

A Response to *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, Bantam Press, 2006

Phil Edwards, © April 2008

Introduction

I have been involved in the science-religion debate seriously for about 20 years. Many people have been debating (talking and writing) about the relationship between the study of science and the study of belief or theology. This debate has included scientists, theologians, humanists, people of a variety of faiths and none, and wistful agnostics. What disappoints me about *The God Delusion* is that Richard Dawkins does not address the points which the science-religion debates have been addressing seriously over many years. Rather, he caricatures religious faith and the caricature he presents is deliberately extreme.

There *are* some religious people who do not question their faith and think that reason has no part to play. However, that has not been the tradition of the main strands of Christianity throughout its history. Other major world faiths have also had a tradition of a questioning faith. David Jenkins former Bishop of Durham wrote in his autobiography that, "Exploring and questions are essentials to the dynamic of living faith". Reason and faith are not opposed to each other but work in tandem.

In my response to Richard Dawkins, I want to address the first two sections of my summary of *The God Delusion* – the sections which concern a God who intervenes in the world and a God who designed it. Some may find what I say unsatisfactory because I am not going to give definite answers; I am rather going to raise questions and pose a number of possibilities. My response overlaps with Mike Williams' response but some may find it helpful to state similar points in a different way.

What is science?

First, I want to begin by looking at what we mean by science. We can study the world in a scientific way only if we make various assumptions. I will mention just three:

- 1) We assume that our thought processes make sense and are reliable. This is what we mean by rationality. We cannot begin any study or discussion without this assumption.
- 2) We assume the natural world is intelligible to us and can be understood. Albert Einstein said that "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible". Without this assumption, we cannot do science.
- 3) We assume that the natural world has order and patterns which we can discern. These patterns scientists describe in terms of what we call "scientific laws".

These are assumptions because we cannot prove any of them. Some scientists have a religious faith but all scientists have faith in these assumptions whether they are conscious of them or not.

Scientific Laws

Scientists describe the order and regularity of nature in terms of scientific laws. Scientific laws are our attempts to summarise the patterns and regularity of the natural world. These so-called laws are usually expressed mathematically and are effectively mathematical models of the natural world. It is helpful to emphasise that these are models. Often they are approximate models – for example, Hook's law which describes how some materials stretch under a load. Sometimes they are models which summarise the behaviour of many events – for example the gas laws describing the pressure, volume and density of gases. These models are always open to be corrected – and scientists want them to be open to correction, otherwise they would have no further work to do.

Near the end of the 17th century, Isaac Newton formulated three laws which describe the movement of objects in our world – from planes to planets, from steam trains to stars. In the twentieth century, these laws were found in certain extreme circumstances to be incorrect by Albert Einstein. The extreme conditions are as follows. Objects do not follow Newton's laws when they are travelling at very high speeds, near the speed of light; nor when the objects concerned are very very small, as small as the particles which make up atoms. We still use Newton's laws when dealing with trains and aeroplanes but we have to use Einstein's laws when dealing with extremes. Now, it may be that scientists will have to modify Einstein's laws to describe the extreme conditions in black holes or at a time near the beginning of the universe. Scientific laws do not set down how nature has to work; rather scientific laws describe, sometimes accurately and sometimes approximately, how we observe nature to behave.

Questions about God

We are now ready to think about God. One question we can ask is: if there is a God, what sort of God do we believe in? In Christianity, the bible shows how the idea of God developed throughout the period of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Our understanding of God continues to develop today. What kind of God do Christians believe in?

The majority of Christians believe that God has acted and does act in the world. Some people's experience today leads them to believe that God acts in the world. So we can ask, how is it that we also experience the world to be regular in its processes? Would not God's actions cause an irregularity within the patterns we observe. A God acting in this way is what Dawkins calls an interventionist God.

Some have argued that because many scientific laws are summary statements, those summaries could not describe one-off events. God's actions, therefore, would be 'invisible' to scientists constructing and testing these summary laws. Others have noted that the world includes both the regularity of clocks and the unpredictability of clouds. They have speculated that where science cannot predict – for example, in so called chaos theory (which is used to describe weather patterns) or in the very tiny world of quantum theory (which is used to describe atoms and fundamental particles), then that leaves room for God to act. Others, myself included, believe that God acts in and through the natural processes which are open for science to investigate. A related point about these natural processes is this. Only if these natural processes are regular can humans have any moral responsibility. If the processes of the world were not regular, we could not be responsible for our actions because we would not be sure what the outcome of those actions would be. This may indicate that if God often intervened in the world, then it would take away our moral responsibility. We can also point out that some writers in the Hebrew Bible, known by Christians as the Old Testament, have written about the regularity of nature and regard the regularity as a sign of the faithfulness of God.

The point I want to emphasise is that people who study religious claims have used reason to test those claims and have constructed models of religious understanding which take into account our present scientific understanding. We may not agree about these models, just as scientists do not all agree on their models of the natural world, but we are open to discuss them and adjust them accordingly.

Dawkins stated that "If God communicated with humans, that fact would not lie outside science." This statement is simplistic as it does not take any account of the many ways God may or could communicate with humans. Some theologians have suggested, for example, that God acts and communicates in the world in an analogous way in which humans decide to act. My decision to raise my arm does not seem to go against any of the regular patterns of the natural order, that is, the scientific laws. Dawkins' statement also does not take into account our understanding of the methods and ways of science, which I have outlined previously.

Evolution

It is clear that science rules out some religious beliefs. For example geologists consider the age of the earth to be around 4.54 billion years old; whereas a few 'Christian creationists' believe that the earth is between 6,000 and 10,000 years old. However, Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection does not rule out a creator God. When Darwin published his "Origin of Species" about his theory of evolution through natural selection, the debate was not polarised between religious people and the scientific community. In fact, only a few theologians but many scientists dismissed Darwinism and evolution. The theologians who welcomed Darwinism saw that they now had a mechanism for God's creativity; they saw that evolution was the way in which God created: God made things make themselves. Charles Kingsley, author of *The Water Babies*, welcomed Darwin's theory because "it got rid of an interfering God". He saw that belief in a God who intervened occasionally was also belief in a God who was normally absent.

Some religious people speak about the world being designed by God. If I used that kind of language, I would mean that God had a plan and purpose for the whole of the created order and I see that plan and purpose built into the structure of the natural world and its processes. I would not mean that God had a design for every species of plant and animal life. Rather I would mean that, in Dawkins' words, "we live in a friendly universe" which allows plants, animals and self-conscious beings to evolve through those natural processes. One can accept evolution through natural selection and believe in a creator God who 'designed' in such a way.