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# THE GOD DELUSION

Richard Dawkins



BLACK SWAN

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## In Memoriam Douglas Adams (1952–2001)

‘Isn’t it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without  
having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?’

## Afterword

by Daniel Dennett

Four books appeared within a few months of each other a decade ago: Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, my *Breaking the Spell*, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God is not Great*. Although the authors knew, or knew of, each other, this near-simultaneous outburst was not planned, but we soon joined forces, informally, and somebody – not one of us – dubbed us the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism. Fame – or notoriety, take your pick – followed, and before long we were joined by a distinguished cadre of other authors who had decisive and well-evidenced cases to present about various problems and failures of religion. Many of these have been well received; but *The God Delusion* has outsold them all, probably by an order of magnitude. Whatever twinges of envy that fact obliges me to experience (I'm only human), they are obliterated by my delight in the fact that his book has outsold all the 'flea' books he mentions in his introduction to this new edition by even wider margins. Those frantically scribbled diatribes – none of which, so far as I know, has attracted favourable attention – are a well-deserved measure of the scale of Richard's impact. And while 'sophisticated theologians' and their friends wanted the world to believe that he failed to engage *serious* religion in his critique, those darn fleas tell a different story: he struck a nerve, and he struck it dead centre.

It was once my distinct pleasure to confront one of these critics directly in print. H. Allen Orr, in 'A mission to convert',<sup>156</sup> reviewing *The God Delusion* and other new books on science and religion, called Dawkins an amateur, not professional, atheist, and claimed he had failed to come to grips with 'religious thought' with its 'meticulous reasoning' in any serious way. I cannot resist quoting from the letter I wrote to the editor

in response, since it expresses my considered view better than anything I could write anew:

He notes that the book is 'defiantly middlebrow,' and I wonder just which highbrow thinkers about religion Orr believes Dawkins should have grappled with. I myself have looked over large piles of recent religious thought in the last few years in the course of researching my own book on these topics, and I have found almost all of it to be so dreadful that ignoring it entirely seemed both the most charitable and most constructive policy. (I devote a scant six pages of *Breaking the Spell* to the arguments for and against the existence of God, while Dawkins devotes roughly a hundred, laying out the standard arguments with admirable clarity and fairness, and skewering them efficiently.) There are indeed *recherche* versions of these traditional arguments that perhaps have not yet been exhaustively eviscerated by scholars, but Dawkins ignores them (as do I) and says why: his book is a consciousness-raiser aimed at the general religious public, not an attempt to contribute to the academic micro-discipline of philosophical theology. The arguments Dawkins exposes and rebuts are the arguments that waft from thousands of pulpits every week and reach millions of television viewers every day, and neither the televangelists nor the authors of best-selling spiritual books pay the slightest heed to the subtleties of the theologians either.

Who does Orr favor? Polkinghorne, Peacocke, Plantinga, or some more recondite thinkers? Orr brandishes the names of two philosophers, William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and cites C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, a fairly nauseating example of middle-brow homiletic in roughly the same

league on the undergraduate hit parade as Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* (1998) and transparently evasive when it comes to 'meticulous reasoning.' If it were a book in biology – Orr's discipline – I daresay he'd pounce on it like a pit bull, but like many others he adopts a double standard when the topic is religion. As Orr says, both James and Wittgenstein 'struggled with the question of belief,' in their admirable and entirely different ways, but both also steer clear of the issues that Orr chides Dawkins for oversimplifying. I wonder which themes in these fine thinkers Orr would champion in the current discussion, beyond the speculation he cites from James, that 'the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe.' I'd be curious to know what Orr thinks that means. How should it be clarified and investigated, in his opinion, or does he just want to leave it hanging unchallenged?

Orr ends by wondering why Dawkins – no expert on religion – wrote his book, and he might also wonder why I wrote mine. Didn't we have more intellectually satisfying problems to work on, problems better fitting our training, interests and talents? I'll answer for myself, but I think Dawkins would give much the same answer. Yes, of course I'd much rather have been spending my time working on consciousness and the brain, or on the evolution of cooperation, for instance, or free will, but I felt a moral and political obligation to drop everything for a few years and put my shoulder to the wheel doing a dirty job that I thought somebody had to do. I am aching to get back to my favorite topics, but I still have to do a fair amount of follow-up, apparently, since there are plenty of people like Orr who still want to protect religion from the sort of unflinching scrutiny Dawkins and I (and Sam Harris and Lewis

Wolpert and others) are calling for. Is this opinion of Orr's just force of habit, or going along with tradition, or has he carefully studied the phenomena and seen that we really mustn't rock the boat, for fear of causing calamity? If the latter, he owes the world a careful and vivid argument to that effect, for it would put Dawkins and the rest of us in our proper place as dangerous intellectual vandals. Such a project would not fit his talents or training, but I should think it would be his duty as a concerned scientist.<sup>157</sup>

Orr never replied, and in the intervening years we have seen many other critics of *The God Delusion*, some of whom have probably actually read the book, do a vanishing act when pressed for details in support of their dire verdicts. The one sentence that is often cited as evidence is Dawkins' delicious catalogue of the (retrospectively obvious) disqualifications of Jehovah as an entity to worship:

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, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

This is a startling indictment indeed; but aside from deploring it, who has the temerity to go through it, point by point, and *dispute* it? As Dawkins notes, Dan Barker has now published a rollicking case for the prosecution, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*, citing chapter and verse for each feature. The ball is in the critics' court, but I don't expect to see a return of service.

We horsemen, and others, have often written about the 'I'm an atheist but' crowd, or the 'faitheists' (a good term coined by

Jerry Coyne), who claim not to find a need in themselves for religious belief but decry the rudeness with which we impose our scepticism on those who still need a fantasy to live by. It never seems to occur to them how patronizing this complaint is: 'I, like you, see through all the smoke and mirrors, but come on, guys, think of the poor dears who can't handle the truth!' We horsemen and horsewomen (many more than four – perhaps we should be rebranded the Dozen Demons of Doubt or something like that) think we are actually showing respect for our fellow adults, readers all, presumably curious and well informed on matters of importance, by directly challenging their professed opinions. Yes, alas, we are not exactly polite, but consider: there is no polite way of asking somebody to consider the possibility that they have wasted their life on an illusion, is there? And sometimes it is important to ask that very question, however awkward it may be. Thank goodness Dawkins has the style to carry off this rude awakening with elegance.

But is he just preaching to the choir, as some have insisted? Has *The God Delusion* actually converted anybody? Yes, indeed. Several of the clergy Linda LaScola interviewed for our study, *Caught in the Pulpit*,<sup>158</sup> revealed that it was their decision to read *The God Delusion* (on the principle of 'know thine enemy') that eventually led to their still secret apostasy. And I have received many emails from people who tell me that reading Dawkins was either the opening alarm bell or the final straw in their lonely journey to atheism. This has been particularly instructive to me, since I went out of my way to write my own book in a more diplomatic tone. I figured that many readers would be strongly tempted to throw it across the room, but I didn't want to give them anything that seemed like a good excuse. It turns out that if you write with the passion and clarity of Dawkins, you can get some of your readers to retrieve the book they have heaved in anger, finish it, and declare themselves persuaded. I wonder how many readers of *The God Delusion* have time bombs ticking away in their minds, accumulating doubt with every passing day.

Is he 'angry'? Is he 'shrill' and 'arrogant'? Look closely, and you will see that these familiar charges are without foundation. What leads people to level them is the fact that they have been accustomed their entire lives to having their darling dogmas handled with kid gloves, never challenged, always 'respected'. I put 'respected' in scare quotes because – a dirty little secret that I suspect everyone knows – hardly anybody truly respects the bizarre doctrines of any religion but their own. They just feel obliged to say (in public) that they do, a bit of lip service to ecumenicism. Do you really think that the archbishop respects the angel Gabriel who visited Muhammad in the cave, or the Angel Moroni with the golden plates? Or that the imam respects the transubstantiation of the wafer and wine? As one very sophisticated Episcopalian priest once confided to me: 'When I found out what my Mormon relatives meant by "God" I rather wished that they *didn't* believe in God!'

Thanks to the new worldwide transparency opened up by electronic media, and especially the internet,<sup>159</sup> we are now all living in glass houses, and all the diplomatic posturing that concealed this mutual disrespect much of the time (except when fighting bloody wars of religion) is beginning to lose its efficacy; so perhaps it is time to retire the faithists' demand for lip service altogether and join Richard Dawkins in a candid exploration of the dreams from which the world is finally awakening.

## Appendix

### A partial list of friendly addresses, for individuals needing support in escaping from religion

I intend to keep an updated version of this list on the website of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science: [www.richarddawkins.net](http://www.richarddawkins.net). I apologize for limiting the list below largely to the English-speaking world.

#### USA

American Atheists

PO Box 158, Cranford, NJ 07016

Voicemail: 1 908 276 7300

[www.atheists.org](http://www.atheists.org)

American Humanist Association

1777 T Street NW, Washington DC 20009-7125

Tel: 202 238 9088

Toll-free: 1 800 837 3792

Fax: 202 238 9003

[www.americanhumanist.org](http://www.americanhumanist.org)

Atheist Alliance International

PO Box 26867, Los Angeles, CA 90026

Toll-free: 1 866 HERETIC

Email: [info@atheistalliance.org](mailto:info@atheistalliance.org)

[www.atheistalliance.org](http://www.atheistalliance.org)

Atheist community of Austin

[www.atheist-community.org](http://www.atheist-community.org)