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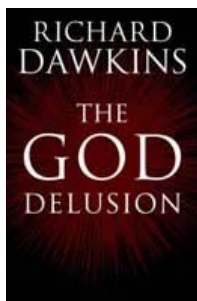
Book of the week

## Judgment day

Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* gives it to believers with both barrels. Joan Bakewell cheers him on

Joan Bakewell

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### **The God Delusion**

by Richard Dawkins

416pp, Bantam, £20

In September 1997 Richard Dawkins allowed an Australian film crew into his Oxford home, only to realise in the course of a particularly inept interview that they were creationists trying to trap him. Tumbling to this, he paused some moments while deciding whether to throw them out or attempt a long and thoughtful explanation that they didn't want to hear. In their resulting film, his hesitation is dishonestly edited to look like intellectual doubt on his part. Creationists and believers in God are right to see him as their arch-enemy. In *The God Delusion* he displays what a formidable adversary he is. It is a spirited and exhilarating read. In the current climate of papal/Islamic stand-off, it is timely too.

There is no hesitancy or doubt here. Dawkins comes roaring forth in the full vigour of his powerful arguments, laying into fallacies and false doctrines with the energy of the polemicist at his most fiery. "My earlier books did not set out to convert anyone ... this book does," he declares. Its tone is chattier than usual, given to conversational asides, even urgent pleadings - "Please, please raise your consciousness about this!" he begs about the religious indoctrination of tiny children. And should you doubt his intent, an appendix lists "friendly addresses for individuals needing support in escaping from religion". The words "humanist", "rationalist", "secular", "atheist" dot those addresses. Dawkins is, if he will excuse the word, on a crusade.

Perhaps he won't excuse the word. It is the slack use of words and the misunderstanding of metaphor that he sees as underpinning the cases made for the existence of a deity. He starts with some sharp definitions of his own: God he takes to mean "a supernatural creator it is appropriate to worship"; pantheism "is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism". There are plenty of "isms" to choose from, but to Dawkins they all smack of compromise. He is an out-and-out atheist and this is his testimony.

With his usual rational skills he sets about dissecting the arguments for the existence of a God. He takes on all comers: Aquinas's five "proofs", Pascal's wager (meant as a joke, surely), even Stephen Unwin's probability of God, whose use of Bayes' theorem to demonstrate the probability of God Dawkins scathingly dismisses as "quite agreeably funny". He puts in its place the believers' misunderstanding of Darwinism. No, it does not mean that we are all here by chance, but by a scientifically demonstrable process of natural selection. His scorn for believers is evident throughout. He speaks of "a mind hijacked by religion" and finds "sucking up to God" a strange rationale for doing good. He is, not surprisingly, appalled by the jealous rage of the God of the Old Testament (lovingly putting Abraham to the test of killing his only son) and has sharp things to say about the

ubiquitous weirdness of the Bible, "a chaotically cobbled together anthology of disjointed documents". When sophisticated believers claim disarmingly that "we don't take Genesis literally any more," he rails "That is my whole point!" It's as much a pick-and-mix philosophy as believers accuse atheists of. What's more, plenty of people still do take the Bible literally. According to Gallup approximately 50% of the US electorate believe the story of Noah.

Dawkins has a lot of easy fun on the wilder shores of religion, but he has serious things to say about why morality doesn't need faith. His argument gathers strength as he enumerates the many ways in which religion is excessively privileged in our supposedly secular society. Christian groups on US campuses are even now campaigning against anti-discrimination laws that protect homosexuals. They have widespread support for their "freedom of religion". Dawkins cites Britain's own educational scandal which is gifting a series of city academies to a rich car salesman who believes in creationism and has £2m to buy his way in. A letter of protest from eight bishops and nine scientists got a perfunctory reply from Tony Blair. Plans for more faith schools go forward. Many of us who might want to stay outside theological debate can't afford to when it is influencing social policy.

Dawkins reserves particular venom for those religious apologists who claim distinguished scientists as their own. He sneers at "the Faustian road to the Templeton prize", the world's largest single financial prize - £800,000 in 2006 - for "progress concerning spiritual values". No atheists sit on the jury and winners are increasingly likely to be scientists who use the "God" word. When Einstein declared that "God does not play dice" he was rounded up by believers as proof that the finest minds shared their superstitions. Similarly, when Stephen Hawking ended his book *A Brief History of Time* with the phrase "then we shall know the mind of God", its sales were set to roar away. Weren't the planet's greatest scientists endorsing the views of the faithful? The answer is "no", and Dawkins unpicks the dangers attendant on any scientist using the word. If they use the word God to mean the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then he admits he himself would, in that sense, be religious. Certainly his books pay lyrical tribute to the awe and beauty of what exists in the physical world. But to use "God in that sense is misleading". As Carl Sagan put it, "it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity".

Dawkins's most original contribution is the examination of why religion has persisted so long after the scientific revolution, and indeed is staging a global comeback of terrifying proportions. He cites his own concept, the meme, the social equivalent of the gene, as the way ideas are spread and handed down. As a Darwinian he is keen to understand what is so beneficial about religion that makes it eligible for survival. He has an interesting theory - exemplified by the moth being attracted to the flame and thus to its death - that an arcane survival mechanism is operating in grossly distorted circumstances.

Believers wrongly accuse Dawkins of being himself a fundamentalist, a fundamentalist atheist. He argues the difference: that given proof he was wrong he would at once change his opinions, whereas the true fundamentalist clings to his faith whatever the challenge. What he doesn't satisfactorily answer is the sense that people of faith have of the divine, a true experience for them that encompasses love and joy and celebration - all the things Dawkins finds in the physical world. He doesn't comprehend that for many people reasoned argument is not the final arbiter of how they choose to live their lives. They are swayed by feelings, moved by loyalties, willing to set logic aside for the sake of psychic comfort. Tell them that all this is the product of chemical and electrical activity in the brain and they will at best assert that God made it thus. For decades now we have been willing to let such diversity of unverifiable beliefs exist among a democratic tolerance of ideas. But this, the assumption of the secular outlook, can no longer be taken for granted. The clouds are darkening around tolerance.

These are now political matters. Around the world communities are increasingly defined as Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and living peaceably together is ever harder to sustain. Champions of each faith maintain its superiority to the rest. Recent remarks by Pope Benedict XVI show the man in his true colours: an absolutist pointing up with intellectual precision the incompatibility of Islam and Christianity. He did this long before he was Pope, writing the declaration of John Paul II that all religions other than the Catholic faith were defective. Since his election he has demoted efforts at rapprochement with Islam and, on a visit to Auschwitz, failed to address the papacy's collusion with Nazism. The Pope is, of course, held to be infallible by the Catholic church. Islam's response to all this - "if you dare to say we're a violent religion, then we'll kill you!" - compounds not only the idiocy of rival dogmas but also the dangers. Islam's sharia law invests the law of the land with its own religious

and often brutal priorities. Apostasy is punishable by death, as is homosexuality. Christian observance is put under increasing pressure. Dawkins is right to be not only angry but alarmed. Religions have the secular world running scared. This book is a clarion call to cower no longer. Primed by anger, redeemed by humour, it will, I trust, offend many.

• Joan Bakewell's book *Belief* is published by Duckworth

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