

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

By Mike Williams, © 17/04/08

Richard, let me say at the outset that I found your book very stimulating and I want to begin my response by agreeing with you on three fundamental points.

Three Points of Agreement

The first is that of the integrity of the scientific view of the world. The task of science is to uncover and investigate the way in which the world is a pattern of cause and effect. Science proceeds by making predictions and testing them by experience and experiment and, within this scientific approach to the world, we do not need to bring in a "God of the Gaps". When we see a gap in the science we should not resort to other kinds of explanation, we should simply work harder at the science.

The second is that if your picture of God is right, then I would agree with you that it is unbelievable and even sick. As I understand it this is the picture of God you repudiate:

An Omnipotent Ruler of the Universe who is fiercely unpleasant, a god of vengeance who is morbidly obsessed with sexual restrictions. A god who creates the universe but who is constantly intervening breaking his own laws and punishing sinners and innocent bystanders. He is the God of the fundamentalist who will go to the trouble of finding a parking place for his righteous servant whilst ignoring the plight of millions who starve.

I cannot believe in such a God and I applaud your critique of the very idea.

Thirdly, and I know my fellow believers might not agree with me on this point, I find all of the traditional arguments for the existence of God inadequate.

Two Eyes not One

But now I want to go on to expose what I see as the shortcomings of your approach. I want to suggest that our world is best viewed by two eyes, the eye of science and the eye of faith. My criticism of your book is that it is exclusively one eyed. You think that the scientific view of the world is the only way of looking at; I think that a one eyed man is missing something that is deeply valuable.

My view is that to be fully human we need these two eyes, Faith and Science. But I also want to suggest that these two viewpoints need one another. Just as we humans need two eyes to see in perspective, so to see the world in perspective we need the eyes of both Science and Faith.

Albert Camus in his classic story *La Peste*, 1947 (*The Plague*) tells the fictional story of the town of Oran in Algeria being afflicted by an outbreak of Bubonic Plague. The epidemic grows and grows and people begin to die. Eventually the town is put into quarantine and basically left to its own devices.

Camus sets up a conflict in the book between the reaction of the priest and that of the doctor. The doctor's approach is simply humanitarian; we have the plague all we can do is to use the best medical resources to combat it as best we can. The priest's response is that it is no good combating the plague, it is a visitation from God and we must simply suffer it because of our sins. Camus' story of the relationship between these two is much more nuanced than I can go into here, but they give us a picture of the two eyes. The eye of science is that of the doctor, the eye of faith is that of the Priest. But the disaster is that the two eyes are not working together, they oppose one another in a disastrous way. Why can't the priest and the doctor work together, the one bringing the resources of science, the other ringing the resources of faith.

When my colleague at Bolton Parish Church began to coordinate our Healing Ministry she did not suggest to people to give up going to the doctor, to give up taking the pills, and just to rely on God to heal. Rather our approach was an integrated one. Prayer, the laying on of hands, anointing with oil but also the trip to the doctor, the taking advantage of all that modern medicine could offer. This is the integrated approach where the two eyes of faith and science focus together in a very powerful way.

My concern, Richard, is that you only permit the eye of science. But, before going on to say why it is important to keep both eyes focussed I want to say that I am equally critical of some of my fellow believers, who want to privileged the eye of faith above the eye science, and even deny the eye of science its place as the Priest did in Camus's story.

I would call you a scientific fundamentalist, but I would also call anyone who dismisses science and says that Faith contradicts science as a religious fundamentalist. A fundamentalist is a one eyed person, and the religious fundamentalist is just as profoundly wrong as the scientific fundamentalist. The priest in Camus's story is wrong because his view of God is wrong. He sees God as a punishing intervening god who blasts innocent people with his wrath. But the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a saving healing God who in his wisdom has given us wonderful resources in the creation, including human science and human wisdom, to work with him for shalom.

We must keep faith and science together. But it is even more profound than that. I believe that we cannot actually separate them, let me give you **five reasons**:-

Moral Freedom

To live as a human being we have to presuppose that we have freedom of action. On the other hand science, to be a complete cause and effect explanation of everything has to presuppose that we are not free in any real sense. This is why all scientific or naturalistic accounts of human moral experience try to give an account of in terms of calculation. We calculate our actions to give us the best advantage. All we are doing is to weigh up the options and go for the best profit. Our calculation may be a conscious or unconscious but, biologically speaking they are the same. The human sense that we must have freedom of action is therefore an illusion. But such a scientific explanation of human action will not do. To be human at all is to look over the horizon of cause and effect and see beyond it something far nobler and far more demanding. If love were just a calculation then we would need something more loving than love to make us human. And this isn't a complicated argument, it is simple human experience. When we have to make difficult decisions

we know that we are called to a responsibility beyond mere calculation. To be morally responsible means looking at life with both the eye of faith and the eye of science.

The Myth of the Independence of Science

It is often said that science itself is value free, what matters is what we do with it. The example often given is that understanding nuclear processes can either lead us to nuclear energy or it can lead us to nuclear bombs. This is far too simplistic. All human actions have intentions and purposes. No scientist is simply an independent observer of nature. The scientist constructs nature as he or she goes. Let me give you the example of Linnaeus. On the face of it his work of classifying animals and plants in genus and species looks innocent enough. It is just cataloguing, that's all. But the truth is that the desire to catalogue is also connected with the desire to control and the desire to control is connected to the desire to manipulate, and the desire to manipulate is the desire to use nature to our own ends. The most dangerous assumption is that the activity that is science is independent of moral value. It leads directly to colonialism, imperialism, racism, and the destruction of the planet. The eye of science needs the eye of faith to keep it focus and to be its critical friend. This is why I disagree with you when you link religion and war. It is true that religion has been an instigator in wars, but I would also argue that western colonialism, Stalinism, and Hitler's fascism are born not of religion but are born of atheism.

Minds as well as Brains

Over recent years there have been massive strides in the science of the brain and there is every reason to believe that these advances will continue. If we adopt a purely naturalistic/scientific understanding of the world we could even say that the neuroscientist will ultimately be able to give us a definitive understanding of the human brain. We will no longer need to talk about minds; there will just be brain processes. But this will never be true because my understanding of myself, my understanding of myself as a unique "I" will always be one step ahead. Science may at some time in the future be able to explain what the brain is, but science will never be able to understand what the "I" is and what it is to be a person. To understand what it means to be a person we need both the eye of science which gives us the brain, and the eye of faith which gives us the mind and the person.

The Unity and Simplicity of Science

We human beings have a profound urge to seek order in the world around us. In ancient societies sometimes thunder was thought of as the voice of the gods, in modern physics we know that thunder is an electrical discharge between the heavens and the earth. But both explanations have one thing in common, the desire to understand thunder. And every explanation seeks this order. The question is where does this notion of order come from in the first place? I would argue that it comes from a very deep seated conviction that the universe has a design and a purpose which we investigate and being to understand. And one of the ways in which modern science pursues this quest is to seek for unity and simplicity in science. Stephen Hawking like Einstein before him is driven to find something called a "theory of everything" which unites all the laws of physics in one comprehensive pattern. Other scientists too are engaged in this quest spending billions of pounds in their quest. But where does this believe in understandability come from, I would say that it can only come from looking at the world with the eye of faith.

Beings in Relation

To be human is to be a person in relation to other persons and in relation to all the other animals and the rest of creation. The basic question concerns the nature of this relation. Am I the one who controls nature, who stands over it and simply uses it? Am I under nature, just another bundle of cells, albeit complex, within the flux? Or am I in relation to everything else in creation as someone who respects, wonders at, even loves, all around me. It is not a question of using nature or being used by nature. Rather we stand with one another and with the whole of nature in a relation of mutual respect, awe and wonder in which we are actively involved. This is the eye of faith and without the eye of faith nature is empty of meaning and does not in any way command our respect.

The caterpillar and the Tree: Two Examples of Being in Relation

Meister Eckhart, 13th c

Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things

Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God.

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon.

So full of God is every creature.

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Part one Section 9 (précis)

Consider a tree. The scientist could give me a very full and fascinating scientific account of a tree down to the last leaf or the last cell, but this does not tell me anything about my relationship with the tree. To live in relation to the tree is to perceive the breathing of its leaves, the suck of its roots. I can see it in its movement, its dance, in the air and wind. I can begin to enter into a relation of grace with the tree. It is now no longer at arm's length; rather I am seized by the power and exclusiveness of the tree. This is not to say that the tree has a soul or a speech, but rather to say that the tree is an event in itself which challenges me, fascinates me. Simply to subject the tree to an exhaustive scientific analysis is to bring the tree into my domain. This way I kill the tree.

Conclusion

The scientific world view is a valuable tool in our understanding of ourselves and the universe in which we live, but so is the world view of faith. My contention is that far from being inimical to one another so that we get Faith *or* Science, we should see both ways of looking at the world as complementary, Faith *and* Science as critical friends and even joyful companions.

From the point of view of specifically Christian theology I would describe this view as incarnational. Christ is human, Christ is divine, both are needed and we must struggle to keep them together.

Notes

In the discussion above I have deliberately not referred to philosophers, theologians, and scientists because I wanted to keep the text as simple as I could. The danger with this approach is that one oversimplifies and leaves oneself open to all sorts of counter arguments. But, if anyone wanted to know the sources from which I have culled the above ideas then the list below may be of use.

The idea of two interpretative languages or viewpoints is a fairly well used image to describe the relationship between faith and science or between the arts and the sciences. What is crucial for me is that the two viewpoints must converge and interact with one another

I have been heavily influenced by Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1781) in my introductory remarks and in Reasons 1, 2, and 4. In particular I regard Kant's critique of the traditional arguments for the existence of God as definitive.

Moral Freedom: Here I have been heavily influenced by the work Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida.

The Myth of the Independence of Science: Here I have been influenced by the Phenomenological tradition and, in particular, Edmund Husserl.

The Unity and Simplicity of Science: Here my principle influence is Kant, Claude Levi Strauss, and Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem.

Minds as well as Brains: Here I have been influenced by Peter Strawson and, again, Edmund Husserl.

Beings in Relation: Here I have been influenced by Martin Buber