

“The God Delusion” by Richard Dawkins

– A response by Jeff Stauffer

“If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down;” Richard Dawkins boldly prefaces his book, “The God Delusion”. However, shouldn’t Christians also have equally bold if opposite intentions – to convert atheists into believers? However, the question at hand is, does Dawkins achieve his goal? While the book has sold well and has gathered much praise, it is largely (to use an election-year phrase) written to “rally the base.” I would argue it is more of an invective against religion than a thoughtful, balanced portrayal of a theistic worldview. Dawkins contrasts the best examples of atheism against the worst examples of religion and expects the reader to not see through the unfair comparisons.

Dawkins does bring out one point upon which Christians will agree. In chapter two he discusses the notion of NOMA (non-overlapping magisterium). This is the idea that science deals with questions of “how,” whereas religion deals with questions of “why.” Dawkins is no post-modernist; he harshly rebukes this position and in this finds common ground with the Christian. Some feel that faith or spirituality is merely a personal preference or search for answers and therefore completely relative and disconnected from the more scientific aspect of how we got here. However, it seems that Dawkins and Christians both agree that the question of how we got here has some significant bearing to the questions of why we are here. Christianity claims to answer both and while the Bible is neither a scientific nor an historical work *per se*, it does contain both science and history and claims to be completely true. So, if we find solid and convincing evidence that the Bible is not true in any aspect (historical, scientific, etc.), it would discredit all of it. The apostle Paul wrote that “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1 Cor 15:14). I would posit that our most basic allegiance is to truth, and that we should *follow the evidence* wherever it leads. While Dawkins does not believe the evidence leads

to Christ, he at least will agree that the truth will answer for mankind the questions of how we got here, and why we are here.

Much of this book is not really an argument for the atheist's position, but instead a long diatribe pointing out the worst that religion has to offer. Terrorism, witch-hunts, the crusades, abortion-clinic bombings, televangelists... the list goes on and on. What can one say? Yes, things done in the name of religion are shameful and horrific. But none of these examples provide much in the way of evidence that these religious groups' central tenets are true or false. If we look for the worst in any situation we will be easily satiated. However, there are three arguments that Dawkins puts forth that are worthy of discussion.

First, Dawkins asks the question, "Who created God?" The question is meant to create an infinite regress in the reader's mind that using God as an explanation doesn't explain anything, because God himself would then need explaining. However, is an eternally existing universe of atoms-in-space any more satisfying? It is hard enough to fathom the infinite and eternity-past. Believing in a material-only world doesn't make this question any easier to grasp. The Christian response is that God is not a created being, but exists eternally outside of time and space. Admittedly, the magnitude of such a statement is hard to grasp. However, the choice lies between an intelligent mind as the ultimate existing thing or eternal atoms floating in space. The difficulty of eternity is inescapable.

Secondly, Dawkins often claims that invoking a Designer in science makes one lazy and that it is an ignorant response. He claims that when Christians can't figure out how something works, they chalk it up to God and move on. There are undoubtedly cases where this has occurred. However, scientific laziness is not limited to the religious. Examples could be cited of

non-religious or atheistic scientists being equally lazy and/or biased in their conclusions. To the contrary, the history of civilization is filled with examples of people who have discovered great ideas in all scientific fields, *because* they believed in God and wanted to study His creation. Even the famed scientist Isaac Newton was deeply religious; in fact, he wrote more on theology than on science! Giving credit to a creator is not evidence of laziness any more than discrediting a creator is a sign of diligence.

And thirdly, Dawkins invokes the “anthropic principle” as evidence against God. This is an interesting move, as this principle is typically supplied as evidence *for* God’s existence. The anthropic principle explores the probability of there being a universe at all. As scientists have studied nature they have discovered the “fine balancing” of numerous laws and physical constants, such as the force of gravity or the ratio of a proton to electron in the atom. As the years go by, the list of values that have to be “just so” for life, planets, even molecules to exist at all grows. What’s the best explanation for this? If tomorrow the state lottery drawing was held and the results were the numbers one through six in order, would you shrug your shoulders and say, “It had to happen sometime,” or would you think there was some funny business going on? Isn’t the most reasonable explanation in a case like this that someone rigged the machine? What if the lottery contained 20 numbers? 100 numbers? At some point even the most naïve person will admit this was not a mere statistical anomaly. This is exactly the situation concerning the universe. Dawkins is on shaky ground as he begins to hypothesize “multi-verses,” where entire universes are popping in and out of existence to help get the numbers back in his favor. By their very definition, we cannot know if these multi-verse theories are accurate. Is this really the best explanation, or is this putting too much faith in materialism and chance?

A final comment regards what has been a very fruitful line of argumentation against a materialist worldview using evolutionary theories to refute naturalism. While this is not something Dawkins defends in his book, it is worth mentioning as this underlies the entire structure of a materialist outlook on the world. The basic argument is, if our human minds are the result of a purely natural evolutionary (blind, purposeless, mindless, etc.) series of events, then why should we trust them to be rational, cognitive, truth-finding machines? One philosopher used the analogy of coming across a pile of rocks on a hillside spelling out the name of a nearby town. But suppose you were told the rocks fell into place during an earthquake a few years back. You'd therefore have no reason to believe the rocks are conveying the true name of the town. In a similar manner, our minds cannot be trusted if they are the result of evolutionary forces, thus we can't trust our minds to tell us evolution is true! Think about it.

To conclude, Dawkins wants us to believe that the existence of God is a "very low probability, but short of zero." Very little in this book forces one to drop to such low confidence levels. A more balanced review of the various lines of evidence leads many, at both popular and scientific levels, to conclude just the opposite: that a materialist worldview is severely lacking in explanatory power. As Blaise Pascal once said concerning this decision, "You must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then?" ... Place your bets.