

# A Summary of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (2006), Bantam Press

Phil Edwards, © April 2008

## Notes

- This short summary has omitted reference to Chapter 3 Arguments for God's Existence as there have been many critiques of these arguments from believers and non-believers.
- These notes and other related information can be found at <http://www.bolton.ac.uk/chaplaincy> and following the Link on the right to [The God Delusion - Richard Dawkins](#).
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## 1) The God Hypothesis

“There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.”

**A theist** believes in such a God who is intimately involved in human affairs: answering prayers, forgiving or punishing sins, intervening in the world by performing miracles. This God is a pernicious delusion.

**The existence of God is a scientific hypothesis:** The religious claim of an interventionist God who answers prayers leads to a very different world from one without such a God. If God communicated with humans, that fact would not lie outside science. Even if we believe in a non-interventionist God, to claim an ultimate design of the universe implies a very different universe.

## 2) No Design – No God

**Evidence for design:** The natural world *looks* as though it is designed. However, evolution through natural selection (Darwinism) gives us evidence to reject creation by design as well as creation by chance. Religious people have argued that the natural world is so complex, it could not have evolved (for example, the human eye). But natural selection is a cumulative process so that what seems highly improbable can be broken up into steps which are not prohibitively improbable. Evolution is the only process, as far as we know, capable of generating complexity from simplicity. We cannot be satisfied to say that this is a mystery as it would mark an end to scientific investigation; ignorance drives scientists on.

**We live on a planet that is friendly to our kind of life.** There are two reasons for this:

- 1) Life has evolved to flourish in the conditions provided by the planet;
- 2) There are billions of planets in the universe and our planet is one of the few which is evolutionary-friendly.

**We live in a friendly universe.** The laws and constants of physics are friendly enough to allow life to arise; a very small difference would make life impossible.

- A *theist* says that God tuned the constants such that the production of life was possible – but this leaves the existence of God unexplained. A God capable of calculating the values of the constants is very improbable.
- Some *physicists* think that the constants have to be the particular values they are for any universe.
- Other *physicists* suggest that there are many co-existing universes, each one with a different set of constants and laws; we are in one of the universes which happened to be propitious to our eventual evolution.

**A God capable of designing a universe** (and who is claimed to be able to send and receive intelligible signals to millions of people simultaneously) would have to be complex and would be statistically improbable. To suggest that a great unknown is responsible for the universe existing rather than not is a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation. The God Hypothesis is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist.

## 3) Why are there religions?

As religious rituals have a cost in both time and resources, an evolutionist has to ask the question, What is the benefit? For evolutionists, ‘benefit’ normally means, What is the enhancement to the survival of the individual's genes?

There is little evidence that religious belief protects people from stress-related diseases. It may be a placebo that prolongs life by reducing stress but this does not explain the extent of the phenomenon.

Neuroscientists suggest there is a 'god centre' in the brain, but Darwinians then want to know what natural selection favoured this.

I suggest that religion is a by-product of the way we bring up our children. There is a selective advantage for children to believe without question what grown-ups tell them in order for them to avoid what is dangerous. This, though, makes them vulnerable to misinformation (mind viruses) such as religion.

**How did religion start?** One psychologist suggests that children have a natural tendency to:

- make a fundamental distinction between mind and matter. This compares with the view of most scientists who regard mind as a manifestation of matter.
- assign a purpose to everything (for example, clouds are 'for raining').

Both tendencies predispose us to religion. Genes are the physical entities which are responsible for biological reproduction. In a similar way, *memes* may be responsible for transmitting culture in human society. Just as there are copying errors (mutations) in genes, religion may be seen as a mutation of these memes. Once religion has a hold, its attribute of being against reason helps its own survival.

#### 4) Do we need religion in order to be good?

Genes are 'selfish' in the sense that, through the filter of natural selection, those that survive do so at the expense of rivals. But this does not necessarily make the organism (humans) selfish.

**There are four good Darwinian reasons for individuals to be altruistic:**

- Genetic kinship: care for those who share similar genetic make-up.
- Reciprocation: giving of favours in anticipation of a payback.
- Acquiring a good reputation for generosity and kindness.
- Conspicuous generosity demonstrates superiority.

These 'rules' of altruism may be carried out even when there is no genetic advantage (example of a reed warbler feeding a young cuckoo).

**We don't need God or religion to have good morals.** One study shows that there is no statistical difference between atheists and religious believers in making moral judgements. Moral principles based only upon religion may be called absolutist but, for example, "Is it always wrong to kill an embryo?"

**Religious people don't derive their morals from scripture**, or if they do, they choose the nice bits and reject the nasty. There are many Old Testament passages which we would now describe as immoral. In the New Testament we read that Jesus didn't derive his ethics from the scriptures of his day.

**The central doctrine of Christianity** is that Jesus was tortured and executed in payment for the hereditary sin of Adam, including possible future sins. This is vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them?

**Religion makes the world's troubles worse**, even when they can be described as political. Religion exacerbates the world's problems through:

- *Labelling of children* in terms of their religion before they know what they believe.
- *Segregated schools*.
- *Taboos against marrying outside the religious culture*.

**We have all changed our attitude to what is right and wrong** over time, whether or not we are religious. These changes have not come from religion. Individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do evil things in the name of religion.

#### 5) What is wrong with religion?

**As a scientist**, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively perverts the scientific enterprise as it teaches us not to change our mind. Religious people who are not fundamentalists make the world safe for fundamentalists by teaching children that an unquestioning faith is a virtue.

**Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate utter madness of the terrorist acts** we have seen over the last few years. Our current war against terrorism is a war against religious idealists who have an unquestioning faith.

**The treasured heritage of our sacred religious books can be retained** even when we give up our belief in God. Any gap that religion leaves in the areas of explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration can be filled in other ways. Explanation and inspiration can come from science.