

The God Delusion. Richard Dawkins (2006)
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Reviewed by Roger Kingdon, January 2010

In 1880 one of Charles Darwin's self-appointed defenders, Edward Aveling, requested permission to dedicate his book *The Students' Darwin* to the great man. Darwin politely but firmly refused to grant any such endorsement, and went on to express reservations about the approach taken:

Though I am a strong advocate for free thought on all subjects, yet it appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity and theism produce hardly any effect on the public; and freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds, which follow from the advance of science. It has, therefore, always been my object to avoid writing on religion, and I have confined myself to science.¹

If only Darwin's latter-day self-appointed defender, Richard Dawkins, had hearkened to his Master's voice! But no: 'Darwin's rottweiler' (as he is known, presumably to evoke a wicked-cool modern equivalent of 'Darwin's bulldog', T H Huxley) has written *The God Delusion*, an uncompromising attack on God and religion, as a result of which it behooves all right-thinking people to restate the case for the notion of a loving God, a tolerant and empowering religion, and an enlightened world-view in which both science and religion play their worthy parts. This brief review is my attempt to set the matter straight.

Let us first be clear what Dawkins is saying in *The God Delusion (TGD)*. His principal thesis is that 'God almost certainly does not exist' (p. 189). Here, 'God' is God-the-Creator, whose existence is *unnecessary* because 'Darwinian natural selection is the only known solution to the otherwise unanswerable riddle' of the existence of 'statistically improbable' complex phenomena such as living organisms (p.138). The greater part of *TGD* is dedicated to setting out the (largely) scientific arguments in favour of this viewpoint. But Dawkins also has a secondary thesis, namely, that religion is a pernicious relic of the past that mankind could well do without. Here, 'religion' means *all* religion, for, although Dawkins is mainly concerned with traditional monotheistic religions for whom God is 'interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering' (p. 41), he also expresses reservations about its more liberal manifestations: 'The teachings of "moderate" religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism' ... 'This is one reason why I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called "extremist" faith' (p.346). Let us consider each of these points in turn, from a Baha'i point of view.

Surely Baha'is believe in God? Yes, but we also believe that God is an unknowable essence 'which the wisdom of the wise and the learning of the learned have failed to comprehend . . . Who hast been from everlasting exalted above all peer or likeness and to everlasting shalt remain the same.'² Certainly we cannot subscribe to Dawkins' reductionist description of God as no-more-and-no-less-than God-the-Creator. In this sense we are in agreement: *The God that Dawkins does not believe in, Bahais do not believe in, either.*

Surely Bahais believe in the human soul, something which requires more than just Darwinian natural selection to appear in the world? In fact 'Abdu'l-Baha endorses *both* the notion of a precious and unique soul, and the possibility of physical evolution:

¹ Charles Darwin, *Letter 12757 – Darwin, C. R. to Aveling, E. B.* (13 Oct 1880). Available online: <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-12757>

² Bahauallah, *Bahai Prayers*. 122-3

To recapitulate: as man in the womb of the mother passes from form to form, from shape to shape, changes and develops, and is still the human species from the beginning of the embryonic period – in the same way man, from the beginning of his existence in the matrix of the world, is also a distinct species – that is, man – and has gradually evolved from one form to another. Therefore, this change of appearance, this evolution of members, this development and growth, even though we admit the reality of growth and progress, does not prevent the species from being original.³

Dawkins might object that this is Baha'is 'having their cake and eating it', for where else *could* the soul have emerged, if not through natural selection? But this misses the point. In this and similar passages in *Some Answered Questions* 'Abdu'l-Baha is not proposing an alternative theory of evolution. On the contrary, by recounting the major tenets of the theory of natural selection 'Abdu'l-Baha is 'rendering unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's', but at the same time it is clear that he is much more concerned with 'the things that are God's': the identity, nature and purpose of the human soul. For 'Abdu'l-Baha, the question is not 'Where did the human soul come from?', but rather, 'Given that it exists, what is to be done with the human soul?' And this is a question for religion, not science. Thus *Baha'is subscribe to the theory of evolution by natural selection, but this does not inform their notion of the human soul.*

Surely Baha'is believe that all major revealed religions are of God, they share fundamental spiritual truths and values, and they are not to be lumped together as a dead and decaying relic of a bygone age? Yes, but we also believe in the 'Divine Springtime', the renewal of religion from age to age: 'Whenever this robe hath fulfilled its purpose, the Almighty will assuredly renew it. For every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it hath appeared.'⁴ And the reason for this renewal is precisely because a religion is not a static entity, rather, over time it experiences growth, maturation and decay just like any other dynamic organism. And, like Dawkins, Baha'is have no time for old, worn-out, corrupted expressions of faith: 'If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act.'⁵ Thus, *insofar that he restricts his criticisms to religions that have long-since diverged from their original purpose, Baha'is can agree with Dawkins.*

Surely Baha'is believe that Dawkins is mistaken in his mission to 'warn people against faith itself'? Yes: This is one of the main points of departure. (The other is the use of language in *TGD*, which is often both emotive and borders on the insulting. This is antithetical both to scientists, who are expected to work with facts and not opinions, and to Baha'is, who are exhorted to express their views with words 'as mild as milk'.) The Baha'i position is that religion is essential for the very survival of mankind:

Everyone who truly seeks and justly reflects will admit that the teachings of the present day emanating from mere human sources and authority are the cause of difficulty and disagreement amongst mankind, the very destroyers of humanity, whereas the teachings of Bahauallah are the very healing of the sick world, the remedy for every need and condition. In them may be found the realization of every desire and aspiration, the cause of the happiness of the world of humanity, the stimulus and illumination of mentality, the impulse for advancement and uplift, the basis of unity for all nations, the fountain source of love amongst mankind, the center of agreement, the

³ 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*. 193-4

⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahauallah*. 81

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*.130

means of peace and harmony, the one bond which will unite the East and the West.⁶

Now, it is to be expected that the Baha'i Faith, being a 'moderate' religion, is sometimes seen by the unscrupulous or ignorant as a soft touch, or, as Dawkins says, 'an open invitation to extremism'. Curious, then, that the extremists have not taken control of the Baha'i Faith, despite numerous serious attempts throughout its 150-year history. Perhaps there is more to 'moderate' religion than meets the eye: or, at least, more to it than Dawkins is prepared to see. *TGD* offers no specific evidence supporting Dawkins' aversion to 'moderate' religion, and so one can only suppose that this aversion is *itself* a statement of faith. What, then, are we to make of his avowed mission to 'do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself'? He is beginning to sound just like those 'priests, mullahs and rabbis' that he so despises. This is a pity: As we have seen, Dawkins' views are not so very different from those of Baha'is; however, *there are no clergy in the Baha'i Faith*. But no-one is beyond redemption, so maybe one day Darwin's rottweiler will awake from his dogmatic slumbers, cast off his dog-collar, and take his place amongst the sheep in the fold. I do hope so.

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*. 440