Early in The God Delusion, Richard Dawkins quotes Thomas Jefferson's statement: "I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence."

This eminently scientific sentiment was echoed two centuries later by the physicist Steven Weinberg, who, like Dawkins, is an outspoken critic of religion, but who has nevertheless suggested that most scientists simply don't spend enough time even thinking about God or religion to merit the label atheist.

But Richard Dawkins is a man on a mission. This new book is the culmination of his recent campaign, which has included a two-part television documentary, aired in Britain, to help humanity rid itself of what he surely views as one of its most vile creations: God.

Before I proceed further, I should, in the interests of full disclosure, confess that I have written exactly one fan letter that I can remember to an author. That letter was written to Richard Dawkins after the publication of a small book, River Out of Eden (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), which I felt was perhaps the most concise and cogent science writing, as well as the clearest discussion of the nature of evolution, I had yet read.

I wish that Dawkins, who has a gift for making science — in particular, evolutionary biology — both exciting and understandable to a broad audience, had continued to play to his strengths, which are desperately needed now more than ever as we confront growing attacks on the teaching of evolution, not just in the United States but in the UK and Europe.

Dawkins the preacher is less seductive. And make no mistake: this book is, for the most part, a well-referenced sermon. I just have no idea who the intended parishioners might be. In his preface, Dawkins claims he hopes to reach religious people who might have misgivings, either about the teachings of their faith or about the negative impact of religion in the modern world. For these people, Dawkins wants to demonstrate that atheism is "something to stand tall and be proud of".

I found this slightly puzzling. I don't believe in Santa Claus, but I am not particularly proud of it. Indeed, I am rarely, if ever, proud of not believing in things. More generally, I think the strategy of focusing on telling people what not to believe is less compelling than positively demonstrating how the wonders of nature can suggest a world without God that is nevertheless both complete and wonderful — an argument that Dawkins reserves for the final few pages of the book. And while there is a lot to complain about in the ubiquitous facile piety so prevalent today, complaining can nevertheless start to get tiresome. Carl Sagan's The Demon-Haunted World (Headline, 1996) likewise too often mirrored Sagan's frustration at all those who over many years have continued to confront him with their superstitions, but it also conveyed his sense of awe and wonder about nature in a way that Dawkins elsewhere has so craftily displayed.

A less sympathetic reader than the author's wife (who apparently read the entire manuscript aloud to Dawkins for him to review) might have provided a more useful foil. Several indulgences detract from the flow, but more importantly, I was struck at how Dawkins' presentation, particularly in the early chapters where he builds his case against God, might offend those who, like myself, are quite
sympathetic to his central thesis. I suspect that few thinking people of faith are unaware of the remarkable evil that has been done in the name of God, or the possibility that, although most cultures worship some god, this could be a mere reflection of the workings of the human brain rather than definitive evidence for God's reality. Yet Dawkins seems to suggest early on that even agnostics might never confront these issues and that he needs to "raise their consciousness", as he puts it. At the very least I find it doubtful that constantly questioning the intelligence of 'true believers' will be helpful in inducing any such reader to accept Dawkins' strongly argued thesis that both God and religion are nonsensical and harmful.

While I usually tend to begin a review with praise and end with reservations, the reverse order here reflects the progression of my own reading of The God Delusion. There are gems in the book, as one might expect from a writer as powerful as Dawkins, but most of them are in the second half of the volume. He ends the first half with what I found to be a less than compelling probabilistic argument against God. (Incidentally, I couldn't help wondering, somewhat facetiously, when Dawkins used an anthropic argument from cosmology to argue against God, that, although indeed only very rare universes may harbour life, if an infinite number of universes exist, could not at least one then harbour what might pass for a divine being?)

But after this Dawkins proceeds to brilliantly review the roots of modern morality and the changing moral 'zeitgeist', as he calls it. With authority and wit, he marvellously dissects the absurdity, hypocrisy and selectivity that is inherent in so much of modern biblical morality. Perhaps there can be no higher praise than to say that I am certain I will remember and borrow many examples from this book in my own future discussions.

Finally, his treatment of religion and childhood is, I believe, precisely accurate. We do our children a great disservice (which Dawkins goes so far as to call abuse) by forcing religion upon them at an age where they are far too young to digest the deep and subtle issues associated with the possibility of divine purpose. In doing so, we encourage them to rely on potentially destructive emotions rather than to use their brains. And pondering how to build a world of adults that might result from the latter rather than the former is surely what motivates Dawkins here, even if his approach might also provoke some religious fundamentalists to harden their unfortunate belief that knowledge and reason are dangerous things, to be avoided at all costs.

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