



The Root of all Evil? - The problem with Richard Dawkin's faith - part 2

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Presenter: Richard Dawkins **Broadcaster:**
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Richard Dawkins' second programme in his two-part series *The Root of All Evil?* began with some very clear assertions: 'Faith,' he said, 'acts like a virus that infects the young.' He elaborated on this by speaking over pictures of young people attending religious schools, and drawing the parallel with gene pools that become isolated and therefore develop separately. So, he argued, children become associated with the faith of their parents and are not encouraged to question or seek truth for themselves. I watched this programme with my seventeen-year-old son who found that he could not identify with that caricature of life within a family of faith. He had always been encouraged to question, to investigate and to think for himself. But Dawkins asserted that it is natural for children to simply accept the things that they are told by their parents so that they will survive. Thus, he argued, the virus of faith reproduces itself and spreads.

This is familiar territory for anyone who has followed Dawkins' writing over the years. I first came across his concept of religion as a virus through the British Humanist Association, back in the early 1990s when they published his Voltaire lecture entitled 'Viruses of the mind', since republished in *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*[1] and also available free on the Internet.[2] In this lecture he drew a particular analogy between the 'religion virus' and biological

and computer viruses. He then described what he saw as the seven typical symptoms of someone infected by this virus. The first of these he has elaborated at some length since then. This was that 'the patient typically finds himself impelled by some deep, inner conviction that something is true, or right, or virtuous: a conviction that doesn't seem to owe anything to evidence or reason.' It was this particular 'symptom of the virus' that he then referred to again in this programme. He talked of 'irrational faith' and reiterated his oft-quoted view that religious people believe *in spite of* rather than *because of* the evidence.

But was it then significant that he didn't expand that position further? Where were the rest of his familiar arguments about the spread of this virus? Where were his further assertions about the so-called 'epidemiology of the spread of faith'? He didn't seek to justify his position. Instead he reverted to the assertions of his first programme – that the morality of Christian (and other) belief is actually immoral. Except this time, instead of presenting a carefully selected and unrepresentative set of believers, he presented a carefully selected and unrepresentative set of quotations from the Bible.

First, he read from Deuteronomy 13 and Numbers 31, with their specific commands to destroy those who would lead the Israelites into the practices of the surrounding nations. These are passages that all Christians have to wrestle with at some time, precisely because they appear to be inconsistent with the Bible's picture of a God of love. But when we look at the appalling practices of the nations around them, we can see that God is, in fact, demonstrating his love by seeking to protect people from these. It is ironic that, in between these two readings, Dawkins referred to Abraham's willingness to obey God by sacrificing his son. But God stops him because he does not want child sacrifice. And yet that is precisely one of the practices that were carried out by the people around the Israelites, and that God seeks to stop by his strict command![3]

Next, Dawkins told the story recorded in Judges 19 of the man who offers his daughter and a concubine to a group of men who are threatening to rape a man. He presented this as if it is something that God commands us all to do. But surely, even he must recognise the difference

between recording something terrible that happened and commanding people to do it.

For a moment he had something nice to say about the Bible, when he told us that Jesus was 'a huge improvement'. But then, he said, it all went wrong with Paul and his 'sado-masochistic doctrine of atonement for original sin.' Dawkins ignores the fact that Jesus himself taught that he had come to die for us, and simply asks the question, 'If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them?' In that one question (to which he doesn't seem to expect or want an answer) he apparently demonstrates an ignorance of the basic biblical message that sin matters; the wrong things that we do are really significant and there is a consequence. If God just let us off, then nothing would ever really matter again. That is why the life and teaching of Jesus is so significant – because he said that he came to take the consequence of sin on himself.

Dawkins summed up his quick tour of carefully selected and misrepresented Bible verses with the words 'barking mad'. Of course, as an individual he is entitled to his view. But as Professor of the Public Understanding of Science we might expect him to research and present the data accurately, and give a more reasoned and reasonable assessment of it.

He then returned to his assertion that religion is a virus ('a parasite') that has infected our minds. With a background of chimps, he presented the view that religion has derived from the evolutionary mechanism that naturally selects co-operation amongst the more developed organisms. But, as we have noted already, he did little to seek to substantiate his virus theory. Perhaps many would have hoped that he would have advanced the arguments of Ludwig Feuerbach or Sigmund Freud. Feuerbach, the nineteenth century Bavarian philosopher sought to argue that humans have created God in their own image, and that religion is best understood in terms of the psychological processes involved in someone coming to faith.[4] More specifically, Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, sought to argue that religion is a form of obsessional neurosis.[5] And since then, Dawkins has sought to argue that religion is a virus of the mind that is passed on from generation to generation. But perhaps he is not so keen to advance what he

used to call the epidemiology of the spread of faith. Maybe he has taken to heart the work of people like social psychologist Michael Argyle who argued in his classic paper *Seven Psychological Roots of Religion*[6] that showing the psychological process by which people came to religious belief, or any other belief for that matter, can tell us nothing about the truth or falsity of that belief. As Argyle put it: 'It does not follow that because a belief has psychological roots it is therefore false.'

If he wasn't going to express his previous views on the epidemiology of the religion virus, perhaps he would substantiate his view of the lack of evidence for the truth claims of Christian faith. Perhaps he would present evidence that the fundamental truth claims of Christian faith (or any other faith for that matter) are mere assertions, unsupported by any evidence. But he didn't do that either. Instead, he simply reiterated his own assertions of the previous week and said that religion is evil and immoral. In watching this, any young philosophy student – my son included – would soon notice the weakness of his argument. As Madeline Bunting said recently in the *Guardian*: 'Behind unsubstantiated assertions, sweeping generalisations and random anecdotal evidence, there's the unmistakable whiff of panic.'[7]

[1] *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*, ed. Bo Dahlbom Blackwell, 1993

[2] See for example www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Dawkins/viruses-of-the-mind.html

[3] For more on this, see David Couchman, 'God and the Canaanites'

[4] Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des*

Christentums, 1841

[5] Sigmund Freud, *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*, 1907

[6] *Theology*, 1964, vol. 67, no. 530 pp. 1-7

[7] Madeleine Bunting, 'No wonder atheists are angry: they seem ready to believe anything', *The Guardian*, 7 January 2006

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