

The God Delusion

by Richard Dawkins.

(Summary by Jeff Stauffer)

Shepherd Project editorial note: this is a very helpful summary of a book which has attracted a great deal of attention. Obviously, we do not agree with Dawkins on most, if not all, of the primary points of his book. This summary is not an endorsement, it is a tool, provided to Christians so that they may be familiar with the basic thrust of this book and prepare themselves to respond intelligently.

Richard Dawkins is arguably the most popular atheist writer/ teacher of our time. His background includes a PhD in zoology from Oxford University and has written numerous popular and academic books on topics ranging from evolutionary biology to genetics. In recent years he has been in high demand giving lectures on the defense of an atheist/secularist position as well as critiquing the Intelligent Design movement. In his book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins attempts to show the irrationality of a belief in God by attacking the idea of such a being on all fronts. He makes his case by providing critical examinations of the role of religion in history, in debunking traditional arguments for God's existence, and through the power of Darwinian natural selection as a replacement for supernatural causes.

Chapter 1: A Deeply Religious Non-Believer

In this short opening chapter, Dawkins makes a distinction between critiquing religions and "a religious feeling." He uses Einstein as an example of someone who was a "deeply religious non-believer." Dawkins portrays Einstein as someone who sees the magnificence of nature as something sublime and beyond our ability to fully grasp. This "religious feeling" (that Dawkins shares) is to be contrasted with a belief in something supernatural. The former is to be enjoyed while the latter is to be rejected.

He also calls on his readers to critique religion like any other topic in the public square and remove the mystique surrounding religions' protected status. The recent Danish cartoon portraying the Islamic prophet Muhammad is a prime example where the public is afraid to say anything critical about a group's religious leaders.

Chapter 2: The God Hypothesis

This chapter begins with an attempt to show that the founders of the United States were, at best, marginal theists, but most likely secularists. He provides several quotes from Jefferson, Washington, and John Adams in support of this claim. The point Dawkins is trying to make is that many "religious" figures from history were probably only so publically to achieve social/political goals, but were privately secularists. He then goes on to explain Stephen Gould's concept of NOMA, "non-overlapping magisterium." To quickly summarize, the idea here is that science deals with questions of "how," whereas religion deals with questions of "why." The two do not overlap (according to Gould) so there should be no friction between science and religion. Dawkins outright rebukes this idea as an "artificial wall" built by theists who need an excuse when evidence doesn't support their claims. NOMA therefore allows "creationists" to continue

holding a seat at the debate table, whereas Dawkins believes they should be discounted from the beginning due to an utter lack of evidence in their favor.

Chapter 3: Arguments for God's Existence

Chapter three is a whirlwind tour of some of the popular theistic arguments from history. None of which are covered in great detail, but each is given a brief description followed by his succinct response. He covers Thomas Aquinas' proofs, the Ontological argument as given by St. Anselm, arguments from personal experience and scripture, and finally examples of admired religious scientists. In each case Dawkins shows the inadequacy of the proof and alternative explanations using a secularists' worldview.

Chapter 4: Why There Almost Certainly is no God

Dawkins begins this chapter using an analogy originally used by Fred Hoyle called 'The Ultimate Boeing 747.' Hoyle equated the probability of life originating on Earth with that of a hurricane sweeping through a scrap yard and assembling a 747. But Dawkins counters with the "consciousness-raiser" that natural selection could complete such a feat through successive slight modifications. While the chances of the 747 being assembled is astronomically great if viewed in one step, it is quite conceivable if one views it as a large procession of reasonable probabilities all chained together with natural selection as the driving force.

Dawkins goes on to critique the intelligent design movement, as largely a "God of the gaps" mentality, where one claims a designer if there is no scientific causal forces to be found. But Dawkins calls this being lazy and in the end leaves us ignorant in many areas, being satisfied to say "God did it" and research the matter no further.

He concludes this chapter with an interesting take on the anthropic principle. This is the concept that the universe seems "fine-tuned" for life, implying a designer. He turns this argument around by pointing out the billions of planets in the sample of the universe, making life statistically bound to happen somewhere. He also draws on "multi-verse" theories that posit multiple universes popping in and out of existence, thereby grossly expanding the possible outcomes.

Behind many of these arguments is a common theme: God is an improbable explanation because it leaves open the question of 'Who made God?' Dawkins thinks that although a multi-verse theory may seem extravagant, it is still more probable than positing a supernatural deity.

Chapter 5: The Roots of Religion

Dawkins explains religion as a by-product of some other evolutionary process. As an example, he cites the moth that is built to follow the light, but occasionally this causes one to burn in the candle flame. It is usually a helpful tool for survival, but we only notice the instances where it doesn't seem constructive. In the same way, Dawkins believes that tools for our own survival create religion as a by-product. He posits that our dualist tendencies (a belief in a mind/body duality) and teleological outlook (the idea that one has purpose in life) helps our survival in some fashion, which gives rise to religious tendencies.

This chapter concludes with probably the most abstract concept in the book: memes. Just as genes are able to replicate and pass on certain “traits” beneficial for survival such as an immune system or eyesight, cultural ideas and phenomenon can be passed on through memes which also are beneficial. While the mechanism to replicate is not yet understood, many believe this to be a system that religious thought gets passed on. Memes might include ideas such as “You will survive your own death,” or “If you die a martyr, you will go to a paradise.”

Chapter 6: The roots of Morality: Why are we Good?

Dawkins argues in this chapter that because cultures around the world share general traits of moral behavior, this supports the claim of a common evolutionary source. He concludes with an attack on religions stating that we only exhibit good behavior because a God is watching over us.

Chapter 7: The ‘Good’ Book and the Changing Moral Zeitgeist

This chapter is a long diatribe pointing out examples of inconsistent or immoral behaviors, ranging from Old Testament atrocities to religious wars in Ireland. He concludes with examples of believed-atheist leaders such as Hitler or Stalin and how it was not their atheist worldview that led them to do evil things.

Chapter 8: What’s Wrong with Religion? Why be so Hostile?

This chapter is largely an extension of chapter 7, where Dawkins points out more examples of the dangers of religion. He includes “fundamentalists” who believe they are right all the time, abortion-clinic bombers, punishment of homosexuals, and the pro-life movement as examples. He concludes that faith fosters fanaticism and supersedes a rational, scientific approach to the world.

Chapter 9: Childhood, Abuse and Religion

Dawkins calls on parents to not indoctrinate their children with their own beliefs, but allow them to choose for themselves what to believe and encourage a skeptic mindset. He equates some forms of religious upbringing to child abuse.

Chapter 10: A Much Needed Gap?

In conclusion, Dawkins ponders the idea of religion filling the role of a consoler, an imaginary friend, or an encourager in times of need. He exhorts us to all shrug off these evolutionary chains and embrace a scientific outlook that is “liberated by calculation and reason.”

Some Questions for Discussion:

- 1) Does the concept of an eternally existing material world seem any more satisfying than an eternally existing Deity?
- 2) If our minds are the result of an evolutionary process, should we trust them to lead us to truth or that they are even rational in the first place?

3) Should people with religious beliefs be required to provide evidence for their worldview?
What then is the role of faith?