



The Dawkins Letters - 4. The God Hypothesis

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Dear Dr Dawkins,

An interesting title. At last we are getting to the meat of your case against God. I wonder in what sense you are using the term 'hypothesis'. Is it that of a supposition? A provisional explanation? Or a theory to be proved or disproved by reference to facts? I suspect that your viewpoint is that mankind, having a 'religious sense', has invented a god or gods to fill in the gaps of our knowledge. In Christian terms this results in Moses, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin giving us the 'God hypothesis' to explain what would otherwise be inexplicable. The story then continues – along comes Darwin with another hypothesis and, lo and behold, the God hypothesis is disproved. Bingo! God is a delusion. Humanity has moved onto a higher consciousness and the only thing left to do is write a book which tells people that is the case, and encourages the enlightened to 'come out' and organise politically so that the virus of religion and the old ways can never be used again. The world is saved. Hallelujah!

Except that is not the way it works. And your attack on the God Hypothesis does not work. Not least because in this chapter you really refuse to discuss it. You define the God Hypothesis as

“there exists a super human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed the universe and everything in it, including us” and you tell us that your proof that this is not so is that “any creative intelligence of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution”. And that is basically it. You spend the remaining 41 pages telling us almost nothing about the God Hypothesis. We learn about secularism and Thomas Jefferson, atheism and American politics, TAP, PAP and NOMA, the Great Prayer Experiment and why you dislike Stephen J Gould, Michael Ruse and other evolutionary appeasers, and little Green Men. It is a rambling incoherent chapter, the worst in the book, and is probably the reason that your book has received such a critical slating. For example *Prospect*, a magazine which largely gives you a sympathetic platform, put it very strongly:

It has been obvious for years that Richard Dawkins had a fat book on religion in him, but who would have thought him capable of writing one this bad? Incurious, dogmatic, rambling and self-contradictory, it has none of the style or verve of his earlier works.

But in all the randomness let's at least have a look at some of the issues you raise. You will forgive me not dealing with them all. Your shotgun approach scatters pellets over a wide area and I do not have 42 pages to pick up the pieces. Other readers are welcome to find their own gems. But I want to look specifically at the following.

You begin with a quite vicious and specious attack on the God of the Old Testament. Your first paragraph is one that you enjoy reading to people and it generally gets a round of applause. To me this indicates that you are touching a raw emotional nerve in many of those who hear you. They have a deep seated hatred of the God of the Bible. I found this paragraph very offensive – so offensive that I will not repeat the whole of it here. Now your standard retort is that you are not offending me, you are offending a god who does not exist. (Cue applause from the fans). But I'm afraid that you **are** offending me. Firstly, you are implying that I believe in this cruel, capricious and evil god. And secondly you seem to be working on the basis that as long as you are not directly insulting me, then I cannot be offended. But if you

attack my family, my friends, my community I am offended because part of my identity is tied up with them. I'm sorry but part of being human is that 'no man is an island' (unless as Nick Hornby points out 'his name is Madagascar!'). My identity is bound up with the God of the Bible and especially Jesus Christ. Therefore when you attack him you are attacking me. So please don't patronise.

However I am not a person who believes that the unforgivable sin is to offend. Maybe I deserve the offensive remarks. If what you say is true then they would be deserved. However your caricature of both the God of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the New is just that – a caricature. Like all such there is an element of truth within it but it is so distorted that it becomes unrecognisable. When I read the Old Testament I find a wonderful God – a God of mercy, justice, beauty, holiness and love. A God who cares passionately for the poor, for his people and for his creation. And amazingly it is the same God in the New. I realise that there are difficulties and problems but these are largely caused by your exaggerated caricature. If you take the foundational teachings about God in both the Old and New Testament then you come up with a much more realistic picture. For example one of your complaints against God is that he is a jealous God. This is true. But not in the sense of the green-eyed monster. God is jealous in the way that a man would expect his wife to be jealous if he started sleeping with other women, or jealous in the way that I am protective of my children. It is about protection, care and honour. Not the negative envy. I find it difficult to believe that you are not aware of that distinction. My main complaint here is that your description of the God of the Old Testament is not one that the Old Testament itself sets forward. Does this fit with your description? "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." (Psalm 103:6-8, NIV). And there are numerous similar passages. It is only by a very selective citation out of context, ignoring all the passages and teaching about God, that you could come anywhere near the caricature you espouse.

Now of course, as you acknowledge, whether this

God is good or bad is irrelevant if he does not exist. Why would we bother arguing about an imaginary being? So that begs the question why do you begin the chapter with such a vicious attack upon someone you consider to be an imaginary being? Could it be that it is a cheap shot expressing hatred against a being who might exist? Or that you know the main substance of your argument will appeal to those who have experienced some sort of religious abuse? Is it not the case that you are not really aiming at a rational response but a polemical and emotional one?

At this point you then go on to discuss polytheism, Oral Roberts, and the Roman Catholic teaching about saints. I am still trying to work out what this has to do with the God Hypothesis. However you do make one point which is now being repeated *ad nauseam* by atheists across the country – that Christians are atheists when it comes to Zeus, Thor and Ra. Atheists just go one god further (cue more gasps of admiration, laughter and cheers). Once again this cheap point fails to take account that there might actually be myths, false gods and delusions. Nor does it recognise that Christians could believe in Christ because of the evidence, not in spite of it. Your point has no more validity than a man who announces that a Rolex cannot be real because he once bought a fake watch, or a woman announcing that love does not exist because she had a bad experience. It is a rhetorical device which does not actually deal with any of the issues involved.

Another argument that you try to counter is one that I often use. When someone tells me they do not believe in God I often ask them to tell me about the God they do not believe in. They will then come out with the kind of statement that you do at the beginning of the chapter and I will tell them that I do not believe in that God either. You rightly point out that this argument is not valid for someone who is claiming that there is no God whatever his character because there is no supernatural (a faith position which is of course itself indemonstrable). However you base a considerable amount of this book attacking particular versions of God and therefore you open yourself to this rejoinder. Most of us do not believe in the God you so passionately attack. And the *ad hominem* examples you use of eccentric and unbalanced religious people are not

what most Christians would identify with. If you stuck to the philosophical debate about whether there was a God at all your book would be a lot shorter (and a lot less popular with your followers). It is your attack on the Christian teaching about God which provides you with the most entertaining smokescreen for your lack of substantial argument on whether God exists in the first place or not.

Which leads us on to NOMA (non-overlapping magisteria). This is the view that science and religion are two separate spheres and that science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. The most famous exponent of this view is Stephen J Gould who in his book *Rocks of Ages* neatly summarises this as "science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven". You don't like this. It appears that you are not very keen on Mr Gould either. And you certainly don't like theologians. If science cannot answer a question then why bother asking theologians – they are as much use as a chocolate teapot (of which more later). You write "I simply do not believe that Gould could possibly have meant much of what he wrote in *Rocks of Ages*". Are you really suggesting that he is so cowardly that he is prepared to lie in order to have some kind of reconciliation between religion and science? That is a serious charge. And one that is not immediately obvious from reading *Rocks of Ages*. I find it a fascinating book and a great deal of valuable insights within it. Take the following for example: "But I also include among my own scientific colleagues, some militant atheists whose blinkered concept of religion grasps none of the subtlety or diversity". He also points out that there are people "who have dedicated the bulk of their energy, and even their life's definition, to such aggressive advocacy at the extremes that they do not choose to engage in serious and respectful debate". It's no wonder you don't like him!

However I would like to take a middle position between your position and that of Mr Gould. He argues for complete separation of the two magisteria (science and religion). You argue for complete annihilation of the religious. I would suggest that there are two magisteria, science and religion but that they actually do overlap. However not totally. There are things that science

cannot and possibly never will be able to prove, and there are things that religion does not comment on. Gould's example is correct – the Bible says nothing about the age of rocks and science can tell us nothing about the Rock of Ages – Jesus Christ. However there are places where the two link. For example if I claim a miracle and that someone has been healed from cancer, then science is able to judge whether the cancer has gone.

You tell us that the existence of God is a 'scientific hypothesis like any other'. And that if God so chose he could reveal himself. He has. And He will. You tell us that "even if God's existence is never proved or disproved with certainty one way or the other, available evidence and reasoning may yield an estimate of probability far from 50%". Really? Why such a confident assertion? Anyway science has moved on since you made that unqualified and unsupported assertion. *The Times* reported (Nov 20th 2006) that the actual figure was well over 50%.

The mathematical probability of God's existence is just over 62 per cent. So says a German science magazine. P.M. tried to settle the issue by using mathematical formulae devised to determine plausibility and probability. Researchers started with the hypothesis "God exists", then tried to analyse the evidence in favour or against the hypothesis in five areas: creation, evolution, good, evil and religious experiences. The scientists applied the formulae to calculate how statistically probable different answers were to questions such as "How probable is it that the evolution of life took place without God?", and "How probable is it that God created the Universe?" Their conclusion will be cheering to many, although not, perhaps, Richard Dawkins.

Hoisted by your own petard.

By the way I am fascinated that you think that there is something to be said for treating Buddhism, not as a religion but as an ethical or philosophy of life. Would you accept then the philosophy that says that handicapped people are born that way because they were bad in a previous life and they are just getting their karma?

Now we move on to the 'Great Prayer Experiment'. This is a complete Red Herring. By definition the

God of the Bible is not mechanical and prayer is to him as a person. It is only if you accept the slot machine view of prayer (put your prayer in and out will come the answer you want) that any such experiment could be conducted. Given that the Bible does not teach that God is a divine slot machine who answers our prayers mechanically the whole experiment is a nonsense. So I am left once again with asking why you even mentioned it?

Speaking of which, what do the position of atheists in the US and your dislike of evolutionary appeasers like Michael Ruse have to do with the God Hypothesis? Do you not think such in-house debates in the Atheist church should be conducted – well, in house? Or am I right in thinking that your book is actually written as a polemical tract for atheists, a rallying call to political action, rather than a serious discussion about the existence of God? Hence the question in the midst of a chapter meant to be discussing the God Hypothesis, “What might American atheists achieve if they organised themselves properly?” (p.44).

Before we leave this depressing chapter we have to deal with another tired old argument (put out in almost every atheist forum). When it is pointed out that an atheist cannot disprove God, the standard text book response is now ‘yes – no more than we can disprove the Celestial Tea Pot god, the tooth fairy or The Flying Spaghetti Monster’ (I loved the notion of a schism occurring resulting in the Reformed Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster!). I do find it hard to believe that you seriously think that the evidence for the God of the Bible is on the same level as the tooth fairy. You have not for example written a book on the tooth fairy delusion. The evidence for God is on a completely different level. I suspect you know that, but again in your rhetorical style the sound bite put down works so much better. Let me put it another way – if the only evidence that existed for Jesus Christ was the same that exists for the Flying Spaghetti Monster then I and millions of others would not believe in him. So about dealing with the evidence that we assert and staying away from an argument which only states what your presupposition is – that there is no God? Hopefully the next chapter will begin to make your case.

And finally something on which we can agree - “A universe in which we are alone except for other slowly evolved intelligences is a very different universe from one with an original guiding agent whose intelligent design is responsible for its very existence”. I live in a universe created by a personal God, the God of mercy, logic, justice, goodness, truth, beauty and love. The God whose purposes and intentions are good. You live in a universe which appeared from nowhere, is going nowhere and means nothing. Perhaps in the next chapter you will give us some reason for this soulless, cold and depressing belief. I can't wait.

Yours etc

David

Read Part 5.

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