

Atheist Richard Dawkins on 'The God Delusion'

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In the last few years, Americans have seen the dark side of religion. The events of 9/11 brought home the extremes to which some radical Muslims would go to defeat infidels and attain virgins. At home, we've seen assaults on the separation of Church and State and attacks on the teaching of evolution and the distribution of life-saving condoms. And now, it appears the godless are fighting back.

During the recent holiday season, there were prominent articles about atheism in The New York Times and the UK's Financial Times and Telegraph, and a segment on NPR's All Things Considered. Richard Dawkins debated the existence of God on the London chat show, The Sunday Edition. Dawkins' book, The God Delusion was a top 10 bestseller on the lists of both the New York Times and LA Times, number one at Amazon UK and Amazon Canada, and number two at Amazon.com. Letter to a Christian Nation by Sam Harris was recently an equally successful bestseller.

A group calling itself "The Rational Response Squad," has launched The Blasphemy Challenge, a campaign to entice young people to publicly renounce belief in the God of Christianity. Participants who videotape their blasphemy and upload it to YouTube will receive a free DVD of The God Who Wasn't There, a number one bestselling independent documentary at Amazon.com.

Richard Dawkins holds the Charles Simonyi Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. His 1976 book, The Selfish Gene, popularized the gene-centered view of evolution and introduced the term "meme." In January 2006, Dawkins hosted on the UK's Channel 4 a two-part documentary on the dangers of religion, entitled (against his wishes, I might add) The Root of All Evil. His newest book, The God Delusion, is an international bestseller.

Below is a shortened version of Terrence McNally's recent interview with Richard Dawkins. You can also listen to the audio of the full interview.

Terrence McNally: When and how did you become an atheist?

Richard Dawkins: I suppose it was discovering Darwinism. I was confirmed into the Church of England at the age of thirteen. I then got pretty skeptical about it, but retained some respect for the argument from Design -- the argument that says living things look as though they've been designed, so they probably have been. I then learned the real scientific explanation for why they look as though they've been designed, and that was enough for me. I lost my religious faith pretty much then.

TM: What do you think explains the current interest in atheism?

RD: I would love to think that there really is something moving -- a shifting in the tectonic plates, and, at last, in America, atheism is becoming respectable; that one can now come out of the closet and proclaim one's self.

I got certain indications of that on my recent tour of the United States. I got packed houses everywhere I went. Of course, I was preaching to the choir, but I was impressed by how large the choir is and how enthusiastic. Over and over again people came up to me afterwards and said how grateful they were that I and Sam Harris and others were finally speaking out and saying the things that they wanted to say, but perhaps didn't feel able to.

TM: You compare the experience of atheists to that of gays in the fairly recent past. Do you think that's an apt comparison?

RD: I think the parallel is a valid one. Until recently nobody dared admit that they were gay. Now, they're rather proud to do so. Nowadays it's impossible to get elected to public office if you're an atheist, and I think that's got to change. The Gay Rights Movement raised consciousness. It initiated the idea of Gay Pride. I think we've got to have Atheist Pride, Atheist Consciousness. I think it's pretty clear that a fair number of members of Congress must be lying because not a single one of them admits to being an atheist. The probability that in a sample of over 500 well-educated members of American society, not a single one of them is an atheist, statistically, that is highly unlikely. So, some of them, at least, have got to be lying, and I think it's a tragedy that they have to.

TM: Could you address a couple of reactions that I see in the media, either to atheism, in general, or to you and your book? One, people ask why are atheists so angry?

RD: That's a very curious misperception. We get accused of being angry or of being intolerant, but, if you were to look at critiques of one political party by the other... when Democrats criticize Republicans, or Republicans criticize Democrats, nobody ever says, "You're being intolerant of Republicans, or angry." It's just normal, robust argument.

People have gotten so used to the idea that religion must be immune to criticism that even a very mild and gentle criticism of religion comes across as angry and intolerant. That's yet another piece of consciousness raising that we've got to undertake.

TM: You and others are accused of being arrogant, condescending. What would you say to that?

RD: Exactly the same thing. Nobody says that a Democrat who dismisses Republican ideas is arrogant. They just assume that's what politicians do. They attack each other's ideas with good, robust give and take. That's exactly what people like me and Sam Harris are doing with respect to religion. Once again, the accusation of arrogance comes about because religion has acquired this weird protection that you're not allowed to criticize.

TM: You give the Americans too much credit. In the last couple of years, perhaps since 9/11, when people criticize the Bush Administration, they are accused of Bush-hating. I think they're attempting to clothe this President and this Administration in the same kind of protective halo that religion has had.

RD: Now that you mention it, I have noticed that very thing. There has been a tendency to say, if you criticize the President, Bush, you are criticizing America, which is ludicrous because he was elected by a --

TM: --a minority.

RD: -- if indeed he was elected at all. I take your point completely. Thank you.

TM: People finally say, "What's it to you? Why not be an atheist if that's what works for you, and leave the rest of us to be as religious as we wish?" This, I believe, is offered as a challenge to your open-mindedness or your respect for others. You're being called "an atheist fundamentalist."

RD: "Fundamentalist" usually means, "goes by the book." And so, a religious fundamentalist goes back to the fundamentals of The Bible or The Koran and says, "nothing can change." Of course, that's not the case with any scientist, and certainly not with me. So, I'm not a fundamentalist in that sense.

Why not live and let live? Why not just say, "Oh, well, if people want to believe that, that's fine." Of course, nobody's stopping people believing whatever they like. The problem is that there's not that much tolerance coming the other way. Things like the opposition to stem-cell research, to abortion, to contraception -- these are all religiously inspired prohibitions on what would otherwise be freedom of action, whether of scientists or individual human beings.

There are religious people who are not content to say, "Oh, well, my religion doesn't allow me to use contraceptives, but I'm quite happy for anybody else to." Instead, we have religiously-inspired prohibitions on aid programs abroad, including in areas where HIV AIDS is rife, prohibiting aid going in any form that might be used to help contraception. That is religion over-stepping the bounds and interfering in other people's freedom. So, religion does not observe this "live and let live" philosophy.

TM: In other words, if it were just a philosophical belief that had no impact on the world, fine.

RD: Exactly. I don't think you'll find many people criticizing any gentle religion, like Jainism.

The other thing is that, as a scientist and an educator, it is impossible to overlook the fact that, especially in America, there is a vigorous and virulent campaign to suppress the teaching of scientific biology. In state after state, there are court battles being fought. Scientists have to go out of the laboratory and waste their time responding to these know-nothings who are trying to stop the teaching of evolution or give equal time to creationism or intelligent design, or whatever they like to call it. They actually are trying to interfere with the freedom of children to learn science and the freedom of science teachers to teach their science properly.

TM: Why did you write *The God Delusion*?

RD: I care passionately about the truth. I believe that the truth about whether there is a God in the Universe is possibly the most important truth there is. I happen to think it's false, but I think it's a really important question.

Also, because I felt that the world actually is drifting, parts of it anyway, towards theocracy in very dangerous ways. Education in my own field of Evolutionary Biology was under threat. There are all sorts of reasons why one might worry about the looming rise of religious influence, especially in the United States of America and in the Islamic world.

TM: Can you explain the distinction you offer between Einstein's God, as you put it, and Supernatural God? You clarify this at the top of the book to make clear which definition of God you believe is a delusion.

RD: Sometimes when people hear that one is an atheist, they say something like, "Oh, well, surely you believe in something." Or "You believe that the Universe is a wonderful place." And I say, "Yes,

of course, the Universe is a wonderful place." And they say, "Oh, well, then you believe in God." And they are using "God" in the Einsteinian sense of a kind of metaphor for that which is mysterious and wonderful in the universe. And the more the physicists look into the origins of the universe, the more wonderful it does seem to become. Without a doubt there is cause for something approaching worship or reverence that moves scientists such as Einstein, and Carl Sagan, and, in my humble way, myself. Einstein was very fond of using the word "God" to refer to that feeling of non-personal reverence.

TM: Beyond that feeling, didn't he also use it to refer to the awesome existence that we confront?

RD: Yes, he did. When Einstein wanted to say something like, "Could the universe have happened in any other way? Is there only one kind of universe?" The way he expressed it was, "Did God have a choice in creating the universe?" Now, to any ordinary churchgoer in the pew, that sounds as though Einstein believed that a personal God designed the universe. In fact, all Einstein was doing was wondering whether there could be more than one kind of universe, which is a perfectly respectable scientific question.

I think it's extremely unfortunate that Einstein chose to use the word "God" for that. Einstein himself was most indignant when he was taken literally and people thought that he meant a personal God, such as the Christian God or the Jewish God. But I think he was asking for trouble by using the word "God." He did it again over Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, which he hated. He expressed his hatred for it by saying, "God does not play dice."

TM: So you're making the distinction between that use of the word "God" and the God that you believe is a delusion?

RD: A personal God. A God who is a deliberate, conscious intelligence, the sort of God who listens to your prayers, forgives your sins. A God who sits down like a master engineer or physicist and designs the Universe, works out what ought to happen, worries about sins, all that kind of thing.

TM: Could you briefly respond, as you do in the book, to some of the arguments for this supernatural, directive, personal God. The argument from beauty...?

RD: People say things like, "If you don't believe in God, how do you account for Beethoven? How do you account for a lovely sunset? How do you account for Michelangelo?" It's such a dopey thing to say. Beethoven wrote beautiful music. Michelangelo painted wonderful paintings and did wonderful sculptures. Whether or not there is a God doesn't add to the argument one bit. So that's not an argument, although an amazingly large number of people seem to think it is.

TM: The argument from scripture...?

RD: There are lots of scriptures all around the world and they contradict each other. There's really no reason to suppose that just because something's written down, it's true. You have to ask who wrote it and when and why.

If you ask somebody, "Why do you believe that your Scripture is the Word of God?" the answer that comes back is, "Oh, because it says so." And you say, "Well, where does it say so?" And they say, "In my Scripture." So, the Holy Scripture, whichever it is, The Koran, or The Bible, or The Book of Mormon, says within itself that it is the Word of God. This is a circular argument and not to be taken seriously.

TM: The argument from personal experience...? In late-night conversations during my high school days, my questions regarding God's existence would be answered by the challenge-defying, "You have to experience it."

RD: I think that is a difficult one, but, on the other hand, anybody who knows anything about psychology, knows what an immensely powerful simulation engine the brain is. I'm impressed by the fact that every single night of my life, my brain conjures up images and sounds of things that have never existed and never will exist. They are completely non-sensical. It's as though I go temporarily insane every night of my life and you do, too. Everybody does. We get a very life-like, full color simulation of a fantasy world inside our heads. Now, when we get that in our sleep, we call it a dream. When we get it in our waking lives -- in much less vivid form -- we might call it a vision of God or a vision of an angel, or we might say "God just talks to me."

Even when you actually see an angel or you actually hear a voice inside your head, that is an easy feat of simulation for the brain to achieve. When it's just a sort of vague feeling that God is whispering to you, it's really rather pathetic to be fooled by that, I think.

TM: My president claims God talks to him.

RD: Yes. Your president is told by God to invade Iraq. It's a pity, by the way, that God didn't tell him there were no weapons of mass destruction.

TM: I, too, wish God had been more specific. What do you make of the recent scientific conversations about certain phenomena such as a "God nodule" in the brain?

RD: There is a certain amount of evidence that specific parts of the brain do have something to do with so-called religious experience. I've had experience of the work of the Canadian neurophysiologist, Michael Persinger. He tries to mimic the effects of temporal lobe epilepsy by passing magnetic fields through the brain. In about eighty percent of subjects, when he passes magnetic fields through certain parts of the brain, he can induce religious or mystical experiences. The details of the religious experience depend upon how the person was brought up. So, if the person was Catholic, they tend to see Virgin Marys or whatever it might be. I turned out to be one of the twenty percent for whom it didn't work. If it had worked for me, I probably wouldn't have seen any gods, but I probably would have experienced some sort of mystical experience of Oneness with the Universe.

TM: How universal is the belief in a supernatural God?

RD: It's universal in the sense that all human cultures that anthropologists have looked at seem to have something corresponding to a belief in some sort of God.

Sometimes it's many gods. Sometimes it's one. Sometimes it's an animistic set of gods -- the God of the Waterfall, the God of the River, the God of the Mountain, the Sun God. The details vary, but it does seem to be a human universal, in the same sort of way as heterosexual lust is a human universal, even though not all individual humans have it. Like sexual lust, I suspect there's a kind of lust for God.

TM: How do you explain its prevalence?

RD: When you ask a Darwinian like me, how we explain something, we usually take that to mean, "What is the Darwinian survival value of it?"

Quite often, when you ask what is the survival value of "X", it turns out that you shouldn't be asking the question about "X" at all, but that "X" is a by-product of something else that does have survival value. In this case, the suggestion I put forward as only one of many possible suggestions, is that religious faith is a by-product of the childhood tendency to believe what your parents tell you.

It's a very good idea for children to believe what parents tell them. A child who dis-believes what his parents tell him would probably die, by not heeding the parent's advice not to get into the fire, for example. So child brains, on this theory, are born with a rule of thumb, "believe what your parents tell you." Now, the problem with that -- where the by-product idea comes in -- is that it's not possible to design a brain that believes what its parents tell it, without believing bad things along with good things. Ideally we might like the child brain to filter good advice like, "Don't jump in the fire," from bad advice like, "Worship the tribal gods." But the child-brain has no way of discriminating those two kinds of advice. So, inevitably, a child-brain that is pre-programmed to believe and obey what his parents tell it, is automatically vulnerable to bad advice like, "Worship the tribal juju."

I think that's one part of the answer, but then, you need another part of the answer: Why do some kinds of bad advice, like, "Worship the tribal juju," survive and others not?

Beliefs like "life-after-death" spread because they are appealing. A lot of people don't like the idea of dying and rather do like the idea that they'll survive their own death. So the meme, if you like, spreads like a virus because people want to believe it.

TM: Though children may tend to believe what their parents tell them, you state strongly that a child should not be called a Catholic child, a Muslim child, or a Jewish child.

RD: Yes. I'm very, very keen on the idea that children should be not labeled like that. We're back to consciousness raising. The feminists raised our consciousness about use of language in all sorts of ways -- things like saying, "his or hers," instead of just "his". In the same way, I think we need to raise consciousness about such labeling of children.

I'm not saying that parents shouldn't influence their children. That would be hopelessly unrealistic. Parents influence their children in all sorts of ways, but I think religion is more or less unique in being licensed to confer a label on a child. You never talk about a "Republican child" or a "Democratic child." You never make the assumption that because a professor of post-modernist literature has a child, that therefore it will be a post-modernist child. It would be ridiculous to do that, and yet if a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim has a child, then the whole of society goes along with the idea that you can label this child "a Jewish child," "a Christian child," "A Muslim child." I think that is a form of child abuse. I think it's a civil rights issue.

TM: Many suggest that you and other atheists, perhaps especially scientists who are atheists, neglect phenomena that you cannot explain. For example, the subjective experience of meaning or comfort of inspiration many claim to receive from their belief or their relationship with God... If millions experience such things, is this not evidence for the source to which they attribute them? If not, can you clarify why it isn't?

RD: There's no question that people do get comfort and consolation from religion. If a loved one has died, of course, it's comforting to feel that they're still somewhere out there caring for you, and you're going to see them again one day. But, what is comforting isn't necessarily true, and it is sort of intellectual cowardice to say, "We should let people wallow in their illusions, because it comforts them." I think it's rather patronizing.

TM: Do you think this is similar to when families or even doctors debate whether to tell someone their cancer is terminal? Because, after all, life is terminal...

RD: That's a really good parallel. There are people who would rather not be told the truth by a doctor and I respect that, but that doesn't make it true. That you want your doctor to tell you that you haven't got terminal cancer, and your doctor obliges by lying to you, that's fine; but the fact is he has lied to you. Similarly, you may be comforted by the thought that there's a God looking after you, but if there isn't a God looking after you, then I'm afraid there isn't one, and that's all there is to it.

I don't want to impose my beliefs on anybody else, but I do care about what's true. If you want to know what I think is true, read my book. If you'd rather not know what I think is true, don't read my book.

TM: Many criticize you on the grounds that science can't answer some of the biggest questions or that science is unwilling or unable to offer those meaningful things that we just talked about. Is it fair to respond to your book or your arguments by pointing out insufficiencies of science?

RD: There are some questions that science not only can't answer, but doesn't want to answer, things like, "What is right? And What is wrong?" or "How shall we be comforted?" Science has nothing to say about "right" or "wrong." Moral philosophy does. There's another whole category of questions that science may not be able to answer -- the really deep questions of existence, like, "Why is there something, rather than nothing?" or "Where did the laws of physics come from in the first place?" It's an open question at the moment whether science will ever be able to answer questions like that.

Physicists, in particular, are working on questions like, "Where do the laws of physics come from?" But it's a fallacy to say that because science can't answer such a question, therefore religion can. Much more realistic to say, "Well, if science can't answer that deep question, nothing can."

TM: In America, we hear that we're more provincial and religious than so many other people; that much of Europe, even the Roman Catholic countries of Spain and Italy, for instance, are far more secular...

RD: I suspect that the grip that religion is alleged to have over America has been exaggerated. If people who are not religious would only recognize that they're not a beleaguered minority, but actually are exceedingly numerous and potentially very powerful... If they would stand up and recognize each other and organize, I suspect that they would soon give the lie to this idea that America is a supremely religious country.

I think there's been a kind of hijacking of American political life by religious interests, and I think it's rather sad the way so many have gone along with that. You'll see even intelligent Democrats desperately currying favor with the religious vote because they think it's so powerful. No member of Congress will admit to being an atheist, although obviously some of them are.

TM: In polls, people are least likely to vote for an atheist for significant political office. They claim to be much more willing to vote, for instance, for a homosexual or a Muslim...

RD: It's no wonder that politicians are scared.

TM: I don't think we can expect too many politicians to move first.

RD: People have to come out of the closet and write to their Congressmen and Congresswomen and say, "Look, stop sucking up to the religious vote. Suck up to us, for a change. Better still, don't suck up to anybody, but speak your own convictions."

TM: I once asked a member of the Achuar -- an Amazon rainforest tribe who had its first contact with the modern world in the 1970s -- "How do you feel about the missionaries?" I assumed he would say, "Oh, bad folks," but he said, "They were the ones who stopped us from killing each other all the time."

Although several of our Founding Fathers were more likely Deists than conventional Christians, they believed that once you took away the monarchy or the Papacy, that the people did need religion in order to behave as a moral society. Do you agree that religion is a civilizing or moralizing force?

RD: There's something awfully patronizing and condescending about saying, "Well, of course, we don't need religion, but the common people do." I hope it's not as bad as that.

With regard to the missionaries being a civilizing influence on tribes whose habit was to kill each other -- presumably, if their first contact with Westerners had been with policemen, they would have said, "Until the policemen came, we killed each other."

Through centuries of change, we have now reduced our natural tendency to kill each other, but there have long been tribes where killing is the norm and the way to achieve worldly success. In our society we talk about making a killing on Wall Street. The equivalent in some tribes in the Amazon jungle might be to literally go and kill sexual rivals, for example.

That changes when such tribes are brought into contact with Western civilization. The fact that the people who go out of their way to bring Western civilization to such tribes usually are missionaries doesn't mean that religion fosters the "Thou shalt not kill," point of view. "Thou shalt not kill" is a general moral principle, which we all have now, whether or not we're religious.

TM: Some people will claim that without religion we would not act morally; we would lack ethics...

RD: That's an appalling thing to say, isn't it? It suggests that the only reason we have morality -- the only reason we don't kill and rape and steal -- is that we're afraid of being found out by God. We're afraid that God is watching us, afraid of the great surveillance camera in the sky. Now, that's not a very noble reason for being good.

As a matter of fact, there's not the slightest evidence that religious people in a given society are any more moral than non-religious people. We are, all of us in the modern world, far more reluctant to kill, reluctant to discriminate against other people on grounds of sex. We no longer regard slavery as a good thing. All these things are universally approved of among educated people of goodwill in modern society, whether or not they are religious. You can point to abolitionists who happened to be religious, and you can point to other religious individuals who were in favor of slavery.

Modern morality is very different from the truly horrifying version of morality in the Old Testament. If we went by the Bible, we'd still be taking slaves. If we went by the Bible, we'd still be stoning people to death for the crime of picking up sticks on the Sabbath. There are all sorts of ways in which we've moved on, and nobody who claims to get their morality from religion, could seriously maintain that they get it from Scripture.

TM: You have a problem with moderate Christians, Jews, and Muslims, don't you?

RD: I take this largely from Sam Harris. In his two excellent books, *Letter to a Christian Nation* and *The End of Faith*, he points out -- and I agree with him -- that the majority of religious people are perfectly nice people who don't do horrible things. Yet moderate religion makes the world safe for extremist religion by teaching that religious faith is a virtue, and by the immunity to criticism that religion enjoys. That immunity extends to extremists like Osama Bin Laden and that dreadful man who goes around saying, "God hates fags." I've forgotten his name...

TM: Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, the list goes on.

RD: The world is made safe for people like them and Osama Bin Laden because we've all been brainwashed to respect religious faith and not to criticize it with the same vigor we criticize political and other sorts of opinions that we disagree with.

If you can say, "such and such a view is part of my religion," everybody tiptoes away with great respect. "Oh, it's part of your religion," then of course, you must go ahead. In a way, we've been asking for trouble by moderate people persuading us to give to all religion a respect, which it has never done anything to deserve.

TM: You quote physicist Steven Weinberg: "Religion is an insult to human dignity. Without it, you'd have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. For good people to do evil things, it takes religion."

You open the book marveling at the wonders of existence. You end it writing about your personal experience of awe and transcendence. You also write eloquently about this in a previous book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*.

RD: *Unweaving the Rainbow*, which I wrote in the late '90s, was my answer to those people who say that science and, in particular, my world view in *The Selfish Gene* was cold and bleak and loveless. Maybe I could read a few words from the opening of *Unweaving the Rainbow*, which I've set aside and asked to be read at my funeral.

"We are going to die and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they're never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place, but who will, in fact, never see the light of day, outnumber the sand grains of Sahara. ...In the face of these stupefying odds, it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here. Here's another respect in which we are lucky. The universe is older than a hundred million centuries. Within a comparable time, the sun will swell to a red giant and engulf the earth. Every century of hundreds of millions has been in its time, or will be when its time comes, the present century. The present moves from the past to the future like a tiny spotlight inching its way along a gigantic ruler of time. Everything behind the spotlight is in darkness, the darkness of the dead past. Everything ahead of the spotlight is in the darkness of the unknown future. The odds of your century being the one in the spotlight are the same as the odds that a penny, tossed down at random, will land on a particular ant crawling somewhere on the road from New York to San Francisco. You are lucky to be alive and so am I."

We are lucky to be alive and therefore we should value life. Life is precious. We're never going to get another one. This is it. Don't waste it. Open your eyes. Open your ears. Treasure the experiences that you have and don't waste your time fussing about a non-existent future life after you're dead. Try to do as much good as you can now to others. Try to live life as richly as possible during the time that you have left available to you.

Interviewer Terrence McNally hosts Free Forum on KPFK 90.7FM, Los Angeles (streaming at

kpfk.org).

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