



## The Dawkins Letters - 7. The Roots and Evil of Religion

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Dear Dr Dawkins,

There is an English nursery rhyme – The Grand Old Duke of York. You know how it goes:

*The Grand Old Duke of York  
He had ten thousand men;  
He marched them up to the top of the hill;  
And he marched them down again.*

I kind of feel that there is where we have now arrived. You have lead us up to the top of the hill to prove why there is no God. Having in my opinion failed, you now in the rest of your book, march us back down again, having a swipe at your favourite religious targets on the way. Chapter five on the roots of religion is your attempt to answer why religion is so prevalent in every society throughout the world. "Though the details differ across the world, no known culture lacks some version of the time-consuming, wealth-consuming, hostility-provoking rituals, the anti-factual counter productive fantasies of religion". Chapter eight follows up on the title of your Channel Four TV series *The Root of all Evil?* I find your analysis in these two chapters hard to respond to because they depend upon the failed thesis that God has been proven not to exist, and

because your treatment of religion is imbalanced, distorted and reflective not so much of objective analysis but rather your own subjective anti-God feelings.

There have been numerous attempts to explain why religion is so prevalent. Some neuroscientists have argued that there is a 'god centre' in the brain; some psychiatrists argue for the placebo effect of religion whereby people are comforted and have their stress reduced; Marxists argue for the view that religion is a tool of the ruling class to subjugate their people and Freudians will argue that religion is part of the same irrational mechanism in the brain that makes us fall in love. That latter point reminds me of studying, as a student at the University of Edinburgh, E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in which he explains away the Methodist revival by suggesting it was an expression of repressed sexuality. Even then I found it a forced and somewhat amusing explanation.

Your own preference is to suggest that religion is actually a by-product of something else and that like everything else it can be explained by evolution. You argue that religion is a misfiring by-product of natural selection. Somehow we have developed a survival mechanism which means that we tend to be obedient to our ancestors. Children naturally have trusting obedience which, whilst it is good for survival, makes them very gullible to 'mind viruses' such as religion. This is where another of your pet theories comes to the fore – the notion of memes. This is an attempt to link Darwinian evolution with the development of ideas. As regards religion it means as McGrath points out "people do not believe in God because they have given long and careful thought to the matter; they do so because they have been infected by a powerful meme". But this idea falls down on at least three levels. Firstly, there is no empirical evidence of such a theory – this is once again a 'science of the gaps' just making things up as you go along in order to fit everything into your all encompassing evolutionary theory. Secondly, if it were true then your own ideas, including Darwinian evolution, would be considered memes as well. Thirdly, as Simon Conway Morris, Professor of Evolutionary Paleobiology at the University of Cambridge, points out "Memes are trivial, to be banished by simple mental exercises. In any wider context, they are hopelessly, if not

hilariously, simplistic". And I would go way beyond that. They are dangerous. If you regard religion as a virus what should be done with a virus? It should be eradicated.

Which leads me to jump to chapter eight – 'What's wrong with religion?' You state that you do not like confrontation and that you 'regularly refuse invitations to take part in formal debates'. I'm afraid this will not wash. Your book is highly confrontational. The fact that you are not prepared to debate is I suspect more to do with the fact that you prefer to be confrontational about people who are not present. You surround yourself with those who agree with you before being aggressive about those who do not. In fact you set up debates and this chapter with a basic myth/meme that is a largely influential one in our culture today. It is the view that religion is essentially something evil and that atheism by contrast is good. Whilst it would only be a fool who denies the fact that some aspects of religion and some religious people have caused a great deal of harm in the world, it is equally foolish to make the kind of irresponsible sweeping statements that you do here – in order to foster the myth that religion is in essence harmful. This is an atheist half-truth which is widely accepted. *The Guardian* newspaper in December 2006 carried a survey of British people which made clear that a majority of people thought religion was harmful and divisive. Of course all religions were lumped together as one. It is the equivalent of the Bush doctrine of the axis of evil – the world is divided into the good guys and the bad guys. You share that simplistic fundamentalist view.

But you don't like being called a fundamentalist. A fundamentalist is someone by your definition who believes 'in a holy book'. A fundamentalist would never change their mind – "we believe in evolution because the evidence supports it, and we would abandon it overnight if new evidence arose to disprove it. No real fundamentalist would ever say anything like that". Really? I believe that the Bible is true. I believe that Jesus rose from the dead. I believe that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. I believe that all human beings are created equally in his image. And I would abandon these beliefs tomorrow if new evidence arose to disprove them. So that makes us even?

I think there are several reasons you are called a

fundamentalist. Firstly, you are passionate about what you believe. Anyone who is passionate about what they believe is often labelled a fundamentalist. Now of course you argue that your hostility that you 'occasionally voice towards religion is limited to words'. You are not going to bomb anyone or behead anyone or fly planes into skyscrapers. But on page 318 you directly contradict yourself when commenting on the old adage "Stick and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me". You declare "the adage is true as long as you don't really believe the words". What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If you are concerned about the impact that words used by religious people may have then you must apply the same criteria to yourself. When you go around describing religion as evil and as a virus you should not be surprised if there are those who hear your words and put them into practice in a way you would not like. Nice middle class professors from Oxford do not kill (unless you watch Inspector Morse) but then neither did nice middle class Professors from Nuremberg in the 1930s. Atheists don't bomb or burn? Really? Try telling that to the members of the 77 churches in Norway which were burnt down when some over zealous young atheists took on board the teaching about how dangerous and evil religion was.

*I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, petty – I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind... (F. W. Nietzsche)*

One atheist writer in advocating attacks on those who believe in the Judaeo-Christian God writes:

*Any intelligent AntiChrist methodology at that point will involve a consolidation of strength, public education in the ways of science and logic for our individual members, and actions taken against the remaining believers. The new society must first stabilize itself and come to a point of economic self-sufficiency and growth in social, intellectual, economic, technological and cultural areas. Once this is achieved, the executions of diehard Christians and Jews should bother no one. (Taken from the Church Arson website)*

Of course it would be entirely wrong to take the

actions and words of a handful of atheist extremists as being indicative of atheists in general (just as it is wrong of you to take the actions and words of a handful of 'Christian' extremists as indicative of Christians) but please bear in mind that your vehemence and language can have consequences that are as serious as the consequences of the vehemence and language of some 'religious' fundamentalists.

Secondly, you do not debate – which gives the impression that you know you are right and that there is nothing really to discuss. It also reinforces the impression that you operate within a very closed world view. In this sense your website has more fundamentalist believers than many religious ones I know. Another sense in which you can be described as fundamentalist is the way that you attack anyone who dares to disagree with you and how you gleefully jump upon books that support your point of view. An example of this is when you hammer Mother Teresa as a woman with 'cock-eyed judgement' not worthy of a Nobel Prize and 'sanctimoniously hypocritical' on the basis of one hostile book you read. Thirdly, you caricature, mock and misrepresent those who disagree with you. This is easy to do when you do not debate with them but it is not fair. As C. S. Lewis points out: "Such people put up a version of Christianity suitable for a child of six and make that the object of their attack".

Chapter eight for example is full of the worst examples of this kind of 'reasoning'. You cite the case of Abdul Rahman who was sentenced to death in the modern liberated Afghanistan we have set up and that our soldiers are currently dying to defend, because he converted to Christianity. Then you equate the Afghan Taliban with 'the American Taliban'. This is disingenuous and dishonest. Whilst there are many aspects of the association between right wing politics and some evangelicalism in the US which I cannot stand, it is clearly wrong to compare them with the Taliban in Afghanistan. No-one (even from the extremes) is calling for the State to execute those who convert to another religion, no-one is arguing for women to be banned from education or that all American women should be covered up. To the ignorant the link between the Taliban and Christianity is a neat tie up and a further justification for their opposition to Christianity. But that is only to the ignorant. You are not ignorant

and you know this.

Another example you use of extremism is Pastor Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church of 'God Hates Fags' infamy. "It is easy to write Fred Phelps off as a nut, but he has plenty support from people and their money". You even cite as evidence for this the fact that since 1991 he has been able to organise one demonstration every four days. Is the fact that one self-publicising head-banger manages to organise a handful of people every four days to carry obnoxious banners proof that religion is dangerous? Are you really blaming Mother Teresa, the Pope, Billy Graham, one thousand million Christians throughout the world and even yours truly for every lunatic who expresses their mental and emotional imbalance in religious terms? That is as rational as my suggesting that because Dr Josef Mengele was a scientist, all scientists are to blame and therefore science should be banned. The point is simply that anyone could produce a list of fringe mentally imbalanced people on any subject. That does not invalidate the subject.

You have a good reason for equating Christianity with the unbalanced fringe. It suits your purposes to agree with them as to what Christianity is. That's why you interview extremists. You set up straw men and then it makes you look so much more reasonable. But that is the tactic of the fundamentalist who is out to prove that he alone has the truth, rather than the scholar or the seeker after what the truth is. A number of years ago I went to a meeting where the speaker was a theonomist, the late Greg Bahnsen. 95% of what he said was excellent but then he made a quantum leap trying to prove that the Old Testament Mosaic civil code, including the punishments, should be applied by the State today. I, like most of the Christians there, was horrified at his misapplication of the Bible. But there were a group of people there who supported him and agreed with his interpretation of the Bible – the people from the Secular Humanist society. You need religious extremists to prove your point and they need you. It's a kind of mutual fundamentalist admiration society where both of you justify your extremism by citing the opposition. A plague on both your houses.

You know this so you attempt to justify the link by pointing out that "even mild and moderate religion

helps to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes". (Do you think that it would be fair of me to point out that even mild and moderate anti-religious rhetoric helps to provide the climate of hatred and certainty in which extremism naturally flourishes?). Again you can only get away with this by using your own definition of faith and refusing to acknowledge the good that is done by religious people because of their religion. You define faith as believing something without evidence – a definition which is just something that you have made up in your own head and has nothing to do with Christianity. My faith is based on evidence. The minute you disprove that evidence I will change my faith. But although you lump together all faiths and all faith as the same, for polemical and political reasons, you are actually creating a grave danger. Take the question of Christianity and Islam. It suits you to lump them both together (including the extremists). Patrick Sookhedo's book *The Myth of Moderate Islam* which you cite is an excellent discussion of the differences between Christian theology and Islamic theology. The danger is that in your equating Christianity and Islam (because of the wilful blindness caused by your hatred of religion *per se*) you will end up handing Islam a victory – at least in Europe. Secularism cannot handle nor deal with Islam – it does not have the spiritual, moral nor intellectual fibre to do so. If you destroy Christianity (which is your aim) then you will leave a spiritual and moral vacuum in Western Europe which will either be filled by a new fascism or Islam. Then you will find out for real the fact that all religions are not the same.

Before finishing let's return to the question of where religion comes from? Why are people so religious? As you point out evolutionary psychologist Paul Bloom tells us that we are naturally dualists believing that there is a difference between mind and matter. Bloom even suggests that we are innately predisposed to be creationists. Dorothy Kelman points out that children are intuitive theists. I would actually agree with this and respectively suggest that this evidence contradicts another atheist myth – that people are only religious because they have been brainwashed as children. In actual fact the default positions for humans is to be religious. It takes the 'education' of secularists to get them to a 'higher consciousness' (in other words to disbelieve what they would naturally believe). Can I make a

tentative suggestion to you? That the reason that human beings worship is that there is someone to worship? That the reason we have a sense of God (as opposed to other animals – when did you last see rabbits holding a prayer meeting or cows a worship service?) is because God has given us that sense? That the reason we are spiritual is because we have a spirit? As C. S. Lewis argues

*Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.*

You cite the following in your attack upon those of us who are deluded by our belief in God - "Self deception is hiding the truth from the conscious mind the better to hide it from others". "There is a tendency for humans consciously to see what they wish to see". Perhaps the boot is on the other foot. What if there is an Atheist Delusion – where we delude ourselves that our natural God consciousness within is not real? That the evidence is not really evidence at all? And that God does therefore not exist? Would not the Psalmist's description be right? "The Fool has said in his heart, there is no God" (Psalm 14 v. 1).

Yours etc

David

Read Part 8.

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