

The Dawkins Letters - 3. Respect

David Robertson

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Dear Dr Dawkins,

I would like to apologise if I in any way am misrepresenting your position. It is not intentional. I disagree with what you say and it would therefore be pretty pointless to write about what you are not saying. However I am becoming more and more convinced that your position is primarily a philosophical and religious position, rather than one you are driven to by science. That also appears to be the position of many of your fellow atheists on your website, whose reaction to the criticism has been akin to some religious fundamentalists I know. It is clear that the website is not about constructive dialogue and debate, but rather about reinforcing the faith of the believers. You do this in a rather interesting way. You have a central thesis, that science proves in so far as it is possible that God does not exist and that belief in him is a delusion. But you surround that thesis with a whole army of smaller arguments, such as the nature of religion, supposed errors in the Bible, hypocrisy in the Church etc. These have the effect of apparently reinforcing your main argument whilst at the same time allowing your supporters to complain when these surrounding arguments are challenged, that the challenger's views are irrational and stupid because they do not address the central thesis. Some Christians want to argue in the same vein – of course God exists and anyone who denies otherwise is ignorant, irrational etc. Thus we end up with the dialogue of the blind and the deaf. Which is pretty dumb. What I am trying to do in these letters is deal with all the secondary arguments in the order that you bring them up in the book. As we deconstruct these we can see that many of them are either red herrings, irrelevant or just simply wrong. And then we are left with the central kernel

of your argument, which shod of this scaffolding, is seen to be naked and without any significant support. The atheist emperor is seen to have no clothes. So I am not going to engage in the yah boo shouting match 'there is no God, yes there is, no there isn't, fool, irrational, idiot' etc that seems to be fairly standard for these kind of 'debates'.

A number of years ago when I was a student at the University of Edinburgh I was involved with a debate with members of the feminist society. It was a debate that left a profound impression. Amongst the other 'rational' arguments used to prove that men were no longer needed was the classic 'the nuclear bomb is the ultimate phallic symbol and therefore all men are less than nice people' (I paraphrase slightly for the sake of decency – this is after all a family letter!). At one point they even threw flour and eggs at myself and my colleague yelling that we were MCP's (Male Chauvinist Pigs) just because we stated that there was a role for men on the earth. It would all have been good fun if it were not for the fact that some of them really believed the hyperbole and nonsense they were sprouting. I suspect that all of them had had a bad experience of some man or other and that this was then being projected on to all men and into some kind of radical feminist philosophy. Coming on to your website there was a sense of *deja vu*. I'm afraid that many atheists seem to work from the same premise – their own experience. (As do many Christians including myself – however I'm sure you would recognise that whilst experience is an important factor it cannot be the determining factor in ascertaining what is objective truth). They have had a bad experience of religion in some form or other; therefore they project that on to every religion or religious person. And when someone like yourself comes along and provides what seems to be a cast iron intellectual justification they seize it like an alcoholic seizes the bottle. Not only are their feelings justified but they are suddenly part of the 'higher intelligence' or 'greater consciousness'.

The trouble is the argument you use and how you approach your subject. I have received several complaints from some of your followers that I have not addressed the central question in my two previous letters – the existence of God. Go on, they say. Prove it. They then complain that I have talked about the issues you talk about. What they

do is a simple and false equation. They state there is only the material and that the only thing that can be called proof is a material proof. In effect they are asking me to prove God as a chemical equation. If you can't do this they say, there is no God. This is the ultimate in circular argument. But it fails at two levels. First of all its presupposition and assertion / assumption that everything is chemical or the result of chemical reaction is itself an unprovable assertion. Secondly it is not an assertion that fits with the observable facts around us. Indeed it requires a great deal of special pleading before one can honestly come to the position that religion is just a chemical reaction, beauty is just a chemical reaction, evil likewise and the sense of God also. Furthermore the logical consequences of such a belief are disastrous. We end up with the absurdity of man as God – the most highly evolved chemical reaction.

As I have already indicated most of your book does not seek to prove its central 'everything is chemical' hypothesis, quite simply because it is not provable. So in order to protect and prop up the faith of your fellow atheists and encourage them to 'come out' you do two things. Firstly you defend atheism from the charge that it leads to various negative consequences. And secondly you go on the attack – ridiculing, mocking and denigrating the beliefs of those who do not share your presuppositions. You realise that this opens you to the charge of being aggressive, arrogant and even harmful to your own cause. Thus you seek to defend your methodology to other atheists. Indeed there is a fascinating sub text in your book – the in-house debate within atheist circles. In the Church of the Blessed Atheist it seems as though there is a doctrinal dispute which could result in a split. On the one hand there is the Respect party (the niceies); on the other the Ridicule party (the nasties). Both factions believe that religion is evil and that anyone who believes in God is a superstitious anti-rationalist. The Respects argue that you have to be nice to people to win them. The Ridicules regard this as cowardice, having more to do with keeping the peace, rather than standing up for the truth. If I belonged to your religion I would be inclined towards your side. And so would the apostle Paul who argued that if the resurrection was not true then Christians should 'be pitied more than all men' (1 Corinthians ch.15 v.19). As

would the prophet Elijah who mocked and ridiculed the prophets of Baal as they prayed, danced and cut themselves in order to arouse their God – "At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened'." (1 Kings ch. 18 v. 27). Even Jesus was fairly scathing towards those who peddled religious untruths and myths.

It is in this context that the last part of chapter 1 argues over the question of respect. Your main point is that you think it unfair and illogical that just because something is deemed to be religious it should be treated with kid gloves. You cite with glowing approval your friend Douglas Adams "Religion ... has certain ideas at the heart of it which we call sacred or holy or whatever. What it means is. 'Here is an idea or notion that you're not allowed to say anything bad about; you're just not. Why not? – because you're not'." I agree with the main substance of your argument – just because someone cites their view as religious does not *de facto* entitle it to respect. Where I think both you and Adams miss the point is that you fail to acknowledge that every society, whether overtly religious or not, has its shibboleths. There are some things that one is not allowed to question at least not without losing one's job, position etc. And that is as true in a secular society (perhaps even more so) as it is in a religious one.

This is seen in another example you bring up, that of Christian groups on campuses suing their universities because the universities are harassing these groups for their perceived anti-homosexual stance. As it happens I am writing this along with a copy of *The Times* (November 18th 2006) which on its front page reports on a similar situation in the UK. Edinburgh University for example has banned the Christian Union from teaching a course about sex and relationships because it promotes 'homophobia'. I have seen this course (entitled *Pure*) and it does no such thing (unless you are prepared to make the completely unwarranted and bigoted assumption that if one does not agree with something that one automatically is phobic about it and hates the people who do agree with it). *Pure* encourages the biblical teaching that sex should be within the context of marriage and that marriage should be between one man and one woman. Likewise the

Christian Union in Heriot Watt University has been banned because its core beliefs 'discriminate against non-Christians and those of other faiths'. The 150 strong CU in Birmingham was suspended for refusing to alter its constitution to allow non-Christians to preach at its meetings and to amend its literature to include references to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and those of 'transgender' sexuality (one wonders what the logic was for leaving out polygamists, bestialists or paedophiles?). The point is simply this – not whether you agree with their particular view of sexuality but whether they are to have the freedom to express that view. Some secularists in the US and the UK seem prepared to take this matter of sexuality and use it the way that Douglas Adams describes. You are not allowed to question it or to have a different viewpoint and when you ask why, you are just told – that is the way it is. I would hope that you would accept that Christian Unions have the right to determine what they believe themselves, as I would Atheist societies, and that nothing should be imposed on people because 'that is just the way things are'.

Going off on another bypath meadow that you set up, you assert that conflicts in areas such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Iraq should be seen as religious wars and not ethnic ones. Whilst I fully agree that religion is sometimes the cause of the most appalling behaviour in people, it is more often the case that religion is the excuse rather than the cause for ethnic divisions and wars. I have met people for example from both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland who were involved in 'the Troubles'. Not one of them thought that they were rioting, or killing for 'God'. It was for their 'community', their 'tribe' – God was just a useful person to bring in to up the *ante*. The IRA for example were a Marxist group who were Catholic only in the sense of belonging to an ethnic community. I remember speaking to a group of young men on their way to Ibrox stadium, the home of Glasgow Rangers, bearing a banner stating 'For God and Ulster' (for American readers wondering what this has to do with football and Glasgow – don't bother – its too stupid to even begin to explain). I asked them if they believed in God. 'Don't know – but we're Protestants!' Do you go to Church? 'No – expletive deleted. We go to Ibrox why would we need to go to Church?' Yet doubtless you would cite such political and ethnic Protestantism as yet another example of religious

conflict. I am sure that the Sunni and Shia war in Iraq and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia are primarily ethnic conflicts with religious tribal gods being called in as reinforcements.

And again there is an inconsistency in the atheist argument being used here. On the one hand you claim that the gods are social constructs of the various tribes / people groups of humanity. On the other you claim that religion is the cause of the various splits and ethnic infighting. Which is it? Do people invent religions so that they can fight one another, or do religions create peoples who will, because of their religion hate and fight one another? You can't have it both ways. Unless you are someone who accepts the Bible's teaching that human beings are inherently selfish and prone towards war, and that they are equally idolatrous, seeking to create 'gods' in their own image – and that the two often come together.

I am grateful to you for your somewhat amusing and sad exposé of the Danish cartoons fiasco. I too have the photo of the Islamic lady with the sign round her neck proudly proclaiming 'Behead those who say Islam is a violent religion'. And I also deplore the absolute cowardice of the press in Britain who refused to publish the cartoons out of 'respect' and 'sympathy' for the offence and hurt that Muslims suffered. You and I know that the real reason they did not publish was nothing to do with respect and everything to do with fear. *The Independent* for example had no difficulty in publishing the most blasphemous attack upon the Christian God but would not publish these cartoons. The BBC would not show the cartoons but had no difficulty in broadcasting the *Jerry Springer* caricature and assault upon Jesus Christ. Little 'respect and sympathy' for the hurt and offence that Christians had to put up with. The British media know that there is a core difference between Islam and Christianity – yes there may be a few Christians who threaten boycotts or pickets but there are none who are going to seek to kill those who blaspheme our God. Whereas they know full well that any derogatory mention of Mohammed will result in serious death threats and violence. At least you have the grace (and the courage) to acknowledge that Islam is a physical threat 'on a scale that no other religion has aspired to since the Middle Ages'.

Having said all that I am a little concerned that you use this defence of free speech to justify your caricaturing and ridiculing of religion and in particular Christianity and Christians. It is not that you do not have the right to criticize but rather that with that right also comes responsibility. A responsibility to tell the truth, to listen to others as well, and not to inflame those who might listen to you, who do not have the nice middle class English Oxford morality that the gene pool has mercifully bestowed upon you. The trouble is that your ridicule, combined with an atheist fundamentalism and the bitterness and irrationality of some of your own supporters, leads to persecution and intolerance. The only atheistic states in the world have been the most vicious and cruel that the world has ever seen. Atheistic secular fundamentalism is in my view as intolerant and coercive as almost any religious position.

On the other hand I would suggest that Biblical Christianity is the most tolerant and practical worldview that exists. Why? Because we don't need to impose our views by force (indeed we are forbidden from doing so). We don't need to shut out knowledge because all truth is Gods' truth. And we don't feel ultimately threatened. We are not interested in political power (or at least we should not be) because we know that our weapons are not the weapons of this world. We respect every human being because they are made in the image of God. Like you, we believe that we should stand up for our views. I am not going to accept Mohammed as a prophet just because some religion tells me to. I must and will however respect and love Muslims as fellow human beings in need of God.

And one last thought. One thing that really annoys some atheists is when Christians promise to pray for them. Why do we pray for you? It is not the kind of 'smite the Amalekites' prayer (although sometimes the temptation is enormous!). Rather we pray that God will work in your life, reveal himself to you and draw you to himself. Not so that we can be proved right but rather because it is, believe it or not, the best possible thing that could ever happen to you. Therefore to pray for you is a supreme act of love because it asks for the best for you. And Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies. So I do pray for you and for all those who have been deluded into thinking that

there is only the material, and that their Creator does not exist. Forgive me.

Yours etc

David