

Chapter 5 – The Roots of Religion

Rough argument outline

It's important to note that this chapter marks a change in the attack. The first four chapters were trying to invalidate the 'God Hypothesis' by undermining the notion of God himself. From now on, Dawkins is striking out at the concept of 'religion' – by proving that religion, and its associated concepts of morality, revelation and the like, he hopes to attack God from a side passageway.

In Chapter 5, his main aim is to show where religion *may* have come from. If he shows that religion is merely a product of some Darwinian process, he thinks, that means that there can't possibly be a God.

The Darwinian Imperative

- Darwinianism by definition doesn't tolerate wastage or unnecessary indulgence – its aim is always to produce efficiency and necessity.
- However, this is ostensibly not the case with religion:

*'Religion is so wasteful, so extravagant...'*¹

- There must be a reason for this. Why?
- If we can't see any way for Darwinianism to be reconciled with the existence of religion, it is the origin of religion that is the problem, not the Darwinian model.

*'Nobody is sure what the benefit of anting is ... but uncertainty as to details doesn't – nor should it – stop Darwinians from presuming, with great confidence, that anting must be 'for' something.'*²

- This leads to a crucial question, asked three times in different ways: why does religion exist if it is:
 1. Wasteful
 2. Inherently dangerous?

*'What is it all for?'*³

¹ Dawkins, p163, 'The Roots of Religion', The Darwinian Imperative

² Ibid, p164, 'The Roots of Religion', The Darwinian Imperative

³ Ibid, p165, 'The Roots of Religion', The Darwinian Imperative

'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?'^{4, 5}

'Whether it is cynically exploited or whether it just manifests itself spontaneously, what ultimately explains the lust for gods?'⁶

- Three possible explanations are given, to be explored in the rest of the chapter:
 1. Group selection;
 2. Manipulative influence of genes in another individual (just as with the common cold);
 3. 'Replicators' replace genes
- Finally, we must bear in mind that in order to accept religion, one may be simultaneously intelligent and stupid.

Direct Advantages of Religion

- The obvious benefits of religion *per se* are regularly insufficient as explanatory mechanisms for its persistence and widespread character. Individual features such as physical healings, comfort and consolation are not sufficient to explain why religion is so widespread.

*'...[the consolation theory] only raises the question of why a mind would evolve to find comfort in beliefs it can plainly see are false. A freezing person finds no comfort in believing he is warm; a person face-to-face with a lion is not put at ease by the conviction that it is a rabbit.'*⁷

- There are distinctive types of explanations for things happening:
 1. Proximate Explanations: these give raw facts and general principles⁸
 2. Ultimate explanations: these give a sense of causality as well – the purpose for which a phenomenon happens, as well as the mechanics of how it happens.

⁴ Ibid, p166, *'The Roots of Religion'*, The Darwinian Imperative

⁵ This is essentially a provocative reworking of ^[3], so as to leave the reader leaning to the point of view of Dawkins even before he answers the 'straw man.' See the work of the Roman lawyer and orator, Cicero, for a classical exponent of this technique.

⁶ Dawkins, p169, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Direct Advantages of Religion

⁷ Steven Pinker, quoted by Dawkins, p168, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Direct Advantages of Religion

⁸ Philosophers refer to this as Carl Hempel's 'Covering Law' of Scientific Explanation

- Dawkins is concerned with the Ultimate Explanation of religion here – why it was favoured in our makeup, not just the fact that it is⁹.

Possible root of Religion 1 – Group Selection

- The central idea of group selection is this: Darwinian selection chooses among species or other groups of individuals, in a way similar to that in which it chooses between alleles¹⁰ in an individual.
- Dawkins himself doesn't believe this is a satisfactory explanation for the root of religion – group selection would always be superseded by lower-level effects (that is, natural selection in individuals would always work more quickly and more effectively than group selection).

Possible root of Religion 2 – Religion as a (genetic) By-Product of Something Else

- Some characteristics aren't in and of themselves beneficial to the organism, but are the by-product of some other trait:

*'Perhaps the feature we are interested in doesn't have a direct survival value of its own, but is a by-product of something else that does.'*¹¹

- An example of this is the fact that a moth will automatically spiral inwards into a candle-flame, burning itself to death. This is a by-product of having adapted to navigate using distant light sources such as the sun and moon, and not an adapted behavioural change itself.
- Religion could be similarly produced – not inherently useful, but the result of another change:

*'We observe large numbers of people ... who hold beliefs that flatly contradict demonstrable scientific facts as well as rival religions followed by others.'*¹²

- Perhaps this is a psychological propensity that was onetime useful, but is now obsolete, leaving behind something manifesting itself as 'religion'
- Dawkins' own suggestion is this: we have evolved to listen to our 'elders' when we are children. Those who do will be more likely to avoid lethalties.

⁹ For an entertaining and understandable description of the difference between proximate and ultimate explanations, see Chapter 3 of 'Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction', by Samir Okasha

¹⁰ Alleles are alternative mutations of the same gene, which compete for the same space on the genome

¹¹ Dawkins, p172, 'The Roots of Religion', Religion as a By-Product of Something Else

¹² Ibid, p173, 'The Roots of Religion', Religion as a By-Product of Something Else

*'If I have done my softening-up work well, you will already have completed my argument about child brains and religion ... For excellent reasons related to Darwinian survival, child brains need to trust parents, and elders whom parents tell them to trust. An automatic consequence is that the truster has no way of distinguishing good advice from bad.'*¹³

- Thus, a child will accept truth from elders without making any judgement call as to how good or bad that truth is.
- This is sinister and self-seeking when the 'truth' is religion, as the child has adapted to accept everything the parent says as true¹⁴.
- So religion continues on unimpeded, as it is passed on to receptive children.

Possible root of Religion 3 – Psychologically Primed for Religion

*'Just as the eye is an evolved organ for seeing ... so the brain is a collection of organs (or 'modules') for dealing with a set of specialist data-processing needs ... Religion can be seen as the misfiring of several of these modules'*¹⁵

- We are natural **dualists** – that is, we acknowledge that the 'mind' is more than just a collection of matter.
- From an early age, this is evident.
- There must be a reason for this, as it is 'evidently' false.
- We are natural **teleologists** – that is, we are aware of intention and design in things, and consequently look for evidence of such.

*'Children are native teleologists, and many never grow out of it.'*¹⁶

- The combination of these two predispositions leads to a receptiveness to religion:

*'Native dualism and native teleology predispose us, given the right conditions, to religion, just as my moth's light-compass reaction predisposed them to inadvertent 'suicide'.'*¹⁷

¹³ Ibid, p176, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Religion as a By-Product of Something Else

¹⁴ This is similar to the implication contained in George Orwell's '1984.' The Junior Anti-Sex League, and The Spies develop a hardened callus in the young children that shapes them to Oceania's Party ideals – their parents have no influence over them to compete. In this instance, it is the State rather than the parent who defines right and wrong for a child, but either way, the child learns not to question an authority figure, and is consequently robbed of the dignity of being human.

¹⁵ Dawkins, p179, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Psychologically Primed for Religion

¹⁶ Ibid, p181, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Psychologically Primed for Religion

¹⁷ Ibid, p181, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Psychologically Primed for Religion

- We are ‘naturally selected’ for teleology because judging the intent of an organism speeds up our decision making process – making us better at avoid tigers, for example!
- Our brains developed to cope with some irrationalities, such as monogamous love:

‘We happily accept that we can love more than one child, parent, sibling, teacher, friend or pet. When you think of it like that, isn’t the total exclusiveness that we expect of spousal love positively weird? Yet it is what we expect, and it is what we set out to achieve.’¹⁸

- And this lays us open to other irrationalities:

‘The equivalent of the moth’s light-compass reaction is the apparently irrational but useful habit of falling in love with one, and only one, member of the opposite sex. The misfiring by-product – equivalent to flying into the candle flame – is falling in love with YAHWEH ... and performing irrational acts motivated by such love.’¹⁹

- This is supplemented by ‘wishful thinking’

‘There is a tendency for humans consciously to see what they wish to see. They literally have difficulty seeing things with negative connotations while seeing with increasing ease items that are positive.’²⁰

‘The idea of immortality itself survives and spreads because it caters to wishful thinking. And wishful thinking counts, because human psychology has a near-universal tendency to let belief be coloured by desire.’²¹

- Even great leaders, who seem to shape religions, do not do so intentionally. Martin Luther, in particular, is singled out as one who hated reason.

Tread Softly, Because you Tread on my Memes

‘In its most general form, natural selection must choose between alternative replicators. A replicator is a piece of coded information that makes exact copies of itself, along with occasional inexact

¹⁸ Ibid, p185, ‘The Roots of Religion’, Psychologically Primed for Religion

¹⁹ Ibid, p186, ‘The Roots of Religion’, Psychologically Primed for Religion

²⁰ Lionel Tiger, ‘Optimism: The biology of hope’, quoted by Dawkins, p187, ‘The Roots of Religion’, Psychologically Primed for Religion

²¹ Ibid, p190, ‘The Roots of Religion’, Psychologically Primed for Religion

*copies, or 'mutations'. Those varieties of replicator that happen to be good at getting copied become more numerous at the expense of alternative replicators that are bad at getting copied.'*²²

- Memes are units of cultural inheritance – they are the replicators of culture, in the way that genes are the replicators of biological inheritance.

*'The central question for meme theory is whether there are units of cultural imitation which behave as true replicators, like genes. I am not saying that memes necessarily are close analogues of genes, only that the more like genes they are, the better will meme theory work; and the purpose of this section is to ask whether meme theory might work for the special case of religion.'*²³

- Memetics describes what effectively seems to be a low-efficiency version of genetic mutation and propagation, with the focus on the result, not the individual steps.
- At each stage of an idea transferring, the purpose is transferred, and so small inaccuracies are smoothed out.
- Memes collaborate with other memes in 'memeplexes' – groups of memes which provide an environment favourable to the flourishing of all the component memes.
- Various bits of religions may not seem individually profitable, but they express themselves in the presence of the whole religion, which makes the oddities develop more fully.
- We need memetics (or an equivalent) to explain why religions develop so quickly and with such similarity in many independent situations, as natural selection operates too slowly.

Cargo Cults

The introduction of the idea of cargo cults is purely an illustration of Dawkins' point that religions can spring up quickly, and that there are similarities between religions in various different settings. For an example of Cargo Cults, listen to Stuart Cashman's sermon of 29 April 2007, entitled 'Isn't religion just a human invention?' (Romans 1:18-28)²⁴, where he introduces the concept to illustrate his point.

Most of the discussion is based around the following statement:

²² Ibid, p191, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Tread Softly, Because you Tread on my Memes

²³ Ibid, p191, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Tread Softly, Because you Tread on my Memes

²⁴ Available from <http://www.dukestreetchurch.com/mod.php?mod=sermons&op=showseries>, in the 'Guest Service' series

'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.'^{25, 26}

Problems with Dawkins' argument

The Darwinian Imperative

- Presupposition is shown – that religion is wasteful. This is to misunderstand its purpose. If its purpose is merely to survive, then this is true, if it is to express a relationship, then it is by no means wasteful.
- Human dignity is undermined – humans are essentially the same as birds and other animals, for example.

*'Universal features demand a Darwinian explanation.'*²⁷

- Why is the above quote true? No evidence given!
- The possible reasons for the existence of religion are all based on Darwinian presuppositions – that everything must be based on Darwinianism. There is no scope for other explanations.
- The whole chapter is designed to show *in what way* we are equipped for religion – it never denies the fact that we are, indeed, set up so as to accept religion. We will return to this presently.

Religion as a By-Product of something else

- The comparison with the moth is spurious – the moth exhibits a behavioural change which it cannot resist, for it stems from pure genetics. Not so with religion.
- Despite his protestations, Dawkins is essentially asking loaded questions – his presuppositions shape the kind of questions he asks, and so his scientific theories are thus predetermined. The answer he wants is contained within the question!
- It is a gross over-simplification to say that children have no way to combat what their parents tell them. Even if we are adapted to accept what they tell us, they are merely the dominant source of 'truth' when we are young, not the only one – Dawkins' own testimony bears this out! If he had believed childhood vicars, he would have been a Christian! This is not a sufficient explanation why God doesn't exist!

²⁵ Dawkins, quoting Arthur C. Clarke's 3rd law, p202, *The Roots of Religion*, Cargo Cults

²⁶ This is also quoted by Lex Luther in 'Superman Returns'. If Hollywood says it, it can't be a lie.

²⁷ Dawkins, p166, *The Roots of Religion*, The Darwinian Imperative

- Also, if children are able to learn at some stage what is good advice and what is bad, surely bad advice would be rapidly dispensed with – it is not a lasting process, and so this explanation is unsatisfactory.

Psychologically Primed for Religion

- The basic presupposition is that dualism is wrong – it must be, so there must be a way of explaining why we are dualists. If I can explain this, I have proved that dualism is false. This is logically not the case – explaining why we are natural dualists does not prove that dualism is incorrect!
- There is considerable stereotyping of natural dualists:

*'Dualists personify inanimate physical objects at the slightest opportunity, seeing spirits and demons even in waterfalls and clouds.'*²⁸

- However, the average dualist **can** make the distinction between that which is just an image and that which is truly 'other.' Just because we see a fleeting image in a waterfall or cloud does not require us to believe that the image is really a unicorn or a lion or a person!
- If we are made by a God with a will and a purpose, and are made in his image, *of course* we too will have a will and a purpose, and so will see purpose and intention in actions.
- Dawkins' aversion to teleology is reminiscent of David Hume, the famous Scottish philosopher, who denied any sense of cause and effect in the universe. He famously argued that it is impossible to experience causal relations, thus cause and effect are a fiction (albeit a necessary one)! This is palpably wrong²⁹.
- The attack on Luther is a considerable misrepresentation of his intentions in commenting on the place of reason. It has been said:

'Properly understood and used, philosophy and reason are a great aid to individuals and society. Improperly used, they become a great threat to both. Likewise, revelation and the gospel when used properly are an aid to society, but when misused also have sad and profound implications.'

²⁸ Ibid, p180, *'The Roots of Religion'*, Psychologically Primed for Religion

²⁹ This is illustrated by the 'hitting Hume' experiment. If I were to meet David Hume in the street and throw him a mighty right hook, laying him out cold and breaking his nose, would he be satisfied with the explanation – there is no causality here, it just so happened that I punched you. Because there is no cause and effect, I'm not culpable for disfiguring you? I think not.

*The proper role of philosophy is organizational and as an aid in governance.*³⁰

- In fact, Luther was more properly understood to advocate *fides quarenes intellectum* (faith seeks understanding), and not the other way around – it is a second-order recourse, not first-order. Whitford, again:

*‘Reason is the devil’s whore precisely because asks the wrong questions and looks in the wrong direction for answers. Revelation is the only proper place for theology to begin. Reason must always take a back-seat.’*³¹

Tread Softly, Because you Tread on My Memes

- The question Dawkins asks of Meme Theory is by no means a scientific one – he is starting with a very specific case, rather than asking the very general question as to whether or not his framework is right.
- Often within science, a theoretical model can be internally consistent (that is, it can work nicely in and of itself), without being the true explanation of reality. This was the problem of irrelevancy left open by Carl Hopper’s Covering Law mentioned earlier. A perfectly internally consistent theory may give an explanation without it being truly relevant. To illustrate, let me borrow from Samir Okasha, Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of York:

‘Suppose a young child is in a hospital in a room full of pregnant women. The child notices that one person in the room – a man called John – is not pregnant and asks the doctor why not. The doctor replies: ‘John has been taking birth-control pills regularly for the last few years. People who take birth-control pills regularly never become pregnant. Therefore, John has not become pregnant.’ ... [even if the facts given by the doctor are true], the doctor’s reply to the child is not very helpful. The correct explanation of why John has not become pregnant, obviously, is that he is male, and males cannot become pregnant.

*... The general moral is that a good explanation of a phenomenon should contain information that is relevant to the phenomenon’s occurrence.*³²

- Now what Dawkins describes as memetics all sounds very nice, but he doesn’t give any evidence that memes really exist. He says things like ‘We can imagine that...’ and ‘If memetics is correct, then...’

³⁰ David M. Whitford, Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy, Clafin University

³¹ Ibid

³² Samir Okasha, ‘*Philosophy of Science: A Very Brief Introduction*’, pp.47-48

- In essence, he's presenting a non-falsifiable theory, which is not good science. It sounds good, but there is little proof that it either explains or predicts reality efficiently.
- My Master's thesis aimed to take a theoretical model of planet formation, and simulate it so that the predictions the model led to could be matched to reality. This does not happen in the description of memetics.
- In fact, even before he starts, it seems like Dawkins' defensiveness rather stinks of 'the lady doth pretest too much...'

*'The alleged problems of memes are exaggerated.'*³³

- By admitting that natural selection operates too slowly to account for the development of religion, and introducing the need for another theory, Dawkins undermines his earlier arguments for our 'fitting' for religion, in favour of memetics – a field which at best is embryonic and often regarded as silly!

Cargo Cults

- The assumption that because technology beyond our ken is indistinguishable from magic means that anything which appears miraculous must be simply some physical process we don't understand seems naïve, at best. Obviously, we don't stop investigating something that we find miraculous, but equally, we don't discount the possibility of something we can't understand.
- This again points to Dawkins' profoundly materialistic monism, with no openness for things outwith the physical universe.

Biblical Perspective

Effectively, Dawkins is asking the question: why are we suited for religions? His attempt to answer this question presupposes that Darwinianism holds the only possible key. But what does the bible say about this? Let us consider a few bible passages:

*'¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end ... ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.'*³⁴

³³ Ibid, p192, 'The Roots of Religion', Tread Softly, Because you Tread on my Memes

³⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:11,14

²⁴"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."³⁵

¹⁴(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) ¹⁶This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares."³⁶

Briefly, the bible teaches that God has made us in such a way that we bear his image – and we are made to be in relationship with him. Everything in us yearns for relationship with our maker, but is infected in every part by paralysing sin. Even if we claim to be ignorant, as Bertrand Russell hoped to if he met God, the testimony of our conscience leads to our conviction before the Holy God.

Despite knowing the truth that God has set plainly before us, we by nature try to suppress it:

³⁵ Acts 17:24-31

³⁶ Romans 2:14-16

*'[Men] suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.'*³⁷

The way we are made by God is why we are receptive to religion. The mechanism that made us that way is one of the secret things that belongs to God (Deuteronomy 29:29), but which He may in his grace choose to reveal to us. But the most basic answer, the 'ultimate explanation' that Dawkins looks for – why a vulnerability to religion is favoured in our development – is this – religion ought to be an expression of our relationship with God and we are made such that we should yearn for that relationship (or at least be aware of its absence)³⁸.

The biblical description of this chapter could be expressed as follows:

*'They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.'*³⁹

³⁷ Romans 1:18,19

³⁸ Incidentally, the bible shows that this is also why we so easily fall into idolatry – we are made to worship something. When we don't worship God, we turn to worship other things

³⁹ Romans 1:25