

The God Delusion: A Meditation

or

Unweaving Rainbows: A Review and a Meditation

By Greta West

In twentieth century America the link between religious belief and personal integrity is so ubiquitous in the popular imagination that to admit one's atheism is tantamount to a confession of amorality, cynicism, hopelessness, spiritual poverty, irreverence, arrogance and possibly poor hygiene. It doesn't seem to matter what supernatural system one believes in as long as one believes in something, a sad fact repeatedly born out in national polls. Agnostics fare somewhat better, but barely. Agnostics are namby-pamby fence sitters who lack the courage of their own convictions.

When one thinks of the religious skepticism of America's founding fathers and that of all the eminent skeptics who followed, this seems a strange state of affairs to find ourselves in. How is it that in a polity founded on secularity and religious freedom, doubters have come to be so reviled? In Europe, where for centuries armies clashed over trivial sectarian differences and heretics were tortured and murdered in the name of God, the atheist's situation isn't nearly so dire. In England, where the Anglican church is the official state religion, the populace is more secular than in the USA.

This provides an awkward segue to the atheism of Richard Dawkins who, besides being decidedly British, is also an evolutionary biologist and Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. American readers became aware of his work in 1976 with the publication of *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins is also the worst kind of atheist: he is utterly unapologetic about it.

I first encountered his work in *The Blind Watchmaker*, published in 1986. Here he explains the remarkably creative power of natural selection, currently thought to be the mechanism that drives evolution. That an elegant design can arise from a natural, unthinking process is, on the face of it, counter-intuitive, and for many downright nonsensical.

Today evolution by natural selection is considered as factual as anything ever is in science. Researchers argue over the details, for there may be forces at work other than natural selection. Sure, you can always find holdouts, just as you can find Ph.Ds who deny global warming (who just happen to work for the oil companies). I recently read an article about a geology Ph.D. who was also a young-Earth creationist. Young-Earthers believe the planet is six thousand years old because the Bible says so. He earned his Ph.D. by doing legitimate science at a mainstream university, and apparently did so by segregating his beliefs from his science — a remarkable achievement in itself.(4)

Thus, in the opening years of the twenty-first century, a hundred and forty-eight years after the publication of Darwin's *Origin*, vast numbers of Americans still haven't come to terms with evolution, a rejection due mainly to religious belief and biblical literalism. It seems obvious to me this is due in part to atheism's soiled reputation. In the popular imagination evolution is closely associated with atheism. There is a widespread notion among regular folk, apparently, that evolution necessarily eliminates the necessity for a creator. It's true that millions of believers have reconciled the two, but apparently many more have not. According to every poll I've seen, the vast majority of Americans think Genesis is literally factual, which to them means evolution simply can't be true.

Now enter Richard Dawkins(5), evolutionist, science writer extraordinary and curmudgeonly atheist. I freely admit that I enjoy his books and essays. He writes with droll wit and admirable clarity. His wide-ranging intellect shines from every page. He is that rarest of birds in nonfiction literature, a good explainer of difficult ideas, somewhat in the mold of Isaac Asimov, blessed be his name. One of my favorite Dawkins books is *Unweaving the Rainbow* in which he eloquently argues that

rainbows can't be unwoven. In other words, scientific understanding in no way lessens our sense of wonder and beauty. Knowledge of the physics of light and air doesn't make the rainbow any less beautiful. In fact, a heightened understanding of the natural world should only deepen our wonder at it, a fact so stupendously obvious that it shouldn't need expounding; and the fact that it is necessary strikes me as nothing less than tragic, for such misapprehension works to turn people away from science, from knowing. After all these years and in spite of everything, still we struggle with the Faustian notion that knowledge is dangerous.

In his more recent book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins joins a small but insistent chorus of voices in denouncing religious belief as irrational and dangerous. It is a peculiar thing that several such books were published and widely noticed in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. It's almost as if the religious skeptics among us were galvanized by that terrible day when Islamic jihadists drove airliners into the towers while chanting "*Allah akbar!*" or "God is great." It is as though skeptics had been waiting from such an event to come along to illustrate their beliefs about religious belief.

The events of 9/11 were tragic on a number of levels. I'll never forget watching black smoke billow from the towers as tiny scraps rained down from the broken windows; and I'll never forget the shock I felt when I realized that some of that debris was made up of people leaping into the abyss in acts of faith and desperation so extreme as to sear the soul. I confess that I remember thinking how this should wake us up to the dark side of religion and cure us of our own religious fanaticism. But alas, it was not to be. In the wake of 9/11 the tragedy was compounded when Muslims everywhere were demonized and feared simply for being Muslim. This fear was quickly expanded to cover anyone who appeared even vaguely Middle Eastern, to people who weren't even Muslim, much less terrorists. Such is the way of things, I suppose, for instead of looking inward to our own faults, we look outward to the alien Other. Even Billy Graham's son, Franklin, joined in the Islam-bashing, condemning Islam for being a violent religion as if his own holy book and its adherents were entirely innocent of violence and the rhetoric of tribal hatred.

In the wake of that awful day the dust had barely settled when Sam Harris(6) was first out of the gate in August 2004. *The End of Faith*, I confess, reflected my own feelings at the time. It excoriated every aspect of religion, and not just the extremist variety; the more liberal faiths were not spared Harris's scathing consideration. In 2006 Richard Dawkins echoed many of the same concerns in *The God Delusion*. Both authors critique faith itself, where faith is defined by default as the unquestioning belief in supernatural agencies.

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins rejects the comforting and widely held notion that science and religion are separate but equal spheres of thought that do not compete. He quotes Steven Jay Gould(7) who coined the phrase "non-overlapping magisteria" and its acronym, NOMA. Gould, an evolutionary biologist, articulated NOMA this way: ". . . science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God's possible superintendence of nature. We can neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can't comment on it as scientists."

Steven Jay Gould is far from the first intellectual to advocate such a peace treaty; Richard Dawkins singles him out because the two were acquainted before, and Gould was an influential popularizer of evolutionary theory. On a personal note, I loved Gould's books of essays on the subject; he taught me a lot about the details of evolution at a time when I needed educating. When I read his book *Rocks of Ages* in which he put forth NOMA, it seemed perfectly reasonable, and certainly politically wise at a time when the advocates of so-called "scientific creationism" were being particularly aggressive in pushing their agenda. The notion of non-overlapping magisteria is a long overdue plea for a truce between science and religion; a kind of intellectual diplomacy. And Richard Dawkins thinks it is rubbish. Dawkins says that "Gould carried the art of bending over backwards to positively supine lengths."

Never one to be diplomatic for diplomacy's sake, Richard Dawkins questions the validity of non-overlapping magisteria. Is it true that science can never adjudicate the issue of God's superintendence of nature? Dawkins says no. "What are these ultimate questions in whose presence religion is an honoured guest and science must respectfully slink away?" Common wisdom holds that science asks "how" questions, while religion asks "why" questions, and never the twain shall meet. But again Dawkins says "rubbish." Asking why the universe exists, or why there is something instead of nothing, may simply be, he says, utter nonsense, questions that ultimately make no sense. It may be like asking, "Why are unicorns hollow?" or, "What is the color of abstraction?" He says, "Not every English sentence beginning with the word 'why' is a legitimate question. Some questions simply do not deserve an answer."

This may well be. One of the basic lessons we draw from the study of philosophy is that we can fool ourselves with semantics. What is the sound of one hand clapping? A philosopher might say this is not an intelligible question, that it is semantically null. Dawkins makes a valid point in claiming that a theologian is no more qualified to answer such questions than the garbage man. Why am I here? What is my purpose? Can a priest/rabbi/pastor answer such questions any better than a scientist can?

These same huge questions have also troubled people of faith. My younger brother, for example, was once a preacher at a fundamentalist church. One of his more odious duties was to lend spiritual aid and comfort to the bereaved. One of his congregants was a grandmother who one night had her grandchildren over for a sleep-over. That night the air conditioner short circuited and started a fire. As her house burned the woman struggled valiantly to rescue the grandchildren, sustaining severe burns herself. But despite her efforts, the children were lost in the fire. My brother told me that counseling this poor woman was one of the most excruciating experiences of his life. It was a turning point for him, for he could make no sense of it. He had quite literally devoted his life to God and the study of His Word, and yet he could offer no answers.

When Job asserted himself and ranted against God, God answered from the whirlwind, saying, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?" My brother received a similar answer and ultimately found it lacking. Richard Dawkins legitimately questions the alleged morality of the Old Testament. If these vile stories serve only as allegory, he asks, then what are they allegories for? What is the moral lesson of Lot offering up his own daughters for rape by the mob? This kind of questioning comes as no shock to religious liberals; but thinkers like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris would demand to know why liberals don't take the next step and reject the Bible altogether? Of what possible use is it?

As I contemplate these issues I find myself in something of a bind. Everything Dawkins says is perfectly reasonable, and yet I am haunted by the feeling that some essential piece of the puzzle has fallen off the table. If religion offers no dependable moral guide as many claim it does, then from where does morality come? Where do we find our ethics? Even fundamentalists pick and choose among the endless dos and don'ts of the Old Testament — they just refuse to acknowledge it. If this is so, then by what criteria do we choose? No modern fundamentalist would defend slavery even though the Bible notoriously takes it for granted. My question, along with Richard Dawkins, is Why? Even a casual study of ancient Roman culture will show that our ethics have evolved since then. We no longer watch wild animals devour people for its entertainment value. We do still watch people beat one another half to death for sport, yet we no longer look forward to the kill. So I wonder: has Christianity made the difference? If so, why did it take Christians over eighteen centuries to realize that slavery was a bad idea? Why did it take one thousand seven hundred and seventy-six years to institute representational government? Or to realize that women were not property but fully sentient beings? Make your own list.

Richard Dawkins is quite right in saying that not all “why” questions are valid, and that morality exists apart from holy books. And yet it has only recently gotten through my thick skull that in spite of the obviously irrational nature of much of religious belief, millions of perfectly rational folks still take comfort from it. A friend explained how she finds solace in the notion that the universe has a purpose. Though she cannot explain God, or define God, or reason why God should exist, she says her belief that there is an entity out there who cares about her saves her from despair — a despair with which she is all too familiar. My friend acknowledges that such belief is not rational; she thinks (or hopes) that there are trans-rational, or ultra-rational, ways of knowing. Richard Dawkins, of course, would say that this is pure nonsense, that any sensible question can be investigated by the methods of science. And this is the key, I think: human beings don’t always ask reasonable questions. Asking why one exists may be a scientifically empty question, yet it is one we all ask. It is a question with existential resonance. On some level we seem to sense our connection with the rest of existence, and we yearn for existence to make sense, to have an ultimate purpose even if that purpose is beyond our ken. It is a kind of hope.

Though I agree with ninety-nine percent of what they say, it seems to me that Dawkins and Harris overlook something crucial to the discussion of religion. Yes, it is irrational to believe in God, just as it is irrational to believe in the existence of unicorns. Dawkins insists that the existence of God is, in principle, a testable scientific hypothesis the same as the unicorn hypothesis. And though I myself have bitterly berated religion for its excesses, and in spite of my own skepticism, I often find myself asking “why” questions. Call it an intellectual flaw or call it irrational, but on a deeply personal level “why” questions are important to me. Apparently I can’t help it, especially during times of emotional crises. I remember complaining to a friend that I couldn’t find God, as if a belief in a supernatural being might help me through it. Even in calmer emotional climes I am fascinated by the question of why something exists instead of nothing. Maybe it’s a nonsensical question; maybe the existence of nothing is somehow more than a semantical contradiction. To paraphrase Steven Hawking, perhaps asking why the universe exists is like asking what lies one mile north of the north pole.

I can find no fault in Dawkins’ reasoning. Like him, I find that a scientific understanding of the world (incomplete as it may be) enriches my life and lends it some sense of meaning. Like him, I bitterly lament the senseless excesses of religious extremism. Indeed, religion makes for an excellent excuse to commit all manner of atrocity. I part company with Dawkins and Harris, however, in their condemnation of liberal religiosity, for it seems to me that liberalism is, at the very least, an intellectual step forward; a step toward rationality and away from the brink of barbarity. I was impressed by something Karen Armstrong⁽⁸⁾ said in *A History of God*.⁽⁹⁾ Those who advocated new and radical views of God, she claims, were invariably charged with atheism by the orthodox, as the Christians were by the Romans. She then wonders if our modern day atheists aren’t harbingers of a different kind of spirituality, one more suited to our age. She goes on to say:

“When religious ideas have lost their validity, they have usually faded away painlessly; if the human idea of God no longer works for us in the empirical age, it will be discarded. Yet in the past people have always created new symbols to act as a focus for spirituality. Human beings have always created a faith for themselves, to cultivate their sense of the wonder and ineffable significance of life. The aimlessness, alienation, anomie and violence that characterize so much of modern life seem to indicate that now that they are not deliberately creating a faith in ‘God’ or anything else — it matters little what — many people are falling into despair.”

Armstrong goes on to say:

“Human beings cannot endure emptiness and isolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.”

The events of 9/11, however, may stand as a warning that the old religiosity will not fade away painlessly, not this time around. I submit that thinkers like Dawkins and Harris are like the Old Testament prophets crying in the wilderness, warning of the dangers we face from those obsolete views of God. Keep in mind that the prophets of old were not beloved by their contemporaries. They acted as agitators and critics, and were rarely invited down to the pub for a friendly pint. We may disagree with what these atheists say; we may feel threatened by their message that unquestioning belief is irrational, and even dangerous. We may feel that the absence of God is nihilistic. This is not, however, a legitimate reason to ignore them. We need to remind ourselves that sometimes the truth hurts. And it is this hurtfulness, I confess, which is the source of my ambivalence. Earlier I pointed out the connection in the popular imagination between evolution and atheism. I therefore regret that Richard Dawkins appears to confirm that erroneous connection. He is an evolutionary biologist who proudly and loudly proclaims his atheism. Though Steven Jay Gould's non-overlapping magisteria may be flawed, and possibly not entirely honest, at least Gould didn't go out of his way to alienate believers. Richard Dawkins does just that, and joyfully so. I don't know how to resolve this problem. All I know is that common folk will reject the wonders of science long before they reject religious faith. Human beings cannot endure emptiness and isolation; and when Dawkins promotes atheism together with evolution, however joyfully he does it, emptiness and isolation is exactly what people see. They don't want their rainbows unwoven.

It's a pretty pickle we're in. Folks will perceive the proponents of evolution as nihilistic atheists even if we are in fact, as Karen Armstrong says, harbingers of a new kind of faith. It doesn't matter if we argue that atheists are not nihilists and amoral scoundrels, for this is how atheism (and, by association, liberalism) is widely perceived. Dawkins and Harris may have a legitimate point in criticizing religious liberals for not speaking out more effectively against fundamentalism. When Muslims went on a murderous rampage over cartoons published in a Danish newspaper, where were the mainstream Muslims? Why was George Bush perceived to be more religious than Al Gore? Why was John Kerry unable to articulate a moral defense of abortion rights? In short, how is it that fundamentalists have claimed and held the moral high ground for more than twenty years?

As prophets crying in the wilderness, Harris and Dawkins are trying to tell us something. Even if we disagree with much of what they say I think it vital we not reject their message simply because the message hurts, or merely because they are atheists. They speak not from positions of hate, but of deep concern.

(1) William Paley: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Paley

(2) Charles Darwin: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin

(3) Gregor Mendel: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregor_Mendel

(4) The New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/12/science/12geologist.html?scp=23&sq=&st=nyt>

(5) Richard Dawkins: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Dawkins and <http://richarddawkins.net/>

(6) Sam Harris: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Harris_%28author%29 and <http://www.samharris.org/>

(7) Steven Jay Gould: www.stephenjaygould.org/ and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Jay_Gould

(8) Karen Armstrong: <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Fellows/Armstrong/armstrong.html> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Armstrong

A History of God.(9) <http://www.salon.com/books/int/2006/05/30/armstrong/> and <http://frimmin.com/books/historyofgod.html>