

GÁBOR ITTZÉS

THE UNDESIRABILITY OF RELIGION  
AND THE IMPROBABILITY OF GOD'S EXISTENCE:  
A REVIEW ESSAY

**DAWKINS, R. (2006) *The God Delusion* (London etc.: Bantam) [6]+406 pp., 24 cm, ISBN-13 978-0593055489, £20.<sup>1</sup>**

Is atheism good for mental health? Absolutely if you think, like Richard Dawkins, that religion is but a form of insanity. His latest book, *The God Delusion* (2006) purports to be a frontal attack on religion in all its forms, Christian or Muslim, polytheistic or trinitarian, fundamentalist or moderate alike. He takes issue not only with creationism and the religious right, considering them, as many European mainstream or liberal Christians do, an aberration. For Dawkins, religion itself is an aberration, no matter in what form or guise it might appear. Religious education, for him, is a form of mental child abuse. The attack is carefully orchestrated, the evidence assiduously gathered, the arguments tirelessly expounded. The message, of course, is not entirely negative. Dawkins strives not only to abolish religion but to raise consciousness for secular humanism or, as he prefers to call it, atheism. He hopes to convince readers that religion can be abandoned, that it is not too late to turn their backs on their childhood indoctrination and start breathing the fresh air of science. The whole case is presented in language that is rhetorically powerful and wittily entertaining, passionately engaged and eminently readable.

Richard Dawkins (b. 1941), an evolutionary biologist by trade, is one of Britain's leading intellectuals and arguably the most outspoken secular humanist today. Recently, he has been selected as one of the world's one hundred most influential people by *Time* magazine (BEHE 2007), while in a poll organised by *Prospect* and *Foreign Policy* he was elected, after Noam Chomsky and Umberto Eco, among the top three public intellectuals in the world.<sup>2</sup> He studied at Oxford, taught in California in the 1960s and worked with Nikolaas Tinbergen, who later won the Nobel Prize. He first acquired international renown by his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, which, still in print, has been translated into more than two dozen languages and followed by numerous best-selling titles. A Fellow of both the Royal Society of Literature (since 1997)

<sup>1</sup> The paperback edition (ISBN-13 978-0552773317) was published by Black Swan (London) in May 2007 for £8.99. It includes a new preface (2007, 13–22) where Dawkins responds to several criticisms. The issues considered are mostly circumstantial rather than substantial (like his polemic style or the degree of danger fundamentalism poses), and his approach is repetitive rather than constructive, contributing little to the emergence of a genuine dialogue. My review will focus on the text of the original hardcover edition.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Prospect/FP Global Public Intellectual Poll – Results' (2005).

and the Royal Society (since 2001), he is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, where he has been teaching since 1970. The professorship, endowed with £1.5 Million, is so conceived that the incumbent is freed from the bulk of the usual academic commitments like lecturing to undergraduates or advising doctoral students, not to mention administrative responsibilities. They can, instead, devote their time, energies and creativity to the popularisation of the scientific understanding of the world through public lectures, books, television and radio productions and whatever media they find suitable and effective. Dawkins' performance, whom Simonyi explicitly recommended to be the first to hold the chair, has certainly not been disappointing in that regard. Since his inauguration, he has published five books, including *The Ancestor's Tale* (2004), which many consider his magnum opus – and is not likely to be superseded by *The God Delusion* despite the wider circulation of the latter title. In addition, he has delivered innumerable public lectures all over the world, especially in Britain and the United States, and wrote and presented documentaries for British television.

While his wide popularity and the remarkable circulation of his books are a living testimony not only to the liberating power of his ideas but also to the appeal and efficacy of his style, he is anything but genteel. He is a dyed-in-the-wool controversialist who has been called, not without justification, Darwin's rottweiler.<sup>3</sup> Dawkins himself has acknowledged the drawbacks and potentially self-defeating nature of his aggressive argumentativeness (HALL 2005), but that does not keep him from charging forth as he is wont in *The God Delusion*, the author's best ever selling book to date, of which every British MP received a courtesy copy last April through a popular initiative (RANDERSON 2007). It has attracted tremendous attention, stirred up a lively public debate, and elicited a wide variety of responses ranging from worshipping the ground he walks on to the plain abusive in tone. It has been, rightly, taken to task for inadequately understanding religion, but has often been held accountable to standards of a specifically theological literacy which Dawkins could not care less about. Giving a comprehensive account of his arguments and engaging many of them critically and in detail, I will argue that the book's success or failure must be evaluated primarily on its own terms.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The phrase has achieved wider circulation once it was popularised by *Discover* magazine (HALL 2005), which picked it up from Dawkins' Oxford colleague, immensely prolific biologist-turned-theologian Alaister MCGRATH (2005), who has now established himself as one of the most visible mainstream opponents of Dawkins and has already responded to *The God Delusion* in a book-long essay with his wife (2007). Though variously attributed, the term 'Darwin's rottweiler' seems to have made its first chronologically attested appearance in Charles Simonyi's original recommendation of Dawkins to the newly founded Oxford chair (DOWNEY 1996). The allusion is to an epithet the first major spokesperson for Darwin's new theory, T.H. Huxley earned in the 1860s when he was nicknamed 'Darwin's bulldog'.

<sup>4</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to Geza Hrivnak, who was not only the first to draw my attention to Dawkins' book but also presented me with a copy of it.

### 1. The existence of God as a scientific question

The Preface announces the authorial intention to convince religious readers to abandon their convictions or, minimally, to liberate those who are already unhappy with their religious past but somehow lack the courage to break away from it. Dawkins sets out to raise consciousness in four ways, to atheism as a realistic and fulfilling option, to the explanatory power of science, to language usage in religious labelling of children, and to atheist pride. This loose list of four largely disparate consciousness-raisers vaguely connected by the thin thread of religion provides a dismayingly accurate foretaste of the book. The ten chapters that follow are much better organised than might be expected from this statement of purpose, but the arguments are often just as confused and specious as this manifesto allows one to suspect. And the book hardly ever aspires higher than the partisan agenda sketched out here. The perspective remains just as skewed throughout as on the opening pages where a world without religion would entail ‘no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no . . .’ (1) – the list goes on for another six lines and more but fails to include, say, the university that grew out of medieval cathedral schools, or a single item of religious art, just to name one more (vast) area where religion has produced results that even committed secularists might (and usually do) value highly. Dawkins himself will turn out to be such an atheist of cultivated taste (86–87), which will only reinforce an early suspicion of the reader, one of the most alarming aspects of the book: Is Dawkins consciously selling out to propagandistic efficiency either in the hope of higher income (the book *has* sold incredibly well) or greater popularity and popular influence (reaching a larger portion of a semi-educated audience)?

The relatively short opening chapter offers some essential terminological ground clearing. Confusingly enough, *religion* can mean a number of things and may include a transcendent awe inspired by nature as well as a supernaturalist view of the world. To forestall later confusion, Dawkins limits the use of words like *God* and *religion* to the latter context. Defending Einstein against attempts of supernaturalist conscription, he presents ‘Einsteinian religion’ as a form of philosophical naturalism (as opposed to *supernaturalism*). Ultimately, the naturalist/supernaturalist dichotomy is decisive, for whatever form the former may take or whatever adjectives it may acquire such as ‘poetic’, ‘philosophical’ or ‘pantheistic’, it remains synonymous with atheism and irreconcilably opposed to supernaturalism and ‘religion’ in its popular sense. Later Dawkins will therefore say that religion in ‘the Einsteinian sense . . . we can all trivially subscribe to’ (153). While the beauty of the natural world does deserve respect, the second half of the chapter goes on to argue that religion does not – yet it routinely receives. Elaborating chiefly on the sad episode of the hostilities stirred up in the Muslim world by the Muhammad caricatures in 2006, Dawkins declares his bafflement at the unconditional, unfounded and undue reverence religious conviction of any and every kind gets, even from enlightened secularists. For his own part, he is only willing to go along as far as he is prepared to respect anyone’s theory about the beauty of his wife and the cleverness of his children.

In the chapters that follow, the reader might wonder about Dawkins' social skills if he indeed exhibits, in place of natural politeness demanded by common courtesy, only as much civility to people of his acquaintance (and their family members) as he bears towards the religious sensitivities of his opponents. More importantly, while he is certainly right to define his terms and is entitled to sharpen rather than water down the issue by offering narrow and polarised interpretations of categories that are, in fact, rather complex and fluid, Dawkins begins a crucial oversimplification as early as this chapter. It will ultimately end in the reduction of religion to the 'Abrahamic religions of the book' at best, and to fundamentalist Christianity at worst. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are highly developed and sophisticated religious systems which may account for a great many adherents in today's world, and for the vast majority of Dawkins' dissatisfaction with religion, but they represent only a small segment of the phenomenon of religion. Dawkins is, of course, no expert in that field, nor does he pretend to be, but the rather thin base that his narrow interpretation of some key terms offers can hardly bear the weight of his robust and global antireligious claims. This danger is exacerbated as the book unfolds.

The core of Dawkins' argument appears in chapters 3 and 4, to which chapter 2 'The God Hypothesis' provides an immediate prelude with the thesis that the existence of God, defined as 'a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us' (31), is a scientific question. The chapter begins with a short gesture towards polytheism in which Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the Roman Catholic deification 'in all but name' (34) of the Virgin Mary, and the pantheon of saints all get their fair share of ridicule. The Olympic and Germanic gods, not to mention Buddhism or Hinduism, come out almost dignified in comparison. But it would be a mistake to take this section too seriously since Dawkins aims avowedly no higher than 'to cover [him]self against a charge of neglect' (35) and states his global claim fairly, 'I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented' (36). Instead of engaging the richness of religious traditions, he is satisfied to single out the god of the Abrahamic religions, especially that of Christianity, and devote the rest of the book to attacking him (advisedly using the masculine form to reference a '(to put it mildly) aggressively male' deity, 35). The total claim quite naturally includes deism, though its superiority over theism is freely recognised, and this point allows Dawkins, bearing especially the significant American segment of his audience in mind, to elaborate, beyond their generally assumed deism, on the committed secularism of the Founding Fathers. The popular culture of today's America with its widespread religious sentiment would make them turn in their graves. This is not the land they once envisioned.

The care Dawkins takes to cover polytheism in his attack and not to leave any form of religion unassaulted is somewhat bizarre. It looks as if he was striving to maximise the scope of his abrasiveness, for he shows no inclination to actually understand or describe the great variety and richness of religions but is content to lump everything together and reduce it to the theistic paradigm of the Abrahamic religions.

Dawkins acknowledges agnosticism, the profession of ignorance and the withholding of final judgement for lack of evidence, as a legitimate stance on certain issues but argues that the God hypothesis is not one of them. He attacks scientists and free thinkers who bend over backwards and declare science's incompetence in the 'ultimate questions' and hand them over to the expertise of theologians.<sup>5</sup> This model of NOMA or non-overlapping magisteria (the term was coined by fellow evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould, with whom Dawkins stood in gentle rivalry until the former's death in 2002) he finds unacceptable. Rather, theology, Dawkins suggests very strongly, has no expertise whatsoever, and the only kind of agnosticism that the God hypothesis deserves is temporary and practical. In principle, the question is a scientific one and can be settled like any other. In practice, Dawkins knows full well, it is not so easy to gather evidence. So for the time being we can estimate the *likelihood* that the hypothesis is true. The argument is only presented in a preliminary fashion in this chapter, but the essential point is clear. That we cannot (yet) decide the question with certainty does not imply that the probability of the answer either way is fifty per cent. Far from it – as Dawkins will try to further demonstrate in chapter 4. Here, however, he is content, on the one hand, to show by way of the botched 'Great Prayer Experiment' that has failed to provide experimental verification of the effectivity of intercessory prayers in a somatic healing process, that a methodologically acceptable scientific approach to the question of miracles, and thereby to the existence of an interventionist, that is, theistic, God, can only produce negative evidence.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, as is shown by our improved estimate of the probability of extraterrestrial life, 'science can make at least probabilistic inroads into the territory of agnosticism' (71).

Dawkins' insight that the undecidability of an issue does not inherently imply a fifty per cent probability provides an important clarification of the matter. Nothing, however, follows from it for an actual probability estimate. What kind of evidence is admitted, how it is weighed and processed are questions to be further considered. Dawkins insists, as well he might, that God's existence is a scientific question. The problem arises when he confuses science with truth itself and takes the scientific quest to be the only legitimate way to find it. Rather, the way of science is one, admittedly a widely applicable and highly effective, way to find out truth about the natural world for specific purposes. There are other ways like the poetic-literary, aesthetic, moral, philosophical and the like – not to mention the religious one. To claim that the existence of God is *not* a scientific question is simply to say that science is not the best way (or that it is a rather inefficient way) to find a relevant answer. In this context, science, religion, philosophy, literature, morality etc. are best seen as approaches to the world, independent of the phenomena on which they are brought to bear. The

<sup>5</sup> The name he invents for them, 'The Neville Chamberlain school of evolutionists' (66), implies, through the British Prime Minister's well-known policy of appeasement of Hitler, a subtle but unambiguous analogy, if not equation, of religion with Nazism.

<sup>6</sup> Dawkins actually makes the additional point, and perhaps that *is* his chief concern, that theologians and religious believers will disregard such counterevidence as irrelevant, yet a similar aloofness would be unthinkable should the experimental evidence turn out in favour of religion.

same issue can be considered from their varying perspectives – and the answers will vary accordingly, and people will find them relevant and helpful to varying degrees. There is no other way than this pragmatic verification with hindsight to favour one or the other approach. None can be a priori or forever excluded from the range of legitimate options. God *qua* scientific question will produce certain kinds of answers, possibly largely or wholly negative, but only an arbitrary fiat may assert them as alone valid or acceptable. That, however, is a level of reflection never attained by Dawkins. In other words, he flatly confuses science with the philosophy of science and the scientific paradigm with epistemology at large. His epistemological primitivism is betrayed by his grinning challenge, ‘If he existed and chose to reveal it, God himself could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favour’ (50). I wonder what Dawkins would accept as a revelation noisy and unequivocal enough to convince him that God did exist.

The third chapter is devoted to ‘Arguments for God’s Existence’ where a great variety of Christian apologetic reasoning is reviewed. Dawkins dismisses such approaches in all their forms. He begins with the five proofs developed by Thomas Aquinas followed by Anselm of Canterbury’s ontological argument and points out their fallacies or unwarranted assumptions (e.g. the infinite regress of Aquinas’ first three arguments or the category mistake of the existential attribute in the Anselmian claim). The argument from beauty is rejected as a non sequitur and the argument from personal experience as convincing only to those undergoing such experience whose origin is nevertheless to be located in the brain’s powerful simulation software and which is, hence, to be classified as illusion or hallucination. Dawkins rightly invokes David Hume and Immanuel Kant, whose work indeed constitutes an ineludible challenge to traditional arguments for God’s existence, but his cavalier dismissal of vast tracts of analytic philosophical development in the interpretation of religious experience since the 1970s seriously raises the question not so much of a misjudgement of the contemporary scene as of a vast gap in his familiarity with relevant intellectual trends. Names like those of William P. ALSTON (1991), Alvin Plantinga or Nicholas Wolterstorff never once occur in the book; Richard Swinburne is the only thinker in the field with whose work Dawkins seems to be acquainted.

The argument from scripture which, incidentally, has nothing to do with the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation churches but refers to an attempted logical demonstration of Jesus’ lordship from biblical historical evidence, is challenged not only on the ground of its logical fallacy (Jesus might have been simply mistaken, an option plainly excluded from the ‘Lunatic, Liar, or Lord’ trichotomy) but also on the basis of the contradictions in, and the historical unreliability of, the biblical gospel narratives.

Dawkins is, of course, right to caution against the fallacy of reading the Bible as a straightforward source of historical information. It is a pity, however, that his biblical scholarship does not even rise to the level of sophistication of a term paper in an introductory New Testament class. And he pays a high price for it because he loses the educated part of his audience much before he goes as far as suggesting, though in a carefully worded phrase which reduces the matter to belletristic sophistry vacuous

of any robust content, that '[i]t is even possible to mount a serious, though not widely supported, historical case that Jesus never lived at all' (97). He is wise to ultimately shrink back from such a dubious claim although equating the truth value of the canonical gospels with that of the Arthur cycle (96) does little to his credit and leaves but scraps to save of the reputation of his biblical scholarship. Even that is demolished before the book is over for, unfortunately, this is not an occasional slip (or rather, a series of occasional slips) but the actual level of Dawkins' expertise. He will briefly repeat the suggestion that the very existence of Jesus of Nazareth is questionable (250); he equates Judaism with Old Testament religion (37) and attributes Hebrews to Paul (253), whom he takes to be the founder of Christianity (37). Apparently oblivious to the vast and flourishing field of historical Jesus studies, the only scholar Dawkins quotes, repeatedly, in the relevant context is Geza Vermes, now Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies at Oxford. Worse still, he cites, with no obvious indication of tongue in cheek, *Ken's Guide to the Bible* as an authority on biblical scholarship (258). In the light of such evidence, one wonders what readership Dawkins seeks to cater for in his book.

Picking up a theme from chapter 1, the next section argues, against Christian apologists who like to point to Newton, Kepler and other distinguished scientists, that the overwhelming majority of today's intellectual elite, as exemplified by members of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States and of the Royal Society in Britain, are overwhelmingly atheists, and goes as far as suggesting that religiousness is negatively correlated with intelligence. He buttresses his claims with the findings of several studies. Just to quote one figure, on the level of a meta-analysis, of 43 studies over the last eighty years on the correlation between education or intelligence with religious belief, 'all but four found an inverse connection' (103). There is, of course, no correlation, between the intellectual elite's religious convictions and the truth of religion, let alone the existence of God, but Dawkins need not be seriously chastised here on account of his indulgence in such fallacious reasoning, for he can be charitably read as merely demolishing an equally weak counterargument.

Pascal's famous wager that one should believe just in case there is a God is dismissed as an argument, at best, for pretending belief in God – but that is in vain in face of an omniscient God. Dawkins is not inclined to take the whole proposal too seriously, but it gives him occasion to air his misgivings about the special status of *belief* in a god. He seems to find it both illogical and repulsive that faith should be singled out as all decisive. He finds kindness, generosity, humility, even honest scepticism better candidates for reward. No wonder that the question will later repeatedly resurface, for it is a stumbling block for Dawkins' reductionist epistemology which bedevils the whole book because he is never able to fully grasp, let alone solve, the problem.

Finally, a discussion of a recent attempt to put a (high) number on the probability of God's existence through the application of Bayes' Theorem, used in probability theory to calculate conditional and marginal probabilities of stochastic events, which Dawkins criticises for feeding arbitrary estimates into the formula, naturally sets the stage for a transition into chapter 4, his own presentation of the *improbability* of God's existence. The overall success of Dawkins' critical arguments will largely depend on

one's philosophical presuppositions and theological commitments, but it would be unfair to deny that Dawkins, a born polemicist, is good at demolishing counterarguments. Most of the time he does that insightfully, passionately and entertainingly.

## 2. The improbability of God's existence

On the threefold premises, then, that all supernatural religion is predicated on belief in an interventionist, miracle-working divine creator, that the existence (or otherwise) and workings of this god fall within the purview of science, and that all arguments in support of the theistic hypothesis can be (and have been) demolished, Dawkins proceeds to mount his counterclaim. He sets up chapter 4 as his trump card of an argument for the extreme improbability of God's existence. What he delivers instead is largely a negative argument, the dissection of the creationists' argument from design. His own thesis, although repeatedly stated, is presented rather sketchily, leaving much to be desired. On the whole, the chapter remains a promise until the reader must realise that no fulfilment is to be expected any more, and instead of a crowning achievement a major disappointment is dished up for her.

The creationist<sup>7</sup> argument from design 'always takes the same general form' (113). It picks out a natural phenomenon, glories in its complexity, emphasises its statistical improbability and challenges the Darwinian to explain its origin. Dawkins counters this strategy by cleverly exposing and questioning its underlying assumptions. Chance and design are a false alternative in the improbability debate partly because they do not explain anything (the one merely restates the problem, the other begs the question) and partly because they categorically overlook natural selection which is a third, and the only valid, option. But even if the creationist argument were valid (formally coherent), it would still be unsound because of a false premise. The phenomena selected are not irreducibly complex as Dawkins demonstrates elegantly and eloquently. This is his home turf, and he delivers an impressive performance. Example after example he reviews and demolishes the creationists' evidence. Natural selection, which explains the emergence of breathtaking complexity of biological life on Earth from its simple beginnings is 'a cumulative process, which breaks the problem of improbability up into small pieces' that are no longer prohibitively improbable (121). That is the option constantly ignored or denied by creationists.

So far Dawkins has given us a fine analysis and convincing critique of creationist logic. When he moves on to the last stage of his critical work, problems begin to mount. The origin of life, another favourite with creationists, is qualitatively different from 'run-of-the-mill evolution' (135) because it was a singular event and as such it

<sup>7</sup> It is clear that creationists championing intelligent design are Dawkins' main target. I shall return to this point later but it is perhaps best to interpret Dawkins' 'creationism' broadly and not limit it to biblical literalists but so as to include in it all forms of theism confessing a creator God. A few pages into the chapter Dawkins declares his bafflement at those theists who consider Darwinian natural selection the way God achieves his creation (118).

can be extremely unlikely and may still have occurred. One explanation why it did is a divine creator – another, preferred by Dawkins, is the anthropic principle. It is an *ex post facto* argument stating that however improbable it is that the universe should support life, and life as complex as it is in its human form, we are entitled to take that ever so slight a chance seriously for here we are contemplating the question. On a planetary scale, in order to support life, Earth needs a sun that is not a binary, a well-placed ‘umbrella’ planet (Jupiter) to shelter it from asteroids, a nearly circular orbit, a distance from the Sun allowing for the presence of liquid water, an adequate moon stabilising its axis of rotation and the like. Each factor is rather unlikely in itself, their combination a good deal more so, yet we cannot deny that this improbable constellation does occur for we would not be here otherwise. Similarly, on a grander scale, the fundamental physical constants like strong force, gravity or the speed of light are such that they allow for life to develop. Were they but slightly altered, the universe would be so vastly different that life could never have evolved in it. Dawkins goes on to offer a variety of cosmological hypotheses like ‘multiverse’ theories or ‘daughter universes through black holes’ to explain why that is so (rather than blame it on a ‘Divine Knob-Twiddler’, 143), but the explanation ultimately comes down to the anthropic principle. No matter how unlikely, we know it is not impossible because we are here. If the emergence of life on a planet has a statistical possibility of one to a billion, an estimate Dawkins works with but takes to be far too long odds, life would still have emerged, statistically, on at least a billion planets, for ‘a billion billion is a conservative estimate of the number of available planets in the universe’ (137), and we need not quarrel with the figure: there is much else to take issue with.

Dawkins apparently believes to pull the rug from under theism by offering a purely natural scientific explanation for the emergence of life and putting a high probability on extraterrestrial life. After all, if life can spontaneously arise, let alone on more than one planet, who needs a creator god? At best (or worst, depending on one’s point of view) a deist watchmaker might be in demand, but Dawkins already disposed of him in chapter 2. Needless to say, a sound cosmological argument would, at most, trouble young-age creationists who believe, to quote a memorable phrase of Dawkins’, ‘that the entire universe began after the domestication of the dog’ (335) – an error several magnitudes greater than ‘believing that the distance from New York to San Francisco is 700 yards’ (336*n*). Unfortunately, Dawkins’ argument need not even trouble creationists, for it is bleeding from several wounds. First of all, it is a non sequitur. Even proof positive of intelligent extraterrestrial life would have no bearing on God’s existence. What Dawkins can offer is almost entirely hypothetical. He does not even pretend otherwise, and the best evidence he cares to propose in favour, say, of Smolin’s ‘tantalizingly Darwinian variant on the multiverse theory’ is that Nobel laureate physicist Murray Gell-Mann reportedly commented that his ‘crazy ideas’ ‘may not be wrong’ (146). That is not a very strong one even for an argument from authority. What Dawkins does on the constructive side of the argument (as opposed to his valuable deconstruction of creationist fallacies) is nothing short of ‘Blinding with Science’ (84) and feeding ‘subjective likelihood weightings’ into a formula (107), of which he criticises others elsewhere but in comparable contexts.

His probability estimate, purporting to be very conservative, of one in a billion for life's emergence on a planet has no scientific foundation, nor does Dawkins bother to give the slightest explanation for it. His 'one in a billion', the length of such odds is elaborated on in eight full lines (138), seems to have no mathematical value but appears to have a function comparable to that of large number words in early modern metaphysical poetry, deployed for their thrilling quaintness, acoustic pleasure and intellectual tickle as aesthetically preferable synonyms for 'very many'. But his argument is self-defeating even on its own terms, for Dawkins allows the rise of the eucaryotic cell and the origin of consciousness to be events of comparable import and improbability to the emergence of life. In that case, however, we need close to a 'billion billion billion' planets to produce, with appreciable likelihood, two forms of intelligent life. The available pool of a 'billion billion' falls miserably short of the expectation. In his reconstruction of the big picture, Dawkins simply overlooks, at best, or deliberately papers over, at worst, these figures.

Bringing in the anthropic principle, in line with his frequently employed strategy, to *explain* why the story must have a happy ending could not save the day for him either. The anthropic principle (itself a slippery term in that various people interpret it considerably differently) simply *states that* an intelligent-life-supporting fine-tuned universe exists; it does *not explain why* it does. Minimally, a multiverse, which as yet is no more than a hypothetical construct, must be presupposed for it to gain explanatory power. The anthropic principle is indeed useful to caution against overhasty conclusions in the opposite direction. Even the most awe-inspiring and improbable-seeming qualities of the universe are no logical proof, though some might take them to be signs, of a creator God. It does not follow, however, that the anthropic qualities of the universe are evidence that God does not exist.

An exceptionally charitable reading could give Dawkins the benefit of the doubt and assume that his fallacious argument merely serves a critical purpose, to counter the likewise problematic creationist conclusion. In that case, Dawkins' own argument for the extreme improbability of God's existence, the fundamental tenet of the chapter, would be reduced to the single point, repeatedly stated but never elaborated, that 'any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and foresightfully tuned to lead to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide' (147). In other words, the God hypothesis raises more questions than it answers. That, of course, depends on what questions one allows to be inventoried – a consideration that probably never occurs to Dawkins, for he nowhere develops his reasoning. He probably takes it to be so simple and self-evident that it needs no explanation. The concluding section of chapter 4, in which Dawkins recounts his exchanges with theologians at a Cambridge conference, acquires considerable significance in this context as virtually the only part of the whole book where Dawkins reflects, to some extent, on his own presuppositions.

He concedes that the best response he got to his challenges was the accusation that he 'was brutally foisting a scientific epistemology upon an unwilling theology' (153). Refusing the charge, he still offers only renewed scientific and no properly

epistemological arguments for his approach. He again dismisses personal experience, proposed by his theological opponents as an independent form of knowing, essentially as hallucination and vision (cf. chapter 3), asserts once more that the God hypothesis is to be scientifically investigated, and denies the simplicity of God. He insists all the while that he is 'not advocating some sort of narrowly scientific way of thinking' (155). Epistemology, however, is not a matter of lip service. The problem is not simply that Dawkins' (unexamined) materialistic presuppositions a priori exclude a wide range of admissible evidence and arguments. Rather, his main blind spot consists in believing that the boundary conditions of the scientific quest itself can be determined and evaluated from within the realm of science. However, science's self-reflection is not scientific but philosophical in nature. Dawkins is blind not only to recognise the actual axiomatic presuppositions of his worldview but to see *that* it has such presuppositions.

### 3. The origins of religion

If Dawkins builds up and presents a 'scientific' case against 'the factual premise of religion' (158) in the first half of the book, the second half contains, broadly speaking, a 'moral philosophical case' against the necessity of religion. Chapter 5 serves as a kind of transition between the two larger patterns by seeking to explain the origins of religion. The question naturally arises, given the ubiquity of the phenomenon in the face of its ostensibly contrafactual and wasteful extravagance. Dawkins is interested in a truly Darwinian 'ultimate' explanation uncovering religion's 'survival value'. He briefly reviews and dismisses several possible explanations like its usefulness for political exploitation, its stress reducing function or group selection in order to suggest, instead, that the question is badly put, and we shall never be able to answer it properly until it is reframed. Religion has no survival value in and of itself. It should be seen as the by-product of something else that does. Religion is like the 'self-immolation behaviour' of moths, killing themselves by flying into the candle, which is the misfiring of their otherwise highly useful navigation system when the source of light is not at optical infinity like the moon or the stars. That is the central claim of the chapter. Dawkins goes on to put forward his own proposal that religion is an offshoot of the eminently survival-enhancing rule of the young generations' unquestioning obedience to parents and elders, but he is not determined to defend that proposal and quite happily lists alternative suggestions that hook religion up with various propensities of the human psyche. Dawkins is apparently ready to support whatever theory is proposed provided it explains religion as the useless by-product of something that has evolutionary value. The details remain just as conjectural as with the cosmological theories. He is so much more interested in the hypothesis than in the evidence that he does not seem to notice that his proposal leaves unanswered the very question he has raised. His own pet theory of 'religion by unquestioning obedience' might explain the spread and change of religion, but hardly its origin. Nor can the analogy of self-immolation hold too far, for religion is admittedly ubiquitous: what if *all* moths went for the

candle?<sup>8</sup> And if religion is so wasteful and useless, one might even wonder why we have not evolved out of it yet.

Dawkins is careful not to overstate his case and not to extend the evolutionary parallel so far as to develop a theory of natural selection of religions. Rather, he suggests, quite hypothetically, that religions are more like languages<sup>9</sup> whose diachronic changes are, on an evolutionary model, best described as 'genetic drift' rather than natural selection. Nevertheless, in the second half of the chapter, Dawkins, the founding father though not the most determined exponent of memetics, a cultural counterpart to genetics, sketches out a memetic theory of religion. On this view, while cultural replicators called memes are not exactly like genes, they are sufficiently similar to be studied by comparable methods. Thus, some religious ideas might have the absolute ability to survive in a meme pool, but others only spread as part of a larger set within which they have a good fit. Various religions can be thus seen as gradually evolving 'alternative collections of memes that flourish in the presence of other memes in the same memplex' (200). This explanation, though not entirely distinct from a strict theory of genetic natural selection that approaches the problem from evolutionary changes in the brain that prime us for religion, better accounts for the rapid spread and development of religions. The chapter is rounded off with a case study of the cargo cults of the South Pacific to illustrate Dawkins' points about the roots of religion, *viz.*, that they can rise and spread very fast, and they can cover their own tracks almost even faster. Further, their similarities teach us that we are wired for religion and suggest that older religions (like Christianity) also arose in a similar fashion as tribal cults.

Dawkins' conclusions are so banal that one wonders why he had to invent a whole new discipline to reach them. Orienting himself on fundamentalist Christians, he may have lost his sense of proportion; hence, his felt need to resort to memetics to belabour the obvious in affirming that Christianity is a historic religion and, whatever its abiding truth content or otherwise, it has evolved tremendously over the last two millennia. But even the tour-de-force introduction to (and of) memetics, fascinating as it is in and of itself, helps little to avert the ultimate failure of the chapter. The key question remains unanswered. Why do certain religious memes have intrinsic survival value? Why are we psychologically primed for religion? What *is* the origin of religion? Dawkins' inability to provide a convincing answer is aggravating once he introduced the question so emphatically and so diligently whetted our appetite for a truly ultimate explanation.

<sup>8</sup> A more precise form of the extended analogy would be, what if there were so many candles around that very nearly all moths were to be enticed by them?

<sup>9</sup> For a theological interpretation of the language-like qualities of religion, see LINDBECK (1984).

#### 4. Religion and morality

Chapters 6 and 7 belong together like no other two in the whole volume, directly discussing questions of religion and morality. The former, second in brevity only to the introductory chapter, first brings a sampling of hate writing by religious, mostly fundamentalist Christian, authors where, paradoxically and disquietingly, the authors threaten Dawkins and like-minded people with the worst kinds of punishment divine or personally inflicted, for undermining the moral life by their atheism. Denying the accusation, Dawkins proceeds to present his own theory of the origin of morality, rooted in our Darwinian past.

There are at least four different reasons which make good evolutionary sense of altruistic behaviour. They include generosity first towards one's kin, second, in expectation of reciprocation, third, to acquire a corresponding reputation, and fourth, as advertisement (expression of dominance or superiority). This evolutionarily beneficial urge is so deep-seated in us that, like its sexual counterpart, it has outlived its original context. Our reflective knowledge that our partner is, perhaps intentionally, infertile does not diminish our sexual urge deriving from the original Darwinian purpose of sex as gene reproduction. Likewise, our urge to altruism remains and drives us to unselfishness. Here we meet again the by-product idea we saw with the roots of religion. There is, however, a crucial difference. We might be moral by mistake, like a reed warbler to a young cuckoo, but those instincts, even if they misfire at times or outlive their original evolutionary pressures, are (or were) good and useful. Religion, on the other hand, has never served a useful purpose on Dawkins' interpretation. He considers our sexual and moral drives 'misfirings, Darwinian mistakes: blessed, precious mistakes' (221). The drive to religion, by contrast, is entirely destructive.

The point morality scores over religion with Dawkins amounts to a Pyrrhic victory, however, for selfishness remains the ultimate Darwinian truth. Surely, Dawkins distinguishes the selfishness of the gene from the altruistic behaviour of the organism through which the gene secures its own survival. To that extent altruism need not be apparent; it might be genuine at the level of the organism. Most if not all Darwinian examples he quotes are nonetheless directed to some (greater) reward even on the level of the organism. Reciprocation, reputation and advertisement will benefit the organism not merely the gene. In that sense, they are more like investment than selfless generosity. The only possible exemption is kin altruism, but Dawkins has serious misgivings about human in-group predilections, of which kin altruism would be a prime example. The view Dawkins espouses tends to be deterministic. It is at least unclear how he would account for genuine human freedom although he most probably would find such an account desirable. In other words, it remains unexplained by what standards he can assess the Darwinian mistakes of morality and sexuality as blessed and precious. Why does he not welcome conservative Catholic mores that attempt to tie sexual desire solely to procreation, reinforcing the ultimate Darwinian connection?

Dawkins argues, on empirical grounds, that humans' innate moral sense seems to be quite universal even if most of us cannot articulate why we find certain options in a given situation morally obligatory or impermissible. Moreover, studies find that such

intuitive decisions are independent of religious conviction. Hence, God or, more broadly, religion, does not seem to be a necessary moral postulate. We do not need to be religious in order to be good – the central thesis of chapter 6. That is, of course, true, but it has no bearing on the existence of God, and the point can only serve a negative (limiting) purpose, to invalidate claims that God and religion are required for the moral life (or, in an even more spurious form, because people can be moral, God must exist). More generally, while nothing clouds Dawkins' eyesight when it comes to spotting non sequitur arguments in *others'* reasoning, he is almost equally prone to fall for such fallacies (or at least to be so careless with them that his readers are virtually *invited* to fall for them) when pursuing his own agenda. He is rather fluid with logical entailments between the undesirability of religion and the improbability of God's existence.

Dawkins considers two further options which link morality to God. First, he seems to acknowledge, though his rhetoric makes it difficult to disentangle what he desires and what he considers the case to be, that morality requires some form of policing to function in the life of human communities. But he suggests that assigning God the role of an omniscient policeman is a rather low view. Being good without the threatening presence of a surveillance camera, be it earthly or heavenly, is morally preferable, and, at any rate, (here he is quick to point out) it makes God's existence more desirable at best but by no means more likely. Second, God may be needed to secure the absolute standards of morality. True, patriotism seems the only comparable source of absolutism, but, in addition to deontologist approaches, consequentialism (like J.S. Mill's utilitarianism) also offers viable options in moral philosophy. In the remaining chapters, taking on, perhaps needlessly, a heavy moral philosophical baggage, Dawkins will profess his preference for such an approach.

Chapter 7 sets out to demonstrate 'that modern western morality, wherever else it comes from, does not come from the Bible' (246). It is important to get the thesis right. Dawkins is critical of the Bible rather than of modern western morality. He is not suggesting that our ethics should come from scripture or that we are living in an age that has fallen on evil days and forgot about its true biblical heritage. On the contrary! His point is that the Bible is useless as a moral guide. It works neither 'by direct instruction . . . [nor] by example' (237). As positive moral code, some (small) parts might be valuable (like some precepts of the Decalogue), but much that is contained in it is inapplicable or downright obnoxious (like capital punishment for breaking the Sabbath). The role models offered by the Bible show, if possible, an even worse track record. Dawkins seems to delight in presenting well-known biblical stories in an unusual light. Noah, Lot, the unnamed Levite of Judges 19, Abraham with and without the Akedah, Jephthah, Moses, not to mention Yahweh himself, all turn out to be anti-heroes of cruel, gruesome, abhorrent stories. What the Bible has to offer in and through them is morally repellent; it is 'not the sort of book you should give your children to form their morals' (247).

Dawkins repeatedly counters the potential objection, extendable to the first approach (direct instruction) as well, that those stories are not to be taken literally but symbolically. First, 'a frighteningly large number of people', including 'approximately

50 per cent of the US electorate' (238) accept the literal truth of the biblical narratives. Further, the choice, according to Dawkins, between various methods of interpretation applied to a given text is arbitrary. It is 'a matter of personal decision' (238) for which there are no objective criteria. It is not a bit better than the atheist's choice against which religion is held up as an absolute foundation. Surely, Biblical literalism can be, and often is, frightening. It is no good, however, to confront it with an equally simplistic counter-hermeneutic. Dawkins uses words like *derive*, *get*, *come from* or *ground on* in the sense of 'interpret the words literally'. The way to oppose biblical literalism would be through hermeneutical sophistication, to which he betrays no inclination. He seems utterly oblivious to elementary hermeneutical insights, has no appreciation for the role of the interpretive *community* and apparently can imagine no interpretive options between unconditional verbatim acceptance and total rejection of a text.

The New Testament does not fare much better at Dawkins' hands than the Hebrew Bible (a designation he, incidentally, never employs). The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount is recognised as 'anticipat[ing] Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years', but his family values (consider Lk 14:26) 'were not such as one might wish to focus on'<sup>10</sup> (250). With that, Jesus is let off the hook surprisingly gently and swiftly by Dawkins, who singles out the doctrine of original sin as the main culprit in the New Testament. The very thought of inherited sin is morally reprehensible as is Christianity's preoccupation with 'sin sin sin sin sin sin sin' (252), not to mention the arrogance of making our petty little transgressions the object of highest and gravest divine attention. The proposed way out of the quagmire, the doctrine of atonement, in turn, is not only 'vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent' but also 'barking mad' (253). One need not be a committed atheist to find the doctrine of sin, especially of original sin, a heavy lesson for modern minds. It is certainly an uncomfortable doctrine. Christian theology itself has a hard time with it; no wonder that it has largely dropped out of the discourse of public theology since Reinhold Niebuhr's time. The atonement poses no less thorny and disturbing questions, but that is an insight Christians do not need Dawkins to gain. It goes back all the way to the New Testament. Instead of being overwhelmed by Dawkins' overconfident and dismissive approach, Christians are likely to be thankful to him for bringing life to their sacred texts and re-invigorating the original religio-cultural context in which Christianity first had to make sense of its central tenets. The Apostle Paul, after all, insisted on 'proclaim[ing] Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' (1 Cor 1:23, NRSV).

The injunction to love one's neighbour, Dawkins proceeds to demonstrate in a substantial section, has always been interpreted narrowly referring to one's (religious) in-group members and implying hostility to outsiders. He cites ancient authorities and modern studies to prove the point. Ultimately, he concedes that factors other than religion might also be responsible for the hostilities between Jews and Arabs in

<sup>10</sup> The allusion is to the American evangelical organisation 'Focus on the Family', a major voice of the Christian right which has recently become politically more active advocating conservative values.

Palestine, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Hindus and Muslims in India, but religion must not be indemnified because it is an inherently, deliberately and cultivatedly divisive force that can only exacerbate already dangerous tendencies. It remains unexplained what exactly is wrong with in-group proclivities per se (we saw how they were rooted in Darwinian forms of altruism), or why religion rather than nationalism is singled out for such a ferocious attack as this book is. Far more conspicuously, the Christian injunction, occurring three times in the New Testament, to love one's enemies (Mt 5:44, Lk 6:27.35) is passed over in utter silence by Dawkins. That is surely one of the most glaring omissions in the entire book, and the reviewer is hard pressed, especially in the light of Mt 5:39.41 and 45 being quoted elsewhere (342–43), to find an alternative explanation for it to silence the lurking suspicion of intentional manipulation of uncomfortable evidence on the author's part.<sup>11</sup>

Returning to his original topic, Dawkins sketches the positive side of his argument. While morality is not derived from a holy book, there is a 'broad liberal consensus of ethical principles' (263) shared by a surprisingly high number of people across languages and cultures and continually evolving in a generally progressive direction. This can be called the *Zeitgeist*. The abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, increased sensitivity to racism, child abuse, wildlife preservation or collateral damage in war are but a few examples that can gauge this overall development. Dawkins suggests a few possible sources like the role of individual leaders or improved education (chiefly the spread of some 'unbiblical ideas that come from biological science, especially evolution', 271), but he is ultimately uninterested in where the change comes from. His concern is to affirm, first, that it is not from religion, next, that 'over the longer timescale, the progressive trend is unmistakable and will continue' (271) and, finally, that it is sufficient 'to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good, or to decide what is good' (272).

One need not take recourse to the feeble and rather hackneyed idea of moral *Zeitgeist* to arrive at Dawkins' conclusion. Again, either his long engagement with fundamentalist debate partners has clouded his judgement, or his frontal attack on all brands of religion deprived him of more sound arguments. The idea of universal moral development is itself suspect despite enjoying great currency in earlier centuries more unambiguously shaped by early modern and modern optimism, say, significantly, between the Thirty Years' War and the First World War. To be sure, Dawkins also sees it as seesawing rather than monotonous improvement, but at least since HORKHEIMER and ADORNO's Enlightenment critique after World War II (1947)<sup>12</sup> it is less

<sup>11</sup> In fairness, it must be admitted that only the last of those three verses is identified. The first two quotes appear (without locus) in a long list of biblical phrases that has made it to common parlance. The list may very well have been compiled by a research assistant without Dawkins ever bothering about the exact source let alone the context of his citations. I find it still virtually impossible to suppose that Dawkins is genuinely unaware of the 'love your enemies' clause. If he is not deliberately tampering with the evidence but simply forgetful, it is still noteworthy that he fails to recall *this* particular feature of Christian ethics.

<sup>12</sup> The first edition of the work, written in exile, appeared in 1944 in New York, but it received its final form by the 1947 Amsterdam edition, which is now regarded as the authoritative version.

than self-evident that such ‘surface corrections’ are sufficient to save the core of the thesis. Equally problematic is the claim of universality (‘Something . . . has shifted in *all of us*’, 268, italics added). Elsewhere he allows for ‘notable exceptions such as the Afghan Taliban and the American Christian equivalent’ (263), but that does not seem sufficiently to account for occurrences like the widespread Muslim outrage over the Muhammad caricatures. Or is Dawkins equating the Muslim world at large with the Taliban? The moral *Zeitgeist* may be much more culture-bound than Dawkins is prepared to admit – and we need not dwell on the latent colonialism and patronising cultural bias of his denial. Even if we allow for the progress of moral ideals over the long haul,<sup>13</sup> it is questionable if humanity’s actual performance gives us much cause for satisfaction. It is enough to take a quick look at the history of the twentieth century to realise that no serious attempt can be made to blame the poor track record on religion preventing the successful and effective implementation of enlightened ethical norms and principles. In fact, the role of religion is anything but obvious at both levels (improving moral ideals and their realisation). Dawkins’ declaration that there is no connection between religion and the moral *Zeitgeist* will not do. It is well known, to quote an instance from a much earlier historical period, that the closing of the Roman circus was a result of Christianity’s resistance to the brutality and bloodshed of the gladiatorial games, and, to comment on one of Dawkins’ own examples, there were many religiously motivated supporters of abolitionism in nineteenth-century America – recall the success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Dawkins adds a postlude to chapter 7, a rejoinder to the charge that Hitler and Stalin were atheists and were motivated in their evil deeds by their atheism. The crucial issue is the latter rather than the former, and Dawkins dismisses it curtly as unfounded, lacking any evidentiary basis, especially in its more general form that ‘atheism systematically *influences* people to do bad things’ (273, italics original). He dwells longer on the less important former question, allowing that Stalin was atheist (but not motivated by it in his brutality) and considering in some detail the evidence for and against Hitler’s atheism versus his persistent Catholicism. He finds the second hypothesis slightly more persuasive. At any rate, atheist people might be evil but not because of their atheism. On the other hand, innumerable wars have been fought in the name of religion.

It is hardly surprising that Dawkins dwells longest on Hitler’s possible Catholicism. There is no corresponding theme with Stalin, and a sophisticated and balanced discussion of religion’s and atheism’s role in influencing people’s actions for better or worse would probably be far too abstract for his intended audience. A *rhetorically* much more powerful approach is to discuss Hitler’s Catholicism at length. Even if it brings little in terms of a solid conclusion, the issue (Hitler may have been a Catholic) is likely to stick in the reader’s mind. Unfortunately, Dawkins’ historical scholarship turns out to be on a par with his biblical expertise. It is perhaps due to his almost

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Reinhold NIEBUHR’s concept of the ethical ideal as an impossible possibility (1935) and note that Niebuhr, already in the 1930s, also delivered a profound *religious* critique of modern secular liberal culture to which Dawkins seems still rather uncritically beholden.

exclusive reliance on secondary and tertiary sources that it escaped his attention that in his *Table Talk* (1973, 59–60, 14 Oct 1941) the Führer envisioned a demise for Christianity under the advances of science rather similar to that advocated by Dawkins himself. In citing Göring's remark on Hitler that 'Only a Catholic could unite Germany' (274),<sup>14</sup> Dawkins again appears to fall for his own kind of literalism, merely allowing that Göring may have referred to Hitler's Catholic upbringing rather than his living faith. Dawkins exhibits no sign of awareness of the long history of German unification, the problem of a small or great union, or the significance of the *Anschluss* in that context. One might even suspect that by 'German Christians' (277) he simply means baptised citizens of the *Third Reich* rather than a particularly pro-National Socialist wing of the church. At any rate, no mention is made of the Confessing Church or the church resistance to Hitler at all although Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of those rare theologians who only get an honourable mention in the book elsewhere (125). For Luther's 'probable' influence on Hitler's anti-Semitism,<sup>15</sup> the only evidence Dawkins cares to offer is the use of the phrase 'brood of vipers' by both men – even while acknowledging that their usage may go back to a common source in Matthew 3:7 (275)! A few pages later, though in a different context attempting to elucidate a cultural historical allusion in a creationist text, he conflates Luther's nailing of *The Ninety-Five Theses* at Wittenberg in 1517 with his reply to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms in 1521 (285–86). Incidentally, both episodes are equally famous but fraught with apocryphal details that could not be conclusively verified by serious historical scholarship.<sup>16</sup> But that is only by the way, for my point is Dawkins' inaccuracy even within the popular historical framework. Translating the seriousness of *this* error in church history to scales to which Dawkins is more accustomed, it would correspond to ten million years on the geological time scale: that is roughly the chronological magnitude of the domestication of the dog.<sup>17</sup>

Dawkins' aloofness to evidence in the details is matched by a similarly skewed presentation of the overall picture. On the one hand, he passes over in silence all the cruelty committed specifically by atheistic regimes against religious people in overtly ideologically motivated campaigns: Stalin himself or his Soviet Union, curtly dismissed as irrelevant by Dawkins, are, sadly, not the only obvious examples as readers, especially from former Eastern Bloc countries, will very well know. On the other hand, he totally neglects the other side of Christianity's history, its contribution to

<sup>14</sup> I have been unable to authenticate the quote. Dawkins takes it from the magazine article which he derives most of his citations from (cf. 395, n108). Unlike in most cases, however, that paper, itself a loose compilation of quotes largely via secondary sources, does not identify the original locus of Göring's sentence. An internet search turns up only one more occurrence, probably not entirely unrelated and supplying no additional information on the quote's origin.

<sup>15</sup> For scholarly treatments of this complex question, see SIEMON-NETTO (1995) and, more recently, OZMENT (2005, 94–100), which can also be fruitfully consulted on the larger historiographical problem of 'The Barbarian Prince' (255–87, esp. 276–83).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. BRECHT (1985–1993) 1, 200 and 2, 460 (esp. n24 on 537), respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Trying to illustrate the significance of the good 300 miles between the two cities could produce even more amusing analogies of astronomical distances.

peace as in the case of the French–German or German–Polish reconciliation after World War II, to social justice as in the Latin American liberation movements during the Cold War period, or to the peaceful overthrow of oppressive atheistic regimes as in Poland, Germany and Rumania in the 1980s.

### 5. A better world without religion?

Dawkins' own, distorted, conclusion to chapter 7 sets the stage for chapter 8, where he gives account of his hostility toward religion. He explains why it is insufficient to be content with his own atheism and leave religion alone. Dawkins starts off with, and devotes the bulk of the chapter to, his chief opponents, religious fundamentalists. The first major accusation he brings against them is that fundamentalism, with its literalist interpretation of the Bible, subverts true science. Then follow several sections with innumerable quotes from fundamentalist sources, both Christian and Muslim, and case after case of grave infringements of human rights by religious zealots. Dawkins here includes no historical evidence but focuses almost entirely on the contemporary scene, esp. Middle Eastern and American (many of his cases taken from the twenty-first century and only two from before 1970, both British). He discusses issues like the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy, radical intolerance of homosexuality, and, at length (on more than ten of less than sixteen pages devoted to these questions), radical pro-life advocacy and anti-abortion violence. The argument is persistent and simple throughout. Fundamentalists, on the one hand, care for what 'other people do (or even think) in *private*' (289, italics original). On the other hand, they punish, or threaten to punish, ostensible 'crimes' with disproportionate penalties whether through the legal machinery of Muslim countries or by proposing comparable (fundamentalist Christian) legislation for the United States or by taking the law into their own hands as in American shootings of abortion providing gynaecologists. Throughout, Dawkins is opposing an enlightened consequentialist ethic to the moral absolutism of religious fundamentalists.

The generalising move from fundamentalism to all religion is made in the last section (on seven of the chapter's twenty-seven pages). Dawkins justifies the leap by stating that 'even mild and moderate religion helps to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes' (303). The underlying premise is that all distinctions and degrees within religion are not only relative but also apparent. Ultimately, unquestioned faith is a virtue for all religion, and that is what makes religion a danger to be shunned par excellence. Dawkins makes it very clear in this section that the problem is religion itself not merely its perversion. 'I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called "extremist" faith. The teachings of "moderate" religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism' (306). Religious faith has to be singled out of potential rivals like patriotism or ethnic identity, which also have their dark side, because it 'is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others' (306).

Whether in the context of science or of moral philosophy, then, Dawkins interprets religious faith as unquestioning and unquestioned approval of something that lacks demonstrable standards and objective justification, something that is beyond argument and verification or falsification. That immunity from reason makes it 'an evil' (308), and since faith is not peculiar to extremist religion but is of the essence of all religion, all religion is to be rejected and resisted. The premises are, of course, false. Faith is not central to all forms of religion. Nor is it nothing but blind assent to unsubstantiated assertions or a preposterous epistemological device to salvage deficient cognition. Faith does have an epistemological component (subject to intense scholarly investigation in analytic philosophy of religion over the last few decades<sup>18</sup>) and it is by no means entirely anti, supra, or irrational. On the contrary, faith's inherent drive for reasoned reflection and understanding has been a major theological theme since Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* – if not since (Pseudo-)Tertullian's paradoxical *credo quia absurdum*<sup>19</sup> (or Paul's 1 Corinthians 1–2). Dawkins' essential and functional equation of moderate religion with extremism is so much beyond intellectual respectability that it deserves no substantial comment. Fortunately, he himself fails to live up to the absurdity of his own claim as is witnessed by his repeated 'lapses' in the book where he is happy to form alliances with mainstream theologians against fundamentalists (e.g. 125).

The subject matter of the penultimate chapter is children and religion. Dawkins deplores the sexual abuse of children but wants to be very clear from the outset that paedophile Catholic priests have received, for a variety of reasons, disproportionate public attention and blame,<sup>20</sup> and they are not the only, and often not the worst, danger children have to face when coming in contact with religion. In fact, he suggests that the mental abuse inflicted on children in the name and with the help of religion can be, and often is, much worse than its physical counterpart. Sadly, Dawkins can cite a variety of deeply moving, genuinely disquieting, and truly shocking stories of children suffering at the hands of religiously motivated adults like a young Inca girl victim of ritualistic sacrifice 500 years ago, a six-year-old Jewish boy forcibly separated from his parents by Catholic authorities in mid-nineteenth-century Italy because he had been secretly baptised by the family's maid, Amish youngsters denied the right to education and withdrawn from school by their parents in the US of the 1970s, twelve-year-old children frightened almost literally to death in 'Hell Houses' run by a fundamentalist pastor and his church in today's America, or young girls(!) sent to an 'uncle' in the country to be circumcised in twenty-first-century Britain. Dawkins is likewise appalled by the mental abuse of children taught creationism in a British

<sup>18</sup> Cf. esp. the works of Reformed epistemologists referred to above, e.g. PLANTINGA & WOLTERSTORFF (1983).

<sup>19</sup> The origin of the phrase is unknown but is widely thought to be a misquote from Tertullian. For the actual words of the Latin church father and an interpretation, see SIDER (1980).

<sup>20</sup> On this topic, see GREELEY (2004) and Péter TÖRÖK's review of the book in an earlier issue of this journal (2006).

school largely financed by government money, which the Prime Minister defended with an appeal to diversity.

Arguing for the protection of children, Dawkins boldly challenges the complacency of tolerant multiculturalism that sacrifices *their* children for the sake of cultural diversity in *our* lives. He acknowledges the dilemma posed for liberals by the tension between opposing cruelty and relieving suffering on the one hand, and respecting other cultures and other norms than one's own, on the other, but he ultimately sides with the children. In momentous questions concerning their fate and well-being, they should also be consulted and given a voice in the decision. Adults have the duty to second-guess what the children in their care would choose for themselves in full awareness of the facts and with the hindsight of a full education and intellectual maturity.

Dawkins' concern for children is laudable and his honesty, for once, in squarely owning up and facing a dilemma is worthy not only of praise but of imitation. No one with the aspiration to be a responsible intellectual can afford to easily shake off the disquieting question he puts his finger on. (The problem, of course, is hardly a reason to be dismissive of religion per se so it ultimately provides no grist to Dawkins' mill.) Unfortunately, his suggested way out of the quandary is very nearly impassable. In the case of the Inca girl of the fifteenth century, for instance, the 'facts' she should possess full knowledge of in order to make an informed choice (and which her guardians should have the responsibility to second-guess) include the detail that the Sun is 'a ball of hydrogen, hotter than a million degrees Kelvin, converting itself into helium by nuclear fusion' (328). The blatant anachronism of the proposal, amounting to absurdity, calls attention to a greater difficulty. Our 'facts', even a good deal of our hard-core scientific knowledge, are time-bound, conditional truths. Thus, as in the case of the moral *Zeitgeist*, what he suggests is vague and slippery, difficult to vindicate in face of disagreement. His position is fraught with unexamined presuppositions which, when not shared, are difficult to establish. Worse still, I think most religious parents do in good faith what Dawkins is advocating. They are second-guessing their children's choice and bringing them up as they think is best for them (and which, consequently, they would indeed choose for themselves if in full possession of the facts although right now they might not yet like the parentally selected way, for they do not yet see the point of discipline, self-denial and the like). In that sense, Dawkins' proposal, presented as his considered opinion in response to possible objections and not as a starting point from which a discussion should develop, is largely vacuous.

Dawkins makes two more points on the topic. One is his consciousness-raiser that children should not be directly labelled with their parents' religion just as they are not labelled with their elders' political or economic convictions. As a Keynesian or Marxist, a Conservative or Liberal child of four or twelve years sounds absurd or ridiculous, so should we be irritated by terms like a Muslim or a Christian child. One should properly speak only of a child of Muslim or Christian parents. All this, however, does not lead Dawkins to reject the Bible and other sacred books as part of a literary education. On the contrary, he concludes the chapter on a somewhat unex-

pectedly conciliatory note. Shorn of their supernaturalism, religious traditions may even be maintained and rituals participated in as a 'treasured heritage' (344).

The demand that children should not be 'forced' to be religious (or to accept a particular religion) but be free to choose for themselves when they are old enough to do so is not new. From a religious point of view, it is fundamentally misguided – which is to say that it is not a neutral proposal but its bias is cleverly papered over, in this case with the help of analogies which can be easily challenged. Religion is not simply factual or reflective knowledge like political, philosophical or economic views. 'To be religious' requires more than purely cognitive ascent (recall Dawkins' misconstrual of faith). That he welcomes religious rituals, divorced from supernatural belief, as a harmless, indeed, precious, tradition further indicates his fundamental misunderstanding of religion.<sup>21</sup> What people choose 'for themselves' as adults will surely depend on what they were taught in childhood, what was chosen for them. The matter, of course, admits of degrees. National identity and language are also chosen for us by our parents, and the latter, especially a mother tongue, is surely more difficult to change in adulthood than religious conviction. By comparison, a false scientific theory might be easily unlearned and replaced with a better one 'in full possession of the facts' (328). A scientific *paradigm*, however, is already a much more difficult question as Thomas KUHN demonstrated half a century ago (1955). Would Dawkins want to put off the moral education of children until they are old enough to choose an ethical system for themselves? Or, to bring in a less adequate but perhaps even more revealing analogy, why not bring up children illiterate and let them choose literacy for themselves if they think it proper in full awareness of the facts given that so much corruption can reach them through the printed media? The very idea is obviously nonsense (and deeply damaging!) unless literacy itself is considered an evil – which is precisely Dawkins' presupposition as regards religion. Finally, to bring in neglected historical evidence once more, there have indeed been made sustained efforts to prohibit the religious education of children. Such was effectively criminalised both in the Soviet Union<sup>22</sup> and in Albania when it proudly confessed itself to be the world's only atheist state. The catastrophic failure those experiments turned out to be should caution us to think twice before trying to implement suggestions like Dawkins'.

Religion is said to serve as explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration. Having dealt with the first two in chapters 4 and 6–7, respectively, Dawkins turns to the latter two in the last chapter. He begins by discussing theories linking adults' belief in God to children's invention of imaginary friends only to conclude that whatever its origin, religion is not the only source of happiness and fulfilment in life. Science can provide comparable if not superior forms of physical consolation like

<sup>21</sup> To put it differently, Dawkins thanks his parents for teaching him 'not so much *what* to think as *how* to think' (327, italics original). That he evidently assumes that religion is more a matter of '*what* to think' than of '*how* to think' is another measure of his misunderstanding of its nature. And even in the context of the truth value of religious claims, however, the actual religious options are much more varied and complex than Dawkins realises, cf. LINDBECK's threefold typology in *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984).

<sup>22</sup> On the unclarities, contradictions and generally prohibitive tendencies of esp. the early Soviet legislation on religious instruction, see ROTHENBERG (1968).

pain relief. Consolation in the face of death may also be needed in two ways, as comfort against the fear of dying, which euthanasia, advocated by Dawkins, is said to be perfectly capable of granting, and as comfort against worries about one's fate after death. In the latter context Dawkins singles out the doctrine of purgatory and dismisses it, almost like a staunch Protestant, as totally unfounded and chiefly invented for the sake of the financial gain it helped secure, via indulgences, for the Catholic church. The meaning and fulfilment of life does not depend on some form of afterlife but on our own choices, on how full we choose to make it.

As for inspiration, Dawkins, allowing that the gap left behind by the demise of God may be filled in a variety of ways, opts for one that draws heavily on science. He begins by evoking a sense of our infinitesimal proportions in comparison with the universe at both the macro and the micro levels. The sense of awe that his similes, examples and explanations from cosmology, quantum theory or probability theory inspire in the reader is only half of his point. The other half is to use our heightened awareness of those immense proportions as a metaphor for the power of science to enlarge our knowledge. We do not literally see beyond the range of visible light, but we have radio telescopes and other instruments to convert more or less the entire electromagnetic spectrum into sensory data within our range of perception. Our life might be a split second, but we have come to understand much of the whole year of the universe's life. Our intuition has evolved to deal with the 'Middle World' of medium sizes, distances, speeds our ancestors had to survive in. But our reality is no more real than that of other species, adapted to their relevant environments. Bats might 'hear' in colour, or dogs might treat a combination of smells as we do harmonious chords. It is science that can open up these new worlds for us, and some day we might even come to develop an intuitive, rather than merely mathematical, understanding of vast tracts of reality that lay outside the range of experience of our evolutionary ancestry. That might be science's ultimate inspiration.

As so often earlier in the book, an open-minded reader will not be inclined to quarrel with Dawkins' conclusions. He can be freely granted, at least on the phenomenological level, that religion and theistic belief are not the only sources of happiness, and people of other persuasions can also lead fulfilled lives. It would be equally short-sighted, if not downright stupid or vicious, to deny that science is not merely useful but can be truly awe-inspiring and genuinely inspirational. Some details might, as elsewhere, invite questions; the narrowness of the evidentiary basis for critical remarks might be lamented; even a suspicion of disingenuousness might arise again when Dawkins, on the one hand, challenges believers to joyfully embrace death and jeers at them for their lack of enthusiasm about the prospect of dying (356), and, on the other, considers 'misguided' (304) those craving martyrdom and volunteering to become suicide bombers.<sup>23</sup> But such details aside, if the whole book were like the last chapter, it would have stirred up a good deal less commotion, for its thesis could only be an affront to the most narrow-minded religious bigots who deny all value outside

<sup>23</sup> Cf. also the case of Paul Hill, executed for the murder of gynaecologist John Britton and his body-guard, with his self-styled 'martyrdom' (294–96).

religion. Whatever Dawkins' goal, and the details do at times make one wonder, the concluding chapter in actual fact adds next to nothing to a critique of religion (and thus contributes just as little to the overall thesis of the book). Nothing follows, namely, from the existence of other sources of consolation and inspiration like science for the undesirability of religion or the improbability of its truth.

The volume comes complete with notes, references, index and an appendix which, answering to the missionary purpose of the book, includes 'A partial list of friendly addresses, for individuals needing support in escaping from religion' (375). Half of the addresses are from the United States, the rest mostly from other English speaking western countries supplemented by one Indian and four 'Islamic' contacts. There are no Continental European addresses included.<sup>24</sup> The index is extensive with over a thousand entries but not fully comprehensive as even some proper names like J.S. Bach (86) are excluded. In addition to occasional footnotes mostly anecdotal in nature, Dawkins supports his argument with 156 endnotes; two to every five pages on average. More than half of the notes are to the internet or non-academic printed media (newspapers, magazines); nor does the remaining lesser half exclusively quote scholarly sources. Dawkins' list of '[b]ooks cited or recommended' (380) includes over 160 titles. Roughly forty per cent of them were published after 2000; sixteen works appeared in the year *The God Delusion* was published (2006)! There is nothing wrong with up-to-date information, and both daily newspapers or weekly magazines and the internet can be sources of accurate and valuable data. The overall impression Dawkins' notes and references convey, however, is twofold. First, the book is primarily intended for popular consumption rather than for an erudite and academically rigorous audience. Given the length and breadth of the ground it covers, the amount of scholarly references is quite limited, and, indeed, not infrequently even verbatim quotations remain unidentified. Second, Dawkins' reasoning is steeped in the ephemeral popular cultural milieu of the text's production. The momentary engagement of an ever-changing cultural context and effective participation in the current public discourse at a popular level are paramount over rigorous scholarly analysis of enduring significance.

## 6. A gem of a pamphlet

Attempting an overall assessment of Dawkins' achievement in *The God Delusion*, it would be foolish to take him to task for his lack of theological expertise.<sup>25</sup> But the book mostly fails on its own terms, too. It sets out to frontally attack all religion, but

<sup>24</sup> Dawkins does apologise for the one-sidedness of the list and announces an updated version on the website of the Richard Dawkins Foundation. At the time of closing the manuscript (Aug 2007), there were already eleven non-British European addresses, including one from Rumania (cf. <http://richarddawkins.net/atheistResources>).

<sup>25</sup> That is a remarkably persistent theme in the critical response to his latest book to which Dawkins, adopting P.Z. MYERS' defence of him (2006), replied in the preface of the paperback edition that it is like demanding that he become an expert on the literature on imperial apparel while all he wants to say is that the Emperor is naked.

ends up rather narrow in its compass. It chiefly confronts fundamentalist Christianity and, to a lesser degree, Islam. Similarly, taking religion to be almost exclusively an intellectual commitment, Dawkins does not even scratch the surface of several of its constitutive elements. As a result of his highly reductionist interpretation, Dawkins greatly misunderstands the phenomenon of religion, and that, paradoxically, seriously limits both the effective breadth and depth of his attack. Unfortunately, even if we forgive the book's inflated claims and bring them down to size appropriate to its actual scope, the performance remains largely disappointing at the intellectual level.

Apparently consistent with the book's stated aim of a head-on assault on religion, Dawkins' confrontational style taking on moderate religion and his calculated impudence targeting well-respected mainstream religious figures from Thomas Aquinas to Pope John Paul II to Mother Teresa seem counterproductive from a tactical point of view if it is indeed religious fundamentalism that makes the world a dangerous place as he seems to admit in the preface to the paperback edition. Why alienate moderates instead of entering into tactical alliance with them? The approach taken again undermines rather than fosters the book's success in terms of consensus building.

By scholarly standards, Dawkins is mostly out of his depth. I have discussed his pedestrian New Testament research, feeble historical scholarship, crude hermeneutics and simplistic epistemology. As a self-respecting intellectual, he should care about failing in those areas for they are all disciplines whose academic respectability and substantiality he appears not to deny (56–57 and *passim*). Further, the logic of his constructive, as opposed to his critical, arguments is largely unconvincing, full of non sequitur arguments and unanswered questions. The very structure of the book is a non sequitur writ large. The first four chapters argue, inconclusively to my mind, that the existence of an interventionist creator God is so improbable a hypothesis that it should be abandoned altogether. Even if that were true, however, religion as such might still be a highly useful and desirable feature of human life. The overarching thesis of chapters five to ten is that religion is not the only viable option, it is not indispensable for our life together as open-minded, happy and morally responsible human beings. That is true, but nothing whatsoever follows from it for the undesirability of religion, let alone for the improbability of God. As for unanswered questions, where Dawkins does suggest solutions, they are mostly conjectural as in the case of cosmological theories and explanations of the origins of religion or of its psychological basis. Anecdotes or, at best, a variety of theoretical constructs consistent with the hypothesis substitute for corroborating evidence. That is not the way to do scholarship even admittedly outside one's own field.

I have repeatedly called attention to Dawkins' unexamined presuppositions. The most fundamental of them is that religion is harmful. It certainly can be that, but the tendentious one-sidedness of Dawkins' presentation of relevant evidence can hardly be explained, unless we suppose deliberate distortion, other than a tremendously influential preconception through which all data are filtered and which remains immune to counterevidence. How else could Dawkins fail to notice that in the Tamarin experi-

ment (255–57) Israeli nationalism may as well be the culprit as Israeli religion?<sup>26</sup> If '[s]exual desire, when channelled through the conduits of linguistic culture, emerges as great poetry [. . . say, in] John Donne's love poems' (221), why deny (or simply pass over in silence) the same praise to religious conviction, equally remarkably emerging in the same poet's oeuvre? Why is Hitler, if not excused, at least 'put in perspective' with the help of the *Zeitgeist* (268–70), and why is Maimonides not (254, 256–57)? Or indeed, why is the same interpretive option denied to all religious thinkers slated in the course of the book, usually for failing by modern standards? Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of those rare exceptions among ecclesiastical figures who are upheld rather than sneered at by Dawkins, but only at the price of the effective denial of his *religious* significance. He is an example of 'political leaders' (271), in his ethics 'anticipated' by Jesus of Nazareth (250) but ultimately indebted, as far as his lasting significance in advocating non-violent civil disobedience is concerned, only to Gandhi (271). That the latter is pointed out not to have been a Christian illustrates yet once more Dawkins' inadequately narrow understanding of religion. Christianity has surely cause to repent when considering its own misogynistic track record. But feminist theologians who have been highly critical of their own tradition for that very reason have also unearthed alternative trajectories. The gospels portray women as the most faithful disciples of Jesus even, literally, under the cross and allow them to be the first witnesses of the resurrection; the Pauline communities recognised the equality of women in all offices and aspects of church life; add to which the entire Wisdom/Sophia tradition – just to quote a few biblical (rather than theological) examples. My point is, again, not special pleading that Dawkins should approach religion more respectfully (that such demands are unfounded is part of his point) but that he is guilty of applying double-standards.

In the second half of the book, Dawkins' arguments come packaged with a hefty dose of consequentialist ethics. As the arguments unfold, Dawkins' own ethical position is fleshed out in increasingly concrete detail, often conveying the impression that it is part and parcel with the larger picture. The approach runs the risk of counter-productivity and self-defeat. Does the reader have to buy into his material ethical positions to accept his central thesis? Does one have to sign up for utilitarianism or, specifically, does one have to support abortion and the legalisation of euthanasia in order to attain a morally fulfilled life without religion? Probably not, but Dawkins, with his amateurish moral philosophy, fails to clearly distinguish between the two levels, let alone to keep them consistently distinct, which marks yet another aspect in which the book disappoints.

On the level of rational argument and reasoned persuasion, a height to which *The God Delusion* appears to aspire, Dawkins' performance, then, falls lamentably short. That is not to deny that the book has great strengths, and I do not simply mean its critical edge on whose sharpness I have had occasion to comment. If one takes the

<sup>26</sup> Dawkins' blind spot is all the more striking as he speaks of 'Palestinian children' (hardly a religious epithet) in the same context (257), and earlier he singled out 'patriotism, especially in times of war' (232) as the only candidate comparable to religion in terms of commanding absolute loyalty.

Preface's declaration of intention seriously and regards consciousness-raising as indeed encapsulating the book's program, a very different reading will result. What Dawkins admits for the last half-chapter will then be applicable to the book's entirety, namely that 'the method of argument [he] must employ is rhetoric rather than logic' (360–61). Seen in that light and freed from the strait-jacket of expectations made on a serious scholarly contribution to either the analysis of religious claims or to the understanding of religion's role in the life of the individual and the community, the work constitutes considerable success. It boosts atheist pride, champions science over religion, and speaks out for children. It is, indeed, a great rhetorical feat which will confirm Dawkins' place in the Royal Society of Literature.

The rhetoric of *The God Delusion* would deserve a study on its own, and I have commented on details often enough not to dwell on the issue here. A few examples will suffice.

I am not necessarily claiming that atheism increases morality, although humanism – the ethical system that often goes with atheism – probably does. Another good possibility is that atheism is correlated with some third factor, such as higher education, intelligence or reflectiveness, which might counteract criminal impulses. Such research evidence as there is certainly doesn't support the common view that religiosity is positively correlated with morality. (229)

Dawkins not only makes a definite critical point (available evidence does not back up the pro-religious claim) but counters the view in question with a hardly more probable thesis (the anti-religious claim is true) presented in carefully qualified ('not necessarily', 'often', 'probably', 'possibility', 'might') but highly suggestive language. Even when he seems to back down, he is subtly supporting the secularist side. If atheism is not directly responsible for better morals, it is correlated with 'higher education, intelligence or reflectiveness' – all attractive values anyone would be happily associated with. On the level of reasoned argument, Dawkins presents an impeccable (because highly qualified) case, but its rhetorical import is much stronger than its logical necessity. What he explicitly says is that there is no correlation between religious views or their absence and ethical standards or performance. The message he nonetheless conveys is that atheism is good for morality. Throughout the book, Dawkins, 'partisan in the controversy' (170),<sup>27</sup> consistently deals out flattery to one and insult to the other side. Chapter 2, for example, opens with a five-line sentence that contains a dozen and a half derogatory adjectives modifying four comparable nouns, all in predicative relationship with the Old Testament deity. It deserves to be quoted in full.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, blood-

<sup>27</sup> Note that I am quoting him out of context. The controversy Dawkins has there in mind is an intra-evolutionary debate over group selection. In the larger and more immediate context of the conflict between religion (theism) and atheism, he never describes himself a partisan but sets himself up as a spokesman for reason (cf., e.g., his dispassionate declaration, 'I can't get excited about personal opinions, whether Unwin's or mine', 108).

thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (31)

It is powerful stuff, and if it is modified with *arguably*, the reader is left in no doubt what Dawkins is going to argue. But underlying all this contemptuous fireworks is the simple but significant assertion that God is a fictional character. Rhetorically highly effective.

There are, of course, other aspects of Dawkins' rhetoric, the readability and wit of his sentences, the memorability and illustrative power of his anecdotes, the passion and immediacy of his voice, but there is only one more feature I want to highlight. Dawkins very effectively uses ridicule and sarcasm to laugh counterarguments out of court.<sup>28</sup> He comments on the ontological argument for God's existence, 'An odd aspect of Anselm's argument is that it was originally addressed not to humans but to God himself (you'd think that any entity capable of listening to a prayer would need no convincing of his own existence)' (80). Just as you'd think that any entity long dead and buried would, at least on Dawkins' view, no longer be in a position to read or listen to an address. Yet in the next chapter Dawkins directly turns to Douglas Adams (d. 2001) his late friend and the book's dedicatee, 'Douglas, I miss you. You are my cleverest, funniest, most open-minded, wittiest, tallest, and possibly only convert' (117). It would be wrong to conclude from the present tense verb forms and the apostrophe that Dawkins, after all, believes like 'approximately 95 per cent of the population of the United States' that he 'will survive [his] own death' (356). Both Anselm's prayerful mediation and Dawkins' grief-stricken invocation can be interpreted with reference to well-established literary conventions, but in the one case Dawkins observes, in the other chooses to deliberately ignore them. The calculated rationalism of Dawkins' Anselm passage is a key to its rhetorical effect while the inclusion of 'possibly only' at the end of the superlatives in his Adams quote betrays gentle self-irony.

Twice during the developmental stages of the text, Dawkins' wife read out loud the entire manuscript to him (7). The final version undoubtedly benefited from the exercise. It is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's practice, who used to read out his works to his butler in order to make sure they really worked. Dawkins' prose works powerfully, and as a battle cry of atheism it surely heartens many in the ranks. But an author of Dawkins' skills and intellect could have opted for rhetorical success *and* intellectual penetration. So a disquieting question remains. Why did Dawkins sacrifice solid research and sound scholarship for biased partisanship? Has his professional judgement indeed failed, perhaps under pressure from his missionary zeal, or has he cynically sold out? Can it be that a brilliant mind like his does not see the glaring inconsistencies and blatant prejudices of his argument? But could it be that he knowingly and deliberately relinquished intellectual responsibility and went for popular appeal at all costs instead? Whatever the startling failures and hidden motivations of

<sup>28</sup> The strategy he may have learnt from Thomas Jefferson, whom he quotes repeatedly and with unvarying appreciation, and who applied it to the doctrine of the Trinity (34). The quote, from a letter to F.A. van der Kemp on 30 July 1816, remains unidentified by Dawkins.

its author, the work will not be quoted as an authoritative text on the impact of religion and atheism on mental health, communal or individual. It is certainly not a must read, but I would not caution anybody against reading it, either – except, perhaps, on grounds of the time commitment it requires. For a pamphlet, it is decidedly bulky. Especially the second half could have been cut by at least a hundred pages.

Dawkins is absolutely right to suggest that there is a serious need for critique of religion today. Regrettably, his book only serves to identify that need, not to fill it. Hans KÜNG's *Projekt Weltethos* (1990), to quote a comparable example, achieves far more in considerably fewer words not least because of its much more realistic assessment of religion. It is not that Küng is less critical towards the dark side of religion. Rather, he sees religiosity as an irreducible dimension of human existence and religion as a double-faced phenomenon, both a great resource and a source of great dangers. While Küng is deeply thought-provoking, Dawkins is merely provocative. If not already established as one, Küng's work is on the way to become a classic. Dawkins', I suspect, will not be long read for the accuracy of its insights and the clarity of its analysis even if the critical side of his work would deserve such recognition. As a catalogue of antireligious anecdotes and ideas, it may remain useful for a while. As a cultural critical exploration of the contemporary scene, it will soon transmorph into a prejudiced period piece. As an *expression* of that context, bearing the imprint of its times, it may remain notable, and as a piece of antireligious advocacy and atheistic propaganda, it may acquire historical significance. Early modern pamphlets are usually not read for their penetrating insights or convincing arguments today. But we were incomparably poorer, and our understanding of sixteenth-century German culture wars would be dreadfully impoverished, had pamphlets not survived from the time of the Reformation in large quantities. *The God Delusion* will be a gem of a pamphlet when discovered in a research library by a twenty-fifth-century historian.

### References

- ALSTON, W.P. (1991) *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell UP).
- BEHE, M. (2007) 'Richard Dawkins', 73 of 100 in *The TIME 100: The People Who Shape Our World*, online edition of the special issue *The Most Influential People in the World* at [http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326\\_1616137,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326_1616137,00.html), accessed 15 August 2007.
- BRECHT, M. (1985–1993) *Martin Luther*, 3 vols., trans. J.L. SCHAAF (Minneapolis: Fortress).
- DAWKINS, R. (2004) *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).
- DOWNEY, R. (1996) 'Article in *Eastsideweek*', downloaded 11 May 2007 from John Catalano's Dawkins website at <http://www.simonyi.ox.ac.uk/dawkins/WorldOfDawkins-archive/Media/seattle.shtml>; originally published in the 11 December issue of the *Seattle Eastsideweek*.
- GREELEY, A.M. (2004) *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P).

- HALL, S.S. (2005) 'Sir Richard Dawkins: Evolution's Fiercest Champion, Far Too Fierce', *Discover* 26:9 (Sep) 50–57.
- Hitler's *Table Talk, 1941–44: His Private Conversations* (1973) trans. by N. CAMERON & R.H. STEVENS (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson).
- HORKHEIMER, M. & T.W. ADORNO (1947) *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido).
- KÜNG, H. (1990) *Projekt Weltethos* (Munich etc.: Pieper).
- KUHN, T. (1955) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3rd ed.; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996).
- LINDBECK, G.A. (1984) *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster).
- MCGRATH, A. (2005) *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* (Malden: Blackwell).
- MCGRATH, A. (2007) *The Dawkins' Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (London: SPCK).
- MYERS, P.Z. (2006) 'The Courtier's Reply', a blog on the Pharyngula website posted 24 Dec 2006, accessed 22 May 2007 at [http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the\\_courtiers\\_reply.php](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the_courtiers_reply.php).
- NIEBUHR, R. (1935) *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper).
- OZMENT, S. (2005) *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (N.p.: Perennial).
- PLANTINGA, A. & WOLTERSTORFF, N., eds. (1983) *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P).
- 'Prospect/FP Global Public Intellectual Poll – Results, The' (2005) accessed online 26 June 2007 at <http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/intellectuals/results.htm>; cf. the relevant paper issue of *Prospect* (No. 116, Nov 2005).
- RANDERSON, J. "'Darwin's Rottweiler" Looks to Round up Britain's Atheists', news blog on the *Guardian Unlimited* website posted on 12 Apr 2007, 3:43 pm; downloaded 25 June 2007 from [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/news/archives/2007/04/12/darwins\\_rottweiler\\_looks\\_to\\_round\\_up\\_britains\\_atheists.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/news/archives/2007/04/12/darwins_rottweiler_looks_to_round_up_britains_atheists.html).
- ROTHENBERG, J. (1968) 'The Legal Aspects of Religious Education in the Soviet Union', *Comparative Education Review* 12, 68–75.
- SIDER, R.D. (1980) 'Credo Quia Absurdum?', *Classical World* 73, 417–19.
- SIEMON-NETTO, U. (1995) *The Fabricated Luther: The Rise and Fall of the Shirer Myth* (Saint Louis: Concordia).
- TÖRÖK, P. (2006) 'Is Celibacy the Secret of Good Mental Health?', *European Journal of Mental Health* 1, 153–55.