

Red River Rationalist

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Thoughts on "The God Delusion" by Richard Dawkins and Arguments of His Critics

Part I:

"I have recently been examining all the known superstitions of the world, and do not find in our particular superstition (Christianity) one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded on fables and mythology." [Thomas Jefferson, letter to Dr. Woods]. Where is Jefferson when we really need him?

In his book, Dawkins makes a strong argument for atheism as the rational choice for sensible people. Using examples mostly from Christianity, he points out the irrationality and internal inconsistencies of religion. Some of his religious critics call him as much a fundamentalist as a Taliban extremist. However, atheism is not a belief system, but the rejection of fantastic stories that are unsupported by evidence. *The God Delusion* is a book dealing with a particular example of the conflict between rationality and irrationality.

Most religions actively discourage critical examination of their claims. Dawkins asks why religious beliefs are such a forbidden topic for rational discussion. Part of the answer may lay in cognitive dissonance, a relatively new psychological theory that explains some very strange aspects of human behavior. The basic principle of cognitive dissonance is that people actively avoid situations where they must maintain conflicting ideas simultaneously. Experiments show that resistance to examination of an idea increases with the importance of the idea to the person challenged.

A common application of cognitive dissonance is the use of violent initiation rites in many elite military groups, primitive societies, teams and fraternities. These rituals tend to bind members strongly to the group. This propensity would have significant survival value in ancient primitive societies. Psychologists have done many experiments showing that for similar situations, people who go through difficult initiations end up with a more positive view and a stronger attachment to the initiating organization than those subjected to a gentler initiation. To have later doubts about the organization, a person would be forced to come face to face with their stupidity for participating in the initiation. More generally, this principle explains why people are often unwilling to change their minds even when presented with overwhelming evidence supporting a revision of thinking.

From personal experience, a few religious people are not disturbed by discussions questioning the basis of their faith, but the vast majority quickly become upset. This may be an attempt on their part to avoid stirring up cognitive dissonance tied to their own doubts about the fantastic claims of their religion.

Once a believer accepts wildly irrational ideas central to a particular religion -- for example heaven, the Trinity, or transubstantiation -- they have strongly invested in their faith since the alternative is to confront their gullibility and doubt their prized "eternal life". The initial imposition of irrational ideas usually takes place without consent in childhood. With fundamentalists and in many mainstream religions indoctrination of the young involves threats (hell) and rewards (heaven). This is the same way I train my dog! Dawkins calls the religious education of children child abuse. This seems to be an overstatement in many cases, but regularly threatening a child with hell, as happens in many

fundamentalist and mainstream sects, can fairly be called abuse.

Cognitive dissonance avoidance may be an aspect of the propensity of humans to create and maintain predictive mental models of the real world. While scientific models have made us the dominant life form on Earth, models are sometimes based on false, untested assumptions. Science offers a process to find and correct errors. Religions violently resist change and reward orthodoxy, not the search for errors and truth. Other examples of misfiring of the model building process are seen in a 2007 Harris poll of Americans. Of 2,500 people surveyed, 29% of people believe in astrology, 41% in ghosts and 31% in witches. Belief in astrology gives people some modeling "knowledge" and hence control over the uncertain future. Belief in the fantastic should thrive on a Christian "education", which is basic training in accepting the irrational as fact.

Dawkins is not hostile to moderate religion but he sees rigid fundamentalism as breeding much of the hatred and violence in the world. Most religions pander to human delusions of grandeur as an attractive and apparently satisfying component of their beliefs. Humans are very, very, very special and of the greatest interest to the gods. Christians even say man was made in the image of God. The advance of science in the last century has narrowed the scope of religion by making many of its tenets improbable. In Christianity, God created the world for humanity. How can the faithful not experience cognitive dissonance when they know that the Earth is a small planet circling an average star among 200,000,000,000 stars in our Milky Way galaxy that is one of about 100,000,000,000 galaxies in the known universe? Just how arrogantly self-centered are the inhabitants of our insignificant speck? The universe is about 13.7 billion years old. If humans are of great interest to God, why did he/it wait until the universe was 99.999% of its present age before whipping up a batch of centrally important humans? Thomas Jefferson had the basic answer! "They [preachers] dread the advance of science as witches do the approach of daylight and scowl on the fatal harbinger announcing the subversions of the duperies on which they live."

Theologians have criticized Dawkins because he has little knowledge of theology. He also lacks detailed knowledge of the lives of fairies, but what does knowledge of the imaginary have to do with his ability hold a rational discussion based upon the evidence. What is theology? In short, it is a futile attempt to apply logic to unobservable, imaginary things. It uses indefinable terms such as God, heaven, hell, soul and spirit and assumes the truth of scriptures of ancient doubtful human origin. Is it a surprise that theological arguments are tortuous gibberish?

Never having previously thought about theology, I found Dawkins discussion of some logical inconsistencies in Christian doctrine to be quite interesting. One basic problem results from Christians giving God too many super powers. This makes it impossible to fit all of the doctrine into a rational and consistent framework. For example, God is omniscient (all knowing: past, present and future) and omnipotent (all-powerful so that anything is within the scope of his power). Unfortunately these powers are inconsistent since an all knowing God cannot be all powerful. In particular, if God knows the future outcome of a series of events he cannot exercise his omnipotence and change the outcome, since this would violate his omniscience. Since he knows the outcome of all events, he is actually impotent and cannot change anything! He could leave and no one would know the difference!

Once you start down this road inconsistencies pop up like toadstools. Another example is: An essential part of Christian doctrine states that humans have the free will to choose between good (God's way) and evil (any other way). If humans had no free will, then damnation is arbitrarily distributed by a God who is also supposed to be perfectly just. If God is omniscient, he knows whether you will go to hell or not before you are born. You cannot change your fate, since this would violate

his omniscience. All those fetuses out there are already damned or saved, so upon birth they can relax, not join a church, and do whatever they please! This same logic also shows that God is the creator of and personally responsible for everything including all the evil in the world. Read the Bible and look at history -- all of this might seem reasonable if God hates mankind!

The second part, to come later, will deal with Dawkins ideas about the origin and persistence of religions as well as "proofs" of Gods existence and the role of religion in fostering evil.

- Charles Sawicki

*"When fascism comes to
America, it will be wrapped in
the flag and
carrying the cross."
[Sinclair Lewis]*

YE GODS!

OK ALL YE DAMNED ATHEISTS, LISTEN UP! I'm suggesting that it would be unreasonable for an atheist to "not believe in god." Here's why: You should be willing to assert which god(s) you don't believe in. I mean, it's not like there was only one god to not believe in. It is easily demonstrable that there are, or at least may be, many gods. The bible of the Christians and Jews mentions several by name: Baal, Mammon, etc. We know that the Christians and Jews believed that their god himself believed in many gods. He said so himself in the preamble to the ten commandments. Thou shalt not, he said, take any other gods before him. Did he not test the pharaoh and harden his heart so that he could ultimately demonstrate that he was a superior god to the god of the Egyptians? And what of Greek gods and the Nordic gods?

Would it not be reasonable for an atheist to assert, "I disbelieve in most gods." That shows some respect for Christians and Jews, because after all it isn't just their god you're dissing. You're just tossing him in the same scrap barrel where you put the other voodoo entities. And at the same time it allows you to open-mindedly examine the evidence of the reality of the great god Mammon (or materialism) or the Sun god (thermodynamics/entropy). A case could certainly be made for the benefits of worshiping either of those two lastly mentioned gods. You may or may not want to serve them, but to ignore them or to disbelieve in them would probably be folly. May the gods of your choice smother you all with blessings and cast your enemies into some sort of inhospitable pit.

- Mikko Cowdery

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"Those people who tell me that I'm going to hell while they are going to heaven somehow make me very glad that we're going to separate destinations."

~ **Martin Terman**

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Putting "God" in the Constitution

In an internet article [Huckabee: Amend Constitution to be in 'God's standards'] published 1/15/2008, David Edwards and Muriel Kane describe Mike Huckabee's proposed constitutional amendment.

The United States Constitution never uses the word "God" or makes mention of any religion, drawing its sole authority from "We the People." However, Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee thinks it's time to put an end to that.

"I have opponents in this race who do not want to change the Constitution," Huckabee told a Michigan audience on Monday. "But I believe it's a lot easier to change the Constitution than it would be to change the word of the living god. And that's what we need to do -- to amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards rather than try to change God's standards so it lines up with some contemporary view."

When Willie Geist reported Huckabee's opinion on MSNBC's Morning Joe, co-host Mika Brzezinski was almost speechless, and even Joe Scarborough couldn't immediately find much to say beyond calling it "interesting,"

Scarborough finally suggested that while he believes "evangelicals should be able to talk politics ... some might find that statement very troubling, that we're going to change the Constitution to be in line with the Bible. And that's all I'm going to say."

Geist further noted of Huckabee that if "someone without his charm," said that, "he'd be dismissed as a crackpot, but he's Mike Huckabee and he's basically the front-runner."

Here is the link, including a video with Huckabee speaking on this:
"http://rawstory.com/news/2007/Huckabee_Amend_Constitution_to_meet_Gods_0115.html"

- **Eric Ashton**

RRF Organization Updates:

One of the many things I like about the RR Freethinkers is that we spend most of our time and energy talking about ideas, not about running the organization. Nevertheless, the organization is doing things I'd like to tell you about.

(1.) Monument Wars: We have retained an attorney and he is ready to proceed to Federal Court with our Complaint. Our objective, of course, is to place our own monument next to the Ten Commandments monument on the Fargo City Hall Mall. By the time you read this, the filing may already have taken place. We have to raise a considerable amount of money to fund this effort and we

will be contacting members to see if you can help.

(2.) To make contributions to the RRF tax deductible we have applied for "501C3" status. We hope to have this status approved within a few months.

(3.) Because many of our new visitors and members find us through the internet, we have come to believe we need to advertise ourselves on a nation-wide web site. We have applied for affiliation with a well-known national group called American Atheists. We hope to have web and other contact information appear on their site soon. Several of our members are planning to attend the upcoming American Atheist convention in Minneapolis.

Thanks to all of you for supporting the Red River Freethinkers.

- Jon Lindgren, President

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"Fronts" Aim for Political Take-over

Here's a quote -- with a little editorializing. It comes from the **Blue Book of the John Birch Society**, page 73 of the "And So, Let's Act" chapter:

5) **"We would organize fronts--little fronts, big fronts, temporary fronts, permanent fronts, all kinds of fronts. --- (lines omitted) ----- The most effective fronts, on either side, are ad hoc committees, aimed to accomplish, or at least publicize, one particular purpose."**

By so doing, Welch accomplishes two things. These fronts phasing in and out come onto the scene to stir things up and then they disappear, leaving no one to blame for whatever happens as a result. They can spout off any lie they wish and in the end there is no one's nose to hold to the grind stone of facts. Should we be happy the Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition has faded away as some suggest? Probably not. They threw their grenades and like guerrilla fighters they are, they hit and are gone leaving us no one to fight. You can rest assured however that another front is on it way --- and we don't even know from which direction it's coming.

The second advantage to the John Birch Society is, in Welch's words: **"They (being communists) would never think of setting up publicly, for instance, a Committee to Promote Communism."** Rather, according to Welch, the Communists would establish a clandestine group something like **"The Committee for Aid to Foreign Born."** Some committees would have nothing but a letterhead. Not even a staff. The advantage of this Welch goes on to say and one of the reasons he promotes such deception is that these groups, such as the John Birch Society's group, Support Your Local Police, **"can bring more of the uninformed and previously indifferent (to the John Birch Society) but patriotic Americans into the fight and can help our cause in many ways."**

Why, you might ask, is this important? The secret to winning any war is to know your enemy. Second, as I have stated before, **"The Blue Book"** outlines the right-wings, the new right, and Christian strategy for political take-over. It is extremely important to know their tactics and to understand, you are shooting at a moving target. Don't charge after the stagecoach shooting behind it.

Stand in front by the road and shoot the lead horse

- **David Johnson**

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The problem with fundamentalists insisting on a literal interpretation of the Bible is that the meaning of words change. A prime example is 'Spare the rod, spoil the child.' A rod was a stick used by shepherds to guide their sheep to go in the desired direction. Shepherds did not use it to beat their sheep. The proper translation of the saying is 'Give your child guidance, or they will go astray.' It does not mean 'Beat the shit out of your child or he will become rotten' as many fundamentalist parents seem to believe. ~Author Unknown

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Lines from Tennyson

The popular Alfred, Lord Tennyson was the Poet Laureate during most of the long reign of Queen Victoria. He is the most quoted, after Shakespeare, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

I wonder what his contemporaries - and the Queen - thought of these 1885 lines from "Vastness":

I

Many a hearth upon our dark globe
Sighs after many a vanished face
Many a planet by many a sun
May roll with the dust of a vanished race
Raving politics never at rest -
As this poor planet's pale history runs, -
What is it all but a trouble of ants
In the gleam of a million million of suns?

XVII

What is it all, if we all of us end
In being our own corpse-coffins at last,
Swallow'd in Vastness, lost in Silence,
Drown'd in the deeps of a meaningless Past?

Was there any thought of impeachment? After all, the queen was the ex officio head of the Church of England. Or was this, somehow, compatible with contemporary Victorian thinking?

- **Bill Treumann**

The Red River Freethinkers is organized by freethinkers to be a nonprofit educational organization. We are a group of nonreligious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate Intellectual Freedom and the use of Reason. Articles and letters in this newsletter present ideas and opinions of individual writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

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Red River Freethinkers Calendar

Regularly scheduled meetings are held at 2:30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month at the Fargo Unitarian Universalist Church at 121 9th Street South in Fargo.

For our February 13 meeting, a conference room at the new branch library in Fargo has again been reserved.

The official address is: Fargo Public Library, Carlson Branch, 2801 32nd Ave S, Fargo. It is across the street from Innovis Hospital. The library phone is 476-5980

BECOME A MEMBER!

Membership includes a subscription to this newsletter. Send dues, name, address, phone number and e-mail address to Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405.

Family membership	\$45/year
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