



published 2008

Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and Richard Dawkins: *The God Delusion*

Review by Jeffrey Stueber

If you wanted two big-mouth atheists to critique, you could not choose any better candidates than Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. Dawkins is the author of the famous *Blind Watchmaker* book and numerous others; Hitchens is somewhat new on the scene but no less boisterous. Their books attack theistic arguments and beliefs while providing background reasons for accepting secular ideals.

Hitchens, early in his book, mentions a challenge given to him by Dennis Prager, one of America's best known religious broadcasters, that asks the rhetorical question whether, if you walked past some young men at night, you would feel more or less safe knowing they just came from a prayer meeting. The theist expects an unqualified "yes," but Hitchens says in cities Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad (just to stay in the letter "B") he would fear for his life because in those cities terrible violence has been done in the name of religion. His point is that religion is bad and secularism is good, certainly not life threatening. Yet, I live in a community where there are many Christian churches (none of any other faiths that I know of) and I would feel absolutely safe walking past a group of men coming out of a prayer meeting at any one of those churches.

Being religious doesn't guarantee one's intelligence improves or that the religious will choose the correct religion. They may even choose to persist in believing a dangerous one while the opportunity to believe a different docile one remains open to them, such as in the Islam belief system. There has to be a serious reason why Hitchens would fear for his life in those cities but I can walk down any street in the town I live in and not fear young men coming from a prayer meeting.

Hitchens tries his hand at explaining the origin of religion when saying "Religion comes from the period of human history where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion." Even if we grant this fact, this doesn't mean the religious believe because of lack of knowledge now; Hitchens knows this otherwise he would not take the effort to critique theistic arguments in his book. If a study of the religious does not now reveal that believers adopt religious explanations because they do not know enough about the natural world, what convictions can we affirm about the truth of Hitchens' theory?

Dawkins doesn't like religion any better and attempts to explain its origin by offering numerous theories, shuffling between them as if pulling them each successively out of a hat and tossing them aside in search of another, and each one can be discarded by us as well. Perhaps, he thinks, religion originates as a by-product of a misfiring in the brain of a useful impulse to believe without question what one is told to do much as children obey their parents unquestioningly. How then does this explain the fact the majority of people (much to the disappointment of Dawkins) have this impulse – unbelievers also? Are we really to believe the majority has a misfiring in the brain? Also, why would we attribute the origin to a misfiring when people generally consider religious belief consoling? Dawkins later suggests belief in religion is a by-product of romantic love.

Certainly love for a god compares somewhat with love for a wife or child, but just because two things share common facets does not mean one is a by-product of the need for the other. (The love for a friend is close to the love of a spouse, but nobody would thus imagine love for a friend was an unfortunate misfiring brain by-product of spousal love.) Perhaps religious ideas are nothing but memes (ideas in the brain) that have survived. However, as I have noted in my book, *Refuting Atheism*, religious ideas like heaven would not survive given their lack of referents. Why, for instance, would a desire for survival after death survive when one knows it wouldn't happen and this knowledge would produce stress even in the presence of what he calls a "memplex"? How about other ideas such as a virgin birth, triune god, angelic figures, and hell (an idea that is sure to be undesirable and hence eliminated by any mematic natural selection)?

What one notices while reading this chapter is the musings of a man who is vividly upset at the fact the data does not fit the theory of which he is so impressed. It's almost like a man, who claims men salespeople sell the most cars and then finds women are outselling them at every turn, grovels about looking for an explanation for this and cannot tolerate his inability to find one. It simply doesn't, and can't occur to Dawkins that evolutionist theory cannot explain the origin of the religious impulse and desire much less its tenets.

Dawkins takes us through an explanation for our moral instinct also and at one juncture talks as if he were offering an explanation for it that jives with creationist theory. He is speaking of Harvard biologist Marc Hauser's book *Moral Minds* detailing studies done about how people respond to moral dilemmas using questionnaires on the internet when we join Dawkins' thoughts in progress.

From the present point of view, the interesting thing is that most people come to the same decisions when faced with these dilemmas, and their agreement over the decisions themselves is stronger than their ability to articulate their reasons. This is what we would expect if we have a moral sense which is built into our brains, like our sexual instinct or our fear of heights or . . . our capacity for language . . . As we shall see, the way people respond to these moral tests, and their inability to articulate their reasons, seems largely independent of their religious beliefs or lack of them. The message of Hauser's book . . . is this: 'Driving our moral judgments is a universal moral grammar, a faculty of the mind that evolved over million of years to include a set of principles for building a range of possible moral systems. As with language, the principles that make up our moral grammar fly beneath the radar of our awareness.'

What better description of a moral awareness that is "written in the heart" (to use a Biblical phrase) can we get?

Dawkins does find a Darwinian explanation for the moral impulse when noting that genes are selfish and therefore would work to enhance the survivability of the individual, not the group. But our human moral intuition has us working toward the good of the group, not necessarily the individual. This is where the group selection and reciprocal altruism he speaks of come into play. While natural selection and selfish genes favor the individual, evolution has fostered cooperation that favors the group.

I guess the first question is this: where along the evolutionary line of descent did we suddenly switch from a selfish nature to a cooperative one and why would we if selfish behavior favored the individual? I rather like the commentary on this by critic of Darwinism, but not creationist, David Stove who says, quite succinctly, "If Darwin's theory of evolution were true, there would be in every species a constant and ruthless competition to survive: a competition in which only a few in any generation can be winners." The human, race, however, is not like that and this fact he dubs "Darwin's dilemma." In fact, altruism has always been a problem for Darwinism, he says. Until the mid-1960s Darwinism continued to say organisms behave in a way that maximizes individual fitness after which evolutionists added the idea of group selection and inclusive fitness where an organism tends to maximize the fitness of the group to which it belongs. Kin altruism is strong, of

course, but altruism shows itself the strongest among people who have no genetic ties: Mother Teresa, for instance. If Darwinian sociobiology makes it out to be that people like this are a “problem” for Darwinian theory, then the problem, Stove says, is not the people but the theory. Perhaps we should consider the human race has never evolved out of competition into a cooperative race and has always been cooperative with a moral code that reinforces that cooperation. Evolutionists might be squeamish about such an idea, but one cannot let biases like those of Hitchens and Dawkins prevent one from seeing the truth. **1**

Hitchens, late in his book, defends secularism against the arguments of theists that assert that evolution-based belief is to blame for social ills. Hitchens doesn't so much defend secularism as try to find minute contributions of religions to tyranny. Yet, the reign of Nazism was totally based in evolution even though Hitler was more an occultist pagan than secularist. Communism was totally based in evolution and atheism. Marx's intellectual pupil Lenin announced that:

Just as Darwin put an end to the view of animal and plant species being unconnected, fortuitous, “created by God” and immutable, and was the first to put biology on an absolutely scientific basis by establishing the mutability and the succession of species, so Marx put an end to the view of society being a mechanical aggregation of individuals which allows of all sorts of modification at the will of the authorities . . . and which emerges and changes casually, and was the first to put sociology on a scientific basis by establishing the concept of the economic formation of society as the sum total of given production relations, by establishing the fact that the development of such formations is a process of natural history. **2**

One additional note needs to be made: Dawkins has obviously divorced himself from any pretensions at being just a scientist. He is a biased propagandist and is looking to find a way to destroy belief in religion as much as Hitchens. This is noted in his frequent allusions to belief in evolution as consciousness raising.

There is more to peruse in these books, but for now I think I have shown there are serious problems with their methodology, as is all atheist works. It would have been better had Dawkins and Hitchens gone back to the drawing board and crafted their arguments again – this time without the bias and ignorance of the data they would rather ignore. *LSI*

References

1. David Stove, *Darwinian Fairytales: Selfish Genes, Errors of Heredity, and Other Fables of Evolution*, (New York, Encounter, 1995), p. 3 and Essay #8
2. K. Marx, F. Engels, V. Lenin *On Historical Materialism*, (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 320