that Dawkins commends to us, one of which advises us to enjoy our sex lives so long as they don't damage others, are for the most part liberal platitudes. Dawkins quite rightly detests fundamentalists; but as far as I know his anti-religious diatribes have never been

matched in his work by a critique of the global capitalism that generates the hatred, anxiety, insecurity and sense of humiliation that breed fundamentalism. Instead, as the obtuse media chatter has it, it's all down to religion.

It thus comes as no surprise that Dawkins turns out to be an old-fashioned Hegelian when it comes to global politics, believing in a zeitgeist (his own term) involving ever increasing progress, with just the occasional 'reversal'. 'The whole wave,' he rhapsodises in the finest Whiggish manner, 'keeps moving.' There are, he generously concedes, 'local and temporary setbacks' like the present US government – as though that regime were an electoral aberration, rather than the harbinger of a drastic transformation of the world order that we will probably have to live with for as long as we can foresee. Dawkins, by contrast, believes, in his Herbert Spencerish way, that 'the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue.' So there we are, then: we have it from the mouth of Mr Public Science himself that aside from a few local, temporary hiccups like ecological disasters, famine, ethnic wars and nuclear wastelands, History is perpetually on the up.

Apart from the occasional perfunctory gesture to 'sophisticated' religious believers, Dawkins tends to see religion and fundamentalist religion as one and the same. This is not only grotesquely false; it is also a device to outflank any more reflective kind of faith by implying that it belongs to the coterie and not to the mass. The huge numbers of believers who hold something like the theology I outlined above can thus be conveniently lumped with rednecks who murder abortionists and malign homosexuals. As far as such outrages go, however, *The God Delusion* does a very fine job indeed. The two most deadly texts on the planet, apart perhaps from Donald Rumsfeld's emails, are the Bible and the Koran; and Dawkins, as one the best of liberals as well as one of the worst, has done a magnificent job over the years of speaking out against that particular strain of psychopathology known as fundamentalism, whether Texan or Taliban. He is right to repudiate the brand of mealy-mouthed liberalism which believes that one has to respect other people's silly or obnoxious ideas just because they are other people's. In its admirably angry way, *The God Delusion* argues that the status of atheists in the US is nowadays about the same as that of gays fifty years ago. The book is full of vivid vignettes of the sheer horrors of religion, fundamentalist or otherwise. Nearly 50 per cent of Americans believe that a glorious Second Coming is imminent, and some of them are doing their damndest to bring it about. But Dawkins could have told us all this without being so appallingly bitchy about those of his scientific colleagues who disagree with him, and without being so theologically illiterate. He might also have avoided being the second most frequently mentioned individual in his book – if you count God as an individual.

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