



The Dawkins Letters - 9. The Good Book and the Moral Zeitgeist

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Dear Dr Dawkins,

In chapter three you have already had a go at the Bible but now you really stick the boot in. The belief in the Bible as instruction or moral example:

...encourages a system of morals which any civilised modern person, whether religious or not, would find – I can put it no more gently – obnoxious.

Those who wish to base their morality literally on the Bible have either not read it or not understood it, as Bishop John Shelby Spong, in The Sins of Scripture, rightly observed.

I have studied the Bible for over 25 years. For 20 of those it has been my job to do so. I have tried to do so with an open mind and a desire to know what it really says. At times it has puzzled me, caused me to question and has presented me with seemingly insurmountable difficulties. I hope that you would grant me as a professional in this field of study, the same respect I grant you as a biologist. Your understanding of scripture is extreme in its condemnation and seems governed more by your atheism than it is by any knowledge or understanding of the text. Yet you prejudge the

whole issue at the beginning of this chapter by again implying that those who do not accept your point of view are not civilised, moral or intelligent enough to understand the Bible. You will forgive me saying this but this is yet again another one of those 'Emperor has no clothes' moments. The tailors in that story tell people that only those who are intelligent enough will see the 'invisible' clothes. Likewise you state that only those who see the Bible as immoral are intelligent and moral. There is almost nothing I can say to people with such presuppositions but let me at least try to help those who are inclined to accept at face value your distorted and sour grape picking version of the Bible.

In your attack on the Bible you mention Noah's ark, Pat Robertson, New Orleans, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Levites concubine in Judges, Abraham lying, the almost sacrifice of Isaac, Jephthah's daughter, the Golden Calf, Moses attacking the Midianites, all in the Old Testament. In the New your objections seem to be that Jesus was rude to his mother and had dodgy family values, and the doctrine of the atonement. In addition to this you try to dismiss the positive teachings in the Bible of 'do not kill' and 'love your neighbour' as actually racist, meaning 'do not kill Jews' and 'love only fellow Jews'. You go so far as to state that "Jesus would have turned over in his grave if he had known that Paul would be taking his plan to the pigs". It's all wonderful knock about stuff for your fans, equivalent to the kind of comedy that George Carlin, whom you cite, is famous for. However it is a long way from what the Bible actually says.

Firstly, anyone who reads the Bible in its context cannot take seriously the suggestion that Jesus only came for the Jews and that love your neighbour, only meant the Jews. The very parable that Jesus told to illustrate that truth was one which involved a non-Jew. Your rewriting and rereading of these verses is out of context, dishonest and deceitful special pleading which says a whole lot more about your prejudgements than it does about the Bible. You base much of your thinking here on what you call a 'remarkable paper' by John Hartung, an associate professor of anaesthesiology and anthropologist. This paper entitled 'Love Thy Neighbor: The Evolution of In-Group Morality,' includes an acknowledgement of you and your wife and more disturbingly a

sympathetic review of Kevin MacDonald's *A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy*. It is all getting disturbingly close to the 'evolutionary' view of religion and Judaism that the Nazi academics and scientists taught. And it is a million miles away from what the Bible actually says.

Secondly, Pat Robertson, New Orleans and the various twisted theologies of some exponents of Christianity have nothing to do with the teachings of the Scriptures which should be judged on their own merits.

Thirdly, you need to learn the basic principles of reading the Bible. You must always read it in context – that includes historical, literary, theological and biblical context. To read out of context is to misread. Then you must recognise that much of the Bible is descriptive rather than prescriptive. In other words it is telling us what went on rather than what should have happened. In fact this is one of the things that helped convince me of the truth of the Bible. Most of the main characters, even the heroes, come out quite badly. They are painted warts and all. If this was myth why would someone write about such things as David committing murder and adultery, or Abraham lying about his wife?

Atheists are fond of arguing against what they consider to be 'literal' interpretations of the Bible. Like some fundamentalists you consider those who are not literalists as just cowards. But it really does depend what you mean by 'literal'. When I am asked if I read the Bible literally I can never answer it, because I need to know first of all what the questioner means. If he means do I take every word at its literal meaning then the answer is no, of course not. When Jesus said I am the vine, he did not mean that he was green and produced literal grapes. To read any literature in such a way, never mind such an extensive collection of books as the Bible, would be plain stupid and false to the book itself. The Bible has at least five different genres – prophecy, poetry, history, letter and law. On the other hand if by literal you mean 'at face value' then yes, I do read the Bible literally. You ask "by what criteria do you decide which passages are symbolic, which literal?". The answer – context, genre and common sense. I really do not expect to be dressed in white and playing a harp in heaven (aka the Book

of Revelation) but I have no doubt that Jesus literally rose from the dead. It was not symbolic of anything, it was written not as poetry but as verifiable history, and it is a fact that is repeated several times. It is quite clear what the Bible means when it speaks about the resurrection. Mind you if you seriously believe that when Jesus taught the Old Testament refrain 'love your neighbour', he meant only Jews, then I guess you can make the Bible say whatever you do or do not want it to say!

One important principle is that of progressive revelation. This is the idea that the Bible, written over a period of more than 1000 years progressively reveals God to us. Little by little the curtain is opened and the light comes in. Therefore some aspects of earlier revelation are superseded by the New Testament.

Another significant principle is one that you state yourself when trying to defend the horrific statements of such enlightened and liberal atheists as H. G. Wells and Thomas Huxley. The latter declared: "No rational man, cognizant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the white man." Yet in order to defend them you declare: "It is a commonplace that good historians don't judge statements from past times by the standards of their own". Perhaps that would be a good motto for you to adopt to some parts of the Bible as well.

I believe the Bible is the Word of God; as such it is true, without error and communicates all that God wants it to. That does not mean it is without problems but I would like to suggest that if you read it bearing in mind the basic principles above then 90% of the problems you cite will disappear. However that leaves the other 10%. It would be foolish to deny that there are major difficulties within the Bible. There are parts of it that make me feel distinctly uncomfortable and that I struggle with. But who am I to sit in judgement upon the Bible? Not long after becoming a Christian there were parts in the Bible that greatly disturbed me. I read a book which purported to deal with most of those difficulties; however it did not help much. But I made a decision that it was stupid and arrogant of me as a young Christian to think that I alone could understand the Bible and attempt to sit in judgement upon it. It was not that it was wrong to question but rather that I had to

be patient, humble and thoughtful. After more than 25 years studying it I have come more and more to appreciate the truth, wisdom, beauty and relevance of the Bible. This is not because I have to, or I am paid to – in many ways it would have been so much easier to give in and to go with the flow, it would certainly have made for an easier life. But I could not in all intellectual honesty give up. As a result I have found the Bible to be more reliable and relevant than anything. I find it amazing, when I teach even parts that seem more obscure and difficult, that it addresses the needs, desires and lives of ordinary people living in the 21st century. I would venture a guess that many of the ‘atheist’ converts from religion are those who have never really drunk deep from the well of Scripture. For me, in the words of B.B. King ‘the thrill has not gone’!

You clearly have difficulty with the atonement as well. “I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent. We should also dismiss it as barking mad, but for its ubiquitous familiarity which has dulled our objectivity. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them?” Whilst I am grateful that you at least recognise, unlike some professing Christians, that the atonement is the central doctrine of Christianity, it is sad that you are obviously missing out on the best part of the whole Bible. The cross has always been a stumbling block both for the religious and those who consider themselves to be wise. Polly Toynbee, the *Guardian* columnist, was scathing about this when she reviewed *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. She vehemently declared that she did not need anyone to die for her sins. For most people the notion that we have done anything so bad as to deserve death is repellent. But that is because we do not have an adequate understanding of evil and sin. And we have no real awareness of the depths of depravity in our own hearts. Once you grasp that then the doctrine of atonement – the idea that the Son of God died in my place and paid the price for my sin – is a notion that is wonderful. It’s the best part of the whole Bible. What would be repellent is if Rousseau’s reputed last words were true; he claimed that God would forgive him because “c’est son metier” (that’s his job). So no matter what we do or how we behave then God will forgive us. Such cheap forgiveness is not just nor biblical.

The most interesting and disturbing part of this chapter is the section headed The Moral Zeitgeist. Here you are expounding a fairly common belief that atheists hold. That things are getting better all the time. Humanity is evolving from a primitive morality to a generally improved moral consensus. This of course is highly questionable and the evidence you offer for such chronological (and indeed Western) snobbery is scanty. Is it really the case that the Moral Zeitgeist is improving in Britain and the US? Are women really being treated better? Has racism and prejudice been done away with? Is our current sex-obsessed, materialistic and shallow society better than it was one hundred years ago? That is not immediately self-evident! I suspect that only a nice middle-class Western moralist could be so confident and glib about the greatly improving moral situation with humanity. I had thought that such liberal utopianism had received a mortal blow after the First World War and was killed off after the Second. But apparently not. You are once again teaching that the human race is evolving to moral perfection and that the only thing that is preventing us from realising this is the evil of religion.

You cite as examples of the improved moral Zeitgeist increased female suffrage and a change in attitude to race. You mention that even Washington, Jefferson and other ‘men of the Enlightenment’ held slaves (curious that you are prepared to excuse this practice in these men because it was 250 years ago but you condemn it in the Old Testament 2000 years ago). Most shocking of all you point out that H. G. Wells in his *New Republic* in answering the question as to how the New Republic would deal with the ‘inferior races’ such as the black, the yellow man, etc. stated, “Well, the world is a world, and not a charitable institution, and I take it they will have to go”. He made it quite clear what he meant – the extermination of inferior races. You state that this position would now be unacceptable in society and more astonishingly you claim that this is because of “improved education and in particular, the increased understanding that each of us shares a common humanity with members of other races and with the other sex – both deeply unbiblical ideas that come from biological science, especially evolution”. When I read that I had to stop and take a deep breath. Did he really write

that? Does he really have the audacity to think that he can get away with such a big lie?! The Bible taught a long time ago (Genesis 1) that both men and women were made in the image of God. The Bible also taught that all human beings, of whatever race were descendants of Adam and that all were made in the image of God. To describe these ideas as unbiblical when they are foundational to the Bible is bad enough. But then to suggest that it is evolution which has lead us away from the evils of Wells *et al* is breathtaking. The Church was teaching at the end of the 19th century that all human beings were made in the image of God. Last year I visited a Black University in South Africa where one of the photos on the wall was of a Black South African who had come to study in Glasgow and returned as an ordained Presbyterian minister in the 19th century. It was not the Church nor the Bible that was teaching that 'inferior races' should be destroyed. In fact you cite Huxley's racism (*Emancipation – Black and White* – published in 1865) as typical of the Zeitgeist of the time. Yet Huxley was arguing against the Zeitgeist. Society, lead primarily by Christian activists and thinkers working on biblical principles, had come to the conclusion that slavery was wrong. For example 20 years before Huxley in the 1840s my own church, St Peters, was holding anti-slavery meetings and acting as a focus for the anti-slavery movement. Huxley was arguing that this biblical morality was unscientific. He believed what he believed not because of the Zeitgeist but because of his science. It was such social Darwinistic evolutionary thinking which fed the manic utopianism of Wells and others. I am grateful that the Zeitgeist of atheistic evolutionary biologists has improved in the 20th century but please do not put us all in the same boat. Which brings me on nicely to the six pages you devote to Stalin and Hitler.

I can understand why Atheists want to dissociate themselves from the like of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot. After all they were the leaders of the only officially atheistic states so far and, shall we say, their human rights record was not exactly great. The only argument I have heard atheists use is that well really Stalin was not an atheist because he behaved unreasonably and unreasonable people cannot be atheists. It's the ultimate in circular arguments and there is no point in trying to break into the circle.

However Hitler is different. You want to cite Hitler as a Christian, although even you know that is going a bit far. As I already indicated this is one subject that I have studied extensively. The basic facts are as follows – Hitler was brought up as a Catholic; when he came to power he did so in a situation where the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church were still significant social forces within German society; he was quite happy to use the Christian churches and Christian symbols when he could; ironically it was those who taught as you do that religion should be privatised and that the Church should stay out of politics who provided the biggest reason for non-opposition to Hitler (thankfully men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others were prepared to ignore that advice and do what they could to resist evil). If we really want to know what Hitler thought then his actions and above all his private words are the most compelling evidence. And I am grateful to you for citing Hitler's *Table Talk* which tells us conclusively what Hitler thought about Christianity: "The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity". Even more interesting is the following from Traudl Junge, Hitler's personal secretary:

Sometimes we also had interesting discussions about the church and the development of the human race. Perhaps it's going too far to call them discussions, because he would begin explaining his ideas when some question or remark from one of us had set them off, and we just listened. He was not a member of any church, and thought the Christian religions were outdated, hypocritical institutions that lured people into them. The laws of nature were his religion. He could reconcile his dogma of violence better with nature than with the Christian doctrine of loving your neighbour and your enemy. 'Science isn't yet clear about the origins of humanity,' he once said. 'We are probably the highest stage of development of some mammal which developed from reptiles and moved on to human beings, perhaps by way of the apes. We are a part of creation and children of nature, and the same laws apply to us as to all living creatures. And in nature the law of the struggle for survival has reigned from the first. Everything incapable of life, everything weak is eliminated. Only mankind and above all the church have made it their aim to keep alive the weak, those unfit to live, and people of an inferior

kind.' (Until the Final Hour, p.108)

That just about says it all.

You ask at the end of this chapter "Why would someone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief?" I assume by that you mean an absence of belief in God. The answer to your question is twofold. Firstly, it could be that the reason people go to war is the absence of belief. If like Stalin or Hitler, you believe that there is no God to answer to, 'that might is right' and that power comes at the end of a gun, then you are much more likely to indulge your selfish genes and go to war to get what you want. The second answer to your question is in the quote above. Hitler clearly did not go to war because he believed in God or because he wanted to spread Christianity. He hated Christianity. On the other hand he did believe that religion was a virus (where have I heard that one before) and that the Jews especially were vermin who should be eradicated in order to better preserve the species. It was all perfectly logical, darwinian and godless. Perhaps the atheist zeitgeist has moved on. But meanwhile until it is proven otherwise, I would prefer to stick with the tried and tested morality of the Bible.

Yours etc

David

Read Part 10.

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