Richard Dawkins has long trumpeted the rationale of science. Now, at 65, he has finally marshalled a lifetime's arguments against believing in God

The God Delusion - By Richard Dawkins - To be published in America by Houghton Mifflin on October 18th - Bantam; 372 pages; £20.

“THE GOD DELUSION” is an irreverent book. The author, Richard Dawkins, accuses Jesus of having “dodgy family values”. And don't get him started on the God of the Old Testament, “a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully”.

Mr Dawkins is an atheist, an evolutionary biologist and an eloquent communicator about science, three passions that have allowed him to construct a particularly comprehensive case against religion. Everyone should read it. Atheists will love Mr Dawkins's incisive logic and rapier wit and theists will find few better tests of the robustness of their faith. Even agnostics, who claim to have no opinion on God, may be persuaded that their position is an untenable waffle.

Like several other anti-religious volumes of recent years (“The End of Faith”, “Breaking the Spell”), Mr Dawkins's book is partly a reaction to the September 11th attacks. These have been portrayed as essentially religious acts. Whatever the hijackers' political or social motivations, it was religious faith that ultimately turned them into killing machines. They believed they were doing God's work and would be justly rewarded in the afterlife.

It is easy to denounce such deluded zealots, but what relation do they have to ordinary, “sensible” religious people? The problem, as Mr Dawkins sees it, is that religious moderates make the world safe for fundamentalists, by promoting faith as a virtue and by enforcing an overly pious respect for religion. (Why is it easier for a Quaker to avoid combat duty as a conscientious objector than someone who simply deplores violence?) Furthermore, the argument goes, any positive aspects of religion can be replaced by equally beneficial non-religious substitutes.

As a prelude to these contestable claims, Mr Dawkins examines the interesting question of why religion is so widespread. Worshipping deities would seem to be an irrational and wasteful habit, yet it has been found in all cultures. Wouldn't natural selection have got rid of religious tendencies if religion were clearly bad for humans after all?

Not necessarily. Mr Dawkins advocates the idea that religion is a by-product of mental abilities that evolved for other purposes. One form of this theory is that children are “programmed” to believe anything their parents tell them, which is quite sensible in light of all the useful information parents can share. But this system is vulnerable to becoming a conduit for worthless information that is passed on for no other reason than tradition.

However, this does not explain the special appeal of religious ideas as opposed to any bizarre ideas. Religious thoughts must be especially compatible with human psychology. “Religion has at one time or another been thought to fill four main roles in human life: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration,” writes Mr Dawkins, enumerating the four targets of his logical firepower.
He shows that religion does not provide a satisfactory explanation for anything. Here his arguments are well-rehearsed and finely honed from decades of combating American fundamentalists. This section will appeal to anyone who ever wondered, if God created the universe, who created God?

As for exhortation, he argues that in practice, religion is not a legitimate source of morality. If it were, Jews would still be executing those who work on the Sabbath. Where morality actually does come from is less clear. Mr Dawkins suggests the source is a combination of genetic instincts, which evolved because morals allowed humans to benefit more efficiently from co-operation, and a cultural Zeitgeist.

For some people consolation and inspiration are genuine benefits of religion, as even Mr Dawkins will allow. But these functions can and should be fulfilled by other means, he says. This is the most problematic part of his thesis. In his case contemplation of the natural world does the job; his final chapter is an ode to the perspective-altering discoveries of modern physics. But only a minority will find as much consolation in quantum physics as in the prospect of reuniting with their dearly departed in heaven.

Even if it is granted that religion should be expunged, how does Mr Dawkins suggest this could be done? Buy his book as a Christmas gift for one's religious friends? Obviously, many people will never be persuaded; that is precisely the nature of faith. The actual plan is twofold.

First, Mr Dawkins wants to subvert the mode of transmission between parent and child. He calls a religious upbringing a form of indoctrination and equates it to child abuse. He wants to encourage a change in the Zeitgeist, so that when people hear the words “a Catholic child”, or “a Muslim child”, they will wince, and ask how a child could already have formed independent opinions on transubstantiation or jihad.

His second and related plan is to energise atheists, whom he regards as being in the same situation as homosexuals were 50 years ago: stigmatised and unelectable to public office (in America, at least). Mr Dawkins dreams of a day when atheists are as well organised and influential as Christian conservatives have become. If nothing else, his book should help bring the atheists out of the closet.

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