

Science, religion and society: Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*

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The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins, Houghton Mifflin, 2006, 416 pages.

It was refreshing to see the publication of Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*. It is not every day that one of the premier evolutionary biologists in the world publishes a text dedicated to the defense of atheism. Dawkins has done us a service, if only in making more acceptable the general proposition that religion and science are at odds with each other, and that it is science that should win out.

The God Delusion has received an enthusiastic response from the public, including in the United States, generally considered the most religious of all industrialized countries. Dawkins book has so far spent 24 weeks in *New York Times* bestseller top 15 for nonfiction. During a book tour in the US last year, Dawkins drew large and sympathetic crowds, including at some states (such as Kansas), more often associated with religious fundamentalism.

Some of the interest generated by Dawkins's book is no doubt due to the author, whose books, including *The Selfish Gene*, have become standard texts in evolutionary biology. Whether or not one agrees with everything he says about the theory of evolution, it is certainly true that Dawkins is a gifted writer with a capacity to explain complicated issues in direct and clear language.

However, there is more involved than this. There is a hunger for alternative perspectives, for views that challenge supposedly universally accepted propositions. There is a latent and widespread oppositional sentiment, and Dawkins's book appeals to a deep hostility to the religious fundamentalism and backwardness that increasingly characterize governments in Britain, the US and internationally.

Against the "appeasement" of religion

There are certain severe limitations to Dawkins's presentation of religion, which will be discussed below. However, perhaps most laudatory in the book is its willingness to challenge not only religious orthodoxy of various stripes, but also those within the scientific community who insist upon attempting to reconcile religion and science. The perspective of these thinkers (who Dawkins dubs the "Neville Chamberlain School of Evolutionists") is that science can best be defended from fundamentalists (such as those who want to ban evolution from public school curricula) by accommodating non-fundamentalist strands of religion. This is done, according to these thinkers, by insisting that religion and science need not be in conflict, that perhaps they are complementary, or at least address different questions.

The late evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould has been closely associated with this perspective, arguing that religion and science occupy what he called "non-overlapping magisteria," using a verbose term to cloak an extremely superficial idea. "To cite old clichés," Gould once wrote, as quoted by Dawkins, "science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, and religion how to go to heaven." Dawkins gives the adequate reply: "This sounds terrific—right up until you give it a moment's thought."

One of Dawkins central claims is, "The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice—or not yet—a decided one. So also is the truth or falsehood of every one of the miracle stories that religions rely upon to impress multitudes of the faithful." In other words, if God exists and is anything more than a vacuous concept, he/she/it must have some effect on the world. This, certainly, is the belief of most religiously-minded people, who believe that God intervenes in the world, performs miracles, answers prayers, etc. Dawkins cites one experiment finding that patients who receive prayers don't actually do better than patients who don't receive them. This may seem a somewhat silly experiment (which was actually performed by supporters of religion) but it does illustrate the basic point—if religious phenomena exist, they can be tested scientifically.

While this is an important observation, there is something missing in Dawkins's presentation of science and religion. He treats the "God hypothesis" as basically equivalent to the claim, for example, that a teapot is in orbit around Mars (a famous proposition given by Bertrand Russell, who pointed out that though he may not technically *know* that such a teapot does not exist, he is not obliged to be agnostic about it). His ultimate justification for his atheism is that it is *very probable* that God does not exist, just as it is *very probable* that there is no teapot orbiting Mars. The preponderance of evidence indicates, says Dawkins, that God does not exist. This "99 percent atheism" actually leaves the door open for skepticism if seriously challenged.

The God hypothesis, however, is a very different type of hypothesis from the teapot hypothesis. Indeed, it is not really a hypothesis at all, since it involves at its core the claim that the process of scientific investigation—including the testing of hypotheses—cannot arrive at truth (or at least the complete truth). The religious proposition involves the belief that there exists truth outside the possibility of scientific investigation, and therefore the statement that there can be no scientific justification for religious belief is—from the point of view of the religious individual—beside the point. One is merely question begging by asking, "But what are your scientific grounds for your non-belief in science?"

The conflict between science and religion lies at a more fundamental level than Dawkins's empiricism. The foundation for atheist belief is not really that God is an unlikely proposition (though the hypothesis, if taken as a scientific hypothesis, is the most unlikely hypothesis one can come up with), but that atheism flows from a materialist world-outlook—a philosophical position that holds that everything that exists consists of the law-governed development of matter in its various forms. Since matter is law-governed, it can be subject to scientific investigation, and at the same time science requires the presumption that the objects of its investigation follow causal relationships. This, ultimately, is the central conflict between religion and science, which is conflict between materialism and idealism, rationality and irrationality.

The proof of the materialist world outlook lies in the entire historical experience of mankind in its interaction with nature, particularly in the

extraordinary development of scientific knowledge over the past several hundred years. The proof of materialism is demonstrated in this historical practice, whereby mankind has not only formed hypotheses, but realized these hypotheses in the transformation of the material world.

It has become a fad among those who argue that science and religion are compatible, while also arguing strongly for the teaching of evolution in schools (and perhaps most prominent among these is Eugenie Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education), to make a distinction between *methodological naturalism* and *metaphysical naturalism*. Science, according to these thinkers, depends on methodological naturalism—the assumption during scientific experimentation that there exists nothing outside the material world of cause and effect. This is distinct from the claim that there is *actually* nothing outside of this material world of cause and effect.

Such an argument, taken up by those who would defend science education, in fact undermines the foundation of science altogether, since it eliminates any solid connection between scientific investigation and reality. There may exist a God—or any other supernatural entity—but science can never discover this underlying truth (what Kant would term the *noumena*), since science relies on the assumption of causal relationships and natural law-governed processes, which supposedly may or may not allow humans to arrive at a complete understanding of the universe.

The ability of science to predict and transform the material world demonstrates, however, that it is not only a useful method, but a means of arriving at an understanding of the real world. Through a rigorous system of observation, reason, hypotheses and experimentation, science allows humans to arrive at truths about the world as it is “in itself.” It is a systematic means of testing the truth of our conceptions through practical interaction with the world. Its rationality is what distinguishes science from religion, which in one way or another relies on the irrational, on superstition, on “faith.”

Religious belief and social history

Dawkins does not deal seriously with any of these philosophical issues, and his defense of atheism, while important, is ultimately unconvincing and superficial. He devotes a considerable amount of space in his book to discussing the various “proofs” for the existence of God (the cosmological argument, the argument from design, etc.), all of which have been refuted a hundred times already, and to which Dawkins adds nothing new. Most of these proofs (such as the assertion that every effect must have a cause, a recession that must lead ultimately to an uncaused cause, which is God) are not remotely convincing to anyone who does not already believe in God, and their refutation will not in general be convincing to anyone who does.

On the more frequently invoked “argument from design,” Dawkins points out that Darwin put an end to this proof in his theory of evolution, which explained how complex, apparently intelligently-designed organisms, are the product of a long process of natural selection.

In discussing the origins and perpetuation of religious beliefs, much more is required than a review of the various proofs for God’s existence. A scientist must also examine why these beliefs arose and why they are perpetuated. Here Dawkins enters what is for him somewhat foreign territory, and he frequently stumbles, due in large part to his failure to take seriously the role of social relations in shaping and perpetuating religious belief.

To adopt a materialist, scientific, approach to religion is first of all to recognize that religion is fundamentally a product of society. Culture is a social, not an individual, phenomenon, and in the process of his development the individual adopts in one form or another ideas present in the broader social milieu. A materialist explanation of religious belief must therefore be rooted in a materialist approach to society. As with many natural scientists, however, Dawkins does not carry through his

materialism to social and cultural history. He ends up resorting to various idealistic explanations for religious belief.

Historical materialism—that is, Marxism—sees ideology, including religion, as rooted in the process of production and the social relations humans enter into in order to produce. As Marx wrote in his famous preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”

On the one hand, religion is perpetuated by the ruling elite during different stages of historical development as a means of justifying particular social arrangements. In the Middle Ages, for example, the Catholic Church in Europe was one of the principal institutional and ideological props of feudalism, not to mention one of the largest landowners. With control over the productive forces, the ruling elite, in alliance with the church, could perpetuate religious belief through myriad means. In addition to justifying various hierarchies, religion has been used to tell the poor and exploited that salvation lies in the next world, rather than this one.

On the other hand, religion frequently plays the role of “opiate,” i.e., it provides comfort for the poor and exploited, a hope for salvation and a better life in another world. For this reason, religious ideology can have a receptive response among broader sections of the population. Religion, Marx wrote in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, is the “sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions.”

Of course, the history of religion, like that of any ideological phenomenon, is complex. Religious ideology takes on a semi-independent existence, with its own internal logic. There is also a trend in religious evolution. As humans come to understand the natural world through the process of scientific explanation, the concept of God has tended to become more abstract, more removed from day-to-day events. Religion tends to occupy the realms of human experience that scientific knowledge has yet to penetrate, though this is not an entirely linear trajectory. In general, however, social progress has been associated with the advance of science and the retreat of religion.

The point is that this explanation of religion imbues any discussion of religion with the social content necessary for its comprehension. Dawkins completely dismisses this perspective. “Nor are Darwinians satisfied by political explanations, such as ‘religion is a tool used by the ruling class to subjugate the underclass,’” he writes. “It is surely true that black slaves in America were consoled by promises of another life, which blunted their dissatisfaction with this one and thereby benefited their owners. The question of whether religions are deliberately designed by cynical priests or rulers is an interesting one, to which historians should attend. But it is not, in itself, a Darwinian question. The Darwinians still want to know why people are *vulnerable* to the charms of religion and therefore open to exploitation by priests, politicians and kings.”

This is a fair enough point when discussing the historical origins of religious belief in the evolution of man (though the talk of “cynical priests and rulers” is a mechanical and one-sided presentation of the Marxist theory of religion, which Dawkins here alludes to without naming). Given the way in which religious beliefs of some sort or another have emerged on numerous occasions in almost every society, it is certainly legitimate to ask if there is something in our biological makeup that predisposes human society to adopt religious conceptions, even if one insists that the social dimension takes precedence in man’s later development. There might be other ideologies that could serve the same social function as religion does, so one is led to ask why religion predominates. Dawkins would like to discuss what it is in our evolutionary heritage that makes religious explanations particularly attractive, that makes religious ideology

particularly universal. We will return to the limitations of this approach below, after first going into some detail about Dawkins's views on the question that he would like to focus on.

In giving his own answer, Dawkins notes that an evolutionary explanation of religious belief need not postulate an evolutionary benefit for religion itself. "I am one of an increasing number of biologists who see religion as a *by-product* of something else," he writes. "More generally, I believe that we who speculate about Darwinian survival value need to 'think by-product.' When we ask about the survival value of anything, we may be asking the wrong question."

Dawkins proposal for an evolutionary foundation of religious belief is not particularly profound: We have evolved to believe what we are told by our elders. This is beneficial, Dawkins says, because generally our elders are right, and those who believed what they were told benefited from the accumulated experience of their elders. This may be true, but it leaves open the question as to why it was religion that has been passed on from elders to children, rather than something else. The fact that Dawkins does not consider this obvious objection to his theory is an indication that he has not really thought through this question very seriously.

More promising is the theory presented by Daniel Dennett that religion is fundamentally misplaced intentionality. Humans evolved to interpret certain actions, particularly actions that they did not understand, to be the product of intentional agents. This was useful when dealing with actual intentional agents, because it allowed early humans to better predict the behavior of animals or fellow humans (a particularly useful quality as social relations developed). Religion is the imputation of intentionality on the natural world: It is a god that causes the rain to fall and the rivers to flood; it is a god that is the cause of life and death, etc.

While these various proposals are interesting, they are not particularly useful unless they are rooted in an investigation of the scientific evidence, including archaeology. As of yet, both Dennett and Dawkins have been engaging largely in armchair evolutionary biology in discussing this question.

More fundamentally, theories such as those proposed by Dawkins and Dennett do not further our understanding of the history of religion, which is really the most important question in understanding its persistence and nature today. Supposing that religion had an initial impulse in misplaced intentionality or in the tendency of children to believe what they are told, this does not explain why it should continue even when science has led us to the conclusion that this intentionality is in fact misplaced, and does not explain why children continue to be indoctrinated in the existence of fictional beings. It also does not explain why religion has evolved as it has over the years.

To deal with this question, Dawkins (and Dennett) resort to the theory of the "meme," a supposed cultural equivalent of the gene. A meme is a purported "unit of cultural inheritance," and certain memes have a greater tendency to reproduce themselves, etc. A more detailed critique can be found in James Brookfield's review of Dennett's book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a natural phenomena*. Here it is sufficient to note that by locating the basis for the spread of an ideology in the idea itself (rather than the society in which the idea emerges and spreads), the proponents of meme theory generally fall into an idealist interpretation of history, one that has great difficulty in explaining what accounts for ideological development.

Dawkins confesses the difficulty he has in explaining cultural evolution when he writes about the "moral zeitgeist," which he says is "a mysterious consensus, which changes over the decades" and accounts for changes in moral or religious conceptions. He has no real explanation for the changes in this "moral zeitgeist," but, Dawkins writes, "The onus is not on me to answer."

If all Dawkins aimed to do was provide a logical proof for the non-existence of God, or propose theories for why religion may have emerged

in the development of early human society, we might accept this statement. But in fact Dawkins aims to do much more. He wants to tackle contemporary social and political issues, and without any serious basis for explaining why religions persist he is left floundering, often finding his way into quite reactionary positions.

Religion and politics

The problem Dawkins and others confront in explaining religious and ideological change lies ultimately in their refusal to take up Marxist theory. Dawkins refers to Marx only once in passing, and deals with class theory only in the paragraph quoted above. For Dawkins, religion has no social or political significance. He treats it merely as an idea without any real connections to the more material conditions of life.

He writes, to cite one example, "The Afghan Taliban and the American Taliban [Christian fundamentalism in the United States] are good examples of what happens when people take their scriptures literally and seriously." Certainly scripture plays a role, but both the Afghan Taliban and the "American Taliban" are products of deeper social relations in their respective societies, and in fact the differences between these societies impart different characters to the respective ideologies.

This approach to religion has definite political consequences. Early on in the book, Dawkins discusses the case of the anti-Islamic cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, which produced sharp protests in February 2006. Press and governments around the world denounced the protests as attacks on free speech, and defended those who decided to publish the bigoted cartoons as proponents of free speech.

Dawkins accepts this interpretation entirely. One need not be a supporter of the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism to recognize that what was really involved was not a defense of free speech by a Danish newspaper, but a deliberate provocation designed to whip up anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe and elsewhere. The protests, on the other hand, reflected anger that was more than merely religious in character. There is seething resentment against the United States and European governments to their policies in countries composed largely of Muslims.

The fact that discontent in many regions of the Middle East and other areas often takes a religious character is also a product of historical and political factors. The perspective of secular bourgeois nationalist movements has failed utterly, secular socialist and internationalist movements have been systematically betrayed by Stalinism, and the United States and other powers have worked for a long time to undermine secular movements of all stripes because they have viewed these movements as more of a threat to their interests than religions movements. Both Osama bin Laden and the Taliban are in part products of the American intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when the US waged a proxy war against the Soviet Union by generously funding the most extreme Islamic fundamentalists. On the other hand, a movement such as Hamas in the Palestinian territories—which is very different phenomenon from Al Qaeda—has gained traction in part because it provides critical social resources and services not provided through any other channels, particularly as the Palestinian Liberation Organization has moved increasingly to the right, accommodating itself to American imperialism.

Dawkins's blindness to the social and political roots of religious ideology leads him toward quite reactionary positions. He goes so far as to quote approvingly the words of Patrick Sookhdeo, director of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, who has written: "Could it be that the young men who committed suicide were neither on the fringes of Muslim society in Britain, nor following an eccentric and extremist interpretation of their faith, but rather that they came from the very core of the Muslim community and were motivated by a mainstream interpretation of Islam?"

One rubs ones eyes in disbelief when one reads the uncritical representation of these words by Dawkins. The Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity is an evangelical outfit whose main aim is to

promote anti-Islamic chauvinism, which is precisely the aim of Sookhdeo's sentence quoted above. One might give Dawkins the benefit of the doubt in assuming that he quotes without real knowledge of who he is quoting, but regardless it is certainly a misfortune that Dawkins, an outspoken opponent of the war in Iraq and an opponent of Christian ideology as much as Islamic, should lend his authority to such a vile perspective. But such is the consequence of remaining blind to the social and political issues that lie behind most religious questions. Approaching such matters from an idealist perspective, Dawkins is easily led to the conclusion that Islamic fundamentalists must simply be a product of Islam as a religion, and this leads him into the same bed with such utter reactionaries as Sookhdeo.

There is a tendency among the advocates of atheism—and this is perhaps most clear in the works of Sam Harris, who Dawkins also quotes approvingly on several occasions—to adopt a contemptuous attitude toward the religiously-minded population, which is still a majority of the working class around the world. Since religion is conceived of only as an ideological phenomenon, it is ultimately the population itself that is to blame for belief in religion and whatever policies are justified in the name of religion. Not only does this often lead to right-wing political positions, it also fails utterly in offering a suggestion for how the influence of religion can be diminished.

Marxists too want to undermine the influence of religious movements, in the Middle East, in the United States, and around the world. Religion is inherently anti-scientific. It cloaks the real nature of society and repression, and it often serves as an ideological buttress for social reaction and militarism.

However, to realize this aim requires that one first of all comprehend the actual social and political basis of religious belief. As Marx wrote in the same work quoted above, “The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their conditions is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*... Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law*, and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.”

In other words, the fight for scientific consciousness among masses of people, and with this a materialist world outlook, must be bound up with the attempt to explain to people the real nature of society and oppression. It must be bound up with a political struggle and a socialist movement.



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