

# The God Delusion

## A Book Report by Marvin L. French

There have been numerous reviews of this book, but a mere “review” comprising a page or so cannot cover its large scope, which this “report” will do albeit in summary form. The format will touch on the preface, each of the 10 chapters, and each sub-chapter. Comments on some reviews of the book will follow. Quotations included are not necessarily from the book, but are pertinent to its content, some of which is paraphrased rather than quoted.

The author is Richard Dawkins, a British ethologist and evolutionary biologist, who holds the Chair for the Understanding of Science at Oxford University. He is the author of *The Selfish Gene*, which offers a good education on the role of genes in evolution and natural selection. His work on BBC television includes *The Root of All Evil?*, describing some of the evil being done in the name of religion.

### Preface

Dawkins wants to emphasize four “consciousness-raisers”:

Atheists can be happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled..

The illusion of design is explained by Darwinian natural selection.

Children are not born as Christians, Muslims, Jews, etc., and should not be labeled as such.

Atheist pride should assert itself.

Dawkins: A dictionary defines delusion as “a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence.” He is sympathetic with Robert Pirsig’s observation that “when one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called religion.”

The preface begins a repeated theme that America is a highly-religious land in which fundamentalists hold great power. While they indeed hold inappropriate power, it is not so great as Dawkins seems to think. The Supreme Court has seen to that in many of its decisions. Nor are Americans all that religious. One-third of the 83% who say they are Christians are not affiliated with any church. Only 40% of Americans say they go to church regularly, but further checking on attendance shows that about half of them are fibbing. E.B.White: “Why is it...that an Englishman is unhappy until he has explained America?” An example of inappropriate power: The BBC’s three-part series about atheism, *A Brief History of Disbelief*, was not shown in most southern states, while the Christian fundamentalist propaganda program, *Wall of Separation* (denying such a wall between government and religion), was shown nationally.

### 1. A deeply religious non-believer

#### Deserved Respect

Theists believe in a personal God who created all and supervises everything, deists in an impersonal god who created the universe but lets it run without interference. Pantheism, “sexed-up atheism,” uses “god” as a synonym for the laws of the universe. The book’s title refers only to supernatural gods, not to the “god of nature” revered by Jefferson, Einstein, Sagan, and other deeply religious non-believers, whose religiosity deserves respect. They ought not to use the word “God” as a non-supernatural synonym for Nature, or for

the Universe, or for the lawfulness that governs its workings, because the common understanding is that the word refers to a supernatural entity.

[mlf] Some pantheists believe in a non-natural substance or spirit (but not a god) that is separate from nature.

### **Undeserved Respect**

Why did muslim objections to the Danish cartoons get so much consideration (they were not published in England), even though they were generally so savage (“Behead those who say Islam is a violent religion!”).

Ethnic cleansing is often a euphemism for religious cleansing, as in Iraq and arguably in Yugoslavia.

## **2. The God Hypothesis**

Dawkins’s strawman hypothesis, which he knocks down: There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us. This is a pernicious delusion. For those who would say, “But I don’t believe in the sort of god you describe,” Dawkins makes clear that he is attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural. Perhaps he will someday write a book denouncing *all* superstitious beliefs (e.g., spiritualism, astrology, numerology, an immaterial “soul”).

Dawkins’s alternative: Any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the product of an extended process of gradual evolution and natural selection..

### **Polytheism**

A belief in multiple gods, which Christianity denies but approaches closely (the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, angels and saints). Thomas Jefferson got it right when he said, “Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them; and no man has ever had a distinct idea of the trinity. It is the mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus.”

### **Monotheism**

Typified by Judaism’s belief in a single *personal* God possessing unpleasantly human qualities. Gore Vidal: “The great unmentionable evil...is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They are, literally, patriarchal--God is the Omnipotent Father--hence the loathing of women for 2000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates.”

### **Secularism, the Founding Fathers and the Religion of America**

Personal qualities form no part of the deist god of Voltaire and Thomas Paine, who is loftily unconcerned with human affairs. He is a hyper-engineer who set up the laws and constants of the universe, detonated what we would now call the Big Bang, retired and was never heard from again. It is conventional to assume that the Founding Fathers of the American Republic were deists, but the greatest of them may have been atheists, or at least would have been in our time. They were secularists who believed in Jefferson’s “wall

of separation,” keeping religion out of politics. The genie of religious fanaticism is rampant in present-day America, and the Founding Fathers would have been horrified. Even ultra-conservative Barry Goldwater deplored it: “I am warning them today that I will fight them every step of the way if they try to dictate their moral convictions to all Americans in the name of conservatism.”

[mlf] Dawkins might have added that the oft-heard assertion that the United States “was founded on Christian principles” is false. There is no mention of Christianity in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, and both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams despised any sort of organized religion. The country was founded on naturalistic principles inspired by Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke (Jefferson’s “trinity”), not by Christianity. Another advocate for the wall of separation, perhaps surprisingly, was the religious President Jimmy Carter.

### **The Poverty of Agnosticism.**

There are two kinds: (1) TAP, or Temporary Agnosticism in Practice, the legitimate fence-sitting where there is a definite answer but we haven’t found it yet. (2) PAP, Permanent Agnosticism in Principle, a deeply inescapable kind of fence-sitting that says the answer is forever inaccessible. From this agnostics often make the illogical deduction that the question is a 50-50 proposition either way. The TAP principle is superior, because God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice. Either he exists or he doesn’t, and it pays to look at the probabilities. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence; as Bertrand Russell said, the burden of proof rests with the believers, not the non-believers.

Dawkins provides a “spectrum” of belief possibilities: strong theism, “*de facto*” theism (short of 100 percent), agnosticism leaning toward belief, impartial agnosticism (50 percent), agnosticism leaning toward atheism, “*de facto*” atheism (near-zero probability), and strong atheism. He puts himself in the next-to-last category “only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden.”

### **NOMA**

Stephen Jay Gould says, “We neither affirm nor deny the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature.” Coining the phrase “non-overlapping magisteria” (NOMA), he claims that the net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm, while the magesterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. The two magisteria do not overlap.

Dawkins replies: “This sounds terrific--right up until you give it a moment’s thought. What are these ultimate questions in whose presence religion is an honoured guest and science must respectfully slink away? Why are scientists so cravenly respectful towards the ambitions of theologians, over questions that theologians are no more qualified to answer than scientists themselves? The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question. Does Gould really want to cede to *religion* the right to tell us what is good and what is bad? The fact that it has nothing *else* to contribute to human wisdom is no reason to hand religion a free license to tell us what to do. Which religion, anyway?”

### **The Great Prayer Experiment**

The Templeton Foundation provided researchers \$2.4 million for an experiment that monitored 1,802

patients who received coronary bypass surgery. They were divided into three groups, Group 1 was prayed for (but not told that), Group 2 was not prayed for, and Group 3 was prayed for (and told that). The results, published in the American Heart Journal of April 2006, were clear-cut. There was no difference between Groups 1 and 2, but Group 3 suffered significantly more from complications than the others. Knowing that they were being prayed for evidently brought them additional stress. The Oxford theologian Richard Swinburne let fall this gem: “There is quite a lot of evidence anyway of God’s existence, and too much might not be good for us.”

### **The Neville Chamberlain School of Evolutionists**

An evolution defense lobby has sprung up, most notably represented by the National Center for Science Education. They want to appease the religious who are ashamed of their brethren’s opposition to evolution by allowing them NOMA with no objection, keeping on their good side and not antagonizing them. Espouse NOMA, they say, agreeing that science is completely non-threatening because it is disconnected from religion’s claims.

Chicago geneticist Jerry Coyne: “It’s not just evolution versus creationism. To scientists like Dawkins and Wilson [E. O. Wilson, the celebrated Harvard biologist], the *real* war is between rationalism and superstition. Science is but one form of rationalism, while religion is the most common form of superstition. Creationism is just a symptom of what they see as the greater enemy: religion. While religion can exist without creationism, creationism cannot exist without religion.”

### **Little Green Men**

Whether we ever get to know about them or not, there are very probably alien civilizations in the universe that are superhuman, to the point of being god-like. In what sense, then, would they not be gods? The crucial difference lies not in their properties but in their provenance. Entities that are complex enough to be intelligent are products of an evolutionary process. No matter how god-like they may seem, they didn’t start out that way. Natural selection has lifted life from primeval simplicity to the dizzy heights of complexity, beauty, and apparent design that dazzle us today.

## **3. Arguments for God’s Existence**

### **Thomas Aquinas’ “Proofs”**

The five *a posteriori* proofs of Thomas Aquinas are easily exposed as vacuous, not proving anything. The first three are just different ways of saying the same thing. All involve an infinite regress—the answer to a question raises a prior question, and so on *ad infinitum*. The proofs are:

1. *The Unmoved Mover*. Nothing moves without a prior mover. Who moved first? God.
2. *The Uncaused Cause*. Nothing is caused by itself. There has to be a first cause, which we call God.
3. *The Cosmological Argument*. There must have been a time when nothing existed. Since physical things exist now, there must have been something non-physical to bring them into existence, and we call it God.
4. *The Argument from Degree*. There are degrees of perfection, which can only be compared with a maximum standard, which we call God.

5. *The Teleological Argument, or Argument from Design.* Things in the world, especially living things, look as though they have been designed. Therefore there must have been a designer, and we call him God.

Dawkins: Evolution by natural selection produces an excellent simulacrum of design, mounting on prodigious heights of complexity and elegance.

### **The Ontological Argument and Other *A Priori* Arguments**

The ontological argument, proposed by St. Anselm of Canterbury in 1078, was thoroughly refuted by both David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Dawkins doesn't bother with a refutation, why should he? The argument is that if you can think of something perfect, it must exist, because non-existence would be less than perfect. The logic is fine, but the premise is silly. Think of a perfect meal. It wouldn't be perfect if it didn't exist, therefore it exists. Just for fun, Dawkins quotes six other silly arguments from a list of over three hundred provided on [www.godlessgeeks.com](http://www.godlessgeeks.com).

### **The Argument from Beauty**

If there is a logical argument linking the existence of great art to the existence of God, it is not spelled out by its proponents. It is simply assumed to be self-evident, which it is not.

### **The Argument from Personal “Experience”**

As to personal “experiences” of gods or other religious phenomena, if you've had such an experience you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings.

David Hume: “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish.”

### **The Argument from Scripture**

After running through the many contradictions and impossible scenarios contained in the gospels, Dawkins concludes by saying that 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. In the far-sighted words of Thomas Jefferson, writing to John Adams, “The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.”

### **The Argument from Admired Religious Scientists**

Bertrand Russell: “The immense majority of intellectually eminent men disbelieve in Christian religion, but they conceal the fact in public, because they are afraid of losing their incomes.”

The overwhelming majority of Fellows of the Royal Society, like the overwhelming majority of US Academicians, are atheists. Paul Bell in *Mensa Magazine* in 2002 found that of 43 studies carried out since 1927 on the relationship of between religious beliefs and one's intelligence and/or educational level, all but four found an inverse connection. That is, the higher one's intelligence or educational level, the less one is likely to be religious or hold supernatural beliefs of any kind.

A reasonable conclusion from existing studies is that religious apologists might be wise to keep quieter than they habitually do on the subject of admired role models, at least where scientists are concerned.

### **Pascal's Wager**

The French mathematician Blaise Pascal reckoned that, however long the odds against God's existence might be, there is an even larger asymmetry in the penalty for guessing wrong. You'd better believe in God, because if you are right you stand to gain eternal bliss and if you are wrong it won't make any difference anyway. There is something distinctly wrong about the argument, however. Believing is not something you decide to do as a matter of policy. Pascal's wager could only ever be an argument for *feigning* belief in God. And the God that you claim to believe in had better not be omniscient or he'd see through the deception.

But why, in any case, do we accept the idea that the one thing you must do to please God is to *believe* in him? Isn't it just as likely that God would reward kindness, or generosity, or humility? Or sincerity? Suppose the god who confronts you turns out to be Baal? Indeed, doesn't the sheer number of potential gods on whom one might bet vitiate Pascal's whole logic?

Pascal also said, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

### **Bayesian Arguments**

The Bayesian argument for the existence of God put forward recently by Stephen Umwin in *The Probability of God* is both weaker and less hallowed by antiquity than others. The plan is to start with complete uncertainty, which he chooses to quantify by assigning the existence and non-existence of God a 50 percent starting likelihood each. He then lists six facts that might bear on the matter (our sense of goodness, the existence of evil in people and in nature, minor and major miracles, with a weight assigned (by Umwin) in numbers for the sake of the exercise. The resultant math shows a 67 percent likelihood for God's existence, which Umwin ups to 95 percent by an emergency injection of "faith." Aside from the 50-50 starting point, the weighting factors are arbitrary and subjective, making the exercise meaningless.

There is a much more powerful argument that does not depend on subjective judgment, which is the argument from improbability. It transports us away from 50 percent agnosticism toward the extreme of theism in the view of some, and toward the extreme of atheism in Dawkins' view. A designer God cannot be used to explain organized complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right, leading to an infinite regress from which God cannot help us escape.

## **4. Why There is Almost Certainly No God**

### **The Ultimate Boeing 747**

Fred Hoyle said that the probability of life originating on Earth is no greater than the chance that a hurricane, sweeping through a scrapyard, would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747. Others have borrowed the metaphor to refer to the later evolution of complex bodies. The odds against assembling a fully functioning horse, beetle or ostrich by randomly shuffling them are up there in 747 territory. That, in a nutshell, is the creationist's favorite argument--an argument that could be made only by somebody who thinks natural

selection is a theory of chance whereas--in the relevant sense of chance--it is the opposite. The illusion of design is a trap that has caught us before, and Darwin should have immunized us by raising our consciousness. Would that he had succeeded with all of us.

### **Natural Selection as a Conscious-Raiser**

Natural selection not only explains the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance. The scientifically savvy philosopher Daniel Dennett pointed out that evolution counters one of the oldest ideas that we have: “the idea that it takes a big fancy thing to make a lesser thing...the trickle-down theory of creation. You’ll never see a spear making a spearmaker.” Darwin’s discovery of a workable process that does that very counter-intuitive thing is what makes his contribution to human thought so revolutionary, and so loaded with the power to raise consciousness.

### **Irreducible Complexity**

The candidate solutions to the riddle of improbability [of complex organisms] are not, as is falsely implied, design and chance. They are design and natural selection. Chance is not a solution, given the high levels of improbability we see in living organisms, and no biologist ever said that it was. The answer is that natural selection is a cumulative process that breaks the problem of improbability into small pieces, each slightly improbable but not prohibitively so. When large numbers of these slightly improbable events are stacked up in series, the end product is very very improbable indeed, improbable enough to be beyond the reach of chance. The creationist insists on treating the end product as a one-off event, not understanding the power of *accumulation*. Another name for the “jackpot or nothing” fallacy is “irreducible complexity.” Either the eye sees or it doesn’t, there are no useful intermediates. But this is simply wrong. Such intermediates abound in practice--which is exactly what we should expect in theory.

Darwin wrote: “If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down. But I can find no such case.” Nor has anybody else since Darwin’s time.

### **The Worship of Gaps**

Creationists eagerly seek a gap in present-day knowledge or understanding. If an apparent gap is found, it is *assumed* that God, by default, must fill it. American geneticist Jerry Coyne: “If the history of science shows us anything, it is that we get nowhere by labeling our ignorance ‘God.’” Those people who leap from a personal bafflement at a natural phenomenon straight to a hasty invocation of the supernatural are no better than the fools who see a conjuror bending a spoon and leap to the conclusion that it is “paranormal.”

We live on a planet that is friendly to our kind of life, and we have seen two reasons why this is so. Natural selection has evolved organisms that flourish in the conditions provided by the planet. The anthropic principle is the other reason. However small the minority of evolution-friendly planets may be, our planet necessarily has to be one of them.

### **The Anthropic Principle: Planetary Version**

The anthropic principle is usually applied to the cosmos, but Dawkins introduces the idea on a smaller, planetary scale. We exist here on Earth. Therefore Earth must be the kind of planet that is capable of

generating and supporting us, however unusual, even unique, that kind of planet must be. It must have water, supportive temperature, a nearly-circular orbit, large neighbor planets that intercept dangerous asteroids, a friendly sun, etc.

The design theory says that God set up all these details for our benefit. The anthropic approach, like natural selection, is an alternative to the design hypothesis. However improbable the origin of life on Earth, we know it happened because we are here. Suppose it was so improbable as to occur on only one in a billion planets. Even with such absurdly small odds it would occur on a billion planets, given the likelihood of a billion billion planets in the universe.

### **The Anthropic Principle: Cosmological Version**

We live on a friendly planet but also in a friendly universe whose laws permit life to arise. Physicists have calculated that if any of the laws and constants of physics were slightly different, life would be impossible. The theist says that God, when setting up the universe, tuned the fundamental constants of the universe so that each one lay in a zone necessary for the production of life. This response to the riddle of improbability is an evasion of stupendous proportions. It is more than a restatement of the problem, it is a grotesque amplification of it. How do theists cope with the argument that any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and farsightfully tuned to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide?

The alternative anthropic answer, in its most general form, is that we could only be discussing the question in the kind of universe that was capable of producing us. Perhaps we will discover someday that the constants depend on one another, or on something else as yet unknown, in ways that we today cannot imagine. Another possibility is that of multiple universes, with ours the lucky one that wins the probability game by having the right combination of physical constants.

### **An Interlude at Cambridge**

Dawkins was invited to a Cambridge conference on science and religion, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation. He was the token atheist among the 18 invited speakers. The audience was a small number of hand-picked science journalists, each of whom had been paid \$15,000 plus expenses to attend. Conferences just don't pay audiences to attend. Was Templeton using his money to suborn science journalists and subvert their scientific integrity?

The theologians at the conference were *defining* themselves into an epistemological Safe Zone where rational argument could not reach them because they had *declared by fiat* that it could not. There are other ways of knowing beside the scientific, and it is one of those ways of knowing that must be deployed to know God. The most important of these ways turned out to be personal, subjective, experience of God. Several claimed that God spoke to them, inside their heads, as a human might. Dawkins replied that if God really did communicate with humans that fact would emphatically not lie outside science.

He left the conference stimulated and invigorated, and reinforced in his conviction that the argument from improbability--the "Ultimate 747" gambit--is a very serious argument against the existence of God, and one to which he has yet to hear a theologian give a convincing answer despite numerous opportunities and invitations to do so. [Philosopher] Dan Dennett rightly describes it as "an un rebuttable refutation, as devastating today as when Philo used it to trounce Cleanthes in Hume's Dialogues two centuries earlier.

## 5. The Roots of Religion

### The Darwinian Imperative

Darwinian selection is not restricted to the genes of individual organisms. There are possibly three other targets of benefit: (1) the theory of group [rather than individual] selection, (2) the extended phenotype [the individual in question may be working under the influence of genes in another individual], and (3) the “central theorem” may substitute for “genes” the more general term “replicators.” Religion is so wasteful, so extravagant, and Darwinian selection habitually targets and eliminates waste. The fact that religion is so ubiquitous probably means that it has worked to the benefit of something, but it may be to the benefit of the religious ideas themselves, to the extent that they behave in a somewhat gene-like way, as replicators.

Primitive peoples can be seen to be extremely intelligent in order to prosper in a hostile environment, while at the same time holding superstitious beliefs that are palpably false and for which “useless” is a generous understatement. Why do humans fast, kneel, genuflect, nod maniacally towards a wall, crusade, or otherwise indulge in costly practices than can consume life and, in extreme cases, end it?

### Direct Advantages of Religion

George Bernard Shaw: “The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.” The question of whether religions are deliberately designed by cynical priests or rulers is an interesting one but is not in itself a Darwinian question. The Darwinian still wants to know why people are *vulnerable* to the charms of religion and therefore open to exploitation.

### Group Selection

Group selection is the controversial idea that Darwinian selection chooses among species or other *groups* of individuals. Dawkins admits that in principle it can happen, but that it is not a significant force in evolution, as lower-level selection is likely to be stronger. Individuals who differ from the group in a way that enhances the survival of their descendants can change the character of a group significantly. Darwin visualized tribes with altruistically co-operative members spreading and becoming more numerous in terms of numbers of individuals. But this is ecological replacement, more like the spread of the grey squirrel in Britain at the expense of the red, not true group selection.

### Religion as a By-Product of Something Else:

Trusting obedience (e.g., to parents) is valuable for survival, but the flip side of trusting obedience is slavish gullibility. An automatic consequence is that the truster has no way of distinguishing good advice from bad. Odd religious beliefs do not seem weird to those brought up on them, while the unfamiliar beliefs discovered by anthropologists in primitive societies seem laughable.

### Psychologically Primed for Religions

A dualist distinguishes between matter and mind, a monist believes that mind is a manifestation of matter and cannot exist apart from it. Psychologist Paul Bloom believes the tendency to dualism is built into the brain, providing a natural disposition to embrace religious ideas. He also believes we are innately predisposed to be creationists because natural selection “makes no sense.” Children are especially likely to

assign purpose to everything and there is a name for it: teleology. Children are native teleologists, and many never grow out of it.

Human psychology has a near-universal tendency to let belief be colored by desire. Anthropologist Lionel Tiger: “There is a tendency for humans consciously to see what they want to see.” Justin Barrett coined the acronym, HADD, for hyperactive agent detection device. We detect agents when there are none, and this makes us suspect malice or benignity where nature is only indifferent. Daniel Dennett mentions the possibility that the irrationality of religion is a by-product of a particular built-in irrationality mechanism in the brain: our tendency, which presumably has genetic advantages, to fall in love. Dawkins: “The symptoms of an individual infected by religion may be startlingly reminiscent of those more ordinarily associated with sexual love.” St Teresa of Avila’s famously orgasmic vision, for instance.

### **Tread Softly, Because You Tread on My Memes**

Even though conventional Darwinian selection of genes might have favored psychological predispositions that produce religion as a by-product, it is unlikely to have shaped the details. For them, we should look not to our genes but to their cultural equivalents. A candidate is the meme, a unit of cultural inheritance. The central question for meme theory is whether there are units of cultural imitation which behave as true replicators, like genes. Might meme theory work for the special case of religion?

Religious memes that might plausibly have survival value in the meme pool, either because of a beneficial effect or because of compatibility with an existing memplex, include: human immortality; faith (belief without credence) is a virtue; non-believers should be killed or otherwise punished; martyrdom will lead to an especially wonderful part of paradise; weird beliefs (the Trinity, incarnation) might be destroyed by attempts to understand them, so call them untouchable *mysteries*; everyone must respect religious beliefs with a higher level of automatic and unquestioned respect than that accorded to other kinds of belief.

Most religions evolve, sometimes with astonishing speed. A case study follows.

### **Cargo Cults**

The entire history of some of these cults, from initiation to expiry, lies within living memory. The islanders of Pacific Melanesia noticed that during the Second World War white people enjoyed wondrous possessions but never made them themselves. When articles needed repair they were sent away and new ones kept arriving as “cargo” in ships or planes. Evidently then, the “cargo” must be of supernatural origin, a belief augmented by what looked like ritual ceremonies, such as listening to small boxes that emit light and voices.

Cults sprang up in attempts to obtain “cargo” for the islanders themselves by doing the same things. Typically, the believers would create airstrips to prepare the way for cargo planes. The majority of these religions claim that one particular messiah will bring the cargo when the day of apocalypse arrives. It is striking that cargo cults sprang up independently on islands, which suggests some unifying features of human psychology in general.

## **6. The Roots of Morality: Why Are We Good?**

Many religious people find it hard to imagine how, without religion, one can be good, or would even want to be good. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg: “Religion is an insult to human dignity. With

or without it, you'd have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, you need religion.”

### **Does Our Moral Sense Have a Darwinian Origin?**

Four Darwinian reasons for altruism: genetic kinship, reciprocation, reputation, and conspicuous generosity (indicates power).

### **A Case Study in the Roots of Morality**

Harvard biologist Marc Hauser: “Driving our moral judgments is a universal moral grammar, a faculty of the mind that evolved over millions of years to include a set of principles for building a range of possible moral systems. As with language, the principles that make up our moral grammar fly beneath the radar of our awareness.”

### **If There is No God, Why be Good?**

Such research as there is certainly doesn't support the common view that religiosity is positively correlated with morality. Einstein: “ If people are good only because they fear punishment and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.”

Sam Harris, in his *Letter to a Christian Nation* reports that states with large populations of conservative Christians have higher rates of violent crime, burglary, theft, and murder than other states. Three of the most dangerous cities in the U. S. are in the pious state of Texas. H. L. Mencken: “People say we need religion when what they really mean is we need police.”

Moral philosophers agree that moral precepts, while not necessarily constructed by reason, should be defensible by reason. The major divide is between “deontologists” such as Kant and “consequentialists” (including utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham). Deontologists believe that morality consists of obeying the rules. That is not quite the same thing as moral absolutism, but close enough in a book of this sort. Absolutists believe there are absolutes of right and wrong, imperatives whose rightness makes no reference to their consequences. Consequentialists more pragmatically hold that the morality of an action should be judged by its consequences. One version of consequentialism is utilitarianism, associated with Bentham, James Mill, and Mill's son John Stuart Mill. Bentham's imprecise catchphrase: “the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.”

## **7. The “Good Book” and the Changing Moral Zeitgeist**

There are two ways in which scripture might be a source of morals or rules of living. One is by direct instruction, e.g., the Ten Commandments. The other is by example: God, or some other biblical character, might serve as a role model. Both routes encourage a system of morals which any civilized modern person, whether religious or not, would find obnoxious. Those who wish to base their morality literally on the Bible have either not read it or not understood it. People who claim to derive their morals from scripture do not really do so in practice.

### **The Old Testament**

According to Gallup, 50 percent of the US electorate take their scriptures literally. The terrible stories of ethnic cleansing, ill treatment of women, plagues on both the guilty and the innocent, the death penalty for cursing your parents and sexual transgressions, are not good moral lessons. Those who say they do not take it all literally must pick and choose which moral lessons to accept. But then we must have some moral bias: a criterion which cannot come from scripture itself and is presumably available to all of us whether we are religious or not.

### **Is the New Testament Any Better?**

There's no denying that from a moral point of view Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the New Testament. The Sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time. His "turn the other cheek" anticipated Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years. He was not content to derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing, explicitly departing from them, for example when he deflated the dire warnings about breaking the sabbath, saying, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath."

But there are other teachings in the New Testament that no good person should support. The sin of Adam and Eve is thought to have passed down the male line. What kind of ethical philosophy is it that condemns every child, even before it is born, to inherit the sin of a remote ancestor?

### **The Moral Zeitgeist**

Since even the religious among us do not ground our morality in holy books, how then do we decide what is right and wrong? As a matter of fact there is a consensus that prevails surprisingly widely, one that has no obvious connection with religion. It extends, however, to most religious people, whether or not they *think* their morals come from scripture. The majority of us don't cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech and protect it even if we disagree with what is being said; we pay our taxes; we don't cheat, don't kill, don't commit incest, don't do things to others that we would not wish done to us.

In any society there exists a somewhat mysterious consensus that changes over the decades, for which Dawkins uses the German word *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times). Female suffrage is now universal in the world's democracies, but this reform is astonishingly recent, starting with New Zealand in 1893. Since then one country after another has followed suit, culminating with Kuwait in 2006. In the early part of the twentieth century almost everybody would be judged racist by today's standards, going by the literature of the time. Washington, Jefferson, and other men of the Enlightenment held slaves. Concern for endangered species has become accepted with the same moral status as was once accorded to keeping the sabbath and shunning graven images.

[mlf] The same is true of environmental concerns, and homosexuals have been able to come out of the closet (will atheists be next?).

The *Zeitgeist* moves on, so inexorably that we sometimes take it for granted and forget that the change is a real phenomenon in its own right. Where have these concerted and steady changes in social consciousness come from? From inspired leaders, perhaps, and from improved education, certainly not from religion. It is more than enough to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good, or to decide what is good..

### **What About Hitler and Stalin? Weren't They Atheists?**

What matters is not whether Hitler and Stalin were atheists (dubious for Hitler), but whether atheism *influences* people to do bad things. There is not the smallest evidence that it does. Religious wars have been horribly frequent in history, but none have been fought in the name of atheism.

## **8. What's Wrong with Religion? Why Be So Hostile?**

Religion has been a force for divisiveness the world over. While many internecine battles within nations are sometimes political rather than religious, religion amplifies and exacerbates the damage in at least three ways: (1) labeling of children from an early age before they can decide about religion; (2) segregated schools, isolating children with members of their own group only; and (3) taboos against "marrying out," thereby preventing the mingling of feuding groups.

Dawkins: "Such hostility as I or other atheists occasionally voice towards religion is limited to words. I am not going to bomb anybody, behead them, stone them, burn them at the stake, crucify them, or fly planes into skyscrapers."

### **Fundamentalism and the Subversion of Science**

Fundamentalists know they are right because they have read the truth in a holy book and nothing will budge them from their belief. By contrast, a scientist believes because he has studied the evidence, a big difference. He believes in evolution because the evidence supports it, and would abandon it overnight if new evidence arose to disprove it. No real fundamentalist would say anything like that.

Fundamentalist religion actively debauches the scientific enterprise, teaching us not to change our minds, and not to know exciting things that are available to be known. It is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds. Non-fundamentalist "sensible" religion may not be doing that, but it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue.

### **The Dark Side of Absolutism**

Blasphemy and "marrying out" are punishable by death in many muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the "new" Afghanistan, and is still on the books as a crime in Britain. In 2006 in Afghanistan, Abdul Rahman was sentenced to death for converting to Christianity, when all he did was change his mind. He escaped execution only on the plea of insanity, along with intense international pressure. Dawkins likes the term "American Taliban" for extreme Christian fundamentalists, which is a bit of a stretch if taken literally.

### **Faith and Homosexuality**

The official Taliban punishment for homosexuality was execution by burial alive under a wall pushed onto the top of the victim. Private homosexuality was a criminal offense in Britain until 1967. In 1954 the British mathematician, Alan Turing, one of the fathers of the computer, was convicted of the criminal offense of homosexual behavior in private. Given the choice of two years in prison or emasculating hormone injections, he took a third course--an apple laced with cyanide.

The attitude of the “American Taliban” towards homosexuality epitomizes their religious absolutism. Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition: “[Homosexuals] want to come into churches and disrupt church services and throw blood all around to give people AIDS.”

### **Faith and the Sanctity of Human Life**

Dawkins points out that objections by Christian fundamentalists to abortion and stem cell harvesting from embryos, calling it murder, does not seem to square well with their vigorous support of capital punishment. I think the religious would point out that there is a difference between taking an innocent life and taking the life of a vicious murderer, so their stance is not self-contradictory. The self-contradiction comes from their disregard of the many lives that could be saved if stem cell research were allowed to find ways of saving them. And, by the way, they place abortion doctors in the same category as vicious murderers.

Randal Terry of American Rescue, an organization for intimidating abortion providers: “When I, or people like me, are running the country, you’d better flee, because we will find you, we will try you, and we’ll execute you. I mean every word of it. I will make it part of my mission to see to it that they [abortion doctors] are tried and executed.”

### **The Great Beethoven Fallacy**

The anti-abortionist’s next move in the verbal chess game usually goes something like this: The point is not whether a human embryo can suffer at present. The point lies in its *potential*, and abortion has deprived it of the opportunity for a full human life. A hypothetical dialogue between two doctors, to be found in many versions on the internet, goes like this:

“About the terminating of pregnancy, I want your opinion. The father was syphilitic, the mother tuberculous. Of the four children born, the first was blind, the second died, the third was deaf and dumb, the fourth was also tuberculous. What would you have done?”

“I would have aborted the pregnancy.”

“Then you have just killed Beethoven.”

This is a fully fledged urban legend, a fabrication, but that is beside the point. Even if it were not a lie, the argument derived from it is a very bad argument. The world is no more likely to be deprived of a Beethoven by abortion than by chaste abstinence from intercourse. Every refusal of any offer of copulation by a fertile individual is, by this dopey “pro-life” logic, tantamount to murder of a potential child!

### **How “Moderation” in Faith Fosters Fanaticism**

The teachings of “moderate” religion, though not extremist in themselves, help to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. It can be very dangerous, and to plant it in the mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong. Terrorists are not motivated by evil, they are motivated by religion.

Voltaire: “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.”

Bertrand Russell: Many people would rather die than think. In fact, they do.”

## **9. Childhood, Abuse and the Escape from Religion**

### **Physical and Mental Abuse**

Dawkins downplays priestly abuse of children by saying it is mostly harmless. He considers the damage done arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place. He is persuaded that the term “child abuse” is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell.

Pastor Keenan Roberts of Colorado has a particular brand of nuttiness that takes the form of Hell House. Children are brought there, by their parents or their Christian schools, to be scared witless over what might happen to them after they die. Actors play out fearsome tableaux of particular “sins” like abortion and homosexuality, with a scarlet-clad devil in gloating attendance. These are a prelude to the presentation of Hell itself, complete with realistic sulphurous smell of burning brimstone and the agonized screams of the forever damned.

### **In Defence of Children**

Children should be taught not so much *what* to think as *how* to think. It is *their* privilege to decide what they shall think, and not the parents’ privilege to impose it by *force majeure*.

The Supreme Court ruled that the Amish need not send their children to school until age 16, which state law requires. The majority opinion, written by Chief Justice Warren Burger: “As the record shows, compulsory school attendance to age 16 for Amish children carries with it a very real threat of undermining the Amish community and religious practice as they exist today; they must either abandon belief and be assimilated into society at large, or be forced to migrate to some more tolerant region.”

There is something inhumane about the sacrificing of children on the altar of “diversity” and the virtue of preserving a variety of religious traditions.

### **An Educational Scandal**

There is no “wall of separation” in Britain. A proud initiative of the British government was “city academies.” Rich benefactors are encouraged to put up seed money, to which the government adds ten times that amount plus running costs and salaries in perpetuity. One such is Emmanuel College, whose benefactor is Sir Peter Vardy, a wealthy car salesman who has become connected with a clique of fundamentalist teachers led by Nigel Mcquoid, now director of a whole consortium of Vardy schools. He believes the earth is less than 10,000 years old and says it is unbelievable that we used to be monkeys. Now turn to his head of science, Stephen Layfield, whose lecture “The Teaching of Science: A Biblical Perspective” was so embarrassing to the system that it was pulled from a Christian website that published it. Some excerpts:

“We stand firm upon the bare proposition that God has spoken authoritatively and inerrantly in the pages of holy Scripture.”

“The Scriptures are not merely religious documents. They provide us with a true account of Earth history.”

He urges science teachers to “note every occasion when an old-earth paradigm is explicitly mentioned or implied by a textbook and courteously point out the fallibility of the statement. Wherever possible, we must give the alternative (always better) Biblical explanation of the same data.”

### **Consciousness-Raising Again**

Our society refers to children as Catholic, protestant, Muslim, etc. but not as liberal, conservative, or anarchistic according to the political leaning of their parents. Children should not be labeled with their parents’ religious affiliation. “Catholic schoolgirls” faced protests from Loyalists as they attempted to enter school, with bottles and stones thrown at them. Let children learn about different faiths, let them notice their incompatibility, and let them draw their own conclusions.

### **Religious Education as a Part of Literary Culture**

We can give up belief in God while not losing touch with a treasured heritage, including biblical literature. An atheist world-view provides no justification for cutting the Bible and other sacred books out of our education.

### **10. A Much-Needed Gap?**

Religion has at one time or another been thought to fill four main roles in human life: explanation, exhortation (moral instruction), consolation, and inspiration.

#### **Binker**

In A. A. Milne’s *Now We Are Six* there is an imaginary childhood friend called Binker. Some children actually believe an imaginary friend exists, which may be a good model for understanding theistic beliefs in adults.

#### **Consolation**

What can be substituted for God? Religion’s power to console doesn’t make it true. Why is it that religious people are more fearful of death than the non-religious, considering that they can look forward to a pleasant afterlife? There must be a God, the argument goes, because if there were not life would be empty, pointless, futile, a desert of meaninglessness and insignificance. How can it be necessary to point out that the logic fails at the first fence? Maybe life *is* empty. The truly adult view is that life is as meaningful, as full and wonderful, as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed.

#### **Inspiration**

As many atheists have said, the knowledge that we have only one life should make it all the more precious. However brief our time in the sun, if we waste a second of it, or complain that it is dull or barren or (like a child) boring, couldn’t this be seen as a callous insult to those unborn trillions who will never even be offered life in the first place? If the demise of God will leave a gap, different people will fill it in different ways. One way is with a good dose of science, an honest and systematic endeavor to find out the truth about the real world.

## **The Mother of all Burkas**

One of the unhappiest spectacles to be seen on our streets today is a woman swathed in shapeless black from head to toe, peering out at the world through a tiny slit. As an analogy, our eyes see the world through a narrow slit in the electromagnetic spectrum. Visible light is a small chink of brightness in the vast dark spectrum, from radio waves at the long end to gamma rays at the short end. The metaphor of the narrow window of light, broadening out into a spectacularly wide spectrum, serves us in other areas of science. We live near the center of a cavernous museum of magnitudes, viewing the world with sense organs and nervous systems that are equipped to perceive and understand only a small middle range of sizes, moving at a middle range of speed. The metaphor can be extended to a scale of probabilities, with a similarly narrow window through which our intuition and understanding are capable of going. We are ill equipped to handle very improbable events, but we are liberated by calculation and reason to visit regions of possibility that had once seemed out of bounds. Darwin seized the window of the burka and wrenched it open, letting in a flood of understanding whose dazzling novelty, and power to uplift the human spirit, perhaps had no precedent--unless it was the Copernican realization that the earth was not the center of the universe.

**Some Book Reviews** (Most can be found on the internet.)

### **Jim Holt, New York Times**

Mr. Holt objects to Dawkins' language, such as characterizing morality only for God's sake as "sucking up to God" and using the phrase "Nur Nurny Nur Nur," but the latter was within a dialogue of children on a playground, one child saying it to another after apparently winning a debate. It's the way children talk, for Pete's sake. He also considers it wrong that Dawkins should question the sincerity of serious thinkers like Stephen Jay Gould. That is an apparent reference to this sentence concerning NOMA: "Does Gould really want to cede to *religion* the right to tell us what is good and what is bad?" It *is* strange that a scientist would seemingly want that, what's wrong with saying so?

Holt writes: "In training his Darwinian guns on religion, he risks destroying a larger target than the intends." What target is that? He doesn't say. He doesn't like Dawkins' treatment of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, saying for instance that the defect in the logic of the "ontological" proof was not identified. Hey, the logic is fine, it's the premise ("imagine a most perfect being") that is ridiculous. Such arguments, Holt says, "even when they fail to be conclusive, can at least give religious belief an aura of reasonableness. The God hypothesis is at least rational to adhere to, isn't it?"

No, it isn't. Anyway, Dawkins doesn't care much what people like Holt want to believe, it is blind faith in their beliefs and religious practices attached to them that open the way to extremism, intolerance, inhumane attitudes, and mental abuse of children. That's what he is attacking.

Holt: "In a particularly low blow, he accuses Richard Swinburne, a philosopher of religion and science at Oxford, of attempting to 'justify the Holocaust,' when Swinburne was struggling to square such monumental evils with the existence of God." Quotes out of context seem to be a habit with some reviewers. Here's what Dawkins wrote: "I was on a television panel with Swinburne, and also with Oxford Professor Peter Atkins. Swinburne at one point attempted to justify the Holocaust on the grounds that it gave the Jews a wonderful opportunity to be courageous and noble. Peter Atkins splendidly growled, 'May you rot in hell.'"

### **Terry Eagleton, London Review of Books**

Eagleton characterizes the book as “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching.” I would apply the same adjectives to this review. He faults Dawkins for not researching every obscure writer on the subject of God (Eriugena? Rahner?). Why should he, when the lack of credible evidence negates everything supernatural? Who cares about the differences between Dun Scotus and Aquinas?

The worst statement in the review is that Dawkins “holds, against a good deal of the available evidence, that Islamic terrorism is inspired by religion rather than politics.” He blames global capitalism, and says “the present US government...is the harbinger of a drastic transformation of the world order.” Let’s hope he’s right!

### **Massimo Pugliucci, Skeptical Inquirer, July/August 2007**

Pugliucci should be more careful about quotes. He attributes to Dawkins the statement, “I have yet to see any good reason to suppose that theology ...is a subject at all.” That was said by a former head of Oxford College in regard to a young theologian’s doctoral thesis.

While disputing none of the meat of the book, he charges that it contains “a somewhat sloppy philosophy.” Quibbling, he challenges Dawkins’ statement that the God Hypothesis (as previously defined) “is a scientific question,” saying “he is wrong, it’s a philosophical one..... being an a-theist is as reasonable as being a-unicornist, but that ain’t science; it’s a good, old-fashioned philosophical argument.”

But there is no border between science and philosophy, they overlap, or, in another sense, science is all there is. Certainly science has the right to question any statement from theologians about the existence of the supernatural, for which science can find not a scintilla of credible evidence.

David Hume in *Concerning Human Understanding*: If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysic, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”

### **William D. Aiten, Amazon customer review**

Please read this one, available as a “comment” on *The God Delusion* at [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com). It is a great review.

### **Joan Bakewell, Guardian Unlimited Review**

This excellent review appeared in the British daily newspaper, *Guardian Unlimited*, 23 September 2006. Easiest to find using a search engine (I used Google, giving her name and the title of the book).

### **Suggested Viewing**

The website [www.veoh.com](http://www.veoh.com) has some good videos that can be viewed and/or downloaded. Search for them using the name of the video. They include:

*Atheism: A Rough History of Disbelief*, written, directed, and narrated by Jonathan Miller. This three-part series, televised by the BBC, deals with the subject of atheism. It was shown on some PBS stations in America, but generally not in the southern states (Florida an exception) because of objections from Christian fundamentalists, who seem to have the power of censorship over what can be seen on “public” television.

*The Atheism Tapes*, consisting of six interviews conducted by Jonathan Miller during the production of his series. The material was deemed too valuable to end up on the cutting room floor, so it was included on three videos that hold two tapes each. The interviewees are Steven Weinberg, physicist; Arthur Miller, playwright; Colin McGinn and Daniel Dennett, philosophers; Richard Dawkins; and Denny Turner, Cambridge theologian.

*The Root of All Evil*, Parts 1 and 2, by Richard Dawkins. It deals with the evils being perpetrated in the name of religion.

*The Big Question: Why Are We Here?*, by Richard Dawkins.