

Why Dawkins is not the Devil:

A Christian Appreciation of The God Delusion



INTRODUCTION

Todd was a bright and popular boy. He lived in a good neighbourhood with his happily married parents in a modest, but comfortable home. He was on the football team at his high school, and did well enough at school to make him a prospect for a College scholarship. He was also involved in leading the local Christian youth group down at the church every week. He had a bright future ahead of him, with the world at his feet.

At some point, Todd's parents noticed that his attitude had changed. He seemed troubled. He no longer took pride in his schoolwork, and he had started skipping church some Sunday mornings because he claimed not to be feeling well. Then one day, suddenly and unexpectedly, Todd was found hanged in a grove of trees near to his house. In his possession there were only two items. One was a suicide note that explained that he had lost his faith and couldn't go on like this anymore. The other item was a copy of *The God Delusion*.



This bulk email that I received is a true story. Well, it might be, except that I can't remember exactly how the story really went. But one way or another, Richard Dawkins is out there right now killing American children.

People are fond of high contrast, where good guy and bad guy are easy to tell apart, and so for a few prominent atheists, religion is an unmixed evil. For Christians, Dawkins is a crown prince of darkness.

Even though Dawkins is supposed to be the Christian enemy, there is much in his book that should be commended to the Christian world. The harshest critics of Biblical religion were its own prophets, and seeing that the modern church often either fails to criticise itself or refuses to listen to any that does arise from within, it is high time that we pay attention to the heathen prophets. In

many ways Dawkins is levelling the kind of critique that the church (if it's possible to think of it as a single entity) needs to hear.

CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

First a word about Christian Humanism. Seeing as this conference is being held in celebration of secular humanism, I hope that it won't offend if I self-identify as a Christian Humanist, at least in a limited sense. I certainly believe firstly that the Christian faith is the sphere in which people most truly express their humanity; and secondly that Christianity ought to produce a love for learning, truth and beauty, and it especially ought to produce love for people. If any of those tenets still apply to humanism as it is now defined, then I think that Christians ought to be humanists, regardless of any disagreements between you and I as to how humanism is best expressed in practice. The reason why I have chosen to bring Richard Dawkins into the mix is that he highlights so forcefully the loss of humanity that has blighted Christianity.

I could occupy a lecture on the grave shortcomings of modern Christianity on each of the tenets that I hope still characterise humanism [Learning; Truth; Beauty], but I have chosen to focus on ethics because there is often a clear and disturbing disparity between Christian behaviour and Christian theology on this point. It is this theme that is most often raised by critics of Christianity, such as Dawkins, as well as by my many critics within the Church, such as myself. Today, I would like to spend some time demonstrating

that the critiques of Christian religion by Dawkins and others end up being much like the kinds of critiques in its own scriptures.

AIMS

The aim of this presentation is not especially lofty. I merely hope to show that Biblical morality is still the standard of living to which the Church is bound, and in comparison with this standard, much of the church is failing and is rightly criticised for its compromise. Furthermore, the ideals that the Bible presents remain a challenge to greater humanity for all of us.

LOVE AND TOLERANCE

So, what are the things that Christians ought to appreciate about the God Delusion? Dawkins' contributions are many. His beautiful descriptions of the wonder that he derives from the pursuit of science are commendable. Likewise, his attempt at explaining religion as a natural phenomenon is instructive, as even the exclusive religions need to account for the existence of all the others.

There are two contributions to which I'd like to draw special attention:

Firstly, Dawkins' vitriolic opening chapter makes the point that religions do not deserve a better deal or immunity from criticism just by virtue of being sacred to some. The aggressive manner in

which he makes this point means that he's unlikely to win too many converts, but he is, I think, basically correct. Religion and government command the most power, and therefore the most power to corrupt. Immunity from criticism for either institution tends to lead to tyranny.

The most obvious local example of Christian failure in this regard was the big furore kicked up over the blasphemy in the UCT Sax Appeal Magazine, which incorporated some cheap slurs against God and Christians. Civil society rarely regards it as a good thing to resort to insults and personal attacks when there hasn't been direct provocation, and so in some measure, it was right for those who were offended to issue a reprimand. However, the kind of response that came from some quarters illustrated that Christians still regard their religion to be beyond criticism. What is worse still is that there was abject failure to acknowledge the right of a plural society to express itself.

The God Delusion also quotes a couple of clearly deluded people who claim to reject pluralism, or promise that when in government, they will abolish it, as if one can legislate away difference of opinion. ["When the Christian majority takes over this country, there will be no satanic churches, no more free distribution of pornography, no more talk of rights for homosexuals. After the Christian majority takes control, pluralism will be seen as immoral and evil, and the state will not permit anybody the right to practice evil." – Gary Potter]

So in this, Dawkins' opening point in the God Delusion is worthy of careful consideration by Christians. Some of us clearly haven't noticed that we share the world with people who hold contrary beliefs, and that this is not a crime.

YOU DON'T NEED GOD TO BE EVIL (BUT IT SOMETIMES HELPS): THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN IMMORALITY

Tolerance is not the major point that I think Christians need to hear, though it is not unrelated. Dawkins spends most of his time on the question of *morality* and religion, and here he raises a serious problem within the modern church. Christians either don't know and don't care what their own scriptures teach in regard to moral living, or they know it only superficially, and fail to keep it when morality is tested.

In the aftermath of the UCT blasphemy scandal, the people who claimed to be standing for all things good and wholesome often resorted to insults, threats and dishonesty.

Dawkins' book lists numerous shocking examples of public Christian utterances that fail to match the standards of common human decency, to say nothing of their insistence that they actually represent the moral elite in society.

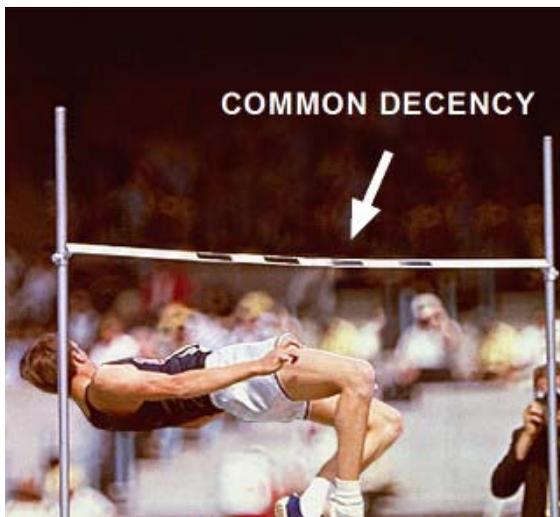
- Ann Coulter: "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."

- Congressman Bob Dornan: “Don’t use the word ‘gay’, unless it’s an acronym for ‘Got AIDS yet?’”
- Paul Hill, who killed an abortion doctor and was executed, believed himself to be a martyr for the faith, ready to receive great reward.
- Ann Coulter: “I defy any of my co-religionists to tell me they do not laugh at the idea of Dawkins burning in hell.”
- Fred Phelps is a baptist minister whose church website address is godhatesfags.com. This is a quote from the book: ‘Phelps has organised 22,000 (now up to 41,000) anti-homosexual demonstrations since 1991 (that’s an average of four per day) in the USA, Canada, Jordan and Iraq, displaying such slogans as “THANK GOD FOR AIDS”’. A particularly charming feature of his website is the automated tally of the number of days a particular, named, deceased homosexual has been burning in hell.’

Finally, there is the recent example of the invasion of the IHEU conference in Nigeria in which Leo Igwe was attacked by a particularly unsavoury Christian group. I can tell you less than most about this event, but there are clear and deep problems when a church spends so much of its time trying to convince people that children are witches, and resorts to attacking their opposition and

damaging property.

All in all, it doesn't take much research to discover ample evidence of Christian moral failure, even if we only set the bar as high as 'common decency'.



Dawkins can be forgiven then for his contention that:

“We do not get our moral reasoning from religion.”

I am very grateful to him for raising this, and it is the kind of statement that is a fantastic consciousness raiser for Christians.

A startling number of professing Christians would be happy to admit this. A further startling proportion would deny this verbally, but prove it true in practice.

For example, Christian Fundamentalism invariably claims to be faithful to what the Bible says, and many of them would consider every other kind of Christianity to be hopeless compromise. However, what Fundamentalism calls Christianity is very often little more than baptised right-wing politics. Furthermore, being thoughtlessly faithful to what the Bible *says* very often means that they fail to know and practice what it *means*.

Dawkins is however mistaken in saying that no one derives their morality from the Bible. Christianity is a religion inextricably bound to its message and its scriptures, including its moral code, properly understood of course.

Throughout the OT, Israel is measured almost single-mindedly according to its faithfulness to the Law and its faithfulness to God. For example, King Omri is known to us through archaeological findings as the king who set up the new capital of Samaria, he expanded borders, he was militarily strong, and economically prosperous. He is so politically significant that the Assyrians refer to Israel as ‘the House of Omri’. Yet the book of Kings does not mention much of any of that, instead measuring him according to his moral and religious character: “But Omri did evil in the eyes of the LORD and sinned more than all those before him.” Saying little else about his twelve-year reign, it moves on.

Likewise, in the NT, Christians are always measured against the standard of Christ himself, which he expresses as love for God and

neighbour (Mt. 22:35-40). Elsewhere, Jesus says directly that obedience to him is required (putting himself in the position of ‘God’s law’).

This measuring of oneself against the example and command of Christ is not optional for Christians.

Throughout the NT, it’s made very clear that God requires a particular standard of holiness if one is to be considered a Christian. So, Jesus says that at the judgment, many people who identify themselves as his followers will be sent away, because they didn’t listen to his words AND do them (Matthew 7:22f). Or a later NT writer says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no-one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

In other words, seeing as Biblically defined morality is so near the centre of everything that is distinctively Christian, if it were true that Christians have dispensed with Biblical morality in favour of whatever is fashionable, we might as well pronounce the death of any sense in which the word Christian is meaningful. We would no longer be following the one after whom we’re named in either word or deed.

So, no, true Christianity must take Biblical ethics seriously, or else it ceases to be Christian.

Having said all of that, I will have no doubt raised many more questions about Biblical morality than I've answered, particularly, I would imagine, about the joining of the OT and NT together. So for example, the cartoon by Zapiro expressing the usual argument:



If I'm claiming that Christians are all bound to Biblical morality, what do we make of the hundreds of laws that we patently don't keep?

It is fairly difficult to answer this objection meaningfully in a handful of minutes, and it would be seriously straining the attention span of a post-lunch session to attempt to do so. I hope that the following explanation will suffice for now.

It would be deeply mistaken to imagine that the Bible subscribes to the literary genre that I'll call 'Holy Book'.



Maybe some Holy books claim to have descended from heaven as abstract and eternal wisdom, but the Bible is not one of them. Treating it as a compendium of timeless, abstract truths is a serious misunderstanding. Everything has context, and to be understood well, it needs to be read within its context. I believe the Bible to be the words of God, but they are words spoken in time to a particular audience. Understanding their relevance to later readers requires interpretation.

So, the Jewish Law, which is the particular target of Zapiro's cartoon belongs to a certain time and for a certain purpose. For example, there is nothing inherently unholy about pork, or this attractive poly-cotton blend shirt. Love is taught as the underlying principle of the law, and there is no stretch of the imagination by

which dual fibre clothing can be seen as inherently unloving. However, the law forbade the mixing of fibres in order to stand as an *illustration* of holiness: one cannot create synthetic religions or live a morally compromised life.

For various reasons, Jesus himself revokes these illustrative laws, requiring only the reality to which they pointed. If you love God and love your neighbour, you are keeping the law, says Jesus, even if you're eating crayfish wrapped in bacon while wearing cheap Chinese shirts.

Here's what Jesus says about these food laws, pointing out that their purpose is illustrative:

Mt. 15:7-11 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” [Isaiah 29:13] Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean’, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean’.”

The OT law provides us with just an example of how love should look in application, but these laws can only apply to the nation of Israel as a Theocracy. They are not general, universal laws. So, when Jesus looses the *faith* of Israel from the *nation* of Israel and offers it to the whole world, the laws that taught Israel about love are replaced by more universal and more pointedly moral laws.

While the law was the example for Israel, Jesus himself is the example for non-national Christianity, especially in his death on the cross for his enemies. Biblical morality describes a *pattern* of love, which we apply to whatever our circumstances happen to be.

Thus, to return to Zapiro's cartoon and the question whether homosexuality can be outlawed on the basis of the Old Testament, it's not as simple as all that. The answer depends on whether homosexuality is merely an OT, national Israelite illustration of unholiness, or a moral issue in itself that breaks the Biblical pattern of love.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

So, if, as I'm arguing, some Christians do actively try to keep to a Biblically defined law of love as their moral code, how should this look?

Justice over religion.

Social justice is central to Biblical religion. Countless times, the Bible teaches that people who have no concern for justice for the poor and helpless have religion that is worthless. Again and again, even in the OT, God calls the sacrifices and religious rituals revolting, because of the oppression of the poor.

Very often, emphasis upon religious systems can be a catalyst for injustice. According to some historians, the faith wars of the Reformation were so brutal in part because people were considered

pious largely on the basis of ritual and regular participation in religious ceremonies. Being so intent on superficial religion, civilisation had become increasingly oblivious to human suffering and the value of the individual.

If celebrity atheists such as Dawkins and Harris have had harsh words for religion, I doubt they've surpassed the kind of language that Jesus aims at the religious leaders of his day. Why the tirade? Because their religion was all about outward ceremony and not about love and relationships. Their religion neglects social justice.

Hear what Jesus says to the popes and priests and theologians of his day:

Mt. 23:13-28 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. ... “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and

self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

So, Biblical morality is concerned with justice, and it has the harshest words for those who think that keeping rules for their own sake will somehow placate God. Christianity is concerned with relationships. It is not a rule-based religion.

Golden Rule: active love

Mt. 7:12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

The Golden Rule is not original to Christ, but it almost universally appears in the negative, in other words, don’t do to others what you wouldn’t like done to you. Jesus’ positive version is far more challenging than that, because it adds the imperative to go out and actively do good to people, to actively meet needs.

Insincere, ritual or even hateful Christianity (such as that of Fred Phelps and his kind) are exposed as being empty on this count.

I remember another example of the kind of insincerity that can accompany Christian profession when I caught an episode of Cheaters some time ago. Cheaters is a show about catching people in the act of infidelity, and then confronting them with their betrayed partner there and then. It's a bit like televised cock-fighting, if you'll excuse the pun. On this particular occasion, the guilty party was a woman who had been living off of her boyfriend's generosity, but sleeping with someone else. Once she was caught in the act and feeling the judgment and shame being heaped on her, she promptly announced 'I've been saved by Jesus, so F*** you', and then addressed an 'F*** you' at each of her accusers and the camera, accompanied by a double middle-finger salute.

So, while Christianity is not a rule-based religion, it is also not devoid of moral demands. You can't claim to be in relationship with God without displaying in yourself the *character* of that relationship.

Love for enemies

According to Dawkins' God Delusion, 'Love thy neighbour' originally (even to Jesus) meant 'Love fellow Jews'. It is, he says, extreme out-group hostility. This is, I think, a clear mistake.

The great passage in which Jesus discusses the identity of one's neighbour is The Good Samaritan.

If there was ever an example of ‘out-group hostility, it was the Jews and Samaritans. They were long-standing enemies. The Samaritans had set up a rival temple to the Jewish one. They had rejected all of the books from the Jewish scriptures that lent support to the Jewish cause, and they kept the ones that legitimised their beliefs. In about 130BC, the Jews destroyed their temple. Shortly after Jesus’ birth, Samaritans desecrated the Jewish temple by littering it with bones, and there were occasionally violent skirmishes between the groups. It is without doubt that the Jews regarded them as enemies, and would have nothing to do with them.

In Jesus’ parable, members of the Jewish religious elite (a priest and a Levite) ignored a fellow Jew who was bleeding to death on the roadside, because it would have made them religiously unclean. But a hated Samaritan comes past, tends to his wounds, takes him to an inn and pays the bill for as long as his recovery takes.

This parable was calculated to shock or even offend Jewish listeners, because they were deeply proud of their religious exclusivity. But Jesus pointedly casts the hero outside of their circle. It smashes their out-grouping.

‘Neighbour’ is not something you are, says Jesus, it is something you do. Being a neighbour even to your enemy is the definitive act of love. Love for neighbour demands love and justice to all, even

across borders.

Warring against ideas, not people.

In continuity with the insistence that love is active, and that love for enemies is the defining feature of love, comes the idea that religious conflict must be fought with *ideas*. St Paul says quite clearly that the battle is not against flesh and blood, but expressed in the realm of argument. With this St Peter also agrees, adding that engagement must be with gentleness and respect.

Once again, the great example of how God fights with unbelievers comes in Jesus, and he in turn is held up as the model for his followers. God doesn't tell us to love our enemies without having done so himself. In order to make sons and daughters out of his enemies, Christians hold that God became man and died on behalf of his enemies as a death-defeating sacrifice in order to reconcile them to God. So Christ gave his life to make enemies into friends.

It is the clarity and frequency of this call in scripture to love people sacrificially and to attempt to *respectfully* persuade that makes Christian bullying tactics, and even Christian violence, so mystifying.

Living at peace.

Finally, scripture often sounds the call to live at peace with others for as long as it remains in one's power to do so. Even if one has to accept unprovoked and undeserved suffering for one's beliefs, it is

better to suffer this shame than to be the cause of escalating tensions.

Conclusion

What I hope this brief survey of the Christian ethic has served to show is that Richard Dawkins' complaints against Christian morality are exactly right, but they are precisely the kinds of things that Jesus himself would no doubt be saying of the church were he here.

Biblical morality is deeply relational and deeply affirming of humanity. There is much to do with the Divine-human relationship, it is true, but that runs hand-in-hand with a conviction of the dignity and value of humanity. The major paradigm for Christian morality is Jesus who suffered for his enemies in order to effect reconciliation. This redemptive pattern is passed on to his followers so that they do all they can to perpetuate the message of reconciliation, even if it means having to sacrifice or suffer unjustly for the sake of others.

The great scandal of Christianity as we know it is the degree to which large parts of the church have lost connection with these founding principles, and so have fallen well short of the love for humanity that stands at its heart. The God Delusion may fail to prove that Christianity is itself deluded, but Dawkins has done us a great service in demonstrating how deluded some people are to think that they're Christian.

And finally, hopefully the comparison between the standard of Christian ethics and the great failure to adhere to it in some Christian quarters is also a challenge to you to strive for greater humanity.

I thank you.