Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion* will soon pass the one million sales mark. How do we respond to such an ‘attack’ on our faith and share the reality of God with people who are searching for truth? Richard Cunningham gives a Christian response to Dawkins’ three main assertions in the book

Richard Dawkins’ bestselling book *The God Delusion* has already become a set text for atheists. The author’s stated aim is unambiguous: ‘If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.’ However, it is so incurious in tone and so unsympathetic to its subject matter that serious, secular thinkers (let alone Christians) are irritated and unimpressed with its contents. Its primary objective seems to be to rally closet atheists to come out and attack religious belief. It is noteworthy that many sceptic websites are employing the language and arguments of the book to rubbish Christianity in particular.

The book makes three major assertions about faith in God: it is delusional; it is unscientific; and it causes violence. While our faith is not dependant on our ability to respond to every intellectual objection, we are encouraged (in the power of the Holy Spirit) to engage in this spiritual battle: ‘We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God’ (2 Cor 10:3-5).

### 1. Faith in God is delusional

Dawkins claims that belief in God is as irrational as belief in the Tooth Fairy or Father Christmas. Attacking faith by means of analogy is a favoured tool of Dawkins, so it is important to question the validity of the analogy. For instance, how many people still believe in the tooth fairy when they leave school and how many adults start to believe in Santa as a result of investigating the evidence and subsequently testify to a changed life? God’s existence cannot be proven, says Dawkins. No, but atheism can’t be proven either. Atheism and Theism must be separately interrogated to see how well they
answer the big issues of life such as human consciousness, morality, beauty, meaning, guilt, purpose, suffering, not to mention the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else’ (CS Lewis, Is theology poetry?). We need to demonstrate the explanatory power, coherence and transforming power of the Christian world view. And contrast it with the inability of atheism to make sense of who we are and how we feel about all those issues. ‘Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is. Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature. Attractive because it promises true good’ (Blaise Pascal, Pensées 12). Pascal recognised the Bible’s ability to describe reality and existence with subtlety and accuracy. We must compare it to the shrill reductionist tones of atheism. For example: ‘The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference’ (R Dawkins, River out of Eden).

2. Faith in God is unscientific

According to Dawkins, science shows us there is no God, and real scientists don’t believe in God. He then tries, quite scurrilously and unsuccessfully, to dismiss some of the most eminent Christian scientists as ‘not real scientists’. No evidence is offered in support of this judgement. It is pure assertion based on the circular argument that science shows us there is no God. Therefore, Christian scientists are not real scientists because they believe in God. The eminent evolutionary biologist the late Stephen J Gould wrote the book Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life. In it he argues that science and religion represent two separate spheres and that science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. ‘Science gets the age of the rocks’, he argues ‘and religion the Rock of Ages.’ Dawkins’ only defence is to claim that Gould could not possibly have meant what he wrote!
Dawkins acknowledges that many people are predisposed to believe in God. He suggests that there is a psychological need to believe in God which causes people to invent God in order to meet this need. This means that the majority of people groups across the world and throughout history have been suffering from a delusion – a virus of the mind. This is problematic at a number of levels. Most obviously Dawkins commits what philosophers would call ‘the genetic fallacy’. Namely that, because he has identified the possible cause of belief (psychological need), he unjustifiably claims to have invalidated the object of belief (existence of God). This is a shocking ‘schoolboy error’. Indeed the ability to discern a universal need (for meaning and belonging etc) should make us less surprised at (rather than dismissive of) a universal solution called God.

The other glaring problem, which Alister McGrath exposes brilliantly in his book *The Dawkins Delusion*, is that this is not a scientific argument. Real viruses can be seen under a microscope. Whereas Dawkins’ religious viruses are hypotheses for which there is no observable, scientific evidence and no serious peer review papers. McGrath goes on to argue that atheism is just as likely to be a virus of the mind, since Dawkins has no objective, scientific method for distinguishing between his own faith (Atheism) and that of Theism. Dawkins ends up making the totally subjective, unscientific argument that his own beliefs are not ‘viruses’, but those beliefs he dislikes are.

3. Faith in God leads to violence

Dawkins rightly points out that religion has been the trigger and motivation for intolerance and violence in Northern Ireland and Palestine. However, it is interesting to note that the majority of suicide attacks have been carried out by the secular Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers. In the twentieth century, it has been atheism’s attempts to eliminate religion and build its own empire that has seen more millions slaughtered than in all the ‘religious wars’ put together.
The truth is that beliefs (religious or atheist) can make people do both noble and wicked things. The pertinent question must be: is the presenting violence consistent with the beliefs of the perpetrator? There is an important difference (other than the scale of the killings) between the atheistic slaughters in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Pol Pot’s Cambodia and Mao’s China and those of the Medieval Crusades. The atheistic killings were entirely consistent with the creeds and agenda of those regimes which had used atheism to remove moral barriers to killing, whereas the killings of the crusades can easily be shown to be against the clear teaching of the New Testament.

Don’t forget Jesus. He was never violent – rather, he was the victim of violence and instructed his disciples not to use the sword. The Amish schoolhouse killings of October 2006 provided a striking example of behavior (the refusal to seek revenge) that flowed from their beliefs.

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