# *The God delusion* delusion

**Graham Leo**
Principal, Emmanuel College, Gold Coast, Qld

## Background

**Whilst I was on sabbatical leave and studying at Oxford, in 2007, I heard from friends and family that there had been quite a lot of exposure in the TV media in regard to Richard Dawkins' latest book, *The God delusion*. Dawkins, at Oxford, holds the interesting post of Professor of Public Understanding of Science.**

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One of my course lecturers was Professor Alister McGrath, who holds the post of Professor of Science and Religion, at another Oxford College. McGrath has written a number of books in response to Dawkins' books about religion. Two of these include a response to *The God delusion*, called *The Dawkins delusion*, and an earlier one, *Dawkins' God: Genes, memes and the meaning of life*.

In one of our classes we examined Dawkins' book, and given the amount of interest in Australia, I thought it might be worth writing something for publication in my school newsletter.[1] Most of the material for this article is drawn directly from Professor McGrath's lectures.

## Introduction

*The God delusion* is a long book, and it is impossible to consider all of it in a short article. At the risk of over-simplifying, Dawkins basically offers four key arguments against religion—not just Christianity, but any faith-based religion. In this article I will attempt to offer a response to each of those four points. Dawkins is a scientist—a biologist—and he is clearly well-trained in the scientific method. Arguing and drawing conclusions based on evidence and facts is his stock in trade. Keep this in mind as we review his arguments.

## Key arguments

### It's all childish …

Dawkins' first argument is that all religion is infantile. A belief in a God of any kind is as foolish as believing in the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus. It is like sucking a dummy.

When I was six years old, I probably believed in both of these characters. So did most people, to some degree. However, by the time I grew up, I lost faith in these, but I did see fit, as I grew older, to put my faith in God. In fact, it would be easy to make a very long list of highly intelligent people, including many scientists, who were atheists in their youth, but who have since turned to a belief in God.

The simple response to Dawkins' accusation is that the evidence suggests that religion is not an infantile response for many people, but in fact a mature response to a lifelong consideration of the real world. People of all backgrounds make this deliberate, mature response—scientists, historians, artists, musicians, lawyers, and so on. There is no hard evidence that can be adduced to this claim of infantilism. Dawkins' assertion is just that—an assertion. It is not based on evidence. Any evidence that is available points us to the opposite conclusion—Christian faith is likely to be a serious, thoughtful, logical and deliberate choice.

### How could anyone believe that?

His second major argument is that all religious faith is irrational. Belief in God, according to Dawkins, just doesn't make sense in a logical and orderly world of facts and reason.

Dawkins' greatest difficulty here is that his own position of atheism is just as much a faith as any religion—Christianity, Islam or whatever. We all live in, observe, and react to the physical world, to other people and to the universe in general. In response to this whole-of-life experience, we form a set of opinions about what it all means and where the world came from and how best to live in it. To respond by saying: "I believe that God made this world and has an interest in it and me", is to make *a faith statement* about this existence. But, equally, to respond by saying: "I believe that no God exists and that there is no meaning or purpose to life other than what I can make or find for myself", *is also a faith statement*.

Dawkins suggests that only irrational people would believe in God. Sensible people, people who think, would have to conclude that God does not exist. This is almost his entire argument. If you are a believer, you obviously are not capable of logical thinking. It is difficult to square this kind of claim with the very large number of scientists and philosophers (all presumably rational people) who are also Christian believers.

*The God delusion* was published in 2006. In the same year, Francis Collins also published a book titled, *The language of God: A scientist presents evidence for belief*. Francis Collins was the Director of the Human Genome Project (the project which

spent several decades mapping the human DNA). Collins is a convinced Christian. Is Dawkins seriously suggesting that Collins is an irrational person? It is hard for Dawkins to sound plausible to anyone who does think, when his arguments are so easily controverted by simply pointing out that a large number of people who clearly do think—and even think within the same discipline of science as Dawkins does—have seen reason to commit their lives to God.

### What are the limitations of science?

The third major argument concerns the question of faith and proof. We cannot prove that God exists. Any serious theologian knows this. Dawkins, however, pretends that the reverse is true—that you *can* prove that God does *not* exist, i.e. that a rational man can walk through the world and consider the universe and gather sufficient evidence to form a reasonable conclusion that a supreme being does not exist. But he offers no evidence!

Even assuming this man knew what he was looking for, what God looked like and where he could be found, to come to the conclusion that Dawkins does without evidence is certainly not science, whatever it is. This is very important to understand. It is central to this debate. Dawkins is presenting his *religious* beliefs—that there is no God—and he is asking us to believe them, because he is an eminent Oxford *scientist*. This is not an argument about the evidence; it is an argument about which faith to adopt in the face of the evidence—the faith of 'no God', or a faith 'in God'.

C. S. Lewis (another Oxford academic) wrote that whilst you cannot prove God's existence, you can find plenty of what he calls 'clues'. The whole of life offers such clues:

- the presence of love and goodness in the world;
- the universal sense of right and wrong and justice, even if we don't always agree on the details, or practise it well;
- the considerable historical evidence of Jesus Christ and his life and death and resurrection;
- the logical structure of the world, and the fact that 'it works'.

These are just some of the 'clues' that, taken all together, point towards the likely existence of a God. They are not proofs, but for Lewis, as 'clues', as pointers, they offer substantial reason to believe.

Dawkins does not present any proof or 'clues' for his position. He merely sneers and makes fun of all religious positions. As a scientist, he must understand the importance of evidence and proofs, and it is fair to ask why he is not presenting proofs and evidence if, in fact, they exist. It is this lack of proof that many atheists (there has been some coverage of this here and in the USA) are somewhat embarrassed about Dawkins' book. They feel that it offers such a poor attempt at any proof, and is so obscured by hatred and sarcasm that it is not actually helpful to their cause.

Science has definite limits to its field of enquiry. It cannot form conclusions about historical events, for example. It is not equipped to make judgements on religion or the future. It can only deal with events or data in the present (generally laboratory events) or past events which can be replicated through experiment. Respectable science acknowledges this.

Dawkins is trading on his expertise as a *biologist* to make judgements on *theology* and *psychology*. Unfortunately the person in the street is too often intimidated by those credentials to question his expertise in this area. As a result, they accept his 'story of faith', assuming it is really a 'scientific and reasonable conclusion'. For example, in his book he describes religion as "a virus of the mind". This instantly creates a negative picture for us—viruses are nasty things that make us sick, destroy our computers, and multiply and infiltrate places where they are not wanted. But this term that sounds scientific is actually a meaningless term. No-one has seen a virus of the mind. You can't examine it. It is not a term used elsewhere in scientific literature. It is a clever debating trick to say something that sounds scientific and hope that no-one will be game to examine it closely and find it to be false.

> ***"Available evidence points to the opposite conclusion—Christian faith is a serious, thoughtful, logical and deliberate choice"***

In an earlier book Dawkins invented the term *meme*. A gene transmits information from generation to generation. Dawkins said that a *meme* transmits beliefs and other irrational ideas. No-one has ever seen a *meme*. No other scientist in the world believes they exist. Dawkins has invented the term to describe a process. In *The God delusion*, he refers again to *memes*, but this time in a way that assumes their existence and scientific verification. He has been attacked for this by his colleagues in scholarly circles, but the ordinary reader assumes that this is real science.

Since he cannot prove his claims about God by any accepted means known to science (or the rules of historical enquiry, or logic), Dawkins has invented a pseudo-science to try to add credibility to his faith position. This is not robust argument or defensible logic and the fragility of his position is lost to most ordinary people, who assume that since he is a scientific expert, he must know what he is talking about.

### Isn't religion to blame for so much of the violence in the world?

Dawkins' final argument is his claim that religion produces violence. Of all his arguments this is the only one that really needs serious defence. A skilled Year 11 debater could have come up with all of the above arguments. But in this modern world, it does seem as if religion might be guilty of producing violence. Look at Ireland in the 1970s and

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80s. Look at Iraq, especially where an American president claims to have heard God tell him to go to war. Look at the Islamic terrorists bent on killing as many people as possible in order to win the favour of Allah. This argument is serious and needs to be addressed. The good news is that it can easily be addressed with a little thought.

First, there is a strong counter-argument that atheism (Dawkins' preferred religion) is also guilty of violence. One would only need to look at the great atheistic communist experiments in the USSR, in China, or in Cuba to find ample evidence that violence was a close partner of atheism. Science itself, since this is Dawkins' field, is not immune from the charges of violence as a bedfellow. It was medical doctors who perpetrated some of the worst horrors of the Nazi camps, conducting experiments on children and Jews and gypsies to see the effects of acid, of gas, of exposure to freezing temperatures, of injections of water into the bloodstream, just to name a few. There are ample surviving records of their experiments, to show the evil they performed with methodical precision. It is science that has helped to create the weapons of mass destruction of the second half of the 20th century.

Deeper thinking and a closer examination of the evidence might show that it is not the presence of religion that provides the causal link to violence, but rather the presence of human beings in just about any activity that can be named. The worlds of business and commerce, sport and leisure, art and music, even of academia, all have their stories to tell of human violence. Violence accompanies human interaction in every known sphere, including religion.

A second major defence to Dawkins' accusation is that if you look carefully at Christianity over the centuries, you will actually find a good deal that is at the opposite end of violence. In the middle of wars, it was Christians (and some non-Christians too, of course) who were building hospitals and helping to alleviate suffering.

Who has not heard of Mother Theresa and her work among lepers and the desperately poor? The Red Cross was originally a Christian organisation, hence its name. It was Christians who commenced Trade Unions to create better conditions for workers in the coal mines. Christians led the fights against slavery, child labour, and against oppressions of many kinds. Admittedly the Church of the day did not always support them, but those at the forefront of many peaceful and peace-making movements were often people driven by their Christian convictions.

The final rebuttal to this argument is to look at Jesus Christ himself, the founder of Christianity. Jesus was a revolutionary who was not known for his violence. The worst thing he did was to tip over tables, twice, to protest against unfair profiteering.[2] His whole life was given to doing good. He was at the *receiving end* of much violence, but he himself was a man of peace and was universally acclaimed as being such. He encouraged his followers to copy his example. The fact that we sometimes have not done so has less to do with the faith we profess than the characters that we bring to that faith. What sounds at the outset to be a strong argument for Dawkins turns out to be a false target.

### "… The conclusion of the matter…"[3]

Dawkins has not presented a reasonable challenge to the Christian faith despite the efforts of the media to promote it. As was the case with Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci code*, any person who wants to attack the Christian faith will find that people who do not think deeply are easy prey. For people who think, who are willing to do the intellectual exercise of engaging with angry opponents of Christianity, there are ample points of argument. There are also more than sufficient examples of influential and intelligent people who have chosen Jesus Christ as their adopted exemplar.

*The God delusion* can easily be used to delude people. Its final success may well turn out to be different from what Dawkins intended, however. It just might drag the whole question of faith out into the open, and cause more people to think about it than before. Certainly Christians need not worry that it raises even one single point of reasonable argument to cast doubt on their faith.

It is not that there are no difficult points for faith. Of course there are. We struggle with questions of poverty, of power, of conflict, of environment, of government, just to name a few. If God were so simple that we could all understand him perfectly, he would not be God at all. The really surprising thing is that Dawkins in his anger and cynicism has simply not dealt with any of the really hard questions. We will continue to deal with them, as Christians who honestly engage with ideas.

Logic and reason that are subjected to the authority of God are still logical and reasonable, in fact, even more so. As time goes on, we will continue to find helpful answers to some of these hard questions. In the meantime, we will continue to place our trust in Jesus Christ, who is the visible representation of God to humankind. He alone offers genuine peace and genuine answers to the big questions of life. Dawkins is just a distraction from the real game, and we ought not to let him distract us too much. TEACH

### Endnotes

[1] Much of this article first appeared in Emmanuel College's Newsletter.

[2] See John 2:15; Matthew 21:12

[3] Ecclesiastes 12:13, NIV.