



AN ASSAULT ON RELIGION

Richard Dawkins shows how religion fuels war, foments bigotry, and abuses children. And all for a God whose existence, he says, lacks evidence of any kind.

Intellectuals of the past have on and off attacked the idea of a supernatural God who created the universe and who is able to intervene in the affairs of men and to whom, therefore, people say prayers seeking favours, asking pardon etc. Despite this criticism, one finds the larger part of humanity still deeply religious although the religious establishment in general has been weakening in many Western countries today. Since 9/11 and the growth of religious fundamentalism, one observes a fresh revival of writings by atheist thinkers and a renewed interest in anti-God literature. One of the most powerful intellectual assaults on religion is found in a new release called "The God Delusion" by British intellectual Richard Dawkins. Richard Dawkins was recently voted one of the world's top three intellectuals alongside Umberto Eco and Noam Choksy by Prospect magazine. I read the four hundred-page book and I found it absorbing reading. Some books do change the reader's consciousness and The God Delusion, surely, is one such book. In fact, Dawkins boldly claims: "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down". There was a British TV series based on the work of Dawkins captioned: "The Root of All Evil".

In the course of his presentation Dawkins, Professor of Evolutionary Biology at Oxford, covers a broad range of disciplines-genetics, philosophy, social anthropology, evolution, evolutionary psychology and history. Richard Dawkins questions the righteousness with which persons of the different faiths regard their own religion. He states: "...by far the most important variable determining your religion is the accident of birth. The convictions that you so passionately believe would have been a completely different, and largely contradictory, set of convictions if only you had happened to be born in a different place". This is good insight and its realization can help to douse fanatics and reduce the possibility of religion being the harshly divisive force that it often is today. There is no justification for the dangerous in-group loyalty and out-group hostility that the religious establishment brings to humankind thereby

causing intolerance, persecution, wars, and exploitation. Dawkins is not dispassionate in attacking religion. This fact mars an otherwise masterly scholarly presentation. He puts in a lot of ridicule as for example when he refers to the Catholic mythology of some 5120 saints that "specialise" in different "areas of expertise" which "include abdominal pains, abuse victims, anorexia, arms dealers, blacksmiths, broken bones, bomb technicians and bowel disorders". He refers to this as having been "shamelessly invented". He states that Pope Paul 11 created more saints than all his predecessors of the past several centuries put together. He refers to the incident when the Pope suffered an assassination attempt in 1981 at Rome and how the lat-



Shyamon Jayasinghe

ter had attributed his survival to the intervention by Our Lady of Fatima: 'A maternal hand guided the bullet', the Pope is reported to have stated after his escape from death. Dawkins asks why she didn't guide the bullet to miss him altogether.

This attack on religion does single out the very worst elements of religion-fundamentalist, non-thinking faith, and intolerance of others outside the flock. However, in so doing the writer goes to the extreme by ignoring the large scale charity work carried out by many religions, the profound morality teachings found in these religions, and the solace that millions of followers derive from practising their religion.

In his incisive dismissal of the 'proofs' for the existence of God famously constructed by St Thomas Aquinas, Dawkins arrives closer home to his central thesis. The first three 'proofs' of St Thomas are easily set aside. We are left with the famous argument from design that is still a very popular defence by monotheists and evangelists. The latter consider this argument a knock down one. The argument states that things in the world, especially living things, look as though they have been designed. Therefore, there must have been a designer, and we call him God. Dawkins examines this in such great logical and scientific detail that it demands serious contemplation. According to Dawkins, basically Charles Darwin has destroyed this argument with his demonstration of

natural selection. The process of natural selection as demonstrated scientifically by Darwin shows how complex things can be formed from simple beginnings 'by graded ramps of slowly increasing complexity'. "Darwinian evolution, specifically natural selection,.... shatters the illusion of design within the domain of biology, and teaches us to be suspicious of any kind of design hypothesis in physics and cosmology as well", argues Dawkins. Finally, the book has a lot of interesting things to state with regard to the argument from 'personal experience'. This argument has been employed by both mystics of different religions and by ordinary folk who claim to have seen visions of God and other heavenly apparitions. Many people believe in God because they believe they have seen a vision of him with their own eyes; or, he speaks to them in their heads. Dawkins explains this phenomenon as caused by the brain's 'software' process. He explains this process with great clarity. Optical illusions and anecdotes like the Yorkshire Ripper having heard the voice of Jesus asking him to kill men women and children, belong to this same cate-



gory of visions, says Dawkins. George Bush says that God asked him to invade Iraq. However, God did not tell him that there were no weapons of mass destruction.

Despite all this criticism, the fact is that religion has survived and is found in all cultures. Dawkins' book deals elaborately with this question. I found this aspect of the book extremely interesting reading. In general terms, Dawkins relies on evolutionary biology and psychology to explain this. A more ground-breaking exposition in this book deals with how one can be moral without any belief in God. Here, Dawkins points out how morality comes naturally to humans in their quest for survival. An atheist can still be a saint!

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தவறானவற்றைத் தவறு என்றும் தவறில்லாதவற்றைத் தவற்றற்றவை என்றும் அறிகிறவர்கள். நற்காட்சியுடையவர்கள் ஆகையினாலே சுவாக்கம் அடைகிறார்கள்.

Beings Who consider wrong things as wrong, and right things as right, having embraced right views, go to heaven.

-NIRAYA WAGGAYA-

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