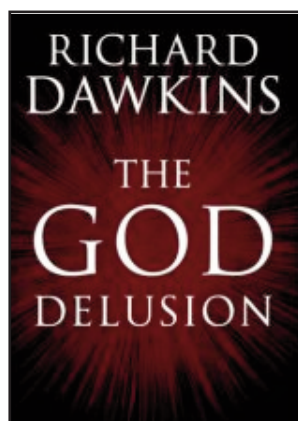


Book reviews



THE GOD DELUSION RICHARD DAWKINS

Bantam Press, 2006
HB, 416 pages, £20.00, 0593055489

For anyone interested in patterns of human thought and motivation, as all GPs surely are, this is an important book which deserves to be widely distributed under Christmas trees this year. It is hard-hitting, passionate, darkly funny and fizzes with intellectual energy. In an age of cultural relativism which vetoes criticism of religion, it is also a very brave book. Dawkins deliberately takes a controversial stance, his intention to provoke debate from which comes reason. We can vigorously debate politics and economics, he argues, so why do we have to tip-toe around religion?

Dawkins nails his 'thesis' to the door right at the start: his aim is to 'raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one'. He pulls no punches in the early pages as we read of the 'undeserved respect' afforded organised religion and of the God of the Bible as 'arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction.' At times here you feel in the company of a slightly drunk, aggressive friend about to get in a fight over a spilled pint. You want to lead him gently outside, whispering soothingly in his ear 'it's alright Richard, it doesn't matter, it's going to be

OK'. It would be a shame if believers were to hurl the book across the room at this point as Dawkins subsequently becomes more engaging, conversational and conciliatory; here you feel in the relaxed company of an incisive and brilliant mind. He acknowledges the artistic and cultural 'treasured heritage' of religion, its 'power to console' and the importance of the Bible in 'literary culture'; but none of that makes it true.

In the early chapters he discusses definitions of God and elegantly dismantles the philosophical and scriptural arguments for God's existence. His interest then turns to the main argument for God in current use, that of 'intelligent design': the idea that the probability of life originating on earth is similar to 'a hurricane sweeping through a scrapyard and having the luck to assemble a 747'. The idea is superficially persuasive, but only to those who do not fully understand evolutionary biology. Richard explains all and here we are reminded why he is such a master of popular science writing. He is lucid, the explanations vivid, the ideas exciting. He discusses, using his theory of memes, why religious belief persists. He examines morality: do we really get our moral sense from sacred texts, such as the Bible, that say we should execute adulterous women and homosexuals? For the huge majority of believers, of course not; but on what basis do we pick out the nice bits and reject the nasty? Dawkins takes the humanist stance that our moral values are based on human nature and experience, independent of religious beliefs.

But, why does all this matter? Don't we all have, after all, a 'God-shaped gap' which needs to be filled? Isn't it just 'harmless nonsense'? It matters for Dawkins because religion is a dangerous and malign influence. Bush and Bin Laden both believe the other is evil, but in fact both men are motivated by God. And, the irony is, it's the same one. Dawkins acknowledges that wars and feuds

between religious groups are not about theology, but politics and innate tribalism; but religion exacerbates difference, is divisive and at its most extreme is used to justify violence. Religion also plays a major role in policy making, and not just in the quasi-theocratic Bush administration. The UK government consults with religious leaders on many areas, such as end-of-life decisions, stem cell research and sexual health, that affect our work.

Dawkins gives the book a hopeful, optimistic finish with a discussion on consolation and inspiration. The world is a place full of love, compassion and meaning but as rational, intelligent beings we have to find it for ourselves. We should not rely, like children, on a benign 'father' to give it to us. For inspiration, we need look no further than the evolutionary wonder of our own eye in the mirror. In Yann Martel's brilliant novel about faith *The Life of Pi* he presents two alternative views of looking at the world. There is one wonderful story with a tiger in it, and another rational, pragmatic explanation for the extraordinary sequence of events. Our hearts want us to believe in the tiger. However, Dawkins argues it is religion that offers the simplistic and reductionist view. A willingness to look, to question and to conceive the inconceivable through science offers a more inspiring and enlightened view of the wonderful world around us than faith. A view that is evidence-based.

Simon Curtis