

The God Delusion: 160 Errors, Gross Exaggerations, and Highly Dubious Claims

By David Marshall, with other contributions

"To him who does not love, nothing whatever is manifested." Gerardus van der Leeuw

Introduction

In the fall of 2006, studying at the Oxford Centre for Missions Studies, every morning I walked by Borders Bookstore in Cornmarket Street, the main shopping district in Oxford. Soon, a book called The God Delusion confronted me from the best-seller rack by the window. The author of this book was Richard Dawkins, whom the British public have voted the best-known intellectual in Britain.

God is a delusion? If that was so, I was wasting my time, and so were my fellow scholars. (Who were studying everything from democracy in India, to child abuse in Peru, to peace in Nigeria – with God as the connecting link.) So is everyone who rises early on Sunday morning, says Grace before a meal, or opens a Bible and looks for answers to life's difficulties.

Richard Dawkins was not coy in his analysis of religion. Yahweh was:

"Arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynist, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." (GD, 8)

Throughout the book, Dawkins pounds modern religion as well, describing "Christian" molesters and terrorists as "mainstream," the "American Taliban" an imminent threat to democracy, and a Christian education as bad as or worse than child abuse.

Neglecting my studies, in nine days I furiously wrote ninety pages of response.

I e-mailed my publisher, and asked if he'd like a book-length reply. Sure, and why not take on Danl Dennett, Sam Harris, and Chris Hitchens while you're at it? He replied. And so in September, 2007, my response, The Truth Behind the New Atheism, was published. (To be followed by books by other "fleas," as Dr. Dawkins refers to Christians who dare disagree – Dinesh D'Souza, John Lennox, David Aikman, John Haught, and others.)

Some have asked about my original list, however. Skeptics take me to task. "The God Delusion is a careful work of scholarship by an eminent scientist well above your pay grade," they say. "We didn't find any errors in his book, and we're beginning to think this list of yours is a fabrication."

So here it is -- reformulated from marginal notes, since the original went missing during a speaking tour to Arizona.

My goal is not to make fun of Dr. Dawkins, or portray him as a dunce. He can be a brilliant writer, and when writing on a subject he knows well, does so with panache and style. But in

The God Delusion he uses his scientific prestige as a "bully pulpit" to attack religion. I think it's legitimate to point out if the pulpit has holes in it.

The God Delusion has been wildly popular, and introduced a new genre to the reading public. In addition, many of Dawkins' arguments reflect ideas that were already popular, and can be found in such works as *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Golden Compass* series, or in books by Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, scholars of the Jesus Seminar, or radical critics of evangelical Christianity like Chris Hedges. Both Dawkins book, and my response, cover a lot of ground. Here, as in my book, I respond not to Dawkins alone, but to an entire culture of error that has grown up in recent years, and on which he draws.

This forum is meant to be somewhat interactive. Feel free to contact me if you think I (1) missed an error, (2) am mistaken about one of my critiques, or (3) you have some supplemental resource or quote that is particularly apt to illustrate one of these points. I may add, subtract, or otherwise amend the list in response.

Dawkins' dubious claims will be listed first by subject, and under each subject head, mostly by order they appear in the book. Subjects are: Faith and Reason; Social Science and the Origin of Religion; Christian theology; World Religions; Science and Religion; Miracles; Philosophy; History – General; History – Christian Origins; History – the Influence of Christianity; Religion and Violence – General; The American Taliban; Morality; The Bible; The Political History of Atheism; and Miscellaneous.

Faith and Reason

#1 Is faith irrational? "The whole point of religious faith, its strength and chief glory, is that it does not depend on rational justification." (23)

Note that Dawkins is not just saying that there is no evidence for religious faith, or that the evidence is bad. Those of course would be highly disputable claims, but not obviously wrong. Dawkins makes it clear that he means the MEANING of faith for Christians and people of other religions is to "believe not only without evidence, but in the teeth of evidence," as he put it in *The Selfish Gene*.

This is one of the main themes of *The God Delusion*. I devote a chapter of *The Truth Behind the New Atheism* to refuting it, and to describe the role reason plays in Christianity, and faith plays in science. For quotes on the rationality of faith from great Christian thinkers down through the centuries, see the anthology, "Faith and Reason" on my website, christthetao.com.

Dawkins made this claim in earlier books as well. Alister McGrath, his colleague at Oxford and a scientist himself, wrote a book in which he responded resoundingly:

"As a professional historical theologian, I have no hesitation in asserting that the classic Christian tradition has always valued rationality, and does not hold that faith involves the complete abandonment of reason or believing in the teeth of the evidence. Indeed, the Christian tradition is so consistent on this matter that it is difficult to understand where Dawkins has got the idea of faith as 'blind trust' . . ." *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*, 99

Dawkins read the book, but paid no attention, either by amending his view, or by attempting (somehow) to refute McGrath. (I say “somehow,” both because McGrath is an expert on what Christians believe, and Dawkins is not, and because in fact McGrath is right, as my anthology shows.) Dawkins’ unwillingness to grapple with the facts in this case truly can be described as “believing in the teeth of the evidence.”

Feedback: Dr. Greg Janzen, who teaches philosophy at the University of Calgary, attempted to rescue Dawkins on point one as follows:

“You claim that Dawkins is wrong to suppose that faith doesn't depend on rational justification. But you define faith in the orthodox Christian sense, according to which faith means "holding firmly to and acting on what you have good reason to be is true . . . But, of course, when Dawkins says faith doesn't depend on rational justification, he's referring to the ordinary or garden variety conception of faith, according to which (roughly) having faith in x means believing x where reason is neutral with respect to x. On this sense of faith--which has been championed by, among others, James, Kierkegaard, Plantinga, and literally millions of lay Christians--faith DOESN'T depend on rational justification.”

Janzen added:

“I want to say this, though: I think you've completely abandoned the principle of charity . . . on your website and in your published works, you have to give your opponents' arguments the best possible run for their money. Can you honestly say you've done this? It certainly seems as though you haven't.”

My response:

Dawkins' main arguments about faith (see below) are that (1) Christians and other "religious" people have no good evidence for belief; (2) They use the word "faith" to make a virtue of believing without evidence, even "in the teeth of the evidence;" (3) This is precisely what makes religion so dangerous; (4) Even liberal faiths "make the world safe for fundamentalism" by teaching children that belief without evidence is a virtue.

In other words, Dawkins’ case against faith depends largely on this first point, that faith in the Christian sense means believing without or in the teeth of the evidence. He never softens or modifies this in any way. He never says, “Some religious people, like some atheists, believe things for which there is no evidence, or think that they don’t need any evidence.” This is because his argument depends on marking a stark, almost Manichean contrast between the “children of light” (literally “brights” as Hitchens puts it) and the “children of darkness” (religious believers.) Point (2) is therefore essential to points (3) and (4). (Sam Harris expands on this point.)

So Janzen is wrong, both about the meaning of the quote above, and on what Dawkins is using it for. Dawkins is not just arguing against blind faith – if he were, most Christian thinkers would be happy to agree with him. He is claiming that religion requires blind faith, which is precisely why it is so harmful. That is an essential part of his argument against religion.

*It is hardly "uncharitable" to accurately quote a false claim, which a well-known scholar has vocally made for more than thirty years (at least since the 1976 printing of *The Selfish Gene*), and show why it is false.*

Kierkegaard probably was guilty of assuming faith does not require evidence. I am inclined to dispute Janzen's interpretation of Plantinga and James (and also Aquinas, whom he brings up in the same discussion), though I won't chase that nut further here. (On Aquinas, see quotes and analysis from the "Faith and Reason" anthology.)

*My dispute with Janzen can be read on the Amazon.com site for *The God Delusion*.*

#2 Just how touchy are believers, anyway? "The rest of us are expected to defend our prejudices. But ask a religious person to justify their faith and you infringe 'religious liberty.'" (23)

This is not in fact the response Dawkins' attacks have met with from Christian thinkers. I do not recall having ever heard a Christian make such a complaint. The implication that an appeal to religious freedom is the usual response a request for evidence is met with, is unbelievable.

#3 "Atheists do not have faith." (51)

As we have seen, by "faith" Dawkins means "belief not only without evidence, but in the teeth of the evidence."

The best way to cast this sweeping generalization in doubt may be to simply name a few of the most influential modern atheists. Karl Marx. Friedrich Nietzsche. Friedrich Engels. Sigmund Freud. Ayn Rand. Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Edward Said. Mao Zedong. Joseph Stalin.

Is it really true that none of these people, or their hundreds of millions of followers, ever believed things like the wisdom of the North Korean community party, without evidence, or in the teeth of the evidence? The evidence, I think, shows that atheists often DO have faith, in Dawkins own rather skewed sense – as of course, do other kinds of people. (A bit like what Judeo-Christians call "idolatry.")

I argue that the more orthodox Christian sense of faith means, "holding firmly to and acting on what you have good reason to be is true." In that sense, I think we all live by faith.

#4 Did McGrath rebut Dawkins? Responding to Alister McGrath: "It seems to be the only point in rebuttal that he has to offer: the undeniable but ignominiously weak point that you cannot disprove the existence of God." (54)

That may be the only point that registered with Dawkins; it certainly is not the only point McGrath made. In *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*, the book Dawkins is referring to, McGrath questioned Dawkins' use of the term "faith." He argued that the idea that science and religion are "at war" has been abandoned by serious historians. He showed that Dawkins misquotes Tertullian, and was sloppy in many of his arguments.

I agree though that McGrath's book was not meaty enough -- which is one reason I wrote a response of my own. But Dawkins' own book might be stronger if he had read McGrath more carefully, and either tried to show why McGrath was wrong, or adjusted his own views accordingly.

#5 "Martin Luther was well aware that reason was religion's arch-enemy, and he frequently warned of its dangers: 'Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but more frequently than not struggles against the divine Word . . .'" (190)

Dawkins apparently borrowed this quote from a website that failed to cite its source. What view of Luther would he have offered if he had read the following quote from him instead?

"And it is certainly true that reason is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possess in this life. By virtue of this fact it ought to be named the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things (Luther, *Disputation Concerning Man*, Theses 4-6, cited in Gonzales, p. 45)."

Chris Marlin-Warfield offers further response to the quality of Dawkins' research on Martin Luther: <http://www.faithfullyliberal.com/?p=879>

#6 Quoting Oscar Wilde approvingly: "Truth, in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived." (191)

This is either a tautology, or false. On the one hand, it may mean, "Religious opinions that are believed true, are the ones that people continue to believe true – and thus 'survive.'" In that case, it is a tautology: to be believed is what it means for an opinion to "survive." In the same way, the theory of evolution "survives" because people continue to see as true.

But if Dawkins means that religions DEFINE truth as "those beliefs that survive," then that's clearly false. On the contrary, the Bible prophecies that in the last days "ignorant scoffers" will appear (II Peter 3), showing that when it comes to ideas, the Bible does not predict the fit alone will survive.

#7 What's wrong with memes? A meme, as Dawkins described it in his 1976 work *The Selfish Gene*, is a "unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation . . . Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches." (*The Selfish Gene*, 192)

Even in *The Selfish Gene*, a pejorative meaning began to attach to the idea of "memes," especially in reference to religion. Dawkins also accepted the suggestion that memes are "living structures, not just metaphorically but technically." A religious meme is a pernicious idea or custom that replicates for its own selfish purposes – in the context of a book about "selfish genes," it was a natural step for the little critters to become sentient.

In later years, writers like Susan Blackmore and Daniel Dennett took the new “science” of “memetics” with great seriousness. However, Dawkins’ rival, Steven Jay Gould, called it a “meaningless metaphor,” and McGrath (among others) subjected it to withering criticism.

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins shows he remains attached to the idea, however:

"The exact physical nature of genes is now known . . . whereas that of memes is not . . . These alleged problems of memes are exaggerated. The most important objection is the allegation that memes are copied with insufficiently high fidelity to function as Darwinian replicators." (192)

No, the most important objection to memes has to be that they don't exist. An idea is not a physical object of unknown nature, it is not a physical object at all. (If it is, it apparently lives on paper, because that is where I found Dawkins' idea of memes.) (See *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, 85-88, for further discussion of “meme theory.”)

#8 "It is not obviously silly to speak of a meme pool." (192)

It is. The image of a “pool” adds an extra layer of confusing poetic license to the idea of memes, which already seem a "meaningless metaphor” to many observers. What Dawkins really seems to mean, in plain English, is that we get ideas from other people. Why not just say so?

#9 Does Pascal think God only wants us to believe? "In my discussion of Pascal's Wager I mentioned the odd assumption that the one thing God really wants of us is belief." (199)

Pascal makes no such assumption. That is not the point of his Wager. Faith meant not just a series of assertions about God, but a life oriented correctly to the true nature of things:

“Follow the way by which they began.” This involves going to mass and saying prayers, but also:

“Now what harm will come to you from choosing this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere, true friend . . . It is true you will not enjoy noxious pleasures, glory and good living, but will you not have others?”

Clearly, “belief” for Pascal was shorthand, not just for ideas affirmed, but for a particular course of life lived. (See also *Truth Behind the New Atheism*, p. 25-6)

#10 Does thought damage theology? "There are some weird things (such as the Trinity, transubstantiation, incarnation) that we are not *meant* to understand. Don't even try to understand one of these, for the attempt might destroy it. Learn how to gain fulfillment in calling it a *mystery*." (200)

In fact, as physicist-turned-theologian John Polkinghorne has pointed out, Christian “dogmas” are a lot like theories in science. Far from assuming that critical thought will destroy them, theologians have subjected these theories to hard thinking, and tried to explain what they mean, for thousands of years. (Whether or not Dawkins takes the time to understand their explanations.) Like scientific theory, not all religious truth is immediately comprehensible to the imagination, but that does not render it irrational.

But in his debate with Francis Collins, sponsored by Time Magazine, Dawkins complains that the God of the Bible is too "comprehensible" to be real: "If there is a God, it's going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed."

Which is it? Is the Christian God false because we understand Him, or because we don't? Dawkins tries out both arguments, as if throwing mud and stones against a church wall, to see which knocks it over. Perhaps what is really happening is that the "incomprehensible" God Dawkins demands has shown up, and Dawkins has decided that, after all, he'd prefer one he can figure out. (Without the trouble of reading theologians who try to explain him!)

#11 Why do "fundamentalists" believe? "Fundamentalists know they are right because they have read the truth in a holy book and they know, in advance, that nothing will budge them from their belief. The truth of the holy book is an axiom, not the end product of a process of reasoning. The book is true, and if the evidence seems to contradict it, it is the evidence that must be thrown out, not the book." (282)

Like many people, Darwin uses the term "fundamentalist" without defining it. Generally he has a modified Manichean view of religion as a mixture not of light and dark, but of dark and murky grey. "Grey" religion is modernized, liberalized, watered-down religious faith, cut loose from the moorings of its original barbaric teachings. The closer to its roots a religion is, the more faithful to Scripture, the more harmful. "Fundamentalism" is religion close to its source – in its starkest North American incarnation, the "American Taliban." But evangelicals in general, and everyone who believes in the "literal truth" of central Christian doctrines, would seem to qualify as "fundamentalists" as Dawkins uses the term.

How does Dawkins know that "fundamentalists," whatever they are, (a) Believe purely or primarily because they assume the truth of Scripture, rather than for some other reason; (2) see the truth of Scripture as axiomatic, rather than the "product of a process of reasoning;" or (3) would throw out the evidence, rather the book, if the two conflicted? He offers no evidence for any of these propositions.

I surveyed mostly conservative Christians on these issues. In fact, most respondents did not just believe "for the Bible says." A majority agreed to each of the following statements: (a) "Faith in God helps make sense of life," (b) "The evidence seems good" (checking "philosophical," "scientific," "historical," and "moral" evidence about equally), and (c) "I have had supernatural experience that taught me the reality of the spiritual world."

The skeptic Michael Shermer took a broader survey of the general population that generally agrees with my results. (*Why Darwin Matters: The Case Against Intelligent Design*, 34-38)

Dawkins and his allies know that the depiction of "fundamentalists" Dawkins offers here is, at least, grossly exaggerated. After all, Dennett calls himself a "godless professor," and brags of how education enlightens young minds. Both Dawkins and Dennett seek, through their writing, to change the minds of believers. In other words, they assume that believers CAN be reasoned with. Of course, it's another question whether their arguments are really persuasive – but their

goal is to persuade.

#12 Can a fundamentalist change his mind? Dawkins describes how a "respected elder statesman" in the Zoology Department of Oxford University went to hear a visiting lecturer on a controversial mechanism in the cell. Hearing the lecture, he decided he'd been wrong about the existence of this mechanism. He went to shake the hand of the visitor and said, "My dear fellow, I wish to thank you. I have been wrong these fifteen years." Dawkins comments, "No fundamentalist would ever say that." (284)

But one of the fundamentals of Christianity is that we have all been wrong. "All we like sheep have gone astray."

Christians have developed a special term for such a discovery: "conversion." Saul, a "fundamentalist" Jew on the road to Damascus, a member of the "Hebrew Taliban," said little more or less to Jesus, when he met him on that road, "My dear fellow. I wish to thank you. I have been wrong these many years."

Nor are such changes of mind unusual for the already converted. John Wesley described his own experience as a "warming of the heart."

Dawkins adds that he is hostile to "fundamentalist religion" because it "teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known."

No one but a fool quickly abandons a belief that has long helped him understand life from a variety of perspectives. But the serious Christian life can and should be an exciting life of discovery. And "fundamentalists" (whatever they are) often do change their minds. It is reasonable to hope for Richard Dawkins.

#13 How do scientists know evolution is true? "By contrast, what I, as a scientist, believe (for example, evolution) I believe not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied the evidence." (282)

Actually, too many of Dawkins' "facts" are gleaned haphazardly from the Internet (as can be seen from his anemic bibliography) and turn out wrong, as we'll see. But even when he gets his facts right, is this process accurately described as "studying the evidence" as opposed to "reading a holy book?"

I open *The Selfish Gene* at random, to page 168. On that page, Dawkins writes about how he thinks bird calls evolved. He credits P. R. Marley for noticing that bird calls seem ideally formulated to be difficult to locate. He envisions unlucky early generations of birds who were found easily by predators, until surviving relatives got the correct modulation down and escaped.

Did Dawkins get his facts about bird calls from books (holy or otherwise) and from other scientists? Or did he personally wait in blinds around the world with tape recorders, then test how which sounds hawks and coyotes can hear best? In fact, Dawkins' works on evolution are based on reports from around the world, in many cases from people he has never met, often at

the end of a long series of something very like what he calls “Chinese whispers” in another context – from bird to field researcher’s ear, from ear to nerves, from nerves to brain, from brain to finger to pen to paper to computer keyboard to screen to modum to Comcast and MSN employees to screens on the other side of the world, to the eye of a colleague, an editor, and so on until it finally catches the eye of Richard Dawkins and is established as Scientific Fact.

The same is true of *Origin of Species*. Darwin did not believe in evolution because he "studied (all) the evidence (for himself)," but because he read reports by scientists and breeders and explorers and curators from around the world, each in contact with a few quanta of data. Darwin studied evidence directly, too, of course – maybe more than Dawkins has been able to -- but whatever personal time he found for finches in the Galapagos or pigeons in England was only a minute fragment of the total evidence required to support his theory.

I believe Jesus died and rose from the dead for much the same reason -- because people I have reason to trust give credible reports that it really happened. This is what "studying the evidence" means in the context of both scientific and religious conversion.

Challenge from Greg Janzen:

“Well, regarding point 13, you do say this:

"But even when [Dawkins] gets his facts right, is this process accurately described as 'studying the evidence' as opposed to 'reading a holy book'?"

”You then go on to cite an example in which Dawkins draws on the work of a fellow scientist to support a scientific claim. So you seem to be suggesting that what Dawkins and his fellow scientists do isn't accurately described as studying the evidence, but rather as reading a holy book. In any case, #13 is entirely opaque; it's a mush of claims (I realize it's a rough draft). If your point is merely that religionists study the evidence too, and don't base their beliefs solely on a holy book, then fair enough. But then why suggest that doing science--i.e., getting the facts right by studying the evidence--can be compared to reading a holy book?

"Did Dawkins get his facts about bird calls from books (holy or otherwise) and from other scientists? Or did he personally wait in blinds around the world with tape recorders, then test how which sounds hawks and coyotes can hear best?"

”Well, no, of course he didn't. But getting facts about bird calls from an ornithology text is nowise akin to basing one's beliefs on a sacred text. Science has no sacred texts, no ultimate authorities. All things you know.”

My Response: *Glad you're disputing a new point, Greg; your challenge is helpful.*

First of all, I'm not exactly saying that what scientists do “isn't accurately described as studying the evidence, but rather as reading a holy book.” Rather, I'm suggesting that reading a book, whether called “holy” or not, can be and often is a means by which to “study the evidence.” The dichotomy Dawkins poses is therefore not nearly as stark as he suggests.

I think the word "holy" obscures the issue here. What Dawkins means by use of the word, is to suggest that religious believers buy "Holy Script" simply because they assume it to be holy. It is therefore above question, and is used as an oracle rather than a source of potential facts that can be evaluated.

I admit that Christians often do this. My point is not that there is no contrast between a Christian reading the Bible, and Charles Darwin reading reports about hornbills in Africa. My point is that the contrast between the two is ameliorated in two ways: first because Christians ALSO see the books of the Bible as evidence (and here I was speaking for myself), and second because scientists ALSO make use of social faith -- they commit themselves, at least tentatively, to facts they believe they have good reason to be true, derived from people they at least to some extent trust. Science, like Biblical interpretation, is a social enterprise.

"But to be short, the plain fact is Dawkins has NOT examined all the evidence on which he bases his theories. He gets most of them from books, or (unfortunately, when it comes to The God Delusion) off the Internet.

"I admit there is some distinction. My point is, Dawkins exaggerates it, and fails to fairly describe the epistemology of either theology or science."

#14 Is scientific belief in evidence a matter of faith? "Philosophers, especially amateurs with a little philosophical learning . . . may raise a tiresome red herring at this point: a scientist's belief in evidence is itself a matter of fundamentalist faith . . . If I am accused of murder, and prosecuting counsel sternly asks me whether it is true that I was in Chicago on the night of the crime, I cannot get away with a philosophical evasion: 'It depends on what you mean by 'true.' Nor with an anthropological, relativistic plea: 'It is only in your Western scientific sense of 'in' that I was in Chicago. The Bongoese have a completely different concept of 'in,' according to which you are only truly 'in' a place if you are an anointed elder entitled to take snuff from the dried scrotum of a goat.'" (283)

This is fun, but evades the point. In fact, the prosecuting counsel can only prove Dawkins was in Chicago by means of faith: "holding firmly to and acting on what you have good reason to believe is true." He assumes faith in the intellectual capacity of jurors. He assumes their ears accurately transmit sound waves, and brains decode them and reconstruct them conceptually in juror's brains. He assumes light transmitted from the murder weapon travels through optic pathways to brains capable of decoding the and comprehending the signals. He relies on witnesses who saw Dr. Dawkins bird-watching on Lake Michigan. He also places faith in police who describe how they found certain fingerprints on a switchblade buried in a deep dish pizza wrapper, and in fingerprint experts who explain why they think they belong to a particular Oxford don.

Christianity does not encourage philosophical or anthropological evasions when it speaks of faith. What it calls for is honest consideration of the evidence.

#15 Would Dawkins abandon evolution overnight? "We believe in evolution because the

evidence supports it, and we would abandon it overnight if new evidence arose to disprove it." (283)

That would be one way to shock the world.

But as Thomas Kuhn argues in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, scientific paradigms do not, in fact, vanish overnight when evidence begins to undermine them. Often proponents need to die off before the new way of seeing things is widely accepted. And given the true history of science, rather than the fairy-tale story Dawkins is presenting here, I doubt even strong evidence against evolution - the fabled rabbit in Pre-Cambrian rocks, or even a herd of such rabbits – would quickly dissuade Richard Dawkins from the theory on which he has based career and fame.

#16 Does liberal religion “make the world safe for fundamentalism?” "Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds. Non-fundamentalist, 'sensible' religion may not be doing that. But it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue." (286)

Of course Christianity does not teach that “unquestioning faith is a virtue.” In fact, it holds up people who had great doubts, like Job, Peter, and Thomas as saints, and even shows Jesus in a moment of “fear and trembling.”

And how does Dawkins know that “sensible” religion (whatever that is) either teaches children that “unquestioning faith is a virtue,” or thereby makes the world “safe for fundamentalism” somehow? How is this supposed to happen? What is his evidence?

Social Science and the Origins of Religion

#17 Did God evolve? "Historians of religion recognize a progression from primitive tribal animisms, through polytheisms such as those of the Greeks, Romans and Norsemen, to monotheisms such as Judaism and its derivatives, Christianity and Islam." (32)

This is an old view of the evolution of religion, held for example by David Hume, and developed in detail by the pioneer anthropologist, Edward Tylor. It was one of the pillars of the communist view of religion. It is however false, as I argue in *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*. (p 88-92; Dennett's longer discussion of the origin of religion is also on target). In fact, primitive tribes often held a remarkably coherent, widespread, and recognizable view of the Supreme God. (See also my *Jesus and the Religions of Man*, p. 183-208, also *True Son of Heaven: How Jesus Fulfills the Chinese Culture*, 15-24.)

#18 Is religion a misfiring of the brain? "The general theory of religion as an accidental by-product -- a misfiring of something useful -- is the one I wish to advance . . . This theory -- that the child brain is, for good reasons, vulnerable to infection by mental 'viruses' . . . it doesn't matter what particular style of nonsense infects the child brain. Once infected, the child will grow up and infect the next generation with the same nonsense, whatever it happens to be." (188)

Ideas are not "viruses," nor is belief an "infection." (As McGrath effectively responds,

“What is the actual experimental evidence for such hypothetical ‘viruses of the mind?’ In the real world, viruses are not known solely by their symptoms; they can be detected, subjected to rigorous empirical investigation, and their genetic structure characterized minutely. IN contrast, the ‘virus of the mind’ is hypothetical; posited by a questionable analogical argument, not direct observation; and it is totally unwarranted conceptually on the basis of the behavior that Dawkins proposes for it.” (McGrath, 137)

In short, Dawkins is allowing his own fertile poetic imagination to run riot. As with his concept of the "meme," he mistakes metaphor for reality. He is guilty of a bad idea, not an infection or disease. People think, analyze, question, argue, change their minds -- these are acts we do, choices we make, not physical agents that reproduce inside of our brains. And again, Dawkins’ talk of “misfiring” is fundamentally teleological – it assumes the brain has a true purpose, which defeats Dawkins argument “from the inside,” as it were.

#19 Is purpose visible in the universe? Note two rather different arguments Dawkins offers on this subject:

(1) "Children are native teleologists, and many never grow out of it." (181)

(2) "We live not only on a friendly planet but also in a friendly universe." (141)

Dawkins seems here to both criticize children, and the child-like, who find purpose and design in the universe, and admit that the universe DOES reveal purpose and design. True, he believes the design is not God's, it is of an evolutionary "blind watchmaker," or an “Anthropic Principle” that guarantees environmental conditions will . In effect Dawkins teaches us to expect to find at least apparent purpose in the universe, because it is and must be a "friendly" place. So how does he know children, and the child-like, are wrong to assume the purpose – which is apparently visible to him as well – is only apparent, and not real? As philosophers of science have pointed out, even if evolution explains everything about biology, that does not remove this question.

#20 Does meme theory help explain God? About the “jealousy” of God: "It is easily enough understood in terms of the theory of memes, and the qualities that a deity needs in order to survive in the meme pool." (246)

If memetics explains why Yahweh is jealous, does it also explain why the gods are not? How did polytheism (which is almost universal, even in ancient Israel) manage to survive for so long? And why, as it seems, were primitive peoples in cultures around the world aware of one true, Supreme God -- even though they went on worshipping other deities as well?

Dawkins throws this suggestion out, hoping we’ll buy it on the strength of one bit of data that seems to support it, without noticing that most the data doesn’t.

But suppose it were a valid critique of monotheism to say, “Of course this one idea of God survived – it has this quality of exclusivism that gives it a competitive advantage.”

What would that mean for atheism? One could respond on the same level, "Of course the atheism gene is spreading – it has this inherent exclusivism that gives it a competitive advantage." Both are forms of the genetic fallacy, that distracts us from the real issue – whether an idea is true – by imagining a sordid origin for it.

Christian Theology

#21 Is theology convoluted? Dawkins quotes the 3rd Century theologian, Gregory the Miracle-Worker:

"There is therefore nothing created, nothing subject to another in the Trinity: nor is there anything that has been added as though it once had not existed, but had entered afterwards: therefore the Father has never been without the Son, nor the Son without the Spirit: and this same Trinity is immutable and unalterable forever."

Dawkins replies:

"Whatever miracles may have earned St. Gregory his nickname, they were not miracles of honest lucidity. His words convey the characteristically obscurantist flavour of theology, which -- unlike science or most other branches of human scholarship -- has not moved on in eighteen centuries." (34)

The first error in this statement is (I think) his evaluation of the quotation. It seems perfectly lucid and clear to me (certainly more so than many social science texts I have read!), and it is hard to see anything obviously dishonest about it. Could it be that Dawkins simply means he doesn't understand the quote?

#22 Does theology progress? The more palpable error though is Dawkins' claim that theology has "not moved on." Of course there are different kinds of "moving on." If he means that orthodox Christians are still orthodox, that's true. But it would be as absurd to say, for example, that the physicist John Polkinghorne "has not moved on" in his book interpreting the Apostles Creed in the light of modern physics (*The Faith of a Physicist*), than to say the atheism of Richard Dawkins' is indistinguishable from that of the ancient Greek thinker, Lucretius. In fact theology has always been an extremely dynamic discipline. Rodney Stark points out that the Trinity itself was a theological deduction, as was the wrongfulness of slavery.

Dawkins should stroll a block down Woodstalk Road behind his house some time, and leaf through the stacks of doctoral dissertations at the Oxford Centre for Missions Studies. Every new scientific discovery, the discovery of every new culture, the emergence of every new school of thought, trend in philosophy or art or popular entertainment, involves fascinating lines.

Indeed, Dawkins himself approvingly cites theologians who have "moved on," in the sense of coming to agree with him on various points, as we will see.

#23 Is the Old Testament God consistently "nasty?" "It is childishly easy to overcome the problem of evil. Simply postulate a nasty god -- such as the one who stalks every page of the Old Testament." (108)

"Childishly easy" is felicitous here. While there are passages in the Old Testament in which God comes across as strange, even cruel to moderns, that is certainly not true of "every page," or even "most pages" of the Old Testament. Dawkins appears to have missed MOST of the Old Testament, and to avoid the adult duty of thinking through complex texts in a serious and careful way.

As I argue in a chapter entitled, "*Is the Good Book Bad?*", Dawkins' biggest problem with the Bible seems to be that he refuses to read it as an adult. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, some people invent a version of Christianity fit for children, so as to refute it more easily. Lewis (in *Reflections on the Psalms*) and the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff (in *Divine Discourse*) offer a more sophisticated and adult understanding of how the Bible is inspired. Surely as a professor at one of the world's greatest universities, Richard Dawkins has a duty to confront a version of Christianity held by thoughtful adults.

#24 Is God good by definition? "Goodness is no part of the definition of the God Hypothesis, merely a desirable add-on." (108)

In fact goodness is an essential part of the definition of God, not only in developed theism, but also among believers in the "Sky God" around the world. "The characteristics of this personage are fundamentally the same everywhere," Emile Durkheim said of God among Australian tribes . . . "He is the benefactor of humanity." Mircea Eliade notes that the Supreme God as known among African tribes "is too distant *or too good* to need worship properly so called, and they invoke him only in cases of extreme need." (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 47, emphasis added.)

In Judaism, God says "It is good" after the stages of Creation, and blesses mankind. Chinese worshipped a Supreme God -- "Huang Tian Shang Di, or Shang Di -- to whom prayers were offered: "The vault of heaven was spread out like a curtain, and the square earth supported on it, and all creatures were happy . . . It is Thou alone, O Lord, who art the true parent of all things."

The fundamental goodness of God is especially clear in Christianity, in which there is room within the Triune God for love.

While the work of God is often mysterious, to the ancients as to us, I know of no culture in which the Supreme God was thought to be evil or morally neutral -- His basic goodness is generally assumed.

#25 Is the crucifixion nuts? "So, in order to impress himself, Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a symbolic sin committed by a non-existent individual? As I said, barking mad, as well as viciously unpleasant." (253)

At times, Dr. Dawkins seems to describe himself.

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever should believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

No doubt this story of the self-sacrificial love of God brings up many questions. No doubt no Christian can fully answer them all. But is it really so evil to think that God loves us so much, that He would suffer on our behalf? I think Lao Zi would have understood it: "The sage puts himself behind, and comes out ahead." The story of Jesus has, in any case, changed millions of lives for the better. It is also a device, as Rene Girard shows, for subverting scapegoating: the victim is shown to be innocent, and thereby condemns oppression.

World Religions

#26 Are Mormons monotheists? "Most of my readers will have been reared in one or another of today's three 'great' monotheistic religions (four if you count Mormonism)."

Mormonism is not monotheistic; it posits the existence of multiple gods. "As man is, God once was; as God is, man can become."

#27 Are Christianity and Islam opposed to humanity? (Quoting Gore Vidal) "Three anti-human religions have evolved -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam." (37) If Christianity and Islam are "anti-human," it is a wonder nearly three billion people on the planet call themselves Christian or Muslim. Most theists acquire faith, along with life, through their parents – who are not so “anti-human” that we mind making more humans. (Secularists are far less likely to have children.)

But of course Dawkins meant to refer to the effect these religions have on the quality of human life, not necessarily its quantity. At least in regard to Christianity, he’s even more mistaken about that, as I argue in detail on pages 135-188 of *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*.

#28 Is theism especially harmful to women? (Still quoting Vidal) ". . . the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god . . . "

The truth, as I argue at different places in three recent books, is just the opposite: the Gospel of Jesus has done more to liberate women than anything else. To limit myself to just one particularly powerful piece of contrary evidence, in 1988 the United Nations took a survey of the status of women in 99 countries around the world. The survey revealed that the countries where the status of women is highest almost uniformly had a Christian heritage. By contrast, none of the countries where the status of women is lowest had a Christian heritage.

India and Nepal, where the “Sky God” has been overshadowed by millions of local deities, ranked not too far ahead of Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Nigeria, and Libya, as among the countries with the highest “gender gap.” Before Christian missions began to influence South Asia – educating girls, combating the burning of widows and sexual slavery, freeing women from confinement – the status of women was far lower than it is today. (See Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey*, also J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, chapter 6, *Social Reform and Service, 1828-1913*.)

Science and Religion

#29 Who favors NOMA? "NOMA (the "non-overlapping magisteria" principle that science and religion belong to different categories, and do not therefore conflict) is popular only because there is no evidence to favor the God Hypothesis. The moment there was the smallest suggestion of any evidence in favor of religious belief, religious apologists would lose no time in throwing NOMA out of the window." (59)

This misrepresents the situation. In fact, NOMA was invented by Steven Jay Gould, a biologist and an agnostic – not a Christian. From the religious side, most apologists DID throw NOMA out the window a long time ago. Christian apologists have almost always maintained that there is in fact empirical evidence for faith in the world of facts and events -- thanks but no thanks, to Gould's kind offer of special protection.

#30 Would it be obvious had the universe been created? Dawkins quotes Christian philosopher (and Oxford colleague) Richard Swinburne:

"What the theist claims about God is that He does have a power to create, conserve, or annihilate anything, big or small. And he can also make objects move or do anything else . . . He can make the planets move in the way Kepler discovered that they move, or make gunpowder explode when we set a match to it; or he can make planets move in quite different ways, and chemical substances explode or not explode . . . "

Dawkins replies:

"Those scientists who subscribe to the 'separate magisteria' school of thought should concede that a universe with a supernaturally intelligent creator is a very different kind of universe from one without. The difference between the two hypothetical universes could hardly be more fundamental in principle, even if it is not always easy to test in practice." (58)

But Swinburne's comment was not about the universe; it was about God. Swinburne didn't say God cannot or would not make a universe that acts like ours; obviously he thinks God did! So this argument is not effective against NOMA, at least as it might be held by someone who agrees with Swinburne.

#31 Darwinian evolution . . . shatters the illusion of design within the domain of biology . . .
" (118)

This is not a demonstrable error, but it is, I think, at least premature. (For reasons I give in chapter 3, *Some Riddles of Evolution*. See also Mike Gene, *The Design Matrix*, for an eye-opening glimpse at just how far biology is from "shattering the illusion of design," and John Lennox, *God's Undertaker*.)

32 What is Irreducible Complexity? "Creationists who attempt to deploy the argument from improbability in their favor always assume that biological adaptation is a question of the jackpot or nothing. Another name for the 'jackpot or nothing' fallacy is 'irreducible complexity' (IC). Either the eye sees or it doesn't. Either the wing flies or it doesn't. There are assumed to be no useful intermediates." (122)

In fact Michael Behe, who popularized the term “irreducible complexity,” and who is Dawkins’ main target, does not make that assumption. Behe does, in fact, consider the possibility of intermediates, so isn’t true to say he “always assumes” there are none. He *argues* (not *assumes*) that in *some cases* (not all), there appear to be no workable intermediates for some biological systems. (See *Darwin’s Black Box*, also *Irreducible Complexity: Obstacle to Darwinian Evolution*, in *Debating Design: From Darwin to DNA*.)

#33 Did Darwin say it all? "Darwin devoted an entire chapter of *The Origin of Species* to ‘Difficulties on the theory of descent with modification,’ and it is fair to say that this brief chapter anticipated and disposed of every single one of the alleged difficulties that have since been proposed."

In fact, some vital elements of modern evolutionary theory, such as the central role mutations are thought to play, were unknown in Darwin's day. Lee Spetner (*Not By Chance*) and Michael Behe (*The Edge of Evolution*) attack Darwinism precisely at this point, arguing that mutations are incapable of producing complex innovations. (Also see my discussion of this problem, p. 69-74.) Charles Darwin was undoubtedly a great scientist, but he did not have the gift of prophecy.

34 What is “Irreducible Complexity?” "‘What is the use of half an eye?’ and ‘What is the use of half a wing?’ are both instances of the argument from ‘irreducible complexity.’ A functioning unit is said to be irreducible complex if the removal of one of its parts causes the whole to cease functioning. This has been assumed to be self-evident for both eyes and wings. But as soon as we give these assumptions a moment's thought, we immediately see the fallacy. A cataract patient with the lens of her eye surgically removed can't see clear images without glasses, but can see enough not to bump into a tree or fall over a cliff. Half a wing is indeed not as good as a whole wing, but it is certainly better than no wing at all. Half a wing could save your life by easing your fall from a tree of a certain height." (125)

First of all, the term "irreducible complexity" was coined by Michael Behe. Behe does not usually talk about eyes and wings, but about microscopic cellular systems, which he knows more about.

More importantly, the question is not what happens when half of a complete structure is missing. The question is what happens when half the PARTS are gone. What good is an eye, for example, without an optic nerve? Or a wing without tendons? In some cases, the mechanism may still work, in others not. But whether Intelligent Design arguments (like a bird with no tendons) will fly or not, Dawkins has sketched them inaccurately. A wing without a tendon could NOT save your life by easing your fall, anymore than a toaster without a cord will heat bread half as much.

By linking a series of three mutations, scientists have been able to produce a fruit fly with an extra pair of wings. But these wings are useless, because they lack muscles. Whether or not this sort of conundrum is an impediment to evolution, Dawkins has explained the problem inaccurately.

#35 Dawkins vs. Dawkins

A: "The creationists are right that, if genuinely irreducible complexity could be properly demonstrated, it would wreck Darwin's theory. Darwin himself said as much: 'If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.'" (125)

B: "Searching for particular examples of irreducible complexity is a fundamentally unscientific way to proceed: a special case of arguing from present ignorance. It appeals to the same faulty logic as 'the God of the Gaps' strategy condemned by the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer." (125)

Which is it? Is the search for the evidence Darwin and Dawkins both say would destroy evolution scientific, or unscientific? If it is scientific for Darwin to issue the challenge, why is it unscientific for "creationists" to try to answer it?

#36 No evidence claimed for Intelligent Design? "ID has no evidence of its own, but thrives like a weed in gaps left by scientific knowledge (127) . . . Behe simply proclaims the bacterial flagellar motor to be irreducibly complex. Since he offers no argument in favor of his assertion, we may begin by suspecting a failure of his imagination."

Again, whether good or bad, Behe does offer evidence. Behe's point is that "specified complexity" is itself evidence for design. In his more recent book, *The Edge of Evolution*, he argues from decades of empirical study of HIV and malaria that favorable mutations do not occur often enough for evolution to produce complex new organs.

This is evidence, whether or not it makes Behe's case.

#37 How easy was it for evolution to get started? "Once the vital ingredient - some kind of genetic molecule - is in place, true Darwinian natural selection can follow." (137)

Modern cells require a lot more than just a "genetic molecule." They need a permeable cell wall, a source of energy, and some 300 proteins, including a variety of machines (sometimes specific and complex proteins) for dealing with all nitty-gritty of making a living and passing on one's genetic blueprints on to the next generation. The assumption that the first "life" could thrive and reproduce with nothing more than a genetic molecule, has at least not yet been demonstrated.

#38 How improbable was the origin of life? "Now, suppose the origin of life, the spontaneous arising of something equivalent to DNA, really was a quite staggeringly improbable event. Suppose it was so improbable as to occur on only one in a billion planets. A grant-giving body would laugh at any chemist who admitted that the chance of his proposed research succeeding was only one in a hundred . . . And yet . . . even with such absurdly long odds, life will still have arisen on a billion planets - of which Earth, of course, is one (138) . . . Even accepting the most pessimistic estimate of the probability that life might spontaneously originate, this statistical argument completely demolishes any suggestion that we should postulate design to fill the gap." (139)

It is not clear where Dawkins gets the idea that the "most pessimistic estimate" of the odds of life

arising on a given planet are "one in a billion." He used the same number some twenty years earlier, in a similarly glib discussion. He certainly didn't get it from "the most pessimistic" origin of life researchers. Hubert Yockey, one such researcher, remarked caustically, "People who do not understand probability often say that extremely improbable events occur frequently," citing this very idea from Dawkins as his example. (*Information Theory, Evolution, and the Origin of Life*, 117) Yockey is but one of many accomplished scientists who have said either that it is impossible to calculate the probability of the origin of life (even Dawkins admits this elsewhere), or that the probability is so low it would not likely happen even once, anywhere in the universe. Richard Dawkins is blowing smoke. (See *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, 66-69)

#39 Is there a legitimate mathematical basis for the "oscillating universe" model? "Some big crunch models have the universe then bouncing back into expansion, and so on indefinitely with, say, a 20-billion-year cycle time." (145)

Astronomer Hugh Ross argues this is not possible; entropy would doom the system. The consensus seems to be that the "oscillating universe" hypothesis is no longer viable. It is, at any rate, a dubious solution.

#40 How many British scientists are Christian? "Another theologian-scientist, the biochemist Arthur Peacocke (the third member of my trio of British religious scientists) . . ." (150)

Tongue in cheek, Dawkins pictures John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, and Russell Stannard as the three constituent members of a "Dickensonian law firm." His point is that serious scientists who are also serious believers in God are few and far between in the United Kingdom.

He's being inconsistent, though. First of all, Dawkins mentions Alister McGrath repeatedly, without drawing attention to the fact that like Dawkins himself, McGrath obtained a doctorate in science (molecular biophysics) from Oxford. Dawkins also mentions Freeman Dyson, an eminent physicist, and an un-named "very distinguished" geologist at Cambridge who argued for the resurrection. So that's two trios at least, by Dawkins own tally.

One of Dawkins' colleagues on the Oxford science faculty tells me that in the physics department alone, he knows ten scientists who are evangelical Christians, including himself. That probably represents a higher percentage than the population at large in the United Kingdom. Dawkins is not being entirely candid with his readers.

#41 Can evolution make sense of holy war? "Why do humans fast, kneel, genuflect, self-flagellate, nod maniacally towards a wall, crusade, or otherwise indulge in costly practices that can consume life and, in extreme cases, terminate it?" (166)

"Crusade" is an odd inclusion here. Offensive warfare, such as the 400 years of *jihad* that preceded the Crusades, is highly adaptive behavior. This is why more than 200 million people in the world speak Arabic today, many, I imagine, sharing some of the prophet's genes. It pays to accumulate funds and wives through offensive warfare.

Similarly, the Crusades probably saved Western Europe from the periodic Muslim invasions that began already in the 8th Century. The author of *The Selfish Gene* ought to appreciate the

effectiveness of “holy war” without appealing to the "placebo effect" of faith. Religious violence pays off in concrete evolutionary terms.

What I think is behind this oversight is a tendency, among critics of Christianity, to disconnect their moral outrage from the stark implications of their own worldview. We'll encounter this tendency again.

Miracles

#42 Do miracles violate science? "I suspect that alleged miracles provide the strongest reason many believers have for their faith; and miracles, by definition, violate the principles of science." (59)

According to some definitions of miracles, an event that gives evidence of being a work of God, even fortuitous coincidence that does not violate any physical laws (like Peter catching a fish with a gold coin in its mouth, or a big haul of fish after Jesus told him where to cast his nets) can be called a "miracle." In *The Case Against Christianity*, atheist philosopher Michael Martin argues that given quantum fluctuations, even the resurrection can potentially be explained (if it happened) as a natural event. So the line between "natural" and "supernatural" is blurred even in theory. Therefore, it is probably best to call an event so overwhelmingly improbable that it is hard to understand as an accident of Nature, but so fortuitous from a theistic perspective that it makes good sense as an “act of God,” can also be called a “miracle.” The word “miracle” is often applied (or misapplied, as the case may be) to the origin of life in a similar way.

But even if define miracles only to include events that involve a suspension of the habits of Nature, talk of "violating scientific principle" is questionable. Science describes the uniformities of Nature, and has nothing to say about realms outside of Nature. If the Author of Nature throws a new event into Creation, this would no more be a "violation" of her principles than it would "violate" the Law of Gravitation to throw a ball into the air. Nature swallows such interruptions without complaint. (See C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* for a typically brilliant discussion of this topic.)

#43 What did the philosopher Richard Swinburne mean? Dawkins discusses a study that apparently failed to show that prayer helps cure patients:

"Another typical piece of theological reasoning occurs further along in Swinburne's article. He rightly suggests that if God wanted to demonstrate his own existence he would find better ways to do it than slightly biasing the recovery statistics of experimental versus control groups of heart patients. If God existed and wanted to convince us of it, he could 'fill the world with super-miracles.' But then Swinburne lets fall his gem: 'There is quite a lot of evidence anyway of God's existence, and too much might not be good for us.' Too much might not be good for us! Read it again. Too much evidence might not be good for us. Richard Swinburne is the recently retired holder of one of Britain's most prestigious professorships of theology, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. If it's a theologian you want, they don't come much more distinguished. Perhaps you don't want a theologian." (65)

What did Swinburne mean by saying, "There's quite a bit of evidence" for Christianity? On his

web site, Swinburne courteously invites Dawkins to enter the conversation rather than “win by shouting,” pointing out that he’s explained the possible advantages of less than complete certainty of God’s existence in his book *The Existence of God*. Rather than find out what Swinburne means, or what evidence for God he points to elsewhere, Dawkins chooses the easy course of mocking him with a snide comment.

Neither does Dawkins make any attempt to consider whether the concept of "too much evidence" might make. Pascal remarked, “There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition.” (*Pensees*, 430) Ambiguity is a concept Christians (and Taoists) have been thinking about for a long time; mockery is not a sufficient response.

#44 Would any apologist dismiss useful but dubious results? "Can you imagine that a single religious apologist would have dismissed (a double-blind study proving prayer healed the sick) on the grounds that scientific research has no bearing on religious matters? Of course not." (65)

I am a Christian apologist, and I did dismiss reports of such studies coming in positive -- on precisely the grounds Dawkins points to earlier in this discussion. Dawkins borrowed the voice of Bob Newhart to make his point:

"What's that you say, Lord? You can't cure me because I'm a member of the control group?"

I have long thought (and have said) that if a study showed that prayer healed only those prayed for in some artificial experiment, that would tend to DISPROVE Christian theology. Jesus refused to do miracles "for show." He warned NOT to "put the Lord God to the test." This is a basic part of the Christian concept of miracles. (It doesn't follow, though, that miracles can't provide good evidence that God is at work.)

#45 Why does Bob Barth think miracles happen? "Bob Barth, the spiritual director of the Missouri prayer ministry which supplied some of the experimental prayers, said, 'A person of faith would say that this study is interesting, but we've been praying a long time and we've seen prayer work, we know it works, and the research on prayer and spirituality is just getting started.' Yeah, right: we know from our *faith* that prayer works, so if evidence fails to show it we'll just soldier on until finally we get the result we want." (66)

But that's almost the opposite of what Barth said. He said we know from *experience*, not from what Dawkins calls "faith."

#46 "The nineteenth century is the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment. When pressed, many educated Christians today are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know it is absurd." (157)

No one coerced the great historian N. T. Wright (also a former colleague of Dawkins) into writing 750 compact, detailed pages arguing for the resurrection. Wright is “educated,” to put it mildly. So evidently Dawkins is wrong: it is still possible for an educated person to affirm

miracles, including the resurrection, without turning red, even to survey vast tracts of research and argue with great force that the Resurrection is one of the best-attested events of ancient history.

It was probably the 18th Century when the educated classes were most embarrassed by miracles. Since then, literacy has grown by leaps and bounds around the globe. Over the same period, devout belief in Christianity and Islam, two miracle-proclaiming religions, has grown dramatically, as has study of Buddhist sutras and the Upanishads. If Dawkins took a ten-minute walk with me on a Sunday morning, I could show him a thousand mostly well-educated Oxford residents praising God, sometimes in tongues, who are convinced that God still does miracles. (I've heard many accounts within a short walk of Dawkins' office.)

Philosophy

#47 Were Aquinas' arguments "vacuous?" "The five 'proofs' asserted by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century don't prove anything, and are easily -- though I hesitate to say so, given his eminence -- exposed as vacuous." (77)

Dawkins should have hesitated longer. I don't find these traditional philosophical arguments as satisfying as some people do (I have heard of professional philosophers who converted through one or another of them). But I doubt many philosophers will agree that they are so easily exposed as "vacuous," as that Dawkins manages the trick.

#48 "The Unmoved Mover. Nothing moves without a prior mover. This leads us to regress, from which the only escape is God. Something had to make the first move, and that something we call God." (77)

Dawkins has skipped an important step, and thus misrepresented Aquinas' argument. From Wikipedia:

- Some things are moved. ("In the world some things are in motion.")
- Everything that is moved is moved by a mover.
- An infinite regress of movers is impossible.
- Therefore, there is an unmoved mover from whom all motion proceeds.
- This mover is what we call God.

There is a huge difference between "some things" being moved, and "everything" being moved. "Some things" need not include "God."

#49 "The Uncaused Cause. Nothing is caused by itself. Every effect has a prior cause, and again we are pushed back into regress. This has to be terminated by a first cause, which we call God." (77)

Again, Dawkins grossly misstates Aquinas' actual argument:

- *Some things* are caused.

- Everything that is caused (“in the world of sensible things”) is caused by something else.
- An infinite regress of causation is impossible.
- Therefore, there must be an uncaused cause of all caused things.
- This causer is what we call God.

Feedback: *Dr. Richard Field, professor of philosophy at Northwest Missouri State University, was kind enough to respond to my dispute with Dawkins on Aquinas:*

“I don't take the discrepancies of the statements of the five ways as so serious. The arguments have been restated in many different ways. Unless you can suggest how the discrepancy introduces inaccuracies, I don't see a problem. After all, Aquinas himself took considerable liberties in restating Avicenna's argument in the form of his third way, especially in abbreviating the argument considerably. But the gist of the argument comes through in Aquinas's version. One might also consider Aquinas's first way, which derives directly from Aristotle's book Lambda of the metaphysics. Aquinas lays out in a paragraph what Aristotle offered in many pages (at least in modern translation).”

Response: *There is a vital difference between “nothing is caused by itself” and “some things are caused . . . everything in the world of sensible things is caused by something else.” The first statement implies that God or other uncaused entities cannot be caused by themselves; the second does not. The second is more reasonable, because we simply don't know how cause and effect might work outside our cosmos and the realm of things that begin.*

#50 Can God do everything? "If God is omniscient, he must already know how he is going to intervene to change the course of history using his omnipotence. But that means he can't change his mind about his interventions, which means he is not omnipotent." (78)

This is much like the old canard, "Can God make a rock so big He can't lift it?" The answer lies in defining "omniscience" and "omnipotence" in a reasonable way. It does not mean doing acts that are self-contradictory, which are really no acts at all. Dawkins is employing a meaningless rhetorical trick, he is not making any real objection to the idea of God at all.

This leaves aside the question of whether God might not be self-limiting in more profound ways.

#51 Have the old arguments for God been mothballed? "The argument from design is the only one still in regular use today . . ." (79)

It is remarkable that an educated man would place so palpably false a claim at the center of what purports to be a persuasive book. A quick survey of apologetic literature shows Aquinas' other arguments still in use. (See for example the debates on the Kalaam Cosmological Argument on the web site of William Lane Craig, with philosophers like Quentin Smith, Massimo Pigliucci, and Corey Washington. Richard Swinburne offers a softer, inductive, Cosmological argument.) Recent discoveries in astronomy have made this a particularly interesting time to discuss the subject. (See the works of physicist John Polkinghorne, astronomer Stephen Barr, etc.)

#52 Did Pascal think the odds against God are long? "The great French mathematician Blaise Pascal reckoned that, however long the odds against God's existence might be . . . Pascal wasn't claiming that his wager enjoyed anything but very long odds." (103)

I have found no such concession in Pascal. In fact, read *Pensees* as a whole, and it appears he thought the evidence for Christianity was good. He gives quite a bit of it himself.

Pascal did speak cautiously about one class of arguments for God, arguments "from the works of nature." Even here he admits that those with "living faith in their hearts" can "see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship." However, in others "this light has gone out," and they see "only obscurity and darkness." In such cases the best course is not to argue from Nature: "This is to give them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble."

In other words, Pascal's objection to this particular kind of argument is purely or at least mainly psychological. It is not that those without faith perceive the true nature of things better, but that they don't – that's what happens when "light goes out." Pascal says, however, that the Bible portrays God as in some sense "hidden." Furthermore, Pascal is assuming there are BETTER grounds for faith, to which believers should point their friends.

Pascal himself brings up many forms of evidence for Christian faith: historical arguments for the resurrection of Jesus, the incredible history of the Jews, prophecies that have come true, and miracles. ("Numerous cures have been found to be genuine, even to the greatest men.")

One of Pascal's most interesting arguments is the subtlety with which the Gospel describes (and then improves) human nature:

"For a religion to be true it must have known our nature; it must have known its greatness and smallness, and the reason for both. What other religion but Christianity has known this? . . . Christianity is strange; it bids man to recognize that he is vile, and even abominable, and bids him want to be like God . . . Though I was born in it, I can't help finding it astonishing."
"No one is so happy as a true Christian, or so reasonable, virtuous, and loveable."

It is not my purpose to evaluate these gnomic remarks, which Pascal maybe planned to flesh out in his complete book. What is clear is that Dawkins is badly mistaken in supposing that Pascal conceded the odds against the truth of Christianity were long.

#53 Pascal's Wager. "Pascal's wager could only ever be an argument for feigning belief in God. And the God that you claim to believe in had better not be the omniscient kind or he'd see through the deception . . . Mightn't God respect Russell for his courageous skepticism . . . far more than he would respect Pascal for his cowardly bet-hedging?"

Dawkins misunderstands Pascal's argument through overlooking its psychological basis. Faith follows action, Pascal points out. (As Jesus said, only those who seek to do the will of the Father will recognize my teaching.) If you suffer from the psychological disorder of doubt, act as if you

know He is real. When you step out “in faith,” (the very opposite of blind faith) that faith will grow:

“For we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind. As a result, demonstration is not the only instrument for convincing us. How few things can be demonstrated! Proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed . . . We must resort to habit once we have seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief . . . for it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us.” (821)

Feedback: *” Dr. Field commented -- As for #53, I might point out the great American psychologist and philosopher William James made the same point in "The Will to Believe." Any argument for faith using practical reason can only work if the religious hypothesis is a "living hypothesis," to use James's term. This same idea comes out in his Varieties of Religious Experience, in his study of conversion. My personal experience suggests to me James is right about that--I've never felt the religious hypothesis to be "living" in his sense. So although Dawkins perhaps should have characterized more fully Pascal's position and then responded (a fault of omission), I think he has a fair point.*

Respectfully, I think Pascal's Wager doesn't work because of its internal logic. But what you speak of are certain comments on the argument, that are not part of the argument at all. James's point is that the argument by itself cannot create genuine religious belief unless certain psychological preconditions are met . . .

Response: *Thanks for your insights. I agree that Pascal's argument may not be effective for everyone, but I suspect he knew that. I think Pascal has in view a reader who is considering faith, and has good reasons for faith, but finds himself in psychological confusion.*

To "gamble on Christ," in Pascal's view, is more than to just say, "I believe." And human beings are more than purely intellectual creatures. Sometimes we lack belief because we have not tried God. Life then becomes an exciting experiment -- "put God to the test," the Bible tells us. Pascal is telling a person in doubt to take a chance on God – not merely “feign belief.”

#54 "Pascal was probably joking when he promoted his wager." (105)

As C. S. Lewis said in another context, “After a man has said that, why attend to anything he says about any book in the world?” Pascal was nothing if not earnest, a fact that shouts from every eloquent page of his book.

#55 Does God need to be complex? *"As ever, the theist's answer is deeply unsatisfying, because it leaves the existence of God unexplained. A God capable of calculating the Goldilocks values for the six numbers would have to be at least as improbable as the finely tuned combination of numbers itself." (143)*

Why is that? The theory of evolution is nothing if not an argument that complexity can spring from simplicity. Dawkins now appears to be arguing the opposite: that complexity requires greater complexity for its origin.

Richard Swinburne rebuts Dawkins' argument on his Oriel College web site. Whether you accept Swinburne's argument or not, the assumption that God "would have to be" more complex (in his parts?) than the effects he produces, is dubious.

No explanation is complete. It would be absurd to say, "You've explained the improbable series of prime numbers in radio waves broadcast from that star system by positing alien intelligence. But the alien you posit is more complex than the numbers, so your explanation violates Occam's Law." There is no rule that when you propose an explanation, it has to explain everything; if there were, the mouths of all scientists, historians, and detectives would remain closed forever.

History (General)

#56 Bertand Russell was "an exaggerately fair-minded atheist." (82)

Here are a few "exaggerately fair-minded" quotes from Russell's signature defense of atheism, *Why I am Not a Christian*:

"Almost every adult in a Christian community is more or less diseased nervously as a result of the taboo on sex knowledge when he or she was young." (29)

"My own view on religion is that of Lucretius. I regard it as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race. I cannot, however, deny that it has made some contributions to civilizations. It helped in early days to fix the calendar, and it caused Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses . . . These two services I am prepared to acknowledge, but I do not know of any others." (24)

(Note: for any reader whose knowledge of the contributions of religion is similarly limited, see pages 135-188 of *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*. I also recommend a good course in Chinese art history.)

"I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world." (21)

(This was in 1927, a year before Joseph Stalin came to power, but ten years and millions of lives into the Bolshevik revolution.)

The exaggeration I grant; the fair-mindedness is doubtful.

#57 "George Bush says that God told him to invade Iraq." (88) This appears to be based on a much-disputed report about a meeting between Bush and Palestinian officials in 2003. During a meeting at a resort in Egypt, former Palestinian foreign minister, Nabil Shaath, says that President Bush told a Palestinian delegation: "God would tell me, George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan. And I did, and then God would tell me, George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq... and I did. And now, again, I feel God's words coming to me, go get the Palestinians their state and get the Israelis their security, and get peace in the Middle East. And by God I'm gonna do it."

Shaath himself describes the comment as simply, "a figure of speech. We felt he was saying that he had a mission, a commitment, his faith in God would inspire him ... rather than a metaphysical whisper in his ear."

White House staff, on the other hand, find no reference to God in notes from the meeting.

Dawkins uses the present simple tense, which implies continuing or repeated action -- Bush says this on a regular basis. He may or may not have said it once – and then it may or may not have been meant literally – but it is at least an exaggeration to claim he "says" it.

History (Christian Origins)

#58 "Christianity was founded by Paul of Tarsus . . ." (37)

Most of the main teachings of Christianity appear before the conversion of Paul. In I Corinthians 15, Paul cites a poem which already encapsulated some of these key beliefs. All 1st Century Christian documents agree on the essentials of what we recognize today as Christian (as opposed to Jewish) theology, whether or not they are associated with Paul and his close followers. Crediting, or blaming, Paul for inventing Christianity is one of those hoary old hypothesis that never goes away, despite repeated refutation, perhaps because it tickles the ears of conspiracy buffs. Here's a detailed rebuttal by Rich Deem:

www.godandscience.org/apologetics/paul_invented_christianity.html

#59 "The historical evidence that Jesus claimed any sort of divine status is minimal." (92)

Some claim the historical evidence for Jesus in general is minimal. I argue to the contrary in *Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could*.

But given a willingness to admit human testimony as evidence, the New Testament offers a lot of evidence about the life and teachings of Jesus -- 27 documents from about nine different 1st Century authors. All of this first-century evidence is that Jesus did indeed claim divine status of some sort. The remarkable thing about this evidence is that it not only permeates every book of the New Testament, but every layer of every Gospel, and seeps to the surface in unconscious assumptions as well as overt proclamations, in actions and reactions as well as words. Squeezing the deity of Christ out of the earliest and best evidence for the life of Jesus would be like trying to squeeze the water out of a Greenland glacier.

#60 Might Jesus have been "honestly mistaken" about being God? Dawkins responds to C. S. Lewis' famous "Lunatic, Liar, or Lord" argument, often called a "trilemma." Dawkins frames the argument as follows: "Since Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, he must have been either right or else insane or a liar." Dawkins responds:

"A fourth possibility, almost too obvious to need mentioning, is that Jesus was honestly mistaken. Plenty of people are." (92)

Are plenty of people really "honestly mistaken" about being God? The point of Lewis' argument

is that while people make a lot of mistakes, sane and honest people do not usually mistake themselves for divinity. Did Dawkins read the argument, before he criticized it? If he had, he would know that far from ignoring the possibility that Jesus was "honestly mistaken," Lewis explained with a great deal of wit and clarity why that was highly unlikely:

'I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher.'

There is a fourth plausible hypothesis -- that the Gospels are legend, or that these "divine" words were put into Jesus' mouth long after the fact. Lewis originally mentioned this possibility in his draft for the broadcast talks that became *Mere Christianity*, but that was cut for lack of time. (C.S. Lewis at the BBC.)

#61 Have theologians disproven the Gospels? "Ever since the 19th Century, scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world." (93)

Dawkins told us that theology "has not moved on" in two millennia; now he hitches a ride on its caboose.

When someone generalizes about "what scholars have discovered," check footnotes, and see whom he's talking about. Dawkins' sources on the Gospels turn out to be the radical scholars Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, and Geza Vermes. Pagels' work on early Christianity was the main target of my 2007 book, *The Truth About Jesus and the 'Lost Gospels,'* with Ehrman a secondary target. I argue that the major claims this school of scholarship makes about Christian Gospels, and Gnostic writings, are just plain wrong – and on some crucial points, it's not even clear they believe them themselves.

N. T. Wright, one of the world's most eminent New Testament scholars, has now written some 2000 systematic and detailed pages of critical study on the Gospels. Far from finding the case against the historicity of the Gospels "overwhelming," he uncovers a great deal of evidence for the general truthfulness of those books – as do other eminent scholars like Richard Hays, Luke Johnson, C Stephen Evans, Ben Witherington, and Craig Blomberg. Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* offers an excellent concise case for the Gospels.

One of the things that shocked me when I was doing research for an earlier book responding to the Jesus Seminar, was to find that some scholars who support Dawkins' position – including Pagels – often seem to have simply failed to read opposing arguments. Reading a few works of pop scholarship that support your view does not qualify anyone to claim an "overwhelming case"

for your point of view.

#62 "All (the Gospels) were written long after the death of Jesus . . . "

Most scholars agree that the first Gospel, probably Mark, was written between about 55 and 75 AD, when its author may have been in his late 40s or early 50s. In the context of ancient history, that is hardly "long after."

#63 "All were then copied and recopied, through many different 'Chinese Whispers generations" . . . (93)

The scholarly consensus is in fact that the Gospels were written within the plausible life-span of Jesus' first followers. Even John, probably the last written, was likely written in the 90s, when Jesus' young disciple might have reached his 80s. There is nothing improbable about reports that the Gospels are based on first-hand and close second-hand information. And there is a great deal of internal evidence -- the sort of evidence an author reveals without thinking -- that this is so. The early church was a close-knit community, and it probably would have been impossible to circulate these documents without input from eyewitnesses. (See *Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could*)

#64 Was Jesus a copy-cat myth? "Robert Gillooly shows how all the essential features of the Jesus legend, including the star in the east, the virgin birth, the veneration of the baby by kings, the miracles, the execution, the resurrection and the ascension are borrowed -- every last one of them -- from other religions already in existence in the Mediterranean and Near East region." (94)

Such theories have been popular since James Fraser included a volume on "dying and rising gods" in his popular late 19th Century classic of confused comparative mythology, *The Golden Bough*.

But Jonathan Smith, University of Chicago historian of religion, explained the concept of "dying and rising gods" as follows, in the 1987 version of *The Encyclopedia of Religion*:

"The category of dying and rising gods, once a major topic of scholarly investigation, must now be understood to have been largely a misnomer based on imaginative reconstructions and exceedingly late or highly ambiguous texts . . .

"The category of dying and rising gods, as well as the pattern of its mythic and ritual associations, received its earliest full formulation in the influential work of James G. Frazer *The Golden Bough*, especially in its two central volumes, *The Dying God* and *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*. Frazer offered two interpretations, one euhemerist, the other naturist. In the former, which focused on the figure of the dying god, it was held that a (sacred) king would be slain when his fertility waned. This practice, it was suggested, would be later mythologized, giving rise to a dying god. The naturist explanation, which covered the full cycle of dying and rising, held the deities to be personifications of the seasonal cycle of vegetation. The two interpretations were linked by the notion that death

followed upon a loss of fertility, with a period of sterility being followed by one of rejuvenation, either in the transfer of the kingship to a successor or by the rebirth or resurrection of the deity.

"There are empirical problems with the euhemerist theory. The evidence for sacral regicide is limited and ambiguous; where it appears to occur, there are no instances of a dying god figure. The naturist explanation is flawed at the level of theory. Modern scholarship has largely rejected, for good reasons, an interpretation of deities as projections of natural phenomena.

"Nevertheless, the figure of the dying and rising deity has continued to be employed, largely as a preoccupation of biblical scholarship, **among those working on ancient Near Eastern sacred kingship in relation to the Hebrew Bible and among those concerned with the Hellenistic mystery cults in relation to the New Testament . . .** “

"All the deities that have been identified as belonging to the class of dying and rising deities can be subsumed under the two larger classes of disappearing deities or dying deities. In the first case, the deities return but have not died; in the second case, the gods die but do not return. There is no unambiguous instance in the history of religions of a dying and rising deity."

This quote is part of Glenn Miller's devastating critique of such arguments, "Is Jesus a Copy-Cat Myth?" at www.christian-thinktank.com/copycat.html. It is odd that Dawkins should refer readers to Gillooly, who is not a recognized historian, as his only source; Miller sifts through the scholarship in depth, and devastating.

Even if these stories predated the Gospels – and in his book, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* Ronald Nash points out that most do not -- showing that one event occurred before another and looks a bit like it, is not enough to demonstrate borrowing. It is common knowledge (Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade) that certain patterns repeat in mythology. As I argue in *Jesus and the Religions of Man* (9-12 and 259-305), "mythological motifs" are also common in known history. It is therefore no argument against the historicity of an event, that something similar is said to have occurred in a tall tale. (Nash exaggerates unnecessarily in his attempts to deny similarity between the Gospels and pre-Christian myth – his basic point is well-made, though.)

#65 What did "begat" mean? "Shouldn't a literalist worry about the fact that Matthew traces Joseph's descent from King David via twenty-eight intermediate generations, while Luke has forty-one generations?" (95)

Not unless the literalist is also ignorant of ancient Hebrew or Greek convention. "X begat (*egenneisen*) Y" does not necessarily mean direct parentage: "descendent of" is a more accurate translation than "son of."

#66 "The four gospels that made it into the official canon were chosen, more or less

arbitrarily . . . "(95)

The choice was not even remotely arbitrary. There are no other books in the ancient world that resemble the Gospels. No competitors to the canonical four have ever been found, or anything like them in all ancient literature. Texts that are compared to the Gospels, like the "*Gospel*" of *Thomas*, *Judas*, or *Mary Magdalene*, or *Apollonius of Tyana*, turn out, on close examination, to be worlds apart. (See Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*, also my *Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could* and *The Truth About Jesus and the 'Lost Gospels.'*")

#67 "out of a larger sample of at least a dozen including the *Gospels of Thomas, Peter, Nicodemus, Philip, Bartholomew, and Mary Magdalen.*"

None of the extant writings mentioned here is a "Gospel" in any reasonable sense of the word. The word "Gospel" is used here to group wildly dissimilar texts. See chapter 4 of *The Truth About Jesus and the 'Lost Gospels,'* "There are no Gnostic Gospels," also my detailed comparison of Thomas and the Gospels in *Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus and Grandma Marshall Could.*

What is remarkable is that skeptics have been able to find no closer parallels than such works to the canonical Gospels. Thomas, the most often cited "parallel," (1) is a list of sayings, not a narrative; (2) 40% of which were borrowed from the Gospels, the rest containing little to nothing that even the work's scholarly fans (like the Jesus Seminar) can honestly say came from Jesus; (3) shows no interest in Hebrew tradition; (4) presents a Jesus who shows no concern for the poor or weak; (5) tells no realistic stories about him; (6) offers no new ethical insights; (7) reveals no connection to 1st Century Palestine; (8) contains no "good news" (which is what "Gospel" means); (9) is clever in a Marin County hot tub philosophical way, but would bore a crowd of Jewish peasants to death; (10) shows Jesus healing no one; (11) nor doing anyone else any good, either; (13) nor ever receiving criticism; (14) nor, of course, dying or rising again.

#68 Was Thomas Jefferson a time traveler? "It is these additional gospels that Thomas Jefferson was referring to in his letter to his nephew: 'I forgot to observe, when speaking of the New Testament, that you should read all the histories of Christ, as well as those whom a council of ecclesiastics have decided for us . . .'" (95-96)

In fact, most of the texts Dawkins mentioned were still buried in the Egyptian desert when Thomas Jefferson allegedly told his nephew to read them. Most would not be discovered until the 20th Century, especially 1945, when the cache at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt was uncovered. Jefferson could not have told his nephew to read any of them, apart from the "*Gospel of Nicodemus*," a (mostly) 4th Century and rather inconsequential text that was popular in the Middle Ages.

#69 Where did you find those stories? "The *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, has numerous anecdotes about the child Jesus abusing his magical powers in the manner of a mischievous fairy, impishly transforming his playmates into goats, or turning mud into sparrows . . . It will be said that nobody believes crude miracle stories such as those in the *Gospel of Thomas* anyway . . ."

(96)

What will be said that Dawkins and his publisher have got the wrong book. These stories appear in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, not in the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*.

#70 Equal status gospels? "But there is no more and no less reason to believe the four canonical gospels." (96)

Nonsense. The four Gospels are more than a hundred years earlier. They confirm one another on hundreds of details. They are firmly based in a Jewish context. They offer geographical and physical details about 1st Century Palestine that have been confirmed. They show numerous internal evidences of truthfulness, as I and others have shown in great detail.

None of these arguments apply to the Gnostic writings. In fact, as I point out, even radical skeptics like Elaine Pagels and the members of the Jesus Seminar sometimes admit to some of the historical advantages of the canonical Gospels implicitly.

#71 Are the Gospels legends? "All have the status of legends, as factually dubious as the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table." (96)

The claim that the Gospels "have the status of legends" has been decisively refuted. In *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Richard Burridge showed that the Gospels actually belong within the genre of *bioi*, or Greek style biography. His argument has been widely accepted. In *Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could*, (p. 181-201) I show that the Gospels enjoy many advantages even over other *bioi*, which make them MORE historically plausible, rather than less, than typical biography of the day.

C. S. Lewis, the "best-read man" of his generation and an expert on myth and fantasy (and a big fan of King Arthur – even including Merlin in one of his space stories), wrote of the *Gospel of John*:

"I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this." (*Fernseed and Elephants*)

#72 "(The Gospel writers) almost certainly never met Jesus personally." (96)

This is by no means "almost certain." As I pointed out above, almost all scholars place the writing of the four Gospels within the plausible lifespan of Jesus' first followers. The early Christian community was small and close-knit. Mark could easily have been the young man mentioned towards the end of his Gospel, as many scholars think. John very likely was involved in the writing of the Gospel that bares his name -- "beloved disciple" may well be his signature. Authorship cannot be proven, but both seem likely, and there is no positive reason to dismiss tradition in either case.

#73 "Much of what they wrote was in no sense an honest attempt at history . . ." (96)

Dawkins does not explain how he knows this. In fact, the Gospels bare numerous marks of being honest reports. Given the many internal markers of honesty -- the willingness to show Jesus doing and saying embarrassing things, the harsh rhetoric directed at him, the inimitable genius of his language, and other markers I and others point to, at best Dawkins' claim is dubious.

#74 Is the New Testament seen as reliable? "Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament . . . as a reliable record of what actually happened in history." (97)

This is an exaggeration: some do, some don't. And for those who don't, as I show in my "Jesus Seminar book," the skepticism often turns on *a priori* assumptions about the nature of reality, not on careful study of the evidence. I describe twelve assumptions that hobble members of the Jesus Seminar in the "search for the historical Jesus: "dogmatic naturalism, incoherent post-modernism, blinding prejudice, errors in understanding Christianity, confusion about time, trust in unreliable sources, poor logic, failure to engage contrary views, doubtful methods, literary dullness, tunnel vision, and use of false dichotomies." (*Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could*, Introduction) Pagels and Ehrman also fall victim to some of these misconceptions.

#75 Are the Gospels pure fiction? *The Da Vinci Code* "Is indeed fabricated from start to finish: invented, made-up fiction. In that respect, it is exactly like the gospels. The only difference between *The Da Vinci Code* and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while *The Da Vinci Code* is modern fiction."

Not even Pagels, Ehrman, or Vermes go nearly so far. One clue that Dawkins' is allowing his eloquence to run away with him is the fact that he has admitted the "probable" historical reality of Jesus. He presumably does not make that claim for Robert Langdon, the character played by Tom Hanks in *The Da Vinci Code*.

#76 What has history done to the New Testament since the 19th Century? "My whole world-view was condemned as 'nineteenth century.' A distinguished Cambridge geologist . . . justified his own Christian belief by invoking what he called the historicity of the New Testament. It was precisely in the 19th Century that theologians, especially in Germany, called into grave doubt that alleged historicity, using the evidence-based methods of history to do so. This was, indeed, swiftly pointed out by the theologians at the Cambridge conference."

Dawkins says theology has made no progress in 19 centuries. But here again, he tries to hitch a ride on the bandwagon of theological progressives.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, N. T. Wright, whom Marcus Borg describes as the leading New Testament scholar in Britain, and philosopher Raymond Martin says offers "by far the most sophisticated" approach to history among early Christian scholars, and who taught at both Oxford and Cambridge, published 700 + pages of "evidence-based history" in the form of a book called *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. This book, and the ones that precede it or parallel it from historians who have come to similar conclusions, does not represent a return to a naive pre-

modern orthodoxy, but a modern challenge that no appeal to 19th Century arguments (with which Wright is intimately familiar) are likely to assuage.

Dawkins' views about the New Testament do, indeed, require updating.

#77 "Unlike the cult of Jesus, the origins of which are not reliably attested . . . "

Actually, they are. See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

#78 Was Jesus one of many legends? "Indeed, scholars such as Geza Vermes, Professor of Jewish studies at Oxford University, have suggested that Jesus was one of many such charismatic figures who emerged in Palestine around his time, surrounded by similar legends." (206)

Strenuous efforts have been made to locate "similar legends," but have failed. (See Philip Jenkin's *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*, also my *Why the Jesus Seminar can't find Jesus, and Grandma Marshall Could*, p. 141-201, also the chapter on John Crossan)

The failure to find any parallel to Jesus that is remotely persuasive carries enormous implications, the flip side of which Dawkins points out. If another Jesus could be found, that would be a great victory for skepticism. But what if, the more one looks, the more the gap between Jesus and all ancient sages and healers grows? That, I argue, is what modern research on Jesus and his times has really revealed.

#79 Do Christians care about the historical Jesus? "Adherents of scriptural authority show distressingly little curiosity about the (normally highly dubious) historical origins of their holy books." (233)

Here we have two gross exaggerations. First, books on the "historical Jesus" sell pretty well; in some cases, better than they deserve. Secondly, it is a gross exaggeration to say "holy books" are "normally highly dubious." Which ones? *The Analects of Confucius? Letter to the Galatians? The Bhagavad Gita?* No careful observer would generalize so glibly about so diverse a collection of texts: each has to be taken on its own historical merits, which at times are considerable.

History (The Influence of Christianity)

#80 Was heaven a useful tool of oppression for slave owners? "It is surely true that black slaves in America were consoled by promises of another life, which blunted their dissatisfaction with this one and thereby benefited their owners." (169)

It is unlikely this occurred to most slave owners. Colonial Quakers were heavily fined for trying to convert slaves. In Catholic colonies, where slaves were allowed to become Christian, they were treated with far more leniency than in British colonies. (Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 314-6. Also see *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, 144-8, on the role Christianity played in the ending of slavery.) In *The Christianization of Slaves in the West Indies*, Jeffrey Padgett points out that Christian faith was seen as a threat to British slave owners there:

Yet for resistance to succeed, the slaves needed to share some common values. Those slaves who were able to convert to Christianity were able to create such a bond through a common religion. In turn, this unity served as a way to resist the atrocities the plantation owners imposed on them. Thus, for many slaves, Christianization served as a means of resistance throughout the period of the slave trade . . .

While some West Indian slaves opposed European Christianity, many more would eventually come to adopt and adapt at least some of its elements. Missionaries from the Moravians, the Baptists, and the Methodists all engaged in the process of Christianization in the West Indies. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Moravian chapels and mission houses were in populated areas of many of the British-controlled islands. Missionaries argued to planters that slaves needed religion and that planters too would benefit from the conversion.

However, many planters felt that the conversion of their slaves would jeopardize their own position of power. Richard Ligon's firsthand account of planter life in the West Indies reveals evidence of this feeling as early as the mid-eighteenth century. His account, *A True and Exact History of the island of Barbados*, contains a passage where Ligon is speaking to a planter about his wishes to convert one of the planters slaves (Sambo) to Christianity.

"I promised to do my best endeavor; and when I came home, spoke to the master of the plantation, and told him, that poor Sambo desired much to be a Christian. But his answer was, 'The people of the island are governed by the laws of England, and by those laws, we could not make a Christian a slave. I told him, 'My request was far different from that, for I desired to make a slave a Christian.' His answer was, 'That it was true, There was a great difference in that,': But, being once a Christian, he could no more account him a slave, and so lose the hold they had of them as slaves, by making them Christians; and by that means should open such a gap, as all the planters in the island would curse him. So I was struck mute, and poor Sambo kept out of the Church."

The planters who opposed the conversion of their slaves feared the possibilities of a Christianized slave, and resented the idea of sharing their religion with a heathen. During the era of the slave trade, many whites claimed that slaves were not capable of understanding Christianity. However, many were afraid that if their slaves received education they would demand their rights as human beings. For slaves to be kept in bondage, they needed to be kept in ignorance. And so, many planters believed that the teaching of Christianity would undermine the whole institution of slavery. The planters who were cruel and barbarous towards their slaves feared conversion the most. They feared the vengeance of their slaves if a revolt were to take place. Those who lived in the West Indies had witnessed the Haitian Revolution where the white French population on the island had been wiped out by rebelling blacks. The planters feared that this could happen on their island if slaves were given the notion of equality through religion, or the promise that eternal life awaited those martyred to the cause of freedom and equality on earth.

Many planters who opposed conversion also did so because they resented missionaries. Christianized slaves sometimes looked to white missionaries for protection when their master was angry with them. Female slaves in particular faced sexual advances from their masters. Those who had internalized European Christianity's ideas about sexual purity now had another reason to reject such advances, even at the risk of infuriating violent white men. Often, females would seek the support of the missionaries and some preachers in turn denounced the planter, sometimes publicly, as a sinner and a rapist. This sort of activity brought violence down on some missions. Notable islands where persecutions of missions and Christianized slaves occurred include Dutch St. Eustatius and British St. Vincent. Both islands suffered for many years and the violence there included public floggings and hanging of converted slaves.

#81 "Christianity, too was spread by the sword, wielded first by Roman hands after the Emperor Constantine raised it from eccentric cult to official religion, then by the Crusaders, and later by the conquistadores and other European invaders and colonists . . ." (37)

This qualifies as gross exaggeration, with some truth, and a lot of error, mixed in.

Stark argues in *The Rise of Christianity* that about a tenth of the Roman population had embraced Christianity by the time of Constantine. The Pro-Christian policies of later emperors – not so much Constantine himself – corrupted the church, but in the following centuries, converts still mostly came into it willingly, not under duress. While acts of force were sometimes employed to spread the faith in Europe (most notably by Charlemagne), the primary vehicles of conversion were (1) preaching and (2) marriage, especially of Christian women to pagan kings. (See Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*.)

The Crusades were not undertaken to spread Christianity, but to defend Greece against 400 years of Muslim attack, and maintain an open corridor for pilgrims to the Holy Land. (Read for example the speech of Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont, available in *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Material*.)

During colonial times, only rarely was Christianity spread by the sword. (For example, in Goa in India.) Sometimes colonial powers BANNED Christian missionaries. Dr. Rochunga Pudaite notes that in the hills of Northeast India, where he grew up,

"Most Indians who have been told that the colonial rulers wanted to convert us will find it incredible and incomprehensible, but it is true that the British rulers burnt the bamboo churches my father had built, and banned taking freewill offerings to support pastors." (Introduction to Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Way to Dignity and Liberty*.)

With few exceptions (the conquistadores perhaps the most notorious – gold and the quarrel with Islam seemed to have warped their thinking), Christianity has spread peacefully, or in the teeth of violent opposition.

Religion and Violence (General)

#81 Is the Irish conflict purely religious? "In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants are euphemized to 'Nationalists' and 'Loyalists' respectively." (21)

It is no "euphemism" to call the combatants in Northern Ireland "nationalists" and "loyalists." One side favors the cause of Irish *nationalism*, the other is *loyal* to Great Britain. Many of the protagonists were not even religious: one "Protestant" ex-terrorist told me he and his terrorist friends had only ever used the name of God to swear. When he became a Christian in prison, both "Catholics" and "Protestants" turned against him. The old joke about "Protestant atheists" and "Catholic atheists" (which Dawkins himself refers to later) was not just a joke.

This is not to say religion had nothing to do with the struggle; but to refer to "nationalists" and "loyalists" in northern Ireland is to make out there was no tribal or national issues involved as well – though they were at least as important, if not more so.

#82 What should a public polemicist learn from rude critics? "I receive a large number of letters from readers of my books, most of them enthusiastically friendly, some of them helpfully critical, a few nasty or even vicious. And the nastiest of all, I am sorry to report, are almost invariably motivated by religion."

If Dawkins says he is sorry that the most abusive letters he receives are from believers, let's be charitable and assume he really is sorry. Given that he spends the next two pages quoting gleefully from nasty letters to atheists ("I'd love to take a knife . . ."), one suspects his sorrow is not unmitigated.

What is surprising is that the world's most famous atheist seems to want us to draw a conclusion about Christians from the fact that a few daft believers have sent him angry correspondence. Who does he suppose sends hate mail to Christians who argue against atheism?

Here's a bit of feedback I received recently:

"You are a pathetic idiot who understands neither Christianity, science or is capable of logic. You are a vile, evil person who lies and cheats for a dollar. If there is a hell (which there isn't), you'll surely rot there."

And here's another, with more sense of romance, though the author has a proven tendency to try to destroy those he criticizes:

"It's a pity that I can't employ capital punishment to cure permanently your delusional mind, preferably by offering you as potential chow to a hungry python, crocodile or Ken Ham's T. rex (If Ham ever succeeds in cloning one)."

I'm not as well-known as Richard Dawkins, of course. If he has to quote letters to his skeptical friends to fluff out his pages of Christian stupidity, then people are being much nicer to radical critics of Christianity than they are to relatively mild critics of the "New Atheism." I'm not making a case against atheism in general based on the anger of a few bitter and pathetic people, however.

#83 Do atheists ever blow up cultural icons? "I do not think there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca -- or Chartres, York Minster or Notre Dame, the Shwe Dagon, the temples of Kyoto or, of course, the Buddhas of Bamiyan." (249)

In response, let me direct Dr. Dawkins to the 20th Century. Obscure the century of our birth may seem to him, but he would do well to attend to it. The Chinese are still cleaning up from the "Red Guards," radical followers of Mao and vocal atheists if any ever walked the earth. The Red Guards did their best to destroy thousands of years of Chinese religious treasure. I've photographed a few instances of that destruction on visits to China: old temples and churches were particularly hard-hit. (Some are still being used for warehouses, apartments, or hospitals.)

Nor, of course, did Soviet atheists keep their hands off the priceless artistic and spiritual treasures of Mother Russia.

#84 Why did "Christians" persecute Jews? "If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment -- thereby, incidentally, condemning remote future generations of Jews to pogroms and persecution as 'Christ-killers' . . . " (253)

The Christian idea of atonement was not the cause of pogroms against Jews -- at best it was a bad excuse. This can be seen by the fact that pogroms were instituted in non-Christian cultures, both before the time of Christ (Babylon, Roman) and in post or non-Christian cultures (Arab, Nazi, Soviet). It can also be seen from the fact that the larger crime of which pogroms were an instance show up in every culture, especially those under stress. (The great anthropologist Rene Girard has made a luminous career of exploring "*The Scapegoat*," as one of his books is entitled.)

Nor did "Christian" murderers always take the Bible seriously. Albert of Aachen, in his account of the early massacres, told how "foolish and insanely fickle" crowd of would-be Crusaders got it into their heads that a certain goose and a certain goat were "inspired by the Holy Spirit," and "worshipped" the beasts "excessively." On the way to the Holy Land, they decided to practice on the local German Jews. When the mob was wiped out even before it left Europe, Albert took that as the judgment of God: "The Lord is a just judge and orders no one unwillingly, or under compulsion, to come under the yoke of the Christian Church."

One can accuse the Medieval mobs that attacked European Jews of all kinds of foolishness, but an excessive devotion to the teachings of the New Testament -- which few could have read -- was probably not among their faults.

Anyway, persecuting Jews because their ancestors crucified Jesus makes no theological sense. Christians believe Jesus laid his life down willingly, "from before the foundations of the world," to save all mankind. (And, Girard says, to reveal scapegoating for the crime that it is.) Given that minorities often suffer in times of stress, and that Jews in particular were subject to pogroms in non-Christian countries, "Christ-killer" was obviously just an excuse.

#85 Does religion cause most divisions among people? "Without religion, and religiously

segregated education, the divide simply would not be there. From Kosovo to Palestine, from Iraq to Sudan, from Ulster to the Indian subcontinent, look carefully at any region of the world where you find intractable enmity and violence between rival groups. I cannot guarantee that you'll find religions as the dominant labels for in-groups and out-groups. But it's a very good bet." (260)

It is an excellent bet. But which is cause, and which effect? Groups choose religions in part in order to self-identity against the Other, which they hate for some other reason. This is why the English become Anglican, while the Irish remained Catholic, and the Scottish became Presbyterian. Even wolves protect the integrity of their territory by urinating on bushes. If wolves mark their boundaries so simply, why is it surprising if human beings find more sophisticated ways to do the same?

The question is whether divisions will lessen if belief in the supernatural dies down. The 20th Century was, among other things a vast empirical test of this question. The answer appeared to be "no." Violent conflict broke out between Russia and China, China and Vietnam, and Vietnam and Cambodia. Combatants simply chose new labels: "Titoists" in Yugoslavia hated "revisionists" in Russia, and a long series of internal purge trials tortured and killed "Mensheviks," "Renegade socialists," "kulak," "Trotskyite-Zinovievian agents of fascism," "right-wing revisionists," "counter-revolutionaries," "cosmopolite," "Titoist," "cow ghost snake spirits." If anything, the end of religion seemed to make the name-calling more creative, and the flame of hatred burn brighter.

It will be objected that it isn't fair to judge all of atheism by what the disciples of Karl Marx made of it. Probably not. But it is foolish of Dawkins, in the face of this history, to try to correlate religion and violence the way he does.

#86 Was religion the only thing that divided India? "In India at the time of partition, more than a million people were massacred in religious riots between Hindus and Muslims . . . There were no badges other than religious ones with which to label whom to kill. Ultimately, there was nothing to divide them but religion." (260)

Dawkins does not give a citation here. Certainly India was divided in many ways in 1949: politically, with people belonging to hundreds of different states, ethnically, by caste, gender, language, and religion. It is hard to believe none of these other divisions played a role. I concede Dawkins' larger point, however. Certainly religion CAN cause or acerbate conflict, and did in the case of India. (Though I doubt the history of India is any more violent than that of the less religious China, where people usually found other things to quarrel about.)

#87 Is "religion" a force for evil? "Even if religion did no harm in itself, its wanton and carefully nurtured divisiveness -- its deliberate and cultivated pandering to humanity's natural tendency to favour in-groups and shun out-groups -- would be enough to make it a significant force for evil in the world." (262)

Dawkins' error here is reification. He forgets that "religion" is an abstract term, and treats it as a single, concrete entity.

In fact, "religion" doesn't nurture divisiveness -- people do. What they believe can either divide them, or bring them together. I know of no evidence that religious people are more divisive than people who lack faith in God, and Richard Dawkins doesn't offer any.

I wrote a book rebutting a group of liberal New Testament scholars called the Jesus Seminar. But on this subject, Dawkins might benefit from reading what Jesus Seminar fellows like Marcus Borg and Robert Funk have to say, about how Jesus "routinely breached the walls and barriers that set sacred space off from profane, and he trampled indifferently on the social dividers that enforced segregation." Cultural, gender, and class transcendence was part of the original appeal of Christianity.

#88 How did we get past slavery? "We have almost all moved on, and in a big way, since biblical times. Slavery, which was taken for granted in the Bible and throughout most of history, was abolished in civilized countries in the nineteenth century." (265)

Here, Dawkins is not so much in error as omitting the most pertinent facts: that the movement to abolish slavery was overwhelmingly led by committed Christians, for religious reasons. (See *Truth Behind the New Atheism*, 144-148, for the short version, Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 291-365 for a fuller version, or Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade*, for a good general history.)

#89 Are biblical women seen as "property?" "Women are no longer regarded as property, as they clearly were in biblical times." (265)

"Biblical times" is an ambivalent term to generalize about. Dawkins might mean, "Conditions in all human societies from about 1000 BC to about 100 AD." Given his comments on this subject elsewhere, what he probably does mean is, "Conditions in ancient Hebrew society influenced by the Bible."

Probably he means that women are portrayed as "property" in the Bible. If so, he is shining his readers. Are Eve, Jezebel, Ester, Ruth, the "woman of noble character" in Proverbs 31, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the "woman at the well," or Priscilla, really shown as nothing but material objects owned by their men-folk? Preposterous.

The American Taliban? Faith and "Civil" Society

#90 Who is guilty of hate-speech? Dawkins tells of a twelve year old boy in Ohio who "won in court the right to wear a T-shirt to school bearing the words 'Homosexuality is a sin, Islam is a lie, abortion is murder. Some issues are just black and white!'" Dawkins argues that the parents couldn't have based their case on the 1st Amendment "because free speech is deemed not to include 'hate speech.'" He also gives this as an example of Christians "harassing" or "abusing" homosexuals. (23)

Certainly the shirt is discourteous. It violates St. Paul's admonition to "speak the truth in love."

But is describing activities as "sins," or beliefs as "lies," really "hate speech?" If it is, Dawkins himself is far more guilty than the twelve-year old. The whole point of his book is not just that Islam is a "lie," (or, if you prefer, "delusion"), but that ALL religions are delusions. And he does

not faint from using the word "lie" on the very next page, when responding to a Muslim himself! Nor does Dawkins hesitate to condemn what he sees as evil acts; *God Delusion* is chock full of such imprecations.

And if the American Constitution doesn't protect our right to say what we think is false or immoral, what good is it? The boots stomping over Dawkins' polemical grave are his own.

#91 Does calling homosexuality a "sin" constitute an insult? "You can't get away with saying, 'If you try to stop me from insulting homosexuals it violates my freedom of prejudice.' But you can get away with saying, 'It violates my freedom of religion.'"

The issue apparently in view is the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist teaching that homosexual acts are wrong. But again, while saying an act is "wrong" may be debatable, it is hardly an "insult." If it is, Dawkins betrays his promise not to deal in wanton insults (see #92) on almost every page of this book. What this betrays, again, is a double-standard on Dawkins' part.

#92 Does Dawkins go out of his way to offend? "It is in the light of the unparalleled presumption of respect for religion that I make my own disclaimer for this book. I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid and gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else." (27)

The first thing to notice about this promise is the assumption it is based on, which Dawkins has been talking about for several pages: that religion is given special "kids gloves" treatment in the marketplace of ideas, offered respect it does not deserve. And Dawkins is probably right that religious ideas are not usually scrutinized in public discourse. But perhaps this reticence is a matter of common courtesy. One does not attack someone else's cherished beliefs unless necessary, out of respect for the person, not always the belief. Note by contrast to the "new atheists," the courtesy and tact with which St. Paul speaks to the Athenians. (Acts 17) (Of course this is not to deny that Christians often DO criticize religious ideas they think false or harmful.)

But the clearer error here is Dawkins' claim that he will "not go out of his way to offend." It is hard to reconcile many of the things Dawkins says later in the book with this promise. One might respond that Dawkins really believes every word he says, so he is not "going out of his way" to offend – he's not put off his course in the least! Still, even atheists who have read the book have reported feeling that Dawkins seems to revel in contemptuous scoffing. So this qualifies at least as a dubious claim.

#93 "The founders most certainly were secularists who believed in keeping religion out of politics." (41)

The religious views of the founders is a hotly disputed question. Careful historians generally admit that this is because it is a complex question. Even the more skeptical, like Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin, injected religion into politics themselves at times. James Madison was probably the most consistent separatist, but even he lapsed at times. Stephen Waldon's new

book, *Founding Faith*, is friendly to the "separatist" position, but shows with admirable fairness just how complex the reality was – in sharp contrast to Dawkins' comic-book caricature.

#94 Does the Constitution separate Church and State? "The constitutional separation of church and state." (212)

The American Constitution contains no such provision.

#95 Did Pat Robertson say that? "In 2005, the fine city of New Orleans was catastrophically flooded in the aftermath of a hurricane, Katrina. The Reverend Pat Robertson, one of America's best-known televangelists and a former presidential candidate, was reported as blaming the hurricane on a lesbian comedian who happened to live in New Orleans. You'd think an omnipotent God would adopt a slightly more targeted approach to zapping sinners: a judicious heart attack, perhaps, rather than the wholesale destruction of an entire city just because it happened to be the domicile of one lesbian comedian." (239)

For a zoologist, Dawkins delivers a punch line impressively. Unfortunately, Pat Robertson didn't make that comment. This "quote" was invented out of whole cloth by a spoof website called "Dateline Hollywood" (which claims to have been founded in 360 B.C. as "Gladiator's Weekly.")

The error is symptomatic, and the root problem can be traced to Dawkins' anemic bibliography. Of Dawkins 156 citations (a paltry number for a 400 page book), the large majority are to newspaper articles or other periodicals or web sites, especially secularist web sites. Only a small handful of books are cited, and even fewer books by people with whom Dawkins disagrees.

#96 "Pat Robertson would be harmless comedy, were he less typical of those who today hold power and influence in the United States." (239)

If that is so, Dr. Dawkins should furnish accurate quotes from the truly dangerous ones, rather than jousting against twelve-year old boys, spoof web sites, and losing candidates for obscure state senate seats.

#97 What "American Taliban?" "No religious leader today (apart from the likes of the Taliban or the American Christian equivalent) thinks like Moses." (246)

Dawkins is, I think, wrong about the oppressive character of Old Testament monotheism, but let's bracket the slam on Moses. The error I would like to point out in this statement is the assumption that the Taliban has even a rough "equivalent" in the United States. Dawkins writes at length, trying to demonstrate the existence of the "American Taliban." I think this is a fantasy. See my rebuttal in *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, chapter 10, "What American Taliban?"

#98 Is theocracy closing in on America? "The incipient American theocracy (see Kevin Phillip's book of that name)." (286)

I debunk this delusion on pages 173-188 of *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*. American Christians do not want a theocracy, still less are we going to have one.

#99 Is Ann Coulter serious? On page 288, Dr. Dawkins cites "somebody called Ann Coulter" from a web site entitled, "The American Taliban." American colleagues, Dawkins notes, "have persuaded me" that Coulter "is not a spoof." Referring (presumably) to radical Muslims, she writes: "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity." (288)

Coulter is, of course, a spoof – a self-caricature. Whether serious or tongue-in-cheek -- and anyone who rules the latter out does not, I think, get Coulter -- the woman is in the business of providing "shock quotes" to give talk show hosts something to yack about. In a word, she's in the same racket as Ariana Huffington, Michael Moore, and a slew of other "shock jocks." Dawkins ought to recognize the club -- he sends his rhetorical drives down their back nine on a regular basis.

It is, in any case, hard to imagine Ann Coulter as part of the "incipient American theocracy." For one thing, she's Catholic, while most of the others are Protestants.

#100 Does "theocracy" render life in America, or ancient Israel, "horrifying"? "The Afghan Taliban and the American Taliban are good examples of what happens when people take their scriptures literally and seriously. They provide a horrifying modern enactment of what life might have been like under the theocracy of the Old Testament." (288)

According to Treadgold, ancient Israel was "unique" in avoiding "the techniques, devices, and institutions of despotism." While Afghanistan under the Taliban stood out for its barbarism and lack of freedom, ancient Israel -- and modern America -- both have influenced the world in the direction of liberty. (Treadgold traced modern democratic freedoms to two main sources: Greece, and ancient Israel.)

In some ways ancient Israel was better off than "modern" Afghanistan. The Taliban outlawed music: by contrast, the longest book of the Old Testament is a song book from which the world still sings. The Taliban kept women at home: the Bible did more to liberate women than anything. The laws in ancient Israel admittedly are harsh by modern standards, but by the standards of the day, in several respects they represented progress. (Also see Thomas Cahill, *Gift of the Jews*.)

#101 Did Mother Theresa deserve a Nobel Prize? "Mother Theresa of Calcutta actually said, in her speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, 'The greatest destroyer of peace is abortion.' What? How can a woman with such a cock-eyed judgment be taken seriously on any topic, let alone be thought seriously worthy of a Nobel Prize?" (292)

Perhaps because she spent her life bathing, washing, and comforting poor people, taking them off the streets, and giving them a place to live out their final days, asking for nothing for herself, and giving those the world cast away love?

A better question would be why Yasser Arafat -- who had no objection to the destruction of young life -- won the Nobel Prize. Most people have the sense to recognize that the Nobel committee honored itself by their association with Mother Theresa, not the other way around.

#102 Should we worry that America will become a Christian fascist state? "This ambition to achieve what can only be called a Christian fascist state is entirely typical of the American Taliban. It is an almost exact mirror image of the Islamic fascist state so ardently sought by many people in other parts of the world. Randall Terry is not -- yet -- in political power. But no observer of the American political scene at the time of writing (2006) can afford to be sanguine." (293)

Actually, observers could afford to be sanguine. Terry Randall ran for an obscure and highly conservative seat in the Florida state legislature, and lost badly.

By contrast, George Galloway, a left-wing British politician who not only says things every bit as batty as Terry Randall, such as rhapsodizing over the thought of Tony Blair's death, and was in cahoots with Saddam Hussein, has been a member of Parliament for twenty-one years now. (The national elective body in the United Kingdom, not some remote shire in the north.) It follows that, if one wants to stake a claim on paranoia, Americans have vastly more reason to fear a Baathist takeover of Britain, than the Brits have to fear that some sort of fascistic Taliban state is -- or was -- about to seize power in America.

#103 Are foes of abortion concerned about "slippery slopes?" "Slippery slope arguments might be seen as a way in which consequentialists can reimport a form of indirect absolutism. But the religious foes of abortion don't bother with slippery slopes." (294)

In fact, the influential documentary, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, with C. Everett Koop and philosopher Francis Schaeffer, made a strong and influential "slippery slope" argument against abortion. Such arguments have been staples of the pro-life movement at least since that time -- most eloquently perhaps in the work of Natural Law philosopher Jay Budziszewski. (See *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide*, and *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law*.)

Dawkins' comment betrays the fact that he does not really know what pro-life thinkers think. As so often, he is shooting his mouth off without bothering to gain a first-hand knowledge of the subject he's writing on.

#104 Is the American Taliban eating its own? "In 2003 Paul Hill was executed for the murder of Dr. Britton and his bodyguard, saying he would do it again to save the unborn. Candidly looking forward to dying for his cause, he told a news conference, 'I believe the state, by executing me, will be making me a martyr.' Right-wing anti-abortionists protesting at his execution were joined in unholy alliance by left-wing opponents of the death penalty who urged the Governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, to 'stop the martyrdom of Paul Hill.'" (296)

The plot thickens. The United States is on the verge of a Taliban-like takeover because George Bush, a right-wing Christian who executes killers and dislikes abortion, is in power. A Lutheran pastor shoots and kills an abortion doctor, and is then executed by the president's own brother! And even though capital punishment is a sign of George Bush' theocratic tendencies (p. 291), it takes an "unholy alliance" to oppose it in this case!

What a tangled web!

Has the American Taliban started eating its own? Or does this incident reveal how marginal the people Dawkins frowns his worried brow at really are? He points to two people who have been killed by "Christian terrorists," in a country of 300 million people, over 70% of whom call themselves Christians. But over the past several years, thousands of Americans have been killed by Muslim terrorists. Hundreds more were killed by agnostic (Timothy McVeigh) and atheist (the Unabomber, quite likely – see *The Unabomber at Harvard*) terrorists. For Dawkins to focus so much attention on that rarest of all creatures in American life, the Christian terrorist, and imply that some general conclusion can be reached about the state of American Christianity from him, makes the term “stacking the deck” respectable by comparison.

#105 Are most Americans pro-choice? "A substantial majority of American Christians do not take an absolutist attitude to abortion, and are pro-choice." (297)

The first is true, the second dubious at best. A Los Angeles Times poll in 2005, the year before Dawkins' book was published, showed the following:

41% favored making abortion illegal with a few exceptions.

24% favored making abortion always legal

19% favored making abortion legal most of the time.

12% favored making abortion totally illegal.

Whether you define the “pro-choice” position as favoring the right to abortion in all or in most cases, neither 24% nor 43% constitutes a majority.

A Gallup / CNN/ USA Today poll yielded similar results later the same year. Their poll asked, "*Do you think abortions should be legal under any circumstances, legal only under certain circumstances, or illegal in all circumstances?*" Results were:

Response:	2005-MAY	2005-JUN	2005-NOV
Legal under any circumstances	23%	24%	26%
Legal under most circumstances	12%	15%	16%
Legal only under a few circumstances	40%	40%	39%
Illegal in all circumstances	22%	20%	16%
No opinion/no response	3%	1%	3%

Again, "legal under any circumstances" was affirmed by only about a quarter of Americans. Even with "legal under most circumstances" added on, that's still a substantial minority -- just 42% -- which would be a very poor showing in a presidential election.

Dawkin's error seems, again, to arise from citing only a friendly web-site, the "Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice," and ignoring neutral or hostile sources.

#106 Is capacity for suffering a wise criteria for choosing whom not to kill? "Secular moralists are more likely to ask, 'Never mind whether it is human (what does that even mean for a little cluster of cells?); at what age does any developing embryo, of any species, become capable of suffering?' (298)

Does that mean murder would be all right when the victim was asleep, or under anesthesia? Or is it the capacity for suffering, rather than actual suffering, that makes murder wrong, for some reason? What reason? I certainly hope "secular moralists" have thought this issue through more carefully than that. Dawkins simplification of moral ethics, like his simplification of Medieval philosophy, carries the characteristic odor of the dilettante.

#107 Is the Beethoven argument valid? On pages 298-300 Dawkins takes on what he describes as the "Great Beethoven fallacy," the argument against abortion that goes, "The father was syphilitic, the mother tuberculous. Of the four children born, the first was blind, the second died . . . What would you have done?" To the answer, "I would have terminated the pregnancy," the pro-life debater drops his punch-line: "Then you would have murdered Beethoven!"

Dawkins ridicules this argument, first of all, by pointing out that the story about Beethoven is an urban legend. Beethoven was a second child, and his father apparently did not have syphilis.

The more important point, Dawkins points out, is that the same logic would condemn us for any failure to engage in sexual conjunction. After all, a Beethoven, Da Vinci or Einstein might issue from any of act of love -- and we have no idea which. After playing with the idea with Monty Python, Dawkins concludes:

"The Great Beethoven Fallacy is a typical example of the kind of logical mess we get into when our minds are befuddled by religiously inspired absolutism."

Beethoven is not an argument I would choose to make. But despite the rhetorical show, Dawkins is missing the point. Beethoven is a response to the "unwanted child" argument made by the Pro-Choice side, or the eugenicist-turned-liberal who says, "These kids can't have a real life, born into poverty and all." As such, the logic is valid -- one cannot assume that birth into desperate circumstances will mean a life unworthy of living -- even if better examples could be chosen. (One I have heard is Jesus.)

108 "The granting of uniquely special rights to cells of the species *Homo sapiens* is

hard to reconcile with the fact of evolution." (300)

By "cells" here Dawkins means "a developing human at an early stage," not a flap of skin off a cut. In that sense, Dawkins' comment is both pernicious and untrue. Untrue because philosophers can easily reconcile special rights for early-term babies with evolution, especially if they don't assume atheism as well. (And yes, the "slippery slope" may come in here.) Pernicious, because that slippery slope marks a course modern society has slid down more than once. It would be foolish to scoff at the abyss while broken bodies still groan up from the depths.

The error here lies in assuming that evolution by itself gives human beings the same status as animals -- apart from intellectual capacity, presumably. That would only be true if, as Dawkins assumes, evolution implies atheism. God may (for all Dawkins knows) have lent human beings a status unique among animals -- as the Genesis account says He did -- even if we originally arose from the same source or process.

#109 How many murderers make a plural? "In illustration of the dark side of absolutism, I mentioned the Christians in America who blow up abortion clinics." (301)

Actually, I think he only mentioned one. (See *Truth Behind the New Atheism*, 190-193, also *Harvard and the Unabomber*.)

This matters because Dawkins depicts fringe Christianity as the center, or "mainstream" as he puts it. (See #113-5.) Use of a singular noun here might have made the maneuver too obviously ridiculous.

#110 Are Christians enthusiastic about doomsday? "Or, switching to Christianity, I could have cited those American 'rapture' Christians whose powerful influence on American Middle Eastern policy is governed by their biblical belief that Israel has a God-given right to all the lands of Palestine. Some rapture Christians go further and actually yearn for nuclear war because they interpret it as the 'Armageddon' which, according to their bizarre but disturbingly popular interpretation of the book of Revelation, will hasten the Second Coming. I cannot improve on Sam Harris chilling comment, in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*:

"It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to say that if the city of New York were suddenly replaced by a ball of fire, some significant percentage of the American population would see a silver lining in the subsequent mushroom cloud . . . Imagine the consequences of the US government actually believing that the world was about to come to an end and that its ending would be glorious. The fact that nearly half of the American population apparently believes this, purely on the basis of religious dogma, should be considered a moral and intellectual emergency." (302)

This is overwrought nonsense. Why, first of all, does Harris say almost half of Americans "apparently" believe the end of the world will be a good thing? It is because he is extrapolating beyond his own data. He cites a survey that shows that 44% of Americans think Jesus is going to return in the next 50 years. He then adds that "according to the most

common interpretation (*how did Harris, a secular Jewish science grad student, decide what the most common interpretation of Christ's return is?*) Jesus will return only after things have gone horribly awry here on earth." Then he tosses out the "mushroom cloud over New York" image to spice things up.

This is, of course, sleazy rhetoric and horrendous logic. The implication that American Christians would be anything other than horrified to see an American city obliterated is, frankly, disgusting. Both Dawkins and Harris owe American Christians an apology.

It is true that theology, or atheology, do influence how we see the world.

I took a survey at probably the strongest pro-Israeli church in Washington State, a conservative, politically-active Assembly of God "megachurch" that often puts on programs in support of the state of Israel. I asked 58 mostly highly-dedicated members of a "worldview" class, "Which statement best describes your views of the conflict between Israel and Palestinian Muslims?" Responses were as follows:

"America should remain neutral." (4 votes)

"America should support Palestinian Arabs because their cause is just." (0 votes)

"America should support Israel, because God promised them the disputed territories." (39 votes)

"I believe Christ will return following the battle of Armageddon. The US should support Israel in order to bring the End Times closer." (9 votes)

"I cannot support the Palestinian Arabs, because they use terrorism." (26 votes)

"I cannot support Israel, because it oppresses the Palestinian Arabs." (0 votes)

"America should support Israel, because their cause is just." (27 votes)

"Other" (3 responses -- justice for all, love is most important, etc.)

Whatever their influence might be (and I think it is exaggerated), it does appear that the most pro-Israel conservative Christians believe God has provided the land of Israel for the Jewish people. A few even seem to buy the "support Israel, and wait for Armageddon" view. But the fact that only a relatively small minority at one of the most pro-Israel congregations in the country take that position, casts doubt on the idea that it has the impact on international policy that Dawkins supposes.

And notice that for most such Christians, theological reasons for supporting Israel seem to be integrated with the belief that (1) the Israeli cause is just (as one might say of the Taiwanese or South Korean cause against the states that threaten them) and (2) their Arab opponents practice terrorism. So it's not purely a matter of abstract theology. Even among "rapture" Christians, views of the Middle East are influenced by theology, but not "governed" by it --

they are aware of the history of the Jews, persecuted by both Europeans and Arabs for more than a thousand years. They are also aware of the activities of Hamas and Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization that preceded Hamas.

When I surveyed a similar class in a conservative church within the "mainline" Presbyterian Church -- USA denomination, more people said America should support Israel "because their cause is just" than because "God promised them the disputed territories." More also seemed to favor a neutral stance (though the sample was very small), and a couple people said they favored the Palestinian Arab side. No one affirmed the "Armageddon" position.

#111 Does Christianity teach the murder of abortion doctors? "However misguided we may think (terrorists), they are motivated, like the Christian murderers of abortion doctors, by what they perceive to be righteousness, faithfully pursuing what their religion tells them." (304)

What they THINK their religion tells them. It would be hard to find a passage in the Bible that commands anyone to kill abortion doctors. The Old Testament does allow capital punishment for murder (however that is defined), but then so, it seems, does Richard Dawkins.

#112 What motivates terrorists? "They are not psychotic; they are religious idealists who, by their own lights, are rational. They perceive their acts to be good, not because of some warped personal idiosyncrasy, and not because they have been possessed by Satan, but because they have been brought up, from the cradle, to have total and unquestioning faith. Sam Harris quotes a failed Palestinian suicide bomber who said that what drove him to kill Israelis was 'the love of martyrdom . . . I didn't want revenge for anything. I just wanted to be a martyr.'" (304-5)

I don't want to give the impression that I in any way approve the actions of Paul Hill, the ex-Presbyterian pastor who murdered the abortion doctor, or Michael Bray, his friend. (Dr. Dawkins neglects to point out that Hill had already been ex-communicated by his church for defending violence – which seems like a wise thing to have done.) But I think it's obvious that the motives of these extremists were different from the suicide bomber Harris cites. In this case, the Christian terrorist killed to protect innocent life (as he saw it) from the guilty. The jihadist killed innocent lives (as he explained) to get to heaven. (Mohammed promised salvation to those who die in *jihad* against unbelievers; even Presbyterians who happen to be terrorists seem to know better than that!)

Dawkins also appears to be biographically incorrect. According to Wikipedia, Hill converted to Christianity (from a life of fighting and drug abuse) at the age of 19. So apparently he was NOT brought up from the cradle to have "total and unquestioning faith" in Christianity -- though his childhood background obviously may have had something to do with later career choices.

#113 Is religious fanaticism "mainstream" in contemporary America? "In early 21st Century America, what seems extreme to the outside world is actually mainstream." (318-9)

Having grown up in the evangelical community in America, lived almost five decades among evangelicals, largely American, visited over 300 churches of many denominations around the world, and spoken in many of them, almost always with periods of Q & A following, I say

nonsense. I do not meet the lunatics Dawkins seeks out. The vast majority of those I do meet are intelligent, hard-working, and honest, and add a great deal (as Arthur Brooks shows in a systematic way) to society. Dawkins cherry-picks the most extreme, distorts even that, then portrays his warped caricatures as mainstream reality. (I show how he does this, and respond in more detail, in chapter 10 of *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, "What About the America Taliban?")

#114 Is “theocracy” on the horizon for America? Quoting a "concerned American colleague:"

"If secularists are not vigilant, Dominionists and Reconstructionists will soon be mainstream in a true American theocracy." (319)

Most Americans don't even know what these two terms mean; and very few Christians want anything other than Constitutional democracy. Again, refer to the chapter in my book on this subject for a complete response.

#115 Is Pastor Roberts “mainstream,” or a “wing nut?” Dawkins introduces a Colorado preacher who founded a place called "Hell House." The purpose of Hell House is to shock children into living lives of virtue by graphically depicting the horrors that await them if they don't shape up. Dawkins concludes: "We cannot write off Pastor Roberts as an extremist wingnut. Like Ted Haggard, he is mainstream in today's America." (320)

By this point in the book, the very fact that Dr. Dawkins takes note of a man has become evidence that he is in fact an "extremist wingnut." I had never heard of such a place until Dawkins introduced it; and I've been to hundreds of evangelical churches and fellowships. Nor do I know anyone who would approve of such abuse. (Though apparently there are quite a few Brits who approve of the British public school system.)

#116 Do Christians celebrate hell? "Whatever they believe hell is actually like, all these hell-fire enthusiasts seem to share the gloating Schadenfreude and complacency of those who know they are among the saved." (320)

Dawkins quotes Ann Coulter: "I defy any of my co-religionists to tell me they do not laugh at the idea of Dawkins burning in hell." (321)

Ann Coulter: I do not laugh. Nor in presentations around the country, speaking in front of thousands of people on the New Atheism and Richard Dawkins, have I yet heard your sentiment seconded. (Even after I read some of Dawkins' harshest attacks against their faith.)

In the past week, an atheist wished hell existed just so I could go there, and a critic of Intelligent Design who boasts of his friendship with some of Dawkins' favorite evolutionary biologists described to me how he'd like to feed me to snakes or crocodiles. So obviously delight in the suffering of others is not a purely theistic phenomena.

It should be an even more obvious that not everyone who believes in hell, wants anyone at all to go there.

But what is hell like? Isn't it cruel for God to create such a place to begin with? I have often recommended C. S. Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*, which I think is the most persuasive and insightful answer to these and other questions on the subject.

#117 Is teaching about hell is child abuse? "Jill Mytton herself had been brought up to be terrified of hell, had escaped from Christianity as an adult, and now counsels and helps others similarly traumatized in childhood: 'If I think back to my childhood, it's one dominated by fear. And it was the fear of disapproval while in the present, but also of eternal damnation. And for a child, images of hell-fire and gnashing of teeth are actually very real. They are not metaphorical at all . . . Hell is a fearful place. It's complete rejection by God. It's complete judgment, there is real fire, there is real torment, real torture, and it goes on for ever so there is no respite from it.'"

In *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis points out that the Bible offers a variety of metaphors, not all of which fit popular Medieval images. His own quite different images in *The Great Divorce* may have been partly based on the experiences of the Indian Christian mystic, Sundar Singh. Lewis' point in both works is that hell is NOT rejection by God, it is rejection OF God BY us – and that in a free world, we must be allowed a choice.

Dawkins presents the teaching of eternal punishment as "child abuse." But if that is true, wouldn't it also be "child abuse" to tell children that no matter what they do, at the end of their lives they just die and fall to pieces? Both are harsh lessons. But the Christian story at least leaves a way out, the possibility of a happy ending. Should atheists be charged with child abuse? I'm not sure that's a helpful question to ask. I don't think any parent should be chastised for kindly and lovingly teaching his children what they honestly believe to be true, especially if they are careful to admit to the incomplete state of their own knowledge.

Dawkins' complaint also runs up against more systematic research, which shows that highly religious people tend to be happier than highly secular people. Given the greater overall happiness religiously committed people experience (and which both Dawkins and Dennett admit), the force of his argument actually works the opposite way around. It would be better for him, and for society, to be cautious about such arguments.

Morality

#118 Is love a “misfiring” in the brain? "Just as the primitive brain rule of sexual lust passes through the filter of civilization to emerge in the love scenes of Romeo and Juliet, so primitive brain rules of us-versus-them vendetta emerge in the form of the running battles between Capulets and Montagues; while primitive brain rules of altruism and empathy end up in the misfiring that cheers us in the chastened reconciliation of Shakespeare's final scene." (222)

Such reductionism is palpably untrue. First of all, what "fires" between Romeo and Juliet is not just lust: it's romantic love, which cannot be reduced to sexual lust pure and simple. (See the second of C. S. Lewis' *Four Loves* for a fuller and most enlightening explanation.)

More vitally, if you reduce love, justice, vengeance, and reconciliation to a "misfiring" of the

"primitive brain," what about algebra, calculus, physics, and evolutionary biology? Presumably our ability to count also has Darwinian roots. Just because our ancestors didn't do calculus as they tracked zebras across the Serengeti, does not mean higher math is a "misfiring" of our brains. Perhaps math, science, and love are precisely what our brains were built to do. In any case, if the universe has no purpose, no *telos*, then NOTHING is a "misfiring."

#119 Can science find "moral universals?" "If our moral sense, like our sexual desire, is indeed rooted deep in our Darwinian past, predating religion, we should expect that research on the human mind would reveal some moral universals, crossing geographical and cultural barriers, and also, crucially, religious barriers." (222)

Patterns one might find, but not "universals." Our sexuality is not "universal," after all -- some animals reproduce asexually, and others conform to what would seem dysfunctional in court -- eating mates, for example. We could not expect, by studying evolution, to find our patterns of sexuality among creatures on other planets. Morality, on the other hand, must in its basic intuitions be universal, or it is not binding (as we feel it to be binding) anywhere. Here we go beyond evolution to something qualitatively different -- or admit that morality is binding nowhere, and slouch into to sub-humanity.

#120 Do we need God to be good? "The main conclusion of Hauser and Singer's study was that there is no statistically significant difference between atheists and religious believers in making those judgments. This seems compatible with the view, which I and many others hold, that we do not need God in order to be good -- or evil." (226)

Hauser and Singer conducted their surveys by asking people how they felt they should act under certain circumstances. (What do you do if you see a child drowning in a pool? What if you can save several people by killing one and using his organs to save the rest?) It turned out that people of different cultures and beliefs gave very similar answers.

Dawkins tentative conclusion, "we do not need God in order to be good -- or evil" does not follow from this study, however. (Results that Christian "natural law" thinking predicted long before Hauser and Singer went to work, by the way.) Dawkins' literal words -- "seems compatible with the view that" -- are not in error, but only because he is hedging his bets by using careful terminology while leading his readers in the wrong direction.

First of all, morality is more than answering questions on a survey. As Arthur Brooks found in his extensive study of how religion influences charity, in practice, highly religious Americans give more than three times as much to charity on average as the non-religious. (*Who Really Cares? America's Charity Divide: Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why it Matters*) When kindness is dangerous, as during a plague (see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*) or in the Gulag (see Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Gulag Archipelago*), is it not likely that what a person believes might have an effect on how he acts? Stark and Solzhenitsyn found (at least anecdotally) that it did. Arthur Brooks' more systematic data confirms those reports.

So perhaps we do need God, if not to do any good, but to live the best lives we can, as

individuals and as a society. In any case, it is naive and unwarranted to extrapolate directly from Internet surveys to real life.

#121 Do Christians murder more? "Correlation evidence is never conclusive, but the following data, described by Sam Harris in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, are nevertheless striking."

"While political party affiliation in the United States is not a perfect indicator of religiosity, it is no secret that the 'red (Republican) states' are primarily red due to the overwhelming political influence of conservative Christians. If there were a strong correlation between Christian conservatism and societal health, we might expect to see some sign of it in red-state America. We don't. Of the twenty-five cities with the lowest rates of violent crime, 62 percent are in 'blue' (Democratic) states, and 38 percent are in 'red' (Republican) states. Of the twenty-five most dangerous cities, 76% are in red states, and 24 % are in blue states . . . "

Harris goes on, but let's stop here in mercy.

This argument, taken from a study by Gary Jensen, is overwhelmingly stupid, and should embarrass every socially and mathematically-literate skeptic who reads it. I describe the dozens of problems with Jensen's argument in an article called "Does Faith in God up the Murder Rate?" on my web site, christthetao.com. For a shorter version, see pages 178-9 of *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*. Despite its popularity with skeptics, this argument is based on "fly-over" data that establishes nothing at all about the relationship between violence and religion, and is contradicted by more careful, ground-level studies.

#122 Does evidence correlating goodness and religion? Quoting Daniel Dennett:

"One thing we can be sure of is that if there is a significant positive relationship between moral behavior and religious affiliation, practice, or belief, it will soon be discovered, since so many religious organizations are eager to confirm their traditional beliefs about this scientifically. (They are quite impressed with the truth-finding power of science when it supports what they already believe.) Every month that passes without such a demonstration underlines the suspicion that it just isn't so."

The suspicion this passage underlines is that neither Dennett nor Dawkins have done their homework on the relationship between faith and charity. In *Who Really Cares*, Syracuse professor Arthur Brooks summarizes a wealth of research that shows that religiously-involved people are "in every measurable way" more charitable than the non-religious. While the book came out in 2006, the same year as Dennett and Dawkins' books, the studies on which he relied were mostly from several years earlier.

#123 What are our favorite excuses for oppression? Quoting Luis Bunuel, "God and Country are an unbeatable team; they break all records for oppression and bloodshed." (233)

Actually, the records are currently held by Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin, who murdered in the name of an ideology that excluded God, and (at least in theory) in a worldwide, borderless working class. Communism had no use for either God or (in theory) country. (Though in practice

communism evolved in a nationalistic direction, especially under Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Kim Il Sung.) Along with the *uber* nationalistic Adolf Hitler, Arab and European slave traders, who acted from the desire for cold cash, for the most part, are among the runners-up.

The Bible: Is the Good Book Bad?

#124 Is the Bible incoherent? "Much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents."

Perhaps an amateur can be defined as a person who finds unreal patterns, or overlooks patterns that are real. But it is always impossible to say for sure that a set of data lacks any cohering pattern. It may turn out that with more information, or closer study, connections and relationships will define themselves out of what originally seemed a meaningless jumble of facts or images.

Millions who spend their lives studying the Bible claim to find a pattern, or many patterns, joining the entire book together into a single, coherent unity. Is Richard Dawkins really in a position to deny the unity that he does not find, but we do? All he can honestly say is, "I have found no pattern," or (perhaps even more honestly) "A scholar I find congenial says she finds no pattern." No one can say, "There is no pattern."

Again, Dawkins could walk a few minutes from his front door, and read the work of intelligent, well-educated men and women who have described remarkable themes and connections that unify the book he dismisses into a coherent tapestry. Instead, he repeatedly shows contempt for theologians, especially those who find such unity, and makes a virtue of not having read their material.

I am doing research presently on the theme of "fulfillment" in the New Testament, and in later Christian thought. That concept -- the idea that Jesus brings Jewish and world history to a consummation -- not only unifies the New Testament, but binds it in remarkable ways to the Old. This is a theme early Christians delighted in exploring, and that great historians, philosophers, and missionaries have come back to with remarkable insights from other cultures.

And that is only one way of saying Jesus brings unity and coherence to both Old and New Testaments. This is the subject of many books, which whatever his antipathies for theology, he needs to read and consider before he can even begin to conclude that the bible is "disjointed," "chaotic" or "cobbled together."

#125 Do Asian holy men read nothing but the Holy Bible? "A frighteningly large number of people still do take their scriptures, including the story of Noah, literally . . . (they no doubt include) many of those Asian holy men who blamed the 2004 tsunami not on a plate tectonic shift but on human sins . . . Steeped in the story of Noah, and ignorant of all except biblical learning, who can blame them?" (238)

Who in the world is Dawkins talking about? Asian "holy men" who know nothing about anything but the Bible, Noah in particular, and blamed the tsunami on sin? None of the Asian

countries affected was majority Christian. Indonesia, India, and Bangladesh are not part of the Bible Belt.

#126 Was Sodom famous for religious piety? (About the rape of two women in the city of Sodom, as recorded in the *Book of Genesis*): "Whatever else this strange story might mean, it surely tells us something about the respect accorded to women in this intensely religious culture." (240)

The culture in question is that of Sodom, hardly a by-word for obsessive piety.

#127 Starved for love in a cave? "Starved of male company, (Lot's daughters) decided to make their father drunk and copulate with him."

That's the Phil Donahue version. The biblical account offers more understandable motives for the girls' seduction of their father (from the ancient Middle Eastern perspective): the desire for prodigy.

#128 Why do Levites abuse their lovers? Dawkins retells the story of a gang-rape and murder recorded in the *Book of Judges*. A Levite was visiting a town in the tribe of Benjamin. In the evening, villagers came to the house he was staying in, and demanded sex from him. Instead, he handed over his concubine, whom they abused until the morning. Finding her dead, and apparently cold as a cold fish, the Levite then cut his lover into twelve pieces, sending one to each of the tribes of Israel, to protest. Dawkins concludes:

"Let's charitably put it down again to the ubiquitous weirdness of the Bible." (241)

A better course would be to look at the actual explanation, which is given in the text. While gruesome by our standards (it would fit well into ancient Chinese political tales), from his perspective, the Levite's actions made some sense. (And the people of his day did not get their meat from the butcher – they were doubtless less squeamish than we about cutting flesh!) The Levite was engaging in a "performance art." He was drumming up outrage against a dastardly crime in a palpable, physical way. He was a shock jock with a purpose. And he succeeded -- eleven of the tribes united to punish the guilty village.

The larger point is that this was not how things were supposed to be. The Bible tells us a terrible story, to make the point that society was a mess -- "every man did what was right in his own eyes." The author assumes his readers will pick up on the moral: the nation was in a state of anarchy, and had drifted far from God.

Dawkins heroically misses the point.

#129 Why did God tell Abraham to sacrifice his son? One of the most famous passages of the Old Testament is Genesis 22, which tells how God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his long-awaited son, Isaac. Dawkins retells the story as part of his brief against the Bible. At the last minute, an angel appeared, telling Abraham to stay his hand. Dawkins explains:

"God was only joking after all . . . By the standards of modern morality, this disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defense: "I was only obeying orders.'" (242)

It is strange to read humor into this passage – unless it is Dawkins who is joking. Again, Dawkins misses not one point, but two. In some ways, (see *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, 100-102), this incident represented two great turning points of human history. The real connection to Nuremberg here is that for perhaps the first time, human sacrifice is declined. From Israel (and ancient China) the news would spread, and this gruesome practice would gradually subside, as gentler form of civilization took hold. There is also more than a hint here of an even more revolutionary innovation which would change all the earth in numerous profound ways, when "God provides a lamb" for Isaac.

#130 How do believers understand the story of Abraham and Isaac? "Second, if not as literal fact, how should we take the story? As an allegory? Then an allegory for what? Surely nothing praiseworthy." (242)

Aside from the testing of Abraham, about which Kierkegaard wrote a famous and "praiseworthy" book, one thing this story seems to mean is, "God does not want human sacrifice." Human sacrifice was common around the world at that time. It was the Judeo-Christian (and Islamic) traditions that put an end to it. From that point of view, the story of Abraham and Isaac was a turning point in history. (There is also a parallel in Chinese tradition, with the story of King Tang, who offered to sacrifice himself under a mulberry tree.)

The great Rene Girard argues that the Bible does to sacrifice exactly the opposite of what naïve moderns like Dawkins suppose: it undermines previously accepted social violence. Girardian scholars point out that the Hebrew term for "God" in the first part of this story is generic; but a more specific term, "The Eternal" is introduced at the climax of the story. What this reminds us, whether so intended by the author or not, is that human sacrifice was a normal religious activity UNTIL God revealed himself. (See <http://fayrights.blogspot.com/2006/08/girardian-interpretation-of-genesis.html>.) It was Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and (to some extent) Confucian theism, which ended that.

The other meaning Christians have long found in this story is symbolic, pointing to Jesus, the lamb whom God provided for our sins. What is unfortunate is not that Dawkins disputes these explanations, is that he appears never to have heard of them. It is like holding two of Darwin's finches in your hand and asking, "What possible explanation could evolutionary biologists have for these birds' beaks?"

#131 Do Christians have any criterion for understanding the Bible? After taking us through much of the Old Testament on his theme tour, Dawkins argues that the Bible cannot be the basis for a Christian morality, because it is such a jumble of contradictory stories. So the real basis for Christian morality must lie outside the Bible: "We must have some independent criterion for deciding which are the moral bits: a criterion which, wherever it comes from, cannot come from scripture itself and is presumably available to all of us whether we are religious or not." (243)

Dawkins overlooks a Christian idea that has 2000 years of history: Natural Law, the theory that moral truth is planted on the human heart by God. On that assumption, “independent” moral reasoning (as if anyone really does derive values independent of their own traditions and social environment) derives, when it works well, from the same source as the truths of Scripture – from God.

More relevantly, though, Christians do have a built-in "criteria" for evaluating Scripture: the life, teachings, and example of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the lens through which we see and make sense of Scripture as a whole, including, of course, the story of Abraham and Isaac that so baffles Dr. Dawkins.

#132 Does the Old Testament give good reasons to worship one God? Dawkins discusses how ancient Jewish religion excluded "false gods," quoting Exodus at length. (246) But he omits reasons given in the Old Testament for excluding other deities of the Middle East that might make sense to modern readers – such as widespread human sacrifice, or the political oppression of neighboring states. As historian Donald Treadgold explains, “Hebrew society was unique in the ancient near East in managing to avoid the techniques, devices, and institutions of despotism.” (*Freedom, a History*, p. 32)

#133 Have we learned from the Bible? "All I am establishing is that modern morality, wherever else it comes from, does not come from the Bible." (246)

What Dawkins establishes, in his island-hopping conquest of the Old Testament, aside from his own frequent failure to understand the text, is that the moral assumptions of the ancient Middle East were often at odds with our own. They cared mostly for the "in-group;" we believe (hopefully) that a man or woman should not “be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” (As Martin Luther King put it.) They engaged in slavery; we pay our employees. They educated boys; we educate children of both genders.

Coughing up a few ill-digested anecdotes from the Old Testament does not even begin to answer the really important question, "How did these changes come about?" Still less does it confound the argument made by many scholars (including myself) that in fact the Christian Scriptures HAVE deeply influenced whatever has changed for the better in human morals over the past several centuries, that as I show in *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, more often than not, it was zealous Christians with Bibles in hand who implemented these reforms.

Modern morality may have improved in some ways, but the improvement is far from uniform. Some 16 million people around the world are still subject to some form of slavery. The number was far greater during the heyday of the mid-20th Century totalitarian states, showing that progress is fragile and reversible. More and more children are raised with only one, or no, loving parents in the home. Modern technology has made it possible for millions of young people to divorce from reality, to live vicariously through the Internet, or in virtual reality games.

It remains vital, therefore, to keep a sharp eye out for what has saved us before, in the reasonable assumption that the same source of life might save us again.

#134 How do you judge between Scriptures? "Apologists cannot get away with claiming that religion provides them with some sort of inside track to defining what is good and what is bad -- a privileged source unavailable to atheists. They cannot get away with it, not even if they employ that favorite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as 'symbolic' rather than literal. By what criterion do you decide which passages are symbolic, which literal?" (247)

Dawkins' error here lies in asking an important question, without even looking for answers. (The last question he asks here seems purely rhetorical; after it he begins a new paragraph, and goes on to something else.) But telling literal from symbolic or figurative language is an important element in ALL literary criticism; you can't get away from it by putting your Bible away. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff gives a pretty good answer to the question as applied to Scripture, in his book *Divine Discourse*, which grew out of his lectures at Oxford. If Dr. Dawkins is going to dabble in deep questions, he needs to read thoughtful Christian literature on this subject, and not just mock in ignorance from a distance.

#135 Do we need religion for "good people" to do evil? Dawkins cites a famous comment by Nobel prize-winning American physicist Steven Weinberg, " "For good people to do evil things, it takes religion." He then points out that Blaise Pascal said "something similar: 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.'" (249)

It's questionable how similar these two statements are. Weinberg appears to be saying that religion is a necessary cause for "good people" to do evil, while Pascal says that people do evil most wholeheartedly when motivated by religion.

An initial question to ask about Weinberg's claim, as a Christian, a psychologist, or an evolutionist, is if there really ARE any "good people." Why "survival machines" programmed by our genes to kill, maim, gorge, and reproduce at all costs, our minds taken hostage and programmed by vile "memes," can in any case be described as "good," or where that goodness could conceivably come from, is murky at best.

Pascal's comment can be defended, especially if you define "religion" broadly enough to include the great secular tyrannies that would appear after he made it. But if there really are many "good" people out there, and if "religion" is defined in terms of supernatural beliefs, then Weinberg is plainly wrong. People are pressured into acting in ways that bring discredit to their upbringing or character for all kinds of reasons – finances, love, sleepless nights, torture chambers in the Ministry of Love. Steven Weinberg should read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* or *The First Circle*.

Arthur Brooks shows that the average spiritually-committed believer in the United States gives more than three times as much to charity as the average non-church goer. If Weinberg is right, does that mean all those non-believers are NATURALLY so much stingier than believers? This is empirical evidence that at least in America, religion more often helps bad people do good.

#136 How did Jesus treat his family? "Jesus' family values, it has to be admitted, were not such as one might wish to focus on. He was short, to the point of brusqueness, with his own mother, and he encouraged his disciples to abandon their families to follow him. 'If any man come to me

and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciples." (250)

Dawkins is being obtuse. If "hate" one's family here means "abandon" them, then what does it mean when Jesus tells his disciples to "hate" their lives as well? Did he want them to commit suicide? There is no evidence that suicide was one of the foundational teachings or practices of the early Christian church – neither was running away from home.

Here the text demands a little skill in teasing literal and figurative meanings apart. (A job even the strictest biblical fundamentalist usually manages, however!) Jesus was past master at hyperbole, and clearly that is what he was employing here. The disciples did not, in fact, abandon their families; Jesus even healed Peter's Mother-in-Law. To take a few words out of context, and contort obviously figurative language into literal, is to be obtuse. Dawkins is also obtuse not to notice that the early disciples married, and that they saw it as a vice to fail to care for their families. ("Whoever does not provide for his dependents, and especially for his own family, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (I. Timothy 5:8))

Jesus might be said to have spoken "brusquely" to his mother on occasion. He also obeyed her as a child, and fulfilled her request to help friends at a wedding. He also remembered to care for her as he was dying on the cross. No doubt it was difficult to be Jesus' mother, but not because he lacked all "family values."

#137 Does modesty cause misery? "The Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life. Sam Harris is magnificently scathing in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*: 'Your principle concern appears to be that the Creator of the universe will take offense at something people do while naked. This prudery of yours contributes daily to the surplus of human misery.'" (252)

On the contrary, Christian sexual morality, when followed, does more to prevent human misery than almost anything. Christian romance binds husband and wife, encourages cheerful sexuality, keeps children within loving families, and prevent unwed pregnancies, STDs, jealousy, polygamy, the gloomiest half of the Country Music chart, and some of the nastiest forms of misery on the planet. I respond to the New Atheists' claims on this subject on pages 203-206; and with a larger wealth of evidence on pages 61-86 of *Jesus and the Religions of Man*.

If God cares at all about human beings, He must certainly care about "what we do while naked." (Which is, after all, the condition in which He created us.) When followed, Christian "prudery" dramatically subtracts from the sum total of human misery in ways that show up in stats for crime, disease, mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, and every other important measure of well-being and happiness.

#138 Did the Old Testament only teach nationalism? "'Love thy neighbor' didn't mean what we now think it means. It meant only 'Love another Jew.'" (253)

If that is so, why did the Old Testament command Jewish people to befriend strangers from other lands? Why does it contain the story of Moab, who took an immigrant under his wing? There is

nothing in the text that forces one to think God was only talking about Jews. "Thou shalt not murder" is not qualified.

#139 Did Jesus condemn all Gentiles? "Jesus limited his in-group of the saved strictly to Jews." (254)

The most famous story in the Gospels, if not all literature (Charles Dickens thought it the best) is the story of the Good Samaritan. Dawkins himself uses the term twice -- forgetting, it seems, where it came from.

What was a Samaritan? Not a Jew. Why did Jesus tell the story of a Samaritan who saved the life of a strange Jew? He told it in answer to the question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus concluded his story of the "Good Samaritan" by holding this foreigner up as a model for his Jewish disciples: "Go and do likewise." (Luke 11)

If that were not clear enough, John also told the story of The Woman at the Well. The woman in that story is also a Samaritan, a non-Jew. Jesus' conversation with her is precisely about salvation. "If you knew the gift of God, and who you are talking with, you'd ask me, and I'd give you living water." The Samaritan woman, noticing no doubt that Jesus is pushing the boundaries of Hebrew custom by talking with her, brings up the question of Jews and Samaritans herself. Jesus responds by saying salvation is "from" the Jews, but that now "true worshippers" are no longer limited to worshipping in Jerusalem or some other site. When his disciples return, Jesus tells them, "Look at the fields! They are white for the harvest!" -- clearly referring to what will come next, the salvation of the whole (non-Jewish) village through the auspices of a fallen Samaritan woman. The passage ends with Jesus rebuking his own people by contrast!

Then at the end of his career, Jesus is shown telling his disciples to go and make disciples of not only Jews and Samaritans, but "to the ends of the earth." (Matthew 28)

Through what strange process of self-deception did Richard Dawkins need to pass, in order to project a narrow, nationalistic passion on Jesus of Nazareth?

140 Does the Bible say, "Thou shalt not kill?" "Hartung clearly shows that 'Thou shalt not kill' was never intended to mean what we now think it means." (254)

The verb "ratsach" is, commentators generally seem to agree, is better translated here as "murder."

#141 "It meant, very specifically, though shalt not kill Jews." (254) If so, the author should have said that – but he didn't.

#142 Does religion encourage children to justify mass-murder? Dawkins describes an experiment in which Israeli children were told the story of how Joshua destroyed the city of Jericho and its inhabitants, in obedience to the command of God. 74% of the children offered either total (66%) or partial approval of Joshua's bloody act.

Dawkins concludes: "Unlike Maimonides, the children . . . were young enough to be innocent. Presumably the savage views they expressed were those of their parents, or the cultural group in which they were brought up . . . (These results) seem to show the immense power of religion, and especially the religious upbringing of children, to divine people and foster historic enmities and hereditary vendettas." (257)

The study seems to show no such thing.

First of all, were the parents of the 66% of the children who approved of the massacre really so religious? Dawkins assumes they were, but gives no reason to think so. He describes the kids as "schoolchildren," not telling us (though I am sure he would like to) that they attended religious schools. By coincidence, 66% of Israelis describe themselves either as "secular" (44%) or as "non-religious traditionalists." So it is unlikely that the children who voted Joshua "up" did so purely, or mostly, because of religious training. Certainly, Dawkins fails to justify his assumption.

Second, I am not sure "innocent" is quite the right word to describe children, when it comes to tribal warfare. The hunt and fight instincts run, on evolutionary theory, strong in the human creature. As Dawkins and Hartung themselves admit, it is very difficult to justify caring for "out-groups" from evolution. "Survival of the fittest" would seem to equip us to be ruthless to opposing tribes. And tribalism seems to come natural to children of a certain age. (We have to remind our children frequently, during an election year, that the candidate we disfavor is not a bad person, and it is wrong to "hate" him.)

Third, all Jews know they are in a precarious situation, surrounded by hostile Arab nations that daily lob missiles at their settlements, and attempt to blow up Israeli children and other civilians. Children are aware enough of the world to take such facts in. In that context, one hardly needs to mention religion to explain a harsh response to a situation that must have seemed familiar to the children. They would all have recognized that Joshua was "one of them," which is enough for a child's innate tribalism to kick in.

Fourth, children below a certain age are naturally compliant to authority, and to displays of strength. Being asked such a question by an adult of their own "tribe," and with God as an assumed authority figure within the story, the children probably assumed the act was sanctioned by tribal authority.

This interpretation is strengthened when Dawkins gives us more information about the survey:

#143 Are Israeli children religious or tribal? "A different group of 168 Israeli children were given the same text from the book of Joshua, but with Joshua's own name replaced by 'General Lin' and 'Israel' replaced by 'a Chinese kingdom 3,000 years ago.'" Now the experiment gave opposite results. Only 7 percent approved of General Lin's behavior, and 75% disapproved. In other words, when their loyalty to Judaism was removed from the calculation, the majority of the children agreed with the moral judgments that most modern humans would share. Joshua's action was a deed of barbaric genocide. But it all looks different from a religious point of view." (257)

On the contrary, what changed in the second study was not God, but the ethnicity of the human participants. Clearly Dawkins' interpretation of the first study was wrong. The children voted to express solidarity with their tribe, not with the command of God. When God commanded the same thing, but to another tribe, they no longer approved. God is the constant, and the tribe is the variable that turns out to decide the issue.

144 Is the Bible misogynistic? Dawkins contemplates a passage in the *Book of Revelations*: "Ken Smith goes further, pointing out that the 144,000 elect 'did not defile themselves with women,' which presumably means that none of them could be women. Well, that's the sort of thing we've come to expect." (258)

I have a technical, "debater's point" response to make to this jibe, and a more serious and fundamental error to point out here.

The first is that the passage doesn't mean that none of the saved would be women. Looked at literally (and the force of Dawkins' argument depends on a very literalistic interpretation), one could say that half the 144,000 don't "defile themselves with women" because, perhaps, they are women!

But probably the author was simply "counting heads" in the conventional way, by the (male-led) household. Certainly he did not mean that women can't be saved -- that is certainly not what the Bible leads us to expect. Watch how Jesus treats the women in his life. In the early Church, too, not only are women believers, they are often leaders, or key supporters, in the work of the Gospel.

#145 (Quoting Hartung): **"The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination."** (258)

The irony is that Hartung and Dawkins both admit that evolution furnishes no reason to care about "out-groups." As I show in detail (p. 135-188, see also *Jesus and the Religions of Man*, 61-86 and 113-158, and the works of Vishal Mangalwadi and Rodney Stark, also Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity*, etc.), the Bible has done more to teach the world to care for "out-groups," and to liberate slaves, than any other intellectual force on earth.

#146 Does morality evolve ever upwards? "The American invasion of Iraq is widely condemned for its civilian casualties, yet these casualty figures are orders of magnitude lower than comparable numbers for the Second World War. There seems to be a steadily shifting standard of what is morally acceptable . . . Something has shifted in the intervening decades. It has shifted in all of us, and the shift has no connection with religion." (268)

Many dubious assumptions seem to be operating here. If we're going to compare wars, why not compare the American War for Independence with World War II? Atrocities were seldom committed in the great European wars of the 18th Century, and even in General Sherman's March to the sea in the American Civil War, hardly any rapes or murders of civilians seem to have occurred. (As Winston Churchill points out in *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.) By contrast, one or two hundred years later, even the "good guys" killed two hundred thousand civilians in the bombing of Dresden, and a hundred thousand each in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Which direction was the "wave" flowing in those years? It is absurd to depict a retreat from the very recent high point of barbarism that was the struggle with Nazi and Communist holocausts as some sort of fundamental advance in human morality.

It is also questionable that any positive (if potentially ephemeral) move forward since then is

unrelated to religion. What made World War II particularly vicious was the ruthless ideologies of the Nazis, the Japanese Empire, and Soviet communism -- all of which had an ideological, and often anti-Christian or anti-Jewish, edge to it. The passing of those fevers in part seemed to represent a return to an earlier and more humanitarian consensus, which included respect for traditional religion-based morality. And as George Weigel shows in *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism*, the end of the Cold War, if not victory in the Second World War (though that is arguable, too), had a lot to do with Christianity.

#147 Are we more advanced than our great-grandparents? "But most of us in the twenty-first century are bunched together and way ahead of our counterparts in the Middle Ages, or in the time of Abraham, or even as recently as the 1920s. The whole wave keeps moving, and even the vanguard of an earlier century (T. H. Huxley is the obvious example) would find itself way behind the laggards of a later century." (271)

What moonshine! Compare what John Wesley in the 18th Century had to say about black Africans ("punctually just and honest in their dealings; and are also very charitable," industrious tradesmen who are likely to make good astronomers) with what social Darwinists in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries had to say about "crude, immoral hoards" who cannot really be called human at all, and deserve extermination. Compare Francis of Assisi with almost anyone in the 21st Century. Great modern moralists -- Gandhi, Tolstoy, King, the six year old black girl in New Orleans who prayed for racists who were threatening her at the entry to her school -- invariably see themselves as disciples of ancient sages -- if not Jesus, then Buddha, Lao Zi, or St. Francis.

Maybe we are less cruel than earlier ages, now that most Nazis and communists have been laid to rest. But as C. S. Lewis points out, different cultures specialize in different virtues. We may be less cruel, but are also less courageous, than a 19th Century teetotaler who refused a shot of whiskey when he had his leg amputated, or lazier than Ben Franklin's readers. Read accounts of earlier generations, and one notes both differences and similarities, but differences do not always make us look good.

Certainly, the claim that we are morally in advance of our ancestors suggests no great advance in humility or wisdom.

#148 Does Christianity deserve no credit for Civil Rights? "Although Martin Luther King was a Christian, he derived his philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience directly from Gandhi, who was not." (271)

This is wrong-headed on several counts. First, Gandhi was not a Christian, but he did believe strongly in God, whom Dawkins wants us to believe is a harmful delusion. Second, Gandhi was deeply influenced by Jesus, writing in his autobiography that the teaching, "If any man takes your cloak, let him have your coat, too" "delighted me beyond measure." Thirdly, the Indian intelligentsia as a whole was deeply impacted by Jesus long before Gandhi came along. Gandhi was affected indirectly as well. (See *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, p. 137-141)

Finally, of course as a Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King derived his philosophy from Jesus as well as from Gandhi. "I went to Gandhi through Jesus," he explained.

#149 Is common humanity an “unbiblical” idea? "Then, too, there is improved education and, in particular, the increased understanding that each of us shares a common humanity with members of other races and with the other sex -- both deeply unbiblical ideas . . ." (271)

Speaking from Oxford, founded as most great universities were by Christian theologians, it is striking that Dawkins fails to recognize the role the religion he is attacking played in universal education.

He is also as wrong as you can be about the Bible and common humanity. In fact, as the great Chinese scholar Hu Shi, himself a skeptic, admitted, it was Christian missionaries who taught China the humanity of women. (For an account of the role the Gospel played in liberating women around the world, see my *The Truth About Jesus and the 'Lost Gospels,'* p. 119-129.) St. Paul wrote, "In Christ, there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female," at a time when those distinctions were far stronger than they are today.

#150 Or did evolution teach us that we are all human? ". . . both deeply biblical ideas that come from biological science, especially evolution."

In fact, evolution inspired a movement called "social Darwinism," some of whose proponents suggested that Australian aborigines constituted a separate race from white Europeans. (Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*) Even John Hartung, whom Dawkins draws from on this subject, admits that evolution does NOT provide a basis for caring about people outside our own "In" group. "Evolutionists have not been able to devise a model for converting in-group morality into general morality."

In Christ, by contrast, "There is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free." Paul did not get this idea from Darwin, whose book would appear only 1800 years later. Anyway, Darwin argued that there is a fine continuum between individuals, such that no clear and fast line between species can be drawn. Dawkins himself points out that evolution undermines the idea that people *as people* should be privileged. He also points out elsewhere that he would not like a society run on Darwinian lines. It seems to me that Dawkins is fundamentally confused: he wants terribly to credit evolution for moral improvement, but usually remembers that the facts won't bare that interpretation.

The Political History of Atheism

#151 Did atheism have anything to do with the Gulag? "There is no evidence that (Stalin's) atheism motivated his brutality." (273)

There is a great deal of evidence that atheism deeply influenced the immoral teachings and cruelty of communist ideology in general, and no reason to exempt Stalin. David Aikman, who did his doctoral work on "Atheism in the Marxist Tradition" (under the great historian of Soviet communism, Donald Treadgold), takes on this issue in his new book, *The Delusion of Disbelief*.

I also studied under Treadgold (my BA "senior thesis" was a comparison of parallel documents in the Russian and Chinese revolutions in the original languages), and I've lived in both Soviet and Chinese communist societies. Dawkins' view of this subject is naïve and mistaken. My rebuttal lies on pages 197-200 of *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*.

152 Is "end justifies the means" a Christian teaching? "His earlier religious training probably didn't either, unless it was through teaching him to revere absolutist faith, strong authority and a belief that ends justify means." (273)

"The ends justify the means" is an ambiguous slogan. What ends? What means? Obviously some ends do justify some means: the need for medicine to cure a sick child (an end) justifies going to the clinic to buy it. (a means to that end). Dawkins himself would, I think, assert that sometimes normally immoral means might also be justified by important ends -- under some circumstances, one might perhaps steal the medicine, if the child's need for it were dire enough, and if there were no other way, and no other child suffered because of the theft. Finally, there are cases in which NO ONE would assert that the ends justify the means. Only a madman, or a two-year old, would say one should dynamite Hoover Dam to retrieve a lost teddy bear of purely sentimental value buried under its foundation.

So the slogan "ends justifies the means" needs to be carefully explained. What Dawkins seems to mean is that Christians teach that immoral means are generally justified if some good can come out of it.

But Christianity has more often been blamed for denying a "consequentialist" "or "utilitarian" ethic, than for teaching one. In fact, the former term was invented by a Catholic philosopher, G.E.M. Anscombe, in her critique of the great atheist thinker, John Stuart Mill (along with Henry Sidgwick. Anscombe argued that this sort of morality was incompatible with Judeo-Christian thought. Probably the best-known modern advocate of utilitarian morality is the philosopher Peter Singer, an atheist, whom Dawkins quotes approvingly.

All in all, it is highly improbable that Stalin was taught anything of the sort in a Russian seminary, anymore than I was in a Taiwanese one, and far more likely that he would have been taught that at Princeton, under Peter Singer.

153 Was Joseph Stalin an unformed youth when he entered seminary? In any case, Stalin had already become an atheist BEFORE he entered seminary. He went there because it was the only education available, not because he wanted to be indoctrinated in patristic theology.

#154 Were Nazi soldiers Christian? "The terrible deeds (of the Nazis) were carried out by soldiers and their officers, most of whom were surely Christian." (276)

This is quite a Hail-Mary pass of an argument. I have seen statistics showing that the percent of believers among SS troops dropped dramatically during Hitler's sojourn in power, though I was unable to locate them for this book. I did, however, locate figures for the percent of college students who studied theology, which went from 6 percent in 1933 to 2 percent in 1939. Obviously, Hitler discouraged Christian faith as much as he could among important social

groups. Dawkins offers no warrant for supposing that most of the SS, who were responsible for much of the atrocities, were "surely Christian" – and given other trends in Nazi society, it is unlikely.

#155 Did the Catholic Church support the Nazis? "Or perhaps Hitler felt that he had to display some token sympathy for Christianity, otherwise his regime would not have received the support it did from the Church. This support showed itself in various ways, including Pope Pius XII's persistent refusal to take a stand against the Nazis." (277)

To begin with, on the face of it, refusing to "take a stand" against Hitler is not the same as "supporting" him. (Especially when such a stand might cost your life.) If you're in a bank when a robber enters with a gun, and you lie on the ground and do nothing to stop the robbery, it would be vile to accuse you of "supporting" the criminal, simply because you did nothing.

But far from lying idly by while Hitler committed his crimes, in fact Pius XII did much, in his diplomatic way, to undermine the Fuhrer. Jewish author David Dalin, in *The Myth of Hitler's Pope: How Pope Pius XII Rescued Jews from the Nazis*, argues that Pius was in fact responsible for saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews. The pope put several hundred Roman Jews up in his own papal estate! The chief rabbi was so impressed that he not only converted to Catholicism after the war, he took Pius' name for his own baptismal name.

It is an ugly slur indeed to accuse Pius XII of "supporting" the Nazis.

#156 Do "individual atheists" do evil in the name of atheism? "Stalin was an atheist and Hitler probably wasn't, but even if he was, the bottom line of the Stalin / Hitler debating point is very simple. Individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do evil things in the name of atheism." (278)

But Stalin wasn't an "individual atheist." He was one of millions, not only in the Soviet Union but in China, Cambodia, North Korea, Romania, Albania, Vietnam, Cuba, and other countries, who put a third of the human race behind barbed wire and mines, destroyed great art, transformed great cities into endless, soulless stretches of grey concrete, turned children against their parents, taught neighbors to distrust and hate one another, and tortured and murdered tens of millions of innocent people. To pretend that atheism had "nothing to do" with all this, is either ignorant or delusional. Again, Aikman, and my short discussion in *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, are good places to start. See also chapter 3 of my *Jesus and the Religions of Man*, "Where Did Marx Go Wrong?"

#157 "I cannot think of any war that has been fought in the name of atheism." (278)

Not explicitly, perhaps. Neither are wars fought "in the name of theism," per se. They are not infrequently fought in the name of individual ideologies of which atheism or theism are a part -- Islam, Christianity, communism, or democracy.

#158 War over Scripture? Quoting Harris: "Because each new generation of children is taught that religious propositions need not be justified in the way that all others must, civilization is still

besieged by the armies of the preposterous. We are, even now, killing ourselves over ancient literature." (278)

I've already dealt with the false claim that "religious propositions need not be justified."

Who is this "we" Harris speaks of? I haven't killed anyone "over ancient literature." Nor have any of Americas' wars been fought on behalf of Scripture per se – though Christian opposition to slavery of various forms certainly has played a role in some of our conflicts. (And the Revolutionary War may have been inspired to some extent by the 18th Century love of the Greek and Roman classics, which are also "ancient literature.")

Any ultimate cosmology can be used to justify military expansionism, and many can be used to justify a noble self-defense. *Jihad* is not surprising from an evolutionary perspective -- we evolve because the fittest struggle to survive." Evolution, the theory that biological progress comes through violent struggle, is particularly well-adapted to tyranny – which of course does not mean that people who believe in evolution do not sometimes nobly oppose it.

Miscellaneous

#159 "Soldiers are drilled to become as much like automata, or computers, as possible." (176) Dawkins explains further: "Computers . . . slavishly obey any instructions given in their own programming language." (176)

No one denies the role of authority in the military. But this is a silly caricature; a modern army in a democratic state trains men and women to think.

Add-ons from Readers

#160 Does Dawkins' refutation of God work?

Dr. Field: "Perhaps I could give you one (what a unique situation--an atheist adding arrows for a theist's quiver), although its possible you spotted this and simply put it under another category. Dawkins repeatedly asks the question in effect "if God created everything, then who created God?" He clearly doesn't understand that the traditional view is that God need not be created, since God is a per se necessary being, that is, a being whose essence includes existence. I say he clearly doesn't understand this since he never mentions it. It was the most glaring hole in his discussions of philosophical theology that I noticed. There are responses to that view as well, so I wish he had understood the view.

"Please get the error right: the traditional view is that existence is part of God's essence. God is a being the very nature of which requires existence. This is something that Dawkins overlooks. There are problems with this view, but it is a blind alley for Dawkins, since he doesn't recognize it."

