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Where Does *The God Delusion* Come from?

Nicholas Lash

Abstract

While Richard Dawkins' polemic against religion scores easy points against Christian fundamentalisms, he supposes his target to be much vaster: "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods". Given *The God Delusion*'s lack of extended argument, historical ignorance and unfamiliarity with the literature, the praise it has received from some distinguished scientists is troubling.

This essay seeks, first, to examine some of the book's chief weaknesses – its ignorance of the grammar of "God" and of "belief in God"; the crudeness of its account of how texts are best read; its lack of interest in ethics – and, second, to address the question of what it is about the climate of the times that enables so ill-informed and badly argued a tirade to be widely welcomed by many apparently well-educated people.

The latter issue is addressed, first, by considering the illusion, unique to the English-speaking world, that there is some single set of procedures which uniquely qualify as "scientific" and give privileged access to truth; second, by examining historical shifts in the senses of "religion"; thirdly, by locating Dawkins' presuppositions concerning both "science" and "religion", his paradoxical belief in progress, and the reception which the book has received, in relation to tensions in our culture signalled, fifty years ago, by C. P. Snow.

Keywords

Dawkins, God, belief, science, religion, explanation

1. The Puzzling Success of a Deplorable Book

Two of the five writers quoted on the dust-jacket of *The God Delusion* praise the book for its "clarity" and "elegance", and Giles Hattersley, interviewing Dawkins in *The Sunday Times*, describes the "reasoning" of the book as "thrilling to witness – scientific [and]

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imaginative".[1] On the other hand, an American geneticist who believes Dawkins' earlier book, *The Selfish Gene*, to be "the best work of popular science ever written", regrets his failure, in *The God Delusion*, "to engage religious thought in any serious way", and judges "One reason for the lack of extended argument" in the book to be simply that "Dawkins doesn't seem very good at it".[2] Meanwhile, Timothy Jenkins, Dean of Jesus College, Cambridge, an anthropologist and theologian who was once a pupil of Dawkins, says of the book that its author "sounds like an *autodidact* – a man of considerable intelligence and wide reading, but insufficiently acquainted with the disciplines and histories that lie behind what he has read. He simply believes that the books he agrees with are true, and the books he disagrees with wrong". "Although", says Jenkins, Dawkins "claims to be a scientist (as, indeed, in real life he has been), there is no evidence of a scientific approach nor of scientific habits of mind", "no notion of evaluating evidence", for example.

Although the central target of Dawkins' unrelenting invective appears to be biblical fundamentalism (an easy sparring partner because Dawkins is simply a fundamentalist in reverse: working with the same picture of religion, the same account of how the Bible is best read – the fundamentalists taking it all to be true, while Dawkins takes it all to be false), he supposes himself to be casting his net a great deal wider. "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented".[3]

Dawkins makes much of the fact that he is an academic: biologist, Fellow of the Royal Society, at present occupying Oxford's chair in "the public understanding of science". Now, it is a fundamental feature of good academic work in *any* field that it is undertaken with a passion for accurate description and disinterested respect for the materials with which one is working. Dawkins, the biologist, seems not to have acquired the mental discipline necessary for work in the humanities and social sciences. One cannot imagine a physicist holding an atomic particle, or a zoologist a yak, with the same sustained contempt and loathing, the same cavalier disregard for accurate description, the same ignorance of the literature, with which Dawkins treats all religious beliefs, ideas and practices. And, in one of the very few places in which a work of theology is mentioned, he devotes three pages to "Thomas Aquinas's 'Proofs'".[4] What, in fact, we are given is a shoddy misrepresentation of Aquinas' arguments, with no indication

[1] *The Sunday Times* (24 December 2006), p. 3 of *News Review*.

[2] H. Allen Orr, professor of biology in the University of Rochester, reviewing the book in the *New York Review of Books*, 11 January 2007.

[3] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 36.

[4] *Delusion*, pp. 77–79.

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of where they might be found, what others have made of them, or what purpose they were constructed to serve.

As Professor Terry Eagleton pointed out, in *The London Review of Books*, "card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins . . . are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don't believe there is anything there . . . worth understanding . . . The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be".[5]

However, *simply* to counter polemic with polemic does not help to move things on. What I want to do is, firstly, to indicate in a little more detail some of what I take to be the book's chief weaknesses but then, having done so, try to throw some light on its popularity by setting it in the context of some partly real, partly imagined cultural tensions and conflicts that have been with us for around two hundred years.

2. *God is not one of the things that there are*

Dawkins first formulates what he calls "the God hypothesis" as the supposition that "there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us".[6] This account is, it seems, to be taken at face value, as a straightforward and literal description of the kind of thing God is. (Admittedly, the use of the adjective "supernatural" seems to stand in the way of the straightforwardness of the description. This adjective is used again, and again, and again but is never examined; it does no *work* in his argument and he appears quite ignorant of the history of its usage.)

Central to the book is Dawkins' conviction that belief in God is a matter of supposing there to be, above and beyond the familiar world with all its furniture, one more big and powerful thing. I shall say something about "belief" later on. For the time being, let us stay with this question of where the concept of God is to be *located* on the map of the things we talk about and the ways in which we talk about them.

According to the geneticist whom I quoted earlier, "One of the most interesting questions about Dawkins's book is why it was written. Why does Dawkins feel he has anything significant to say about religion and what gives him the sense of authority presumably needed to say it at book length?"[7]

[5] Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching", *The London Review of Books*, 19 October 2006.

[6] *Delusion*, p. 31.

[7] Orr, loc. cit.

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At one point Dawkins asks, almost petulantly: "Why shouldn't we comment on God, as scientists?"[8] I can think of no reason whatsoever why a biologist like Dawkins should not comment on the Franco-Prussian War, the paintings of Fra Angelico or the Saudi Arabian penal system. In all such cases, however, if the biologist's comments are to be worth hearing, he needs to do his homework. I doubt if Dawkins would disagree. The question is, then, why does he suppose himself exempt from the necessity of homework when commenting on the question of God?

The answer seems to lie in the curious and repeated insistence that "God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe"; that "the presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question", and so on.[9]

The first thing to be said about this, I think, is that there *are* no "scientific" facts. There are just *facts*, what is the case. And the unimaginable diversity of things that are the case may be considered in an immense variety of ways, including through the use of those patterns of disciplined investigation which we call "scientific". What Dawkins seems to mean is that the existence of God is an *empirical* question.[10] His confidence that this is so rests on his ignorance of the vast and often dauntingly difficult literature dedicated to considering in what sense this is and is not the case. But even if it *were* as self-evident as he supposes that the question of God's existence is an

[8] *Delusion*, p. 55. In similar vein, the distinguished physicist Stephen Weinberg has written: "I find it disturbing that Thomas Nagel in the *New Republic* dismisses Dawkins as an "amateur philosopher", while Terry Eagleton in the *London Review of Books* sneers at Dawkins for his lack of theological training. Are we to conclude that opinions on matters of philosophy or religion are only to be expressed by experts, not mere scientists or other common folk? It is like saying that only political scientists are justified in expressing views on politics. Eagleton's judgement is particularly inappropriate; it is like saying that no one is entitled to judge the validity of astrology who cannot cast a horoscope" (Stephen Weinberg, reviewing *The God Delusion* in the *TLS*, 17 January 2007). However, one does not need to be an "expert" on anything in particular to know that this is a thoroughly bad argument. Casting a horoscope is a practice of some kind, however misguided. Eagleton did not criticize Dawkins for lacking expertise in religious practice – praying, for example. He *did* criticize him for pontificating about Christian theology (which is a vast body of texts and arguments) while being apparently wholly ignorant of it. Moreover, if someone wishes, not merely to "express views" on politics, but also to denounce, as a bundle of dangerous and irrational nonsense, all political opinions and whatever has been written on political science, then they should first take the elementary precaution of reading the stuff.

[9] *Delusion*, pp. 50, 58–59.

[10] "We haven't yet understood the meaning of the word God if we think that God is something to be found, like an HIV vaccine or aliens in space. Another way of saying the same would be to assert that anything that fits neatly into the world can't possibly be the God who created the world. The search for God is not about reason finding an object of study" (Terrance W. Klein, "Adventures in Alterity: Wittgenstein, Aliens, Anselm and Aquinas", *New Blackfriars*, January 2007, pp. 73–86; p. 82). Or, as Hegel remarked nearly two hundred years ago: "God does not offer himself for observation" (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, I,* ed. Peter C. Hodgson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], p. 258).

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empirical question, why would that fact alone render him competent, as a *biologist*, to comment on it? Biologists are trained to study living organisms. There may, indeed, be people who worship plants or animals and perhaps Richard Dawkins might, as a biologist, help to persuade them of their imprudence, but Jews, and Christians, and Muslims, are not amongst their number!

3. Belief in God

Where the grammar of the word "God" is concerned, Dawkins, ignorant of centuries of Jewish, Christian and Islamic reflection on the "naming" of the holy and utterly transcendent mystery on which the world depends, persists in taking for granted that "God" is the name of a non-existent thing, a particular, specifiable, fictitious entity.

His understanding of the notion of "belief in God" (to which I now turn) is as crass and ill-informed as his understanding of what the word "God" means. He takes it for granted that "believing in God" is a matter of being of the opinion that God exists. However, as Saint Augustine pointed out sixteen centuries ago, even the devils know that God exists! One may know quite well that God exists and yet be entirely lacking in the virtue of faith. Dawkins defines faith as "belief without evidence".[11] Christianity does not. To believe in God, to have faith in God, as Christianity understands these things, is (to quote Augustine again) "in believing to love, in believing to delight, in believing to walk towards him, and be incorporated amongst the limbs and members of his body".[12]

To be a Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim, is to be a member of a particular *people*: a people whose identity is specified by particular habits of memory and ritual, of understanding and relationship and hope. Dawkins tells the story of a young Afghan who was "sentenced to death for converting to Christianity". The story is a tragic commentary on the extent to which the relationships between two traditions, two "peoples", which should (and sometimes have) understood each other to be "cousins", have sometimes deteriorated into bitter conflict. Dawkins, however, sees things differently. "All [the young Afghan] did", he remarks, "was change his mind. Internally and privately, he changed his mind. He entertained certain *thoughts*".[13] Not so. He publicly changed his allegiance from one people to another.

[11] *Delusion,* p. 199.

[12] See Augustine's *Commentary on John, xxix* (*PL*, XXXV, 1631). The somewhat free translation is my own: see Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 20.

[13] *Delusion,* p. 287. For his insistence on the "private" character of religious belief, see also pp. 289, 290.

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Not only does Dawkins suppose "believing in God" to be a matter of privately entertaining the opinion that a thing called "God" exists, but he also imagines that those who *are* of this opinion are committed to refusing to think about it. "Faith", he tells us, "(belief without evidence) is a virtue. The more your beliefs defy the evidence, the more virtuous you are".[14] Instead of providing any *evidence* that religious believers are, characteristically, thus perversely irrational, he ploughs on: "There are some weird things (such as the Trinity, transubstantiation, incarnation) that we are not *meant* to understand. Don't even *try* to understand one of these, for the attempt might destroy it".[15] That sentence gives me a strange feeling, as I sit reading it in my study – the walls of which are filled, from top to bottom, with volumes dedicated to attempts at just such understanding. It really is most disquieting that a book so polemically ignorant of the extent to which faith's quest for understanding has, for century after century, been central to the practice and identity of those educational enterprises which we call the great religious traditions of the world, should receive the plaudits that it has.

4. How to take texts

There is a marvellous passage in one of Cardinal Newman's notebooks that is worth quoting at some length: "We can only speak of Him, whom we reason about but have not seen, in the terms of our experience. When we reflect on Him and put into words our thoughts about Him, we are forced to transfer to a new meaning ready made words, which primarily belong to objects of time and place. We are aware, while we do so, that they are inadequate. We can only remedy their insufficiency by confessing it. We can do no more than put ourselves on the guard as to our own proceeding, and protest against it, while we do adhere to it. We can only set right one error of expression by another. By this method of antagonism we steady our minds, not so as to reach their object, but to point them in the right direction; as in an algebraical process we might add and subtract in series, approximating little by little, by saying and unsaying, to a positive result".[16]

My question to Richard Dawkins is this: given the *centrality* of this insistence, in Christian thought, for two millennia, on the near-impossibility of speaking appropriately of God, is it ignorance or sheer perversity that leads him wholly to ignore it, and to treat all

[14] *Delusion*, p. 199.
[15] *Delusion*, p. 200.
[16] John Henry Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, ed. J. D. Holmes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 102.

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statements about God as if they were characteristically taken, by their users, as straightforward and literal description? He would, as I see it, have no defence along the lines of: "I am talking about the religion of ordinary people, not the shifty evasions of theologians", because most Christians are not fundamentalists. They know that they do not comprehend the mystery of God, and that what we say is said in metaphor and parable.

"Of course", says Dawkins at one point, "irritated theologians will protest that we don't take the book of Genesis literally *any more*. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as allegories".[17] Notice that "any more". Dawkins takes it for granted that Christians have traditionally been fundamentalists, but that as the plausibility of fundamentalist readings of the text has been eroded by the march of reason, "irritated theologians" protest that they no longer take biblical texts literally. Paradoxically, he has the story almost completely upside down. Patristic and medieval theology worked with a rich, at times almost uncontrollable diversity of "senses of scripture". Passages of Scripture gave up their sense only by being read in many different ways. Fundamentalism – in the sense of the privileging of the meaning which a passage, taken out of any context, appears *a priori*, on the surface, to possess – is, as the Old Testament scholar James Barr demonstrated thirty years ago, a byproduct of modern rationalism: of the privileging of timeless and direct description, of mathematics over metaphor, prose over poetry.[18]

What I earlier described as Richard Dawkins' "fundamentalism in reverse" comes through clearly in his curious insistence that the only way to take a biblical text seriously is to "believe it" literally. To take it allegorically (for example) is to "write it off". Somewhere at the back of all this is the myth (the roots of which lie back in ancient Greece) that truth can only be expressed through prosaically direct description, and that all other literary forms are forms of fiction, incapable of expressing truth.

Two more points, still with that passage about "irritated theologians" in mind. In the first place, what are we to make of this curious suggestion that there are only two things to do with texts: you either "write them off" or you "believe" them? This seems a strange way of describing how one works out the ways in which texts, ancient or modern, religious or secular, are best read.

In the second place, it is, I suspect, his preoccupation with contemporary American fundamentalism (treated, throughout the book, as more or less paradigmatic of "religion" across the board) which leads him to suppose that decisions *not* to construe particular passages of

[17] *Delusion*, p. 238, my stress.

[18] See James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

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Scripture "literally" are *arbitrary* decisions. As a result, the question: "By what criteria do you *decide* which passages are symbolic, which literal?"[19] is taken rhetorically, as if the absence of appropriate criteria were self-evident. He does not notice that a good deal of any first-year student of the Bible's time is spent learning how to distinguish between different "literary forms".

5. *Right and wrong*

One of the strangest features of *The God Delusion* is the superficiality of what Dawkins has to say on ethics. It is as if he is not really *interested* in ethics, perhaps in consequence of the tendency of Darwinian anthropology to render the notion of human freedom problematic. He is, however, interested in subverting the belief that, without belief in God, we would behave more badly than we do: "Do we really need policing – whether by God or by each other – in order to stop us from behaving in a selfish and criminal manner? I dearly want to believe that I do not need such surveillance – and nor, dear reader, do you".[20] He is, of course, insistent that religion does much damage in the world, and that the religious education of children is a form of child abuse: "isn't it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about?"[21]

Dawkins deplores "the unhealthy preoccupation of early Christian theologians with sin. They could have devoted their pages and their sermons to extolling the sky splashed with stars, or mountains and green forests, seas and dawn choruses. These are occasionally mentioned, but the Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life".[22] Leaving aside the suspicion that Professor Dawkins has not read very widely in the Fathers of the Church, the complaint is somewhat curious. How lamentable for the Fathers to have been preoccupied with the damage done by human beings to themselves, to others, and to the world of which we form a part, through egotism, violence and greed; through warfare, slavery, starvation! What a wiser atheist than Dawkins might at least agree to be a terrifyingly dark tapestry of inhumanity, Christians call "sin", knowing all offenses against the creature to be disobedience to the Creator. And it is especially paradoxical that Dawkins should deem concern for the dreadful things that human beings do to be a "nasty little

[19] *Delusion*, p. 247 (his stress).
[20] *Delusion*, p. 228.
[21] *Delusion*, p. 315.
[22] *Delusion*, p. 252.

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preoccupation" at a time when we are made daily more aware of the perhaps already uncontrollable extent to which our self-indulgent egotism threatens terminally to damage the "green forests, seas and dawn choruses".

6. *Complexity and evidence*

We have already noticed Dawkins' idiosyncratic description of faith as "belief without evidence". And, because there is no evidence for God, he sees no "good reason to suppose that theology . . . is a subject at all".[23] However, he never, at any point, addresses the fundamental question: what would *count* as evidence for God?

His failure to do so stems partly, I suspect, from the fact that he is not very good at tackling philosophical questions and partly from his unshakeable conviction (to which I have referred already) that the question of God is an empirical question: a question about a real or fictional *thing* or entity of an unusual kind.

This comes across in his handling of an argument of which he seems to be extremely proud: "I keep saying and will say again, however little we know about God, the one thing we can be sure of is that he would have to be very very complex, and presumably irreducibly so".[24]

This would, presumably, be the case if God were a material object, a structure with parts, an organism with a very powerful brain, the product of evolutionary processes. Which Richard Dawkins takes for granted that he must be: "A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right".[25] We seem to be talking about the Wizard of Oz, not the creator of this world and all the worlds there are. Exasperated, Dawkins takes to patronising Professor Keith Ward, who "seems not to understand what it means to say of something that it is simple".[26] I suspect, however, that it is Richard Dawkins who has failed to notice that simplicity, like most interesting words, has a wide variety of uses and that when we say that God is simple, we are speaking, as it were, of a simplicity on the *other* side, not on *this* side, of complexity; a simplicity more like wisdom than like simple-mindedness.

[23] *Delusion*, p. 57.
[24] *Delusion*, p. 125.
[25] *Delusion*, p. 149.
[26] *Delusion*, p. 150. For an interesting collection of essays on styles of explanation in the sciences, see John Cornwell, ed., *Explanations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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7. From Religion to Science: a story of progress?

Turning from some of the major weaknesses of Dawkins' book to the larger question of what it is about the climate of the times that enables so ill-informed and badly argued a tirade to be so widely welcomed by so many intelligent and educated people, I take as my text a passage near the end of *The God Delusion* which seems to me of exceptional importance: "Religion has at one time or another been thought to fill four roles in human life: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration. Historically, religion aspired to *explain* our own existence and the nature of the universe in which we find ourselves. In this role, it is now completely superseded by science".[27]

It is the second and third of these three sentences on which I propose to concentrate: "Historically, religion aspired to *explain* our own existence and the nature of the universe in which we find ourselves. In this role, it is now completely superseded by science". I shall do so under three heads: [1] there is no such thing as "science"; [2] there is no such thing as "religion"; [3] culture wars and the paradox of "progress".

7.1 There is no such thing as "science"

Martin Rudwick's magnificent study of the emergence of the modern science of geology at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries grew out of the Tarner Lectures which he delivered in Cambridge in 1996.[28] The first of those lectures was entitled "The anglophone heresy of 'science'".

"*Scientia*" means knowledge and, in modern culture, "science" and its cognates mean the disciplined and critical investigation of reality. But reality has many different aspects, requiring many different methods of investigation. In French, or German, or Italian, the range of *"sciences"*, or *"Wissenschaften"*, or *"scienze"*, will cover the entire lecture list of a modern university. (There is, in France, an extremely learned and reputable journal entitled *"La Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques"*.) Only in the English-speaking world do we speak of "science" in the singular, a habit (or heresy!) which has two unfortunate sets of consequences. On the one hand, it encourages the illusion that there is, roughly speaking, some single set of procedures which qualify as "scientific". On the other, it encourages the expectation, where knowledge is concerned,

[27] *Delusion,* p. 347, his stress.

[28] See Martin S. J. Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time. The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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that "science" is to be favourably contrasted with something else: "arts" perhaps, or "letters".

When C. P. Snow gave the Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1959, on "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution", he was expressing an *anxiety* in British culture concerning what many perceived to be "a profound mutual suspicion and incomprehension" between those he called "the literary intellectuals" and the natural scientists.[29]

Although the roots of this division can be traced back to the development, in the seventeenth-century, of new standards of empirical investigation of the natural world, it is worth bearing in mind that "the Enlightenment's great intellectual monument", Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, no more represents human knowledge as structured around a division corresponding to what we would now call "the sciences" and "the humanities" than had Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* a century earlier (on which the design of the *Encyclopédie* was based).[30]

The construction of this division was a nineteenth-century achievement, and the "anglophone heresy" seems to have made its first appearance in 1867, in the *Dublin Review*. "We shall", said W. G. Ward, "use the word 'science' in the sense which Englishmen so commonly give to it; as expressing physical and experimental science, to the exclusion of theological and metaphysical".[31]

The point is this. Whenever one comes across the concept of "science", in the singular, being used (as Dawkins does) to support sweeping assertions to the effect that *here*, and here alone, is truth to be obtained, then one is in the presence neither of science, nor of history, but ideology.

7.2 There is no such thing as "religion"

There are, then, sciences galore, but no single enterprise which would count as "science". The story of "religion" is a little different. In the Middle Ages, *"religio"* was a virtue, a kind of justice. Justice is the virtue of giving people and things their due. Religion is the virtue of giving God God's due. On this account, there are two ways in which people may fail to be religious. They may fail by treating God as a creature: as some fact or feature of the world, some entity or idea which we might pick over, master or manipulate. (Dawkins is irreligious in this way, treating God, as he does, as a fictional feature

[29] See Stefan Collini, "Introduction" to C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. vii-viii.

[30] Collini, loc. cit. See Nicholas Lash, "Reason, Fools and Rameau's Nephew", *New Blackfriars* (September, 1995), pp. 368–377.

[31] Cited by Collini, op. cit., pp. xi-xii.

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of the world.) On the other hand, people may fail to be religious by treating some fact or feature of the world as God: by setting their hearts on, bowing down before, worshipping, themselves, their country, money, sex or "reason". (Dawkins is drawn to irreligion in this way as well, through idolisation of evolutionary processes.)

In the fifteenth century, as the Latin word *"religio"* moved into English, it did so to name communities of men and women whose lives were specifically dedicated to the exercise of the virtue of religion. Thus, what were then called "the religions of England" we would refer to as religious orders. Then, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the sense of the word shifted from naming a virtue to naming a set of propositions or beliefs.[32]

A final, fatal shift occurred as an outcome of the struggles usually known as the "Wars of Religion". The title is anachronistic, because these were not "religious" conflicts necessitating the emergence of the State – to keep the peace; "they were in fact themselves the birthpangs of the State . . . for what was at issue in these wars was the very creation of religion as a set of privately held beliefs without direct political relevance".[33]

In contemporary religious studies there is, notoriously, immense and irresolvable confusion as to what "religion" might mean. The word now carries a range of meanings all the way from Durkheim's definition: "the system of symbols by means of which society becomes conscious of itself"[34] to the incoherent, but still widespread, survival of seventeenth-century attempts to "privatise" the notion.

We are still quite often told that we must keep "religion" out of "politics", which is interpreted as a requirement to keep private passions and personal beliefs out of the cool rationality of the "public square". Setting aside this curiously unreal account of how, in fact, the political process works, consider its incoherence from another angle. We speak of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as "religions", and yet the history of these three peoples, and of the relationships between them, constitutes a large part of the history of Europe and the near East (and, in recent centuries, of many other parts of the world as well). And whatever is to be said of those Indian traditions which we usually lump together as "Hinduism", the Kumbh Mela, the gathering, every twelve years, of up to thirty million people, for a month, at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers – a

[32] See William T. Cavanaugh, " 'A fire strong enough to consume the house': the Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State", *Modern Theology* (October, 1995), pp. 397–420; pp. 403–4. Cavanaugh's remarks on the history of the concept of religion, in this fine essay, draw upon Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and the End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

[33] Cavanaugh, art. cit., p. 398.

[34] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide. A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 312.

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gathering so immense that it is clearly visible from space – is a curious expression of the "private" character of religion.

There are, then, a vast variety of traditions, communities, patterns of behaviour, which may – in a range of often contradictory ways – be said to be "religions". But there is certainly no *single* enterprise which would count as "religion".

In the light of these remarks, I now return to Richard Dawkins' account of the roles of religion in human life. "Religion", he says, "has at one time or another been thought to fill four roles in human life: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration. Historically, religion aspired to *explain* our own existence and the nature of the universe in which we find ourselves. In this role, it is now completely superseded by science".[35]

Two comments on that. In the first place, notice that Dawkins's list of the roles which religion has been "thought to fill" entirely fails to mention what is – in the case of the Abrahamic traditions and, I think, in many of the religions of India as well – religion's most fundamental role; namely, the attempted expression, in word and deed, in language, ritual and behaviour, of appropriate *response* to invitations not of our invention.[36]

In the second place, Dawkins sees God as "a competing explanation for facts about the universe and life. This is certainly how God has been seen by most theologians of past centuries".[37] Central it may be to his polemic, as a scientist, against religion, but this contention is, quite simply, wrong.

With the exception of rationalist currents in modern Christianity (and, of course, the fundamentalisms against which Dawkins' invective is especially directed are products of modern rationalism), Judaism, Christianity and Islam have, by and large *not* attempted to "explain" either "our own existence" or "the nature of the universe".

The heart of the matter is the doctrine of creation. It is a consequence of the confession that all things are created *"ex nihilo"* that to name God as "creator" is *not* to offer, at least in any straightforward sense, an "explanation" of the world's existence. Explanations are stories of causes and effects, and there is no such story which begins with *nothing* (for, as the saying goes, from nothing, nothing follows). "It is not how things are in the world that is [the

[35] *Delusion*, p. 347.

[36] Thus, for example, David Burrell construes "Islam" ("submission") as a matter of "returning everything to the one from whom we received everything" (personal communication); quite a good description of Jewish and Christian faith as well.

[37] Richard Dawkins, "A reply to Poole", *Science and Christian Belief*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1995), pp. 45–50; p. 46. I am grateful to Professor Paul Black for drawing my attention to this exchange between Richard Dawkins and Michael Poole.

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mystery]", said Wittgenstein, "but that it exists".[38] Dawkins gets very cross with the Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, for saying something similar: "The pre-eminent mystery is why anything exists at all. What breathes life into the equations, and actualized them in a real cosmos? Such questions lie beyond science, however: they are the province of philosophers and theologians".[39] This irritates Dawkins for the rather trivial reason that he cannot bear the idea that theologians might have serious work to do!

It is often said that God is "the answer" to the question as to why there is anything at all. It is, however, a very *strange* answer, because it does not furnish us with information: it simply *names* the mystery.

Moreover, Jews and Christians and Muslims have always found it important to learn from (for example) Plato and Aristotle, as well as from the Scriptures or the Quran. It was from the philosophers and their "commentators" that medieval Jews, Christians and Muslims sought to understand the world in which they found themselves. And though some aspects of what they called "philosophy" transmuted into "natural philosophy" and hence into what we now call the natural sciences, others did not. In the heat of his polemic against religion, Dawkins not only misattributes to religion explanatory pretensions to which, on the whole, the religions have not laid claim but fails to appreciate that biologists, and others, might be well advised to pay more attention to the problems of philosophy and history than they sometimes do.

7.3 Culture wars and the paradox of "progress"

Chapter Seven of *The God Delusion* is entitled: "The 'Good' Book and the Changing Moral *Zeitgeist*". Invoking "a widespread consensus of liberal, enlightened, decent people",[40] Richard Dawkins is serenely confident that, leaving the darkness of religion behind, and notwithstanding "local and temporary setbacks", the human race progresses steadily into enlightenment and decency: "the progressive trend is unmistakeable and it will continue"; "the *Zeitgeist* moves on".[41]

I have two difficulties with this account. In the first place, emerging from a century which saw more millions slaughtered than during the previous history of the human race, operating as we do an economic system which starves the majority of human beings to feed

[38] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1961), 6. 44. L. W. has "mystisch".

[39] Martin Rees, *Our Cosmic Habitat* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), cited from *Delusion*, pp. 55–56.

[40] *Delusion*, p. 286.

[41] *Delusion*, pp. 271, 267.

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the avarice of a few whose lifestyle now threatens the very planet with catastrophe, I find it hard to understand how a man as intelligent as Richard Dawkins can sustain such smug and counterfactual Whiggery.

In the second place, Dawkins insists that he speaks as a *scientist* and, specifically, as a Darwinian biologist. This is paradoxical because, as Michael Ruse has argued, "A worldview that accepts the full implications of Darwinian natural selection has no place for absolute values, including absolute progress . . . the causal heart of Darwinian theorizing is against the idea of progress".[42]

In his study of *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*, Ruse distinguishes Jewish and Christian doctrines of creation from what he calls *"creationism"*: the worldview of (especially American) biblical fundamentalists. Similarly, he distinguishes the *fact* of evolution, and scientific theories constructed to account for it, from *"evolutionism"*: the whole "metaphysical or ideological picture built around or on evolution";[43] such evolutionism, he insists, is "a religious commitment".[44]

Richard Dawkins occupies a professorial chair for "the public understanding of science", an enterprise he deems best forwarded by relentless warfare against religion. However, Michael Ruse seems to me correct in arguing that the struggle between "creationists" and "evolutionists" (of whom, undoubtedly, Professor Dawkins is one) is not a "simple clash between science and religion but rather between two religions".[45] The irony of *The God Delusion*, then, is that its author is the high priest of a new religion.

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[42] Michael Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 80. On the cover of Alister and Joanna Collicutt McGrath's lucid rebuttal, *The Dawkins Delusion* (London: SPCK, 2007), Ruse is cited as saying: "*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist, and the McGraths show why".

[43] Ibid., p. 4.

[44] Ibid., p. 275.

[45] Ibid., p. 287.

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