

DAWKINS, THEOLOGY AND GOD

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Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* has been a phenomenon. Taking even its author by surprise, it has outstripped all expectations and has been a runaway best-seller for many months. Ten years ago it was hardly conceivable that a book on religion would achieve such wide coverage. It only shows how much the world has changed in the last decade.

It's worth asking at the outset why Dawkins' book has been so successful. There are a number of possible reasons. First is the 9/11 effect. Ever since the planes crashed into the towers on that dreadful day, and it became obvious that this was the work of religious extremists, God and religion have been very public subjects of discussion. Since then, attacks in Madrid, London, Bali, Iraq and other places all over the world have drawn attention to the dangerous phenomenon of religious extremism. We are only too aware that belief in God can make people do all kinds of violent and destructive things and therefore many people are rightly concerned and afraid of the potentially destructive effects of faith within the modern world.

We might think that this suspicion and anger would be directed primarily against extremist Islam, which the media usually portrays as the main origin of religious violence today. However, Christianity has not escaped censure either. Although today it is hard to find many examples of violent Christian extremism, the history of the Christian church is far from unblemished and critics only need to point to the Crusades of the Middle Ages, Medieval anti-Semitism and some more outlandish statements from the weird fringes of Christianity today to lump the Christians in with Al-Qaeda as dangerous fanatics. In that context, a book arguing vehemently against the existence of God and for the harmful effects of religion is bound to have a wide hearing and generate a high level of interest.

The second factor is Dawkins' own reputation. He is of course the Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University and such a prestigious academic position gives his arguments a certain degree of weight that they would not have if they came from someone with a less prestigious post. Here is a serious scientist who appears to know what he is talking about when he writes about the progress made by science and how it has apparently eclipsed religion in explaining the world. This is no casual journalist – it is a voice to be taken seriously.

The third factor is the skill of Dawkins' own writing. In previous works such as *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker* he has shown himself to be one of the contemporary world's most effective interpreters of science to an unscientific readership. He has a remarkable ability to explain complex scientific matters to those who are not versed in such things that outstrips most of his contemporaries.

Perhaps one of the surprising things about Dawkins' book is that its success is in fact founded more upon its rhetoric than its argument. As we shall see, a number of Dawkins' arguments are very questionable and at certain points extremely weak. Yet one thing cannot be disputed and that is the subtle persuasiveness of his prose. He writes in a flowing, articulate and clever way so that as you read his chapters the very tone of the writing and the skill of the presentation carry the reader along until you are (almost) convinced. It is perhaps slightly ironic that an author and a book which prides itself so strongly on logic and argument in fact depends so much upon rhetoric and persuasion. It is worth reading one of his chapters with an eye to the way the

language works, the subtle use of ridicule, the familiar colloquial banter with his reader, and then trying to separate out those from the arguments themselves to see what a brilliant communicator he is. The language quickly creates a cast of goodies and baddies with carefully placed adjectives and pejorative language ('Christian zealots', 'Bible-believing fundamentalists', 'decent liberals', 'thoughtful sceptics' etc.)

However in this short response I want to look at some of the key arguments Dawkins makes and suggest how a Christian might answer them. Many people will have read Dawkins and be a little puzzled as to how he might be answered from a Christian perspective. Others will not have read Dawkins but will have had conversations with friends who have and will perhaps have been troubled as to whether Dawkins' arguments really do spell the end of faith and the demise of God. Whether you have read Dawkins or not, this short piece aims to help you think through the strength of his arguments and perhaps question whether they are as compelling as they can sometimes initially seem.

1. No Sign of God?

One of Dawkins' key arguments is very simple; that there is simply no compelling evidence for the existence of God, especially when it comes to analysing God's supposed intervention in the world. If God answers prayer, performs miracles and the like, then we ought to be able to tell that he is doing such a thing - there simply should be more obvious evidence for Him.

Dawkins is impatient with the argument of Stephen Jay Gould that science and religion are 'Non-Overlapping Magisteria'. He does not find very convincing the idea that science and religion are dealing with two separate types of reality, and really have nothing to say to each other, that they are answering different questions and therefore are mutually exclusive. Gould argues that God is somehow so far beyond this world that science cannot analyse God and his dealings and therefore we should not expect to be able to discern God's hand within the world. Dawkins, however, argues that this does not make sense if religious people really do claim that God intervenes in answer to prayer or perform miracles.

So how might a Christian respond to this? In a sense Dawkins has a point. If God does intervene within the world on particular occasions which seem to transcend the normal operation of physical and biological processes then we might expect to be able to tell when he does so. However, Dawkins is by his own admission no theologian, and does not really appreciate a Christian view of miracles. It is bad theology as well as bad science to imagine a 'God of the gaps' where God is invoked to explain anything that science can't. This is because God is not a 'thing' within the world that causes other 'things' to happen according to the normal observable physical laws of nature. On a Christian understanding, miracles are not random interventions of God, like an secret visitor moving chess pieces on a board while the players are not looking. They are instead actions that seem to obey a different set of laws, or operate in another dimension of reality that is not specifically accessible to scientific analysis or study, and which shows up in odd events in our own world. As the Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen puts it, "In certain unusual situations such as creating a chosen people, revealing divine intentions in Jesus, and revealing the nature of the kingdom of God, higher laws come into play that give a different outcome than normal physical laws which concern different situations. The normal physical laws do not apply because we are in a domain that extends beyond their competence."

God usually achieves his purposes indirectly, through human agency. Particular people in the Bible or Christian history are normally the agents of miracles, whether Moses parting the Red Sea, Jesus raising the dead, or Christian saints performing healings. Christian theology says that God is both beyond this world (transcendent) and yet also operates within this world (immanent). If God is the creator of this physical world and yet occasionally acts within it, through ordinary (or perhaps extraordinary) people, according to a different order of things, then we would expect to see occasional events and experiences within our world which are hard to explain under natural terms. These would include what many people describe as religious experience, inexplicable healings in response to prayer and indeed countless incidents every day around the world which seem unlikely but which are attributed to the fact that someone prayed. None of these can ever be proved to be a direct intervention of God because they are immune to scientific proof - they don't obey the normal patterns of interaction between physical bodies observable by science. God is not a 'thing' within the world that causes other 'things' to move. However, such apparently inexplicable events give a sign of the Christian belief that one day God will bring about a new heaven and a new earth, where this different order of things will be apparent for all to see. Miracles for the Christian are not random, isolated acts of capricious divine choice, but they are signs of another reality. They are signs of the kingdom of God which one day will come.

Dawkins himself gives a tantalising hint of this towards the end of *The God Delusion*. In the final chapter, he draws attention to our very limited imagination, due to the particular way in which we have evolved. He writes 'our brains are not equipped to imagine what it would be like to be a neutrino passing through a wall in the vast interstices of which that wall really consists, nor can our understanding cope with what happens when things move close to the speed of light.'... 'Evolution in middle worlds ill-equipped us to handle very improbable events but in the vastness of astronomical space or geological time, events that seem impossible in middle world turn out to be inevitable.' In other words, Dawkins hints that there could be a different order of things from this one. Might it be, for example, that the resurrected Jesus (who of course we are told appeared capable of walking through walls!) might be a picture of that future, who came into our world at a specific moment of history to reveal to us the new heaven and the new earth that one day God will bring about?

In short, if Dawkins is asking for cast-iron proof of miracles that meet all the requirements of scientific certainty then neither he nor anyone else will ever find them. But the reason is not that miracles do not happen, it is simply that they belong to another dimension of reality which is beyond our current capacity to discern. Miracles will always seem to us inexplicable events which are open to a number of different interpretations. The unbeliever will want to hold onto his faith that one day they will be explained in some naturalistic way. The Christian will see them as signs of a different order of things altogether: the Kingdom of God.

2. Bad Arguments for God?

Dawkins spends quite some time looking at the various arguments that have been used for the existence of God and trying to show that they simply do not work. He makes a decent fist of the point, however it is hamstrung by his lack of knowledge of the subtleties of Christian theology. This is one of the frustrating aspects of the book. It would be irritating for a biologist if I were to try to write a book about science in which I displayed my ignorance of the meaning of multicellularity or the behaviour of chromosomes. So you can imagine it is a little annoying to read Dawkins writing about a subject of which he is certainly no expert and not just a little uninformed.

For example, Dawkins tries to present some of the classic arguments for the existence of God such as Thomas Aquinas' proofs as 'supposed knock-down arguments to convince the skeptic that God exists.' However as many theologians have pointed out, Aquinas' arguments for the existence of God such as the Ontological Argument, the Teleological Argument and the Argument from Design were never meant to be hard and fast proofs to the non-believer to convince them that God exists. Aquinas presents them (as do most other mainstream Christian theologians) as confirmations of faith rather than proofs of it. In other words, for those who have a belief in God, they provide a rationale for showing how that belief makes sense. They show how believing in God interprets the rest of reality and how the world looks from the standpoint of faith in God. Aquinas knows that no one can be argued into belief in God, it is something that emerges in quite another way – by God's own initiative and a human response to it. Dawkins criticizes these arguments for failing to do something which they never set out to achieve in the first place.

Another argument that Dawkins seeks to undermine is the argument from personal experience, the argument that because I experience the reality of God, therefore he exists. Dawkins delights in pointing out all kinds of examples of supposed religious experiences which have turned out to have a completely naturalistic explanation. Of course, it is possible to do this time and time again. There are many experiences that we have or that others profess which on closer examination turn out to have a perfectly simple naturalistic explanation or which have simply been misinterpreted. Having said that however, it is very hard to argue away the whole of religious experience from human history along these lines. Experience of the divine or a dimension beyond the physical is pervasive in just about every culture that has ever lived on the face of the planet. Of course it is interpreted in different ways but the bare fact remains that countless people profess to an experience of something beyond the material or the natural, which the naturalist can always try to explain away, but finds it hard to do so because of the sheer mass of such testimony.

A further point is that very often it seems that experiences which we attribute to God's intervention often seem to involve natural means. I heard a story recently of a Christian girl who was in deep distress after the loss of a very close relation, and who cried out to God for an answer, for meaning and for comfort. She was, as it were, giving God a last chance to reach her. At that very moment another Christian came up to her on a deserted beach, put her arms round her and just gave her a big hug. This was someone she knew and the action was not entirely out of character, however the circumstances of his being there at that particular moment were unusual and somewhat remarkable. Now of course it is possible to interpret this as just a chance event that this person happened to be walking along at that moment and performed that gesture. Naturally, however, and perfectly justifiably, she would interpret this as an answer to her prayer and that this gesture was a sign of something much greater – in other words, the love of God for her, not just the love of this human being. Very often, what we call a 'religious experience' occurs when we interpret what might otherwise be seen as a natural event in supernatural ways because of the particular timing or emotions that surround the event. In Christian understanding, God usually uses people to do his work for him. He has created a world in which he has appointed us humans out of all the species of the world to care for creation and to care for each other. Therefore what we might interpret naturally can from a Christian point of view also be evidence of God's care and love for us.

The third argument that Dawkins likes to ridicule is Pascal's 'Wager'. Pascal was a seventeenth century Christian philosopher who wrote an Apology for the Christian religion, in a famous section of which he argued that it was better to bet on God's

existence than his non-existence. His argument was that, as Dawkins put it, 'you'd better believe in God because if you are right you stand to get eternal bliss and if you are wrong it won't make any difference anyway. On the other hand if you don't believe in God and you turn out to be wrong you get eternal damnation, whereas if you are right it makes no difference'.

Now it is of course fairly easy to poke holes in this argument as Dawkins himself does (I won't rehearse the arguments here). The key point however is that Pascal did not promote this as an argument for believing in God. The argument has a different function for Pascal. He is trying to show that the real reason why unbelievers don't believe is because they simply don't want to. As he famously says elsewhere in his *Pensées*, 'it is the heart and not our reason which is decisive'. His argument in 'The Wager' is directed at his sophisticated gambling friends in seventeenth century Paris. He simply wants to point out to them that if they were true betting men, looking for the best odds, they would always bet on God because the odds are far more in favour of belief than they are of unbelief. But he goes on to point out that his friends do not believe, which only goes to show that their reasons for unbelief are not based on the logical odds that might be available in this question, but come from another source. They don't believe simply because they don't want to believe. So again, this argument was not and never can be presented as a fail-safe argument for the existence of God.

Christian theology has always claimed that faith does not emerge from a process of argument. It can be aided by careful thinking but it emerges when a person encounters God themselves at a much deeper level than the merely rational. Therefore, arguments for the existence of God can only ever be confirmations or explorations of the internal coherence and consistency of faith rather than something presented to unbelievers to convince them. That isn't to say that good arguments can't be suggested that would point towards belief, but they can only ever hope to show the internal coherence of belief in God rather than providing 100% proof to force the unbeliever into submission.

3. Science explains everything?

Dawkins argues that natural selection explains everything we can see around us and therefore there is no need for God. When the French philosopher Laplace explained his ideas to Napoleon, and the emperor asked him the question 'Where is God in your philosophy?' Laplace is supposed to have famously replied: 'I have no need of that hypothesis.' The main point of Dawkins' argument is that the existence of complex beings such as ourselves can be perfectly explained by the process of natural selection and there is really no need for supposing any kind of God as part of the process. Natural selection can show how complex human beings can emerge from very simple elements. Therefore the Argument from Design does not work, and we can do without God. He also goes on to argue that the existence of God is extremely improbable. The direction of evolution is always from something very simple towards something very complex. If a God were placed at the beginning of the process, you would still be left with the question of how that very complex being (God) came into being in the first place. It's a slightly more sophisticated version of the old argument that simply asks the question 'Well, who made God then?'

Now Dawkins may well be right in arguing that natural selection does provide a good explanation of how we have developed from very simple organisms, how life emerged, and how the world has come to be what it is today. However there remain a number of questions. For example, several philosophers have pointed out that it is

hard to imagine human language appearing through a simple process of genetic evolution. Evolutionary process would normally expect a new ability to have appeared in one individual first, however it is impossible for language to be individual – it has to involve at least two people who converse together. There is also a further question that Dawkins is simply unable to answer and that is the question of why there is anything here at all? Yes, the process may have begun with some very simple elements combining to form life but why were those elements there in the first place? He cannot escape the question of the origins of life by simply positing a set of chemical entities which combined to form life.

Now this is the argument of infinite regress, where you have to find some kind of starting point for the whole process. The Big Bang is of course one possible solution to this argument but even that does not provide an answer because it still leaves open the question, why there was something to go 'bang' in the first place? The problem is that viewed within a naturalistic framework, everything we see has a prior cause to it, and it is logically very difficult to find an original first cause within that naturalistic structure. We need something outside the system which precisely by being outside the system needs no prior cause to launch the whole thing in the first place. Christian theology has always claimed God to be transcendent – in other words, not contained within the discernable and analyzable world. He is, in a sense, outside the system although, as we have seen already, he does act in other ways than through physical agency, not least in the Incarnation of his own self in the person of Jesus Christ.. Therefore God does not have to be as simple as Dawkins argues; he would only need to be simple if he were part of the naturalistic world, part of the continuum of space and time which we experience as the universe.

The basic problem is that biology can explain something of how we came to be what we are today but it cannot explain everything, nor most importantly, the existence of anything in the first place. Given certain basic elements, it can explain the process by which we emerged and evolved but it cannot explain the origins of those very elements themselves. Christian theology suggests that these elements, the stuff from which life emerged must have come from a non-naturalistic source, in other words, a being beyond this world who gave rise to them. It seems to me perfectly compatible with the story of Genesis to argue that the world originates in the will of a good and loving creator who made a world out of nothing, which was initially simple but which developed over time. The account in Genesis 1 allows for development and evolution because it builds time into the process of creation. God did not create the world in one instant but, as the story tells us, it emerged over time (the mythical period of seven days). Even at the end of the creation narrative there is a sense that the world is still to develop, with it needing to be filled, subdued and nurtured by humankind. Natural selection is not a disproof of God. It is simply a description of how life develops. Therefore there is no contradiction between believing in evolution and arguing for a non-naturalistic theistic explanation as a starting point for the world as we see it.

Furthermore it is hard on the purely naturalistic explanation to argue for the intelligibility of the universe. Why does the universe make sense? Why is it not entirely random? If the world is explicable then that itself requires some justification or explanation. In other words how is science possible? Intelligibility cannot arise from coincidence. Christians would argue that the existence of God does not so much explain the gaps in our knowledge as explain the fact that knowledge is possible in the first place. If the world is the creation of a rational and intelligible being then it makes sense that it is a rational, intelligible place. If it emerged instead from the chance convergence of a number of chemical elements then it is hard to see why it contains any intelligibility at all.

4. Religion a Mistake?

One of the more curious parts of Dawkins' argument is his account of the origins of religion. This concerns his well-known idea of 'memes' or 'units of meaning' which are transferred like a virus from one mind to another and which spread in the same way that a virus spreads. This provides an account of the origins of religion that fits with natural selection, so that 'memes' are like genes which ensure their own survival by mutating to create different forms. Units of ideas or 'memes' will adapt to new circumstances and replicate themselves in subtle and ingenious ways to ensure their survival.

This argument has been criticized on a number of occasions. It is interesting to see that Dawkins seems to be less sure of it now and it takes a much less central place in his quiver of arrows than it used to. The basic problem is this: who is to say which 'meme' is a good virus or a bad virus? He has already come to the conclusion that religion is a bad thing and therefore he explains its origins through this metaphor of a disruptive virus. However who is to say whether religion is a virus or whether Dawkins' own ideas are a virus which are spreading in the same way? There is also of course no independent, objective proof of the existence of 'memes'. It is really a metaphor he is using rather than a scientifically proven fact. This is rather strange as he accuses Christians of basing their faith upon things which are not proven, and so it is a little bit rich to see him arguing so strongly for such an idea himself. The existence of memes is assumed and unquestioned and one might direct the same arguments towards them as he does towards God. And another thing: if religion is a mistaken accident, a biological error, presumably it would have been quickly discarded by the process of evolutionary development. The fact that it has persisted so stubbornly and strongly suggests either that it has a different origin, or that it is hard-wired into us as something lasting and valuable.

Dawkins suggests that religion arises from very simple people misinterpreting ordinary, naturalistic events. He uses an example of a group of South Sea islanders who worshipped a strange figure called John Frum, which evolved into an extreme devotion to the Duke of Edinburgh. The implication of course is that devotion to Jesus emerged from a similar kind of naïve wrong-headedness. The difficulty here is his rather patronizing assumption that first century people were extremely gullible and liable to believe in the unlikely possibility of someone rising from the dead. As many New Testament scholars have pointed out however, first century people did not believe that a man could re-appear after he had died any more than we do. In fact, the resurrection of an individual was the exact opposite of what first century Jews expected. They were expecting some kind of resurrection at the end of time but the last thing anyone was looking for was the resurrection of a particular individual in time. This went against all their expectations and so it is very unlikely that they would have naively accepted such a story unless there were compelling reasons for doing so. The origins of faith in the resurrected Jesus can't be explained quite as simply as Dawkins hopes.

5. Goodness is an Accident?

Dawkins realizes that he also has to come up with some explanation for the origins of morality and goodness if he is to complete his case against religious belief. Again, as in the idea of 'memes', he goes for a naturalistic explanation that fits in with evolutionary biology. He argues that there are Darwinian reasons for people to be

generous or kind towards each other, for example, favouring the fortunes of one's own kin, reciprocity where 'if you scratch my back I'll scratch yours', the benefits of gaining a reputation for generosity and so on. However this does not get away from the basic implication here that all our behaviour is ultimately selfish. It ensures the survival of our own genes and our own selves. Even altruistic behaviour is only altruistic on the surface; underneath it is a thinly disguised means of personal or genetic survival. Dawkins has to argue that love as we understand it is a result of genetic misfiring, an accidental, instinctive by-product of our desire to save and replicate our own genetic features. At the same time, he also argues that we have an instinctive knowledge of good and evil and therefore we do not need to be told it by God or the Bible or the Church or anything like that. There are a number of significant problems with this approach.

a. As we saw in the last point, again there is a real problem of evidence here. This is simply a suggestion which Dawkins has come up with, but going by his own rules we should not believe anything that does not have a strong evidential backing. This argument is precisely an example of the very thing he is accusing his opponents of. How are we to take seriously an argument that has as little evidential basis as this?

b. Christian faith is not so much about telling us what is right and wrong as about enabling us to do what it is right and to avoid what is wrong. In one sense the Bible does not contain much that is new or distinct from any other religious traditions in its understanding of what is right and wrong. Murder, lying, theft and greed are bad. Kindness, generosity, love and friendship are good. So the point of Christian faith is not to give us some new information on what is right and wrong which cannot be discerned from any other means (although there are some distinct characteristics of Christian morality which do mark it off in some respects from other moral schemes). Rather, Christian faith is about enabling us to follow the path of goodness. It describes how we might find a relationship with our Creator restored through his intervention into human life through his son Jesus Christ. It describes how God's own power, the Holy Spirit, can enter a human life to give that life a new dimension of energy and purpose to do what is right and to live a good life, to live according to the Kingdom of God. Criticising Christian morality for not offering a distinct list of do's and don'ts that cannot be found elsewhere is simply to miss the point.

c. At the end of the day there is a simple choice to be made. Is love a 'misfiring instinct', an accidental by-product of evolution, and a thinly veiled strategy for personal or genetic survival? Or is it actually the centre of reality, the reason why we are here? Dawkins and Christian faith give two fundamentally different answers to this question. For Dawkins, love is purely an accident. For Christians, it is the very centre of all that we are. We are made in the image of a God who is love and we were made to learn to love and to be loved. That is the whole meaning of our existence. Christians suggest that we have a deep instinct that tells us that love is no accidental by-product, a 'blessed mistake' but is in fact the very centre of the human experience of human life and happiness.

6. The Tyrant of the Bible?

Dawkins offers us an amusing and ribald description of the God of the Bible, arguing that such a character is by no means a being worthy of worship and devotion, but in fact a cruel tyrant, best confined to history and thrown out of all civilized discussion. True, it is not hard to make this case by careful selection of passages, especially

from the Old Testament and by the careful ignoring of others where God is presented as long-suffering, patient, 'slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness' . Although he ridicules the God of the Bible along these lines, he is strangely silent about Jesus, seeing him as some kind of exception to the ugly character he thinks he sees from the pages of the Bible.

Dawkins again shows his ignorance of Christian theology by taking an over-literalistic reading of the texts. He fails to see that in Christian theology there is a clear interpretative criterion for reading the Old Testament, and that is that we read the Old Testament in the light of Jesus Christ. The central clue the Bible gives us to the character of God is in Jesus. That is the place we should look first and we should interpret everything else in the light of him. The character of Jesus reflects the character of the God of the Old Testament - patiently kind, endlessly loving, achingly compassionate, angry at evil, fiercely loyal. God desires us to worship him not because he is some insecure despot who demands that we cravenly bow down before him, but because for us to worship a God who is in himself love is in fact the best thing we can do. We worship God not because he needs it but because it is good for us.

Moreover, Dawkins again suggests a rather inadequate and weak argument for how morality arises. He suggests that the 'Zeitgeist' or 'Spirit of the Age' creates morality, or in other words, that a general consensus emerges within particular societies as to what is good and what is bad, and we should follow that rather than any account from any sacred text (and certainly not the example of the despotic God he sees in the Old Testament). The difficulty here is that the Zeitgeist is notoriously malleable. The moods of particular societies are easily influenced by powerful figures with money and influence who can engineer all kinds of malicious outcomes. The classic example of course is the Zeitgeist of Germany in the 1930s, where the general consensus of opinion was that it was perfectly legitimate to oppress and exterminate Jews, gypsies, enemies of the Nazi party and the like. What if the Zeitgeist of a particular culture decided that it was acceptable to sacrifice children (as in ancient Near Eastern religion) or to encourage paedophilia (as in Graeco-Roman culture) or for wives to throw themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands (as in Indian life for many centuries)? Should that Zeitgeist therefore be followed? Or is it the case that we do after all need something external to the general consensus of opinion within any given culture that gives us a model of what human life is meant to be and how it is to be lived?

7. The Evil of Religion?

One of the main planks of Dawkins' argument and that of the many other atheists is the suggestion that religion makes people do very bad things. Whereas moderate, gentle atheists like himself are incapable of anything nasty to anyone, religion, being rooted in a transcendent cause, has the power to make people do unspeakably evil things to each other and the world in which they live. Of course it's not hard to find examples of this in the past or from the contemporary world. Much of the violent conflict in the world today from Iraq to Palestine, and terrorist attacks in the USA and Europe, is due at least in some part to religion.

Dawkins takes this argument a step further when he responds to those who ask him why he is so vehemently opposed even to moderate religion. It might seem hard for him to argue that a gentle vicar in a country parish in England is implicated in the gravest evil in the world today, however this is precisely the argument he makes. His point is that moderate religion provides a kind of 'cover' for the bad things done by

extremists in religion. If the moderates in religion gave up their faith then it would expose the extremists for who they are and would deprive them of a vital source of potential support.

Of course Dawkins has a point that religion can make people do bad things, but then again, so can almost anything that is important to human beings. People have done unspeakably horrible things to each other in the name of their family, tribe, nation, football team or even in the name of love. To seek to eliminate anything that can be used for violent ends would logically mean eliminating each of these along with religion. The evils of the early and middle decades of the twentieth century were largely down to utopian visions of political change or nationalistic purity. They had very little to do with religion but far more to do with race and ideology. Ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, Rwanda and Burundi was carried out in the name of tribal superiority rather than any specifically religious motivation. Dawkins is surprisingly confident that atheism would never sponsor such destruction. However it is estimated that Josef Stalin was responsible for the deaths of 20 million people in Russia in the 1930s-50s. Despite Dawkins' brief protestations to the contrary, Stalin's programme for reform in Russian was explicitly atheistic, including its determination to eradicate religion in all its forms. It also had deep roots in Stalin's own desire to replace God with himself: as Nikolai Bukharin, Stalin's colleague once said of him: "he cannot help taking revenge on people, on all people, but especially those who are in any way better or higher than he." Mao Zedong's attempts to create an explicitly atheistic society in the 'Great Leap Forward' and the Cultural Revolution were similarly responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese.

Atheism is just as capable as religion (if not more) of dastardly acts of violence and oppression. The point here is not that religion is necessary superior to atheism in this regard, it is simply to say that human beings are such that they are likely to take any idea, however good or bad, and turn it into an excuse for doing violence to each other. In fact this insight points very clearly to a Christian understanding of human nature which is both gloriously optimistic and hugely pessimistic. Christians believe that we are made in the image of God, capable of amazing acts of love, compassion, mercy and grace. Yet we are also deeply flawed, fragile and fallen, equally capable of acts of terrible evil. This seems to fit the human condition and the course of history far better than the overly optimistic suggestions of atheists such as Dawkins.

Moreover it is possible to turn this same point about moderate religion back on Dawkins view of atheism. Moderate, non-violent atheism such as Dawkins' own could also be argued to provide 'cover' for militant, violent atheism as that supposed by Stalin, Mao and others. Some of Dawkins' own rhetoric calling for the eradication of religion and the criminalisation of bringing up children as religious could be argued to be inflammatory and pointing in one sure direction: the persecution and oppression of Christians, Muslims and Jews. Living in a world of frequent religious and ethnic tension it's hard to see how Dawkins' aggressively condemnatory language can do anything else but foster hatred and cruelty towards religious people, every bit as unpleasant as the acts of which he accuses Christians.

8. The Inspiration of Atheism?

Dawkins rounds off his book with a warm and cuddly vision of the future where atheism will provide consolation, inspire the imagination, and bring about a world of harmony, peace and love. It is clearly an attempt to steal the clothes from religious claims to provide consolation and strength in a difficult world and to answer the

charge that atheism strips the world of its wonder and glory. Can atheism provide such hope? Can it provide the way forward for a glorious future for humanity?

The difficulty here is finding any evidence that this might ever be the case. Previous experiments in trying to build an avowedly atheistic society that deliberately tries to get rid of religion are not very promising. Soviet Russia, as we have seen, was not exactly a beacon of tolerance, peace and harmony (at least not for the 20 million who died). Nor were Pol Pot's Cambodia, Mao's China or the state of Burma today. In other words atheism has so far failed in every attempt to provide this perfect society that Dawkins so optimistically thinks will emerge.

Now of course it is possible to accuse Christianity of failing in the same way. Atheists might argue that Christians have equally failed to provide and to create the perfect society. However Christians never claim to be able to do this. They always claim that until the coming of the new heavens and the new earth, this world will always be imperfect with its characteristic mixture of good and evil. As St Augustine put it, the City of God will live uncomfortably alongside the City of the World in this present age, and so we are not to expect to see the perfect society before God brings it about. Atheism has no belief in any other dimension than the physical and natural, in other words, what you see is what you get – there is nothing more. For atheism therefore, either the perfect society can be created here and now under the conditions of time and history, or it is a chimera, a hopeless dream. Christians say quite bluntly that we will never create the perfect society here on earth. That is to wait until God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth. We get glimpses of that kingdom now in our experiences of justice, mercy, forgiveness and the presence of God but they are only that – glimpses, and not the full reality.

Richard Dawkins reminds me of someone passionately convinced of the virtues of sight, confronted by people trying to explain to him the concept of smell. Such a person might be absolutely committed to the view that vision alone can understand and explain reality. If sight is all we need, if it can contain, explain and describe the whole of reality, then why on earth would we need smell? It cannot be anything real and must be a figment of other people's imaginations. This person cannot grasp an aroma with her eyes, and therefore concludes that it does not exist. And as a result she misses out on a vital dimension of reality. She has to deride those who claim to smell things from time to time as deluded and pathetic. Vision is such a magnificent thing that she cannot see why anyone would want anything else. One day these poor misguided 'smellers' will come to see the truth that what they claim is just an illusion, a mistake.

Perhaps the main problem with Dawkins is that he starts the discussion in the wrong place. Nowhere does the Bible show any interest in the question 'Is there a God'? The writers do not try to prove it, demonstrate it or argue for it. They simply assume it. This is the only way God can be found. Dawkins tends to think belief in God is like a random opinion that one happens to hold, just like believing that it will rain tomorrow, or that there are Yetis in the Himalayas. Yet 'faith' in the Bible is much richer and stronger than that, and involves much more than a mere idea. Faith begins when I realise that I am not what I might be. In fact, to be blunt, I am self-centred, thoughtless, loveless and need to change. And I need to find a way to do that. The God of the Bible is not interested in whether we happen to entertain the opinion that he exists nor not. He is interested in changing us. And only those prepared for that challenge will ever find him.

We find him when we begin to live life on the assumption that not only is God there, but he is to be counted on. We find him when we live on the assumption that Jesus

Christ is the exact image of God, and that the point of life is to let God transform us to be like him. We find him when we begin to live as if every person we meet is valuable because they are made in God's image, that there is always hope in the worst situation because Jesus rose from the dead, that the Bible is God's Word through which he wants to speak to us each day. In other words, faith involves personal risk, and only those prepared to take that risk can find God.

Jesus told a story about a man digging in a field, who found a box of hidden treasure, and who sold all he had to buy that field. God hides himself in our world, just as the treasure is hidden in the field. He is not obvious, but waits to be found by those who are serious enough to stake everything on him, 'sell everything they have' to follow him. Of course it's possible to look at this world and miss God altogether. Jesus Christ said 'those who seek will find'. God is waiting for us to find him, and those who do find love, adventure and satisfaction beyond what they imagined possible.