

Sermon by Email: Palm Sunday 2020

During Lock-down I have, among other things, taken the opportunity to re-visit Richard Dawkins's 2006 book *The God Delusion*. I have it on Kindle and a nice hardback edition too. Richard Dawkins is not pleased with God. He seems to have chosen God as his sworn enemy.

The God Delusion is essentially an extended diatribe against religion in general and belief in God in particular. Dawkins wrote the book, in part, to encourage timorous atheists to come out of hiding. It's not easy to take him seriously¹.

Richard Dawkins is a great writer; pellucid; clear in meaning, expression and style. He writes very well on his own subject (biology). But *The God Delusion* contains little science; it's mainly philosophy and theology² with a good dose of social commentary about the ills of religion coupled with large amounts of abusive language: vitriol, insult, ridicule etc. not to mention an irritating smarter-than-thou attitude. Nice book. But Dawkins is not a philosopher – he's a biologist – in philosophy he's out of his depth. The American atheist philosopher Michael Ruse remarked: *The God Delusion makes me embarrassed to be an atheist*³

To give just one example: We know of no irrefutable objections to its being possible that unguided evolution produced this whole complex and wonderful world. Therefore unguided evolution is true.

There is a truly colossal distance between premise and conclusion here. Dawkins thinks he can show unguided evolution is true (no God, no Mind, no directing force) just by refuting those claims that unguided evolution is impossible. It's like I come home with the news that my line manager is about to recommend me for a £20K pay increase:

That's a lot dear...how wonderful...you must be so pleased...why is he's going to do that?

Well, there are no irrefutable objections to its being possible that he's going to do that.

Oh I see, dear...now come and sit down...

Despite the fact that Dawkins is full of bluster and gives no substantial reason at all why belief in God is mistaken (let alone a delusion) plus the fact that the methodological naturalism³ which he embraces is hugely problematic, it's not really these things that are the concern. Rather it's his objective and his conclusion. His stated *objective* is to convert his reader to atheism by the time she has reached the end of the book. His *conclusion* is a dispiriting picture of intrinsic unloveliness in respect of human beings and their place in the universe; a universe which, for Dawkins, has at bottom “no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference”⁵. (Of course, you can't actually apply a moral value like 'pitiless indifference' to an inanimate object like the universe – but no nitpicking! :-)). He gives his reader a good dose of unwarranted pessimism and then leaves her to get on with it. You can't even cry out to God in your distress or shout at him in your anger because, according to Dawkins, he's not there to listen to you.

After reading Dawkins, the Christian Gospel comes as a breath of fresh air. Nevertheless some, perhaps many of us, are stumped by the real evil and suffering in the world. Of course you can't have real evil without there being a real way things are and are not supposed to be. Which means there is a real right and wrong way in respect of things, a Moral Law⁶ if you like, which permeates both the world and our private and social lives. It's always present and at all levels: should I or we or this nation do this, or should I or we or this nation do that? Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project between 1992 and 2001 and one-time atheist, came to Christianity as this

fact dawned upon him. He writes: “Encountering this argument at age twenty-six I was stunned by its logic. Here, hiding in my own heart as familiar as anything in daily experience...this moral law shone its bright white light into the recesses of my childish atheism, and demanded a serious consideration of its origin. *Was this God looking back at me?*”⁷ (italics mine)

So Dawkins is not happy with the way things are and thinks that making God his sworn enemy helps in some way. But neither is the Bible happy with the way things are. The difference is that Dawkins has no solution but to fall back into some kind of meaninglessness; a naturalism which is, according to the philosophers, self-referentially destructive⁹. By contrast the Bible does not neutralise evil in this way; it faces up to it; it rebels against it; it lies at the very heart of the Gospel; and the Gospel offers us a real solution to the problem in Jesus Christ. That's why we call it the Gospel. Nevertheless our emotional and intellectual barriers - obstructions to faith – exist; they're real. They're very real.

Thinking about barriers, I remember when I first became a Christian. You could say I was part of a modern post-war, science-will-solve-all-ills, non-Christian family. I am the youngest of three children. At age seventeen, however, I had a *tolle lege* moment¹⁰. My two siblings and their spouses-to-be had all been educated in the natural sciences. Their barrier to faith was: science explains everything – no God – period – end of argument. Some say the natural or physical sciences are a one-way superhighway to atheism. Personally, I've never quite understood this opinion given there are top scientists and philosophers in our universities and elsewhere who don't seem to have a problem. People like Francis Collins whom we just mentioned¹¹. But for me, at the time, it was like facing the Four Horsemen, only early. When Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris came along thirty years later it was *deja vu*.¹²

Over time my atheist siblings did come to Christ but not merely through debate and argument, which was reassuring. They were, I thought, human after all :-). As C. Stephen Evans says, people rarely if ever come to faith just by way of logical arguments¹³. My brother, who's a retired physics lecturer, has a schizophrenic stepson whose illness and its repercussions have been distressing for all concerned for many years. My sister who once led a very active life found herself suddenly bed-ridden for ten years. It was by way of these *experiences* that they came to Christ because, in their cases, it was only in these experiences that they met Christ. What's more, Christ turned these painful experiences into their greatest ministry. Goodness and love grew out of an otherwise meaningless event. It changed them. Who better can empathise with someone who has a mentally disabled son or daughter than a person whose stepson self harms, steals, exhibits bizarre behaviour, does drugs and is regularly escorted to the post office by his dealer? Who better to console someone living through the misery of chronic illness than someone whose life came to an abrupt stop with all the repercussions on career and family life? Sometimes it's our life *experiences* that dismantle the barricades which may never otherwise come down. Thomas Carlyle (Senior) once said, *what's needed is a Christian who knows Christ other than at second hand*¹⁴. These are such people. In our trouble and pain we know Christ other than at second hand whether we realise it or not; whether we cry out to him in our pain or just shout at him in our anger.

Today is Palm Sunday: the final stage of our journey to the Cross. We each carry our pain as we accompany him whatever that pain may be. Our darkest moments are also often our finest moments, though again we very often can't see it ourselves; we're too close to the events. When our heart is broken and we feel abandoned, out of options and the pain is great – at times such as these we're walking with Christ to the Cross. We don't just know *about* the Cross; we know it at first hand, by *experience*. That's what my sister and brother found. And the barricades come down. Now we know we are not alone. We have an inchoate sense of his love and we're drawn to it; something inside us wants to surrender to it. It's like a Jack Reacher thriller¹⁵.

Our wounds are like a tree. A tree is wounded and slowly, very slowly, year by year, a new ring of wood forms around the wound. The cavity, where the love and pain was, never disappears, it's always there, but it gets compartmentalised¹⁶ and the tree gets strong again. When a person is refined rather than destroyed or embittered by life, they are like a tree and exert an attraction all their own. You see it in the writings of people who have come through what are commonly called 'God-forsaken times and places'¹⁷ – their Calvary. And we thank God for them; well, at least I do, maybe Dawkins doesn't. They are the real people in whom we see Jesus Christ fully alive. They've gone down to the depths with him and this is something too valuable for them not to share. A person who knows Christ other than at second hand should never ever retire because Christ has given them so much to *give*. The trouble is, we often don't see it until someone else points it out.

As this Holy Week you walk with Christ to the Cross, may he generate a new spirit and create a new heart inside you because of your experiences not despite them. Come to him on your knees and just spend time with him in quiet contemplation. Pour out your hurt and pain. Removing barriers is hard won – both by us and by Christ. He brings light out of darkness. Let's not waste that light; that which we've been given. We're equipped to serve. Reach out to those only you can reach - people who, if *you* don't reach them, then very possibly nobody else will - stretch out and touch them with Christ's beauty (Jack Reacher again) and bring them to him¹⁸ Aldous Huxley once said: *experience is not what happens to you; experience is what you do with what happens to you*¹⁹. Service is a fantastic privilege. Those who hunger and thirst after Christ know that a Christian can *never* retire. Albert Schweitzer said, *The only really happy people are those who have learned how to serve*. Only you can reach certain people – they are within your reach - nobody else's. Christ transforms our understanding through our experiences. When we open the door²⁰ and invite him in:

*Our life is changed; his coming our beginning*²¹.

Since we started out with Dawkins, I'd like to finish with a story from Alister McGrath ²².

“I'd just finished giving a lecture in London early in 2010. A young man came up afterwards and asked me to sign a copy of my book *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. I asked him what led him to study theology. He told me he had read Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion* a year or so earlier and it seemed unfair and one-sided and he needed to hear the other side. So he started going to church. After a while he found he could not sustain his faith in the parody when confronted with the real thing. He converted to Christianity – joyfully and decisively. 'Without Dawkins' he told me 'I would never have given God a second thought.' As I signed the book the young man said he had a theological question for me. Since *The God Delusion* had been instrumental in his conversion, should he thank God for Richard Dawkins in his prayers? McGrath concludes: ...hmm...I'm still thinking about that one....

Every blessing

Doug

[I have deliberately avoided mentioning Covid-19 but our thoughts and prayers are very much with victims and their families at this time. At the time of writing I see one person on the Island has died from it. May we use this unprecedented time to love our neighbours better than we normally do, bring Christ to them and pray for them. May this soon come to an end – and may we be better for the experience. Keep well and safe – we can't afford to lose any choir members :-)]

References

1 Fellow New Atheist Daniel Dennett says: *I risk a fist to the face or worse. Yet I persist.* What nonsense. Attacking religion today (as in 2006) is about as dangerous as a Conservative back-bencher endorsing the Chairman of the 1922 Committee. But I found this interesting: In 2009 the philosopher Alvin Plantinga referred to Dawkins and Dennett as *the touchdown twins of current academic atheism*. Who were the Touchdown Twins? Maybe you know, I didn't. It's to do with American football. Glenn Davis and Doc Blanchard. What's connection with Alvin Plantinga? Notre Dame held the Black Knights to a scoreless tie in 1946 which dethroned them as national champions (it seems the Army squad – West Point – was called the Black Knights. Still is – more at end of these References). Plantinga taught philosophy at Notre Dame. This took some research – I hope you're impressed.

2 Maybe we should call it *a-theology* – not atheism but anti-theism. Dawkins is an anti-theist.

3 The American atheist philosopher Michael Ruse, Professor of Philosophy, Florida State University: “*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist.” Philosophically Dawkins is not up to the mark; but it's not surprising – after all he's a biologist. What's that saying?... *Horses for Courses*.

Analytic philosopher Alvin Plantinga winner of the 2017 John Templeton prize writes: “...much of the philosophy he purveys is at best jejune...many of his arguments would receive a failing grade in a sophomore philosophy class...”

4 *Naturalism* – the view that only the matter and energy of nature exist – and nothing else (no God or anything like God); the total interlocked event of cause and effect outside of which there is nothing. *What the naturalist believes is that the ultimate Fact, the thing you can't go behind, is a vast process in space and time which is going on of its own accord. Inside that total system every particular event (such as your sitting reading this book) happens because some other event has happened; in the long run because the Total Event is happening. Each particular thing (such as this page) is what it is because other things are what they are; and so, eventually, because the whole system is what it is...everything that is exhibits at some particular place and time, that general 'existence on its own' or 'behaviour of its own accord' which belongs to Nature (the great total interlocked event) as a whole. No thorough going Naturalist believes in free will; for free will would mean that human beings have the power of independent action, the power of doing something more or other than what was involved by the total series of events. And any such separate power of originating events is what the Naturalist denies. Spontaneity, originality, 'action on its own' is a privilege reserved for 'the whole show' which he calls Nature.* (C S Lewis: *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* Collins (Fount) Second (1960) Edition pp10-11.

For more on Naturalism see *Naturalism* by Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro. Also C S Lewis *Miracles* Chapter 3: *The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism*. Lewis is pretty clear and presents a good argument for the independence of Reason from the 'Total Event'. To his credit New Atheist Daniel Dennett is at least consistent when it comes to this, but it means he has to deny free will and the existence of persons. This, I think, is a bit of a problem for most of us :-)

5 In this respect Dawkins is much like David Hume, just not as thorough. David Hume 1711-1776 Scottish Enlightenment philosopher. Hume was an agnostic who held to the principle of 'reason alone' and ended in total scepticism. Towards the end of the book Dawkins admits to a limited scepticism (because we have been cobbled together by unguided evolution it is unlikely that our view of the world is overall accurate). But he fails to plumb the depths of this view as David Hume did. Reason (alone) led Hume to doubt *everything* including sense experience. In his *A Treatise of*

Human Nature he writes: *I am in a most deplorable condition! I'm not surprised :-)*

6 Of course, *if your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one* – William James

7 Francis Collins *The Language of God* Pocket Books 2007. This is a *must-read*.

“To understand the moral law, it is useful to consider, as C S Lewis did, how it is invoked in hundreds of ways each day without the invoker stopping to point out the foundation of his argument. Disagreements are part of daily life. Some are mundane, as the wife criticising her husband for not speaking more kindly to a friend, or a child complaining 'it's not fair' when different amounts of ice cream are doled out at a birthday party. Other arguments take on larger significance. In international affairs, for instance, some argue that the United States has a moral obligation to spread democracy throughout the world, even if it requires military force, while others say that the aggressive, unilateral use of military and economic force threatens to squander moral authority.”

Back cover:

Dr Francis S Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, is one of the world's leading scientists, working at the cutting edge of the study of DNA, the code of life. Yet he is also a man of unshakable faith in God...

What an elegantly written book...A real godsend for those with questioning minds but who are also attracted to things spiritual. Desmond Tutu.

To balance formidable standard-bearers like Dawkins, we seek those who possess religious conviction but also scientific achievements to credibly argue the widespread hope that science and God are in harmony – that, indeed, science is of God...Foremost of those arguing for common ground is Francis Collins – Time magazine

Timely and incisive. Collins shows how our understanding of evolution, far from standing in the way of faith, reveals a universe of ever greater ingenuity and subtlety – Paul Davies author of *The Mind of God*.

8 St Paul to the Romans 8:18-25

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait...

9 For 'self-referentially destructive' see Alvin Plantinga *Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* https://uk.video.search.yahoo.com/search/video;_ylt=AwrJQ5ywBnFeKG0A5Qx0g81Q?p=closer+to+truth+p+lantinga+naturalism&fr=iphone&fr2=piv-web&.tsrc=apple AND/OR C S Lewis *Miracles – A Preliminary Study* (especially chapter 3 – *The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism*)

10 I confess to a certain shy embarrassment in relating this fact. I call it my *tolle lege* or 'pick up and read' experience. It came out of the blue and without warning. I knew nothing about St Augustine at the time and, if I had, would probably have got him mixed up with Augustine of Canterbury or some other saint. In fact up until that day I don't recall ever having given religion a thought except perhaps, in my schoolboy ignorance, by way of amusement or ridicule. I'm sure Freud would have his own explanation – I have my own :-)

Tolle lege – St Augustine of Hippo (AD354-430) *Confessions*. Augustine describes how his conversion was prompted by hearing a ... voice saying "*take up and read*" (Latin: *tolle, lege*). Resorting to the *Sortes Sanctorum*, he opened the Bible and read Romans 13 13-14...*not in revelling and drunkenness, not in ... quarrelling and jealousy... but put on the Lord Jesus Christ...* His

Confessions is an outpouring of thanksgiving and penitence.

11 As well as many other scientists and philosophers there is the interesting case of Antony Flew. For those who may not know, Antony Flew was (along with J L Mackie and Bertrand Russell) an influential atheist philosopher during the latter part of the 20th century. At the age of 81 he converted to theism on the basis of arguments. His principle was always: *follow the evidence wherever it leads*. Needless to say, his 'conversion' was denounced by Dawkins who accused him of tergiversation (apostasy - deserting the cause).

See Antony Flew (with Roy Varghese) *There is a God (How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind)*. Harper One 2007

Also: discussion Gary Habermas and Antony Flew

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My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism

A Discussion between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas

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Also John Lennox: *Far from science having buried God, not only do the results of science point towards his existence, but the scientific enterprise itself is validated by his existence*. John C. Lennox MA M Math MA (Bioethics) DPhil PhD DSc – Emeritus Professor of Mathematics University of Oxford - in *Can Science Explain Everything?* OUP 2019

12 The Four Horsemen of New Atheism: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris.

WIRED magazine coined the name *New Atheism*. No heaven, No hell, Just science – Religion is not only wrong, it's evil.

13 see C Stephen Evans *Why Believe? (Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God)* Eerdmans Grand Rapids Michigan – Inter-Varsity Press England 1996

14 Thomas Carlyle Snr. – quoted in William Barclay *The Letter to the Romans* St Andrew Press Edinburgh 1955

15 Lee Child *Persuader* – a Jack Reacher thriller Bantam Books 2003 'Reacher grabs me on page one and never lets go' (Ken Follett) 'I am very much in love with Jack Reacher – as a man and a role model. If I can't shag him, I want to be him' (Lucy Mangan). [this quote is not intended to shock or be irreverent, just to show depth of attraction]

16 CODIT – Compartmentalisation of Decay in Trees. A tree reacts to wounding and invasion via four containment walls: 1 xylem vessels (longitudinal spread), 2 medullary rays (lateral), 3 annual rings (radial) and cambium (Wall 4). Walls 1-3 may hold but can fail depending on the type and strength of pathogen and overall tree health. Wall 4 (laid down by the cambium at the time of wounding) never fails. That is why you sometimes see completely decayed wood adjacent to perfectly sound wood – in other words, cavities. In some cases the original tree totally decays as walls 1-3 fail by which time a new and healthy tree has formed around the old leaving a completely hollow centre. This is maximal containment.

17 *Searching for God in God-Forsaken Times and Places: Reflections on the Holocaust, Racism and Death*. Hubert G Locke. Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2003. While Christ endured such suffering and cried out to God in his anguish on the Cross, he never for one moment denied God's existence. When Job's wife urged him in his suffering to *curse God and die* he rebuked her foolishness (Job 2: 9-10). There is no necessary connection between evil and suffering and the non-existence of God, nevertheless it is a problem which Christians should always wrestle with. If they don't there's something wrong with them. Quietism isn't an option. See *The God I Don't Understand (Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith)* – Christopher J H Wright 2009 Zondervan.

18 St John 1.41 – we don't read much about Andrew in the Gospels. He keeps a low profile. But if Andrew hadn't brought Peter to Christ then the Early Church may never have got off the ground.

19 Aldous Huxley *Texts and Pretexts: An Anthology with Commentaries*

20 Christ to the Laodiceans: *I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.* Revelation 3.20

21 Compare the last line of Edwin Muir's Poem: *The Horses*

22 Alister McGrath *Why God Won't Go Away* SPCK 2011

Alister Edgar McGrath FRSA (born 1953) - a Northern Irish theologian, priest, intellectual historian, scientist (biology), Christian apologist, and public intellectual. He currently holds the Andreas Idreos Professorship in Science and Religion in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, and is Professor of Divinity at Gresham College. He was previously Professor of Theology, Ministry and Education at King's College London and Head of the Centre of Theology, Religion and Culture, Professor of Historical Theology at the University of Oxford and was principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, until 2005. He is an Anglican priest. McGrath is a former atheist. See interview <https://youtu.be/Hp6SuVaxuJ0>

Despite being dubbed the "Touchdown Twins," Army's Glenn Davis and Doc Blanchard were not identical physical specimens. Doc Blanchard, at 6'0" and 205 pounds, was by far the bigger of the two football legends. The 5'9", 170 pound Davis, however, may have been the better natural athlete.

Despite increased competition and Blanchard's ills, 1946 Army squad still remained undefeated; the only blot on its record being a scoreless tie against Notre Dame, which dethroned the Black Knights as national champions

Army Black Knights football

American Football Team

The Army Black Knights football team, previously known as the Army Cadets, represents the United States Military Academy (West Point) in college football. Army is currently a Division I Football Bowl Subdivision member of the NCAA. The Black Knights currently play home games in Michie Stadium with a capacity of 38,000 at West Point, New York. The Black Knights are coached by Jeff Monken who is in his sixth season as head coach. Army is a five-time national champion, winning the title in 1914, 1916, and from 1944–1946.