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From The Times May 12, 2007

How dare you call me a fundamentalist

The right to criticise ‘faith-heads’

Richard Dawkins

The hardback *God Delusion* was hailed as the surprise bestseller of 2006. While it was warmly received by most of the 1,000-plus individuals who volunteered personal reviews to Amazon, paid print reviewers gave less uniform approval. Cynics might invoke unimaginative literary editors: it has “God” in the title, so send it to a known faith-head. That would be too cynical, however. Several critics began with the ominous phrase, “I’m an atheist, BUT . . .” So here is my brief rebuttal to criticisms originating from this “belief in belief” school.

I’m an atheist, but I wish to dissociate myself from your shrill, strident, intemperate, intolerant, ranting language.

Objectively judged, the language of *The God Delusion* is less shrill than we regularly hear from political commentators or from theatre, art, book or restaurant critics. The illusion of intemperance flows from the unspoken convention that faith is uniquely privileged: off limits to attack. In a criticism of religion, even clarity ceases to be a virtue and begins to sound like aggressive hostility.

A politician may attack an opponent scathingly across the floor of the House and earn plaudits for his robust pugnacity. But let a soberly reasoning critic of religion employ what would, in other contexts, sound merely direct or forthright, and it will be described as a shrill rant. My nearest approach to stridency was my account of God as “the most

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unpleasant character in all fiction". I don't know how well I succeeded, but my intention was closer to humorous broadside than shrill polemic. Restaurant critics are notoriously scathing, but are seldom dismissed as shrill or intolerant. A restaurant might seem a trivial target compared to God. But restaurateurs and chefs have feelings to hurt and livelihoods to lose, whereas "blasphemy is a victimless crime".

Expert View



"I agree with Professor Dawkins, not to mention St Paul, in rejecting the argument that people should be allowed their religious comfort"

William Rees-Mogg

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You can't criticise religion without detailed study of learned books on theology.

If, as one self-consciously intellectual critic wished, I had expounded the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus, Eriugena on subjectivity, Rahner on grace or Moltmann on hope (as he vainly hoped I would), my book would have been more than a surprise bestseller, it would have been a miracle. I would happily have forgone bestsellerdom had there been the slightest hope of Duns Scotus illuminating my central question: does God exist? But I need engage only those few theologians who at least acknowledge the question, rather than

blithely assuming God as a premise. For the rest, I cannot better the "Courtier's Reply" on P. Z. Myers's splendid Pharyngula website, where he takes me to task for outing the Emperor's nudity while ignoring learned tomes on ruffled pantaloons and silken underwear. Most Christians happily disavow Baal and the Flying Spaghetti Monster without reference to monographs of Baalian exegesis or Pastafarian theology.

You ignore the best of religion and instead . . . "you attack crude, rabble-rousing chancers like Ted Haggard, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, rather than facing up to sophisticated theologians like Bonhoeffer or the Archbishop of Canterbury."

If subtle, nuanced religion predominated, the world would be a better place and I would have written a different book. The melancholy truth is that decent, understated religion is numerically negligible. Most believers echo Robertson, Falwell or Haggard, Osama bin Laden or Ayatollah Khomeini. These are not straw men. The world needs to face them, and my book does so.

You're preaching to the choir. What's the point?

The nonbelieving choir is much bigger than people think, and it desperately needs encouragement to come out. Judging by the thanks

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that showered my North American book tour, my articulation of hitherto closeted thoughts is heard as a kind of liberation. The atheist choir, moreover, is too ready to observe society's convention of according special respect to faith, and it goes along with society's lamentable habit of labelling small children with the religion of their parents. You'd never speak of a "Marxist child" or a "monetarist child". So why give religion a free pass to indoctrinate helpless children? There is no such thing as a Christian child: only a child of Christian parents.

You're as much a fundamentalist as those you criticise.

No, please, do not mistake passion, which can change its mind, for fundamentalism, which never will. Passion for passion, an evangelical Christian and I may be evenly matched. But we are not equally fundamentalist. The true scientist, however passionately he may "believe", in evolution for example, knows exactly what would change his mind: evidence! The fundamentalist knows that nothing will.

I'm an atheist, but people need religion.

"What are you going to put in its place? How are you going to fill the need, or comfort the bereaved?"

What patronising condescension! "You and I are too intelligent and well educated to need religion. But ordinary people, hoi polloi, Orwellian proles, Huxleian Deltas and Epsilons need religion." In any case, the universe doesn't owe us comfort, and the fact that a belief is comforting doesn't make it true. *The God Delusion* doesn't set out to be comforting, but at least it is not a placebo. I am pleased that the opening lines of my own *Unweaving the Rainbow* have been used to give solace at funerals.

When asked whether she believed in God, Golda Meir said: "I believe in the Jewish people, and the Jewish people believe in God." I recently heard a prize specimen of I'm-an-atheist-buttery quote this and then substitute his own version: "I believe in people, and people believe in God." I too believe in people. I believe that, given proper encouragement to think, and given the best information available, people will courageously cast aside celestial comfort blankets and lead intellectually fulfilled, emotionally *liberated* lives.

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Charles Bremner's Paris weblog



Exit the bulldozer

France says goodbye to dear old Uncle Jacques


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Dawkins' claim that "decent, understated religion is numerically negligible"

simply does not reflect reality. And it's even more untrue of the UK than the US.

Let's take the US for a moment. Who are the dangerous crowd? The Southern Baptist Congress, and probably a bunch of small Pentecostal-flavoured groups.

According to http://www.adherents.com/rei_USA.html, they cover 17.4% of the population. That's smaller than the 24.5% of the population who are Roman Catholic, and it's not close to a majority of the 85% of Americans who self-identify as Christian. It's not even a majority of the 44% of the US population who regularly attend a Christian place of worship.

Andrew Bromage, Melbourne, Australia

No scientific researcher would conclude there's no adequate explanation just because he couldn't see or imagine it.

Father Bryan Storey , Tintagel, UK

Lucy,

No, it's quite easy to prove a negative. You can prove, for example that the square root of two can NOT be written as a fraction. You can prove that NO flat triangle has 270 degrees (by proving that they all have 180). You can prove that there are no gods (not like the Christian one, anyway) simply by observing that the ostensibly good and omnipotent God of created a world which contains evil. Wherever it came from, it ultimately came from him, and freewill arguments don't get us anywhere. (Why, for example, wouldn't they apply in Heaven?)

God is a logical contradiction, and hence reductio absurdum, does not exist.

Paul Caira, London, UK

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