

Chapter 7 – The Good Book and the Changing Moral Zeitgeist

This is probably the most non-sensical, polemical, ill-thought out and badly argued chapter in the whole book.

Having tried to show in Chapter 6 that we can develop a moral system without the need for God, he now attempts to go one step further. He attempts to show that:

1. **Religion is actually a bad source of morals** and that none of us, even “religious” people, get their morals from religion.

His argument is as follows:

- But the bible is full of examples of bad behaviour you wouldn't want to emulate.
- God appears nasty and vindictive

2. **Our morality has evolved over the last 100 years to be better, without religion**

He tries to demonstrate that actually in the last 100 years we have become better with the changing ‘moral zeitgeist’ (a German loan word meaning ‘spirit of the times’, or a ‘mysterious consensus which changes over the decades’ as Dawkins puts it.)¹ These changes, he argues, are nothing to do with religion but, implicitly, our further moral evolution.

His logic is as follows:

1. **Why religion is a bad source of morality.**

He claims there are two ways to get morals from the bible:

- From the principles it teaches (e.g. the Ten Commandments).
- From the example of the people that it sets before us as heroes or role models (e.g. Abraham, David, etc)

At this point it is worth remembering that Dawkins’ expertise is in genetics, not hermeneutics (the science of interpretation).

He then he argues that teaching and examples of the bible do not lead to good morality because:

- (a) The principles are out of date
- (b) The examples of morality in the bible are immoral

¹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, p265

- (c) God behaves in an immoral way by commanding the Canaanite genocide (in Joshua)
- (d) Jesus supports his argument rather than undermines it.

Let's look at these in turn:

(a) The principles are out of date

For example, Dawkins feels the first two commandments are now out of date. These are "You shall have no gods before the Lord" and "You shall not make any idols).

All he is doing here is substituting his morality in place of God's. This is the heart of sin and mankind's rebellion against God since the Garden of Eden.

(b) The examples of morality in the bible are immoral

Then he looks at some of the stories in the Old Testament to show that in his opinion, the principles they teach are not that moral. For example:

- Lot offering his daughters to the crowds to rape in Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19)
- A similar story in Judges 19 when a Levite's concubine is raped
- Abraham lying about Sarah being his wife in Genesis 12
- Jephthah sacrificing his daughter in Judges 11

Of course, Dawkins' problem in all these cases is that he *assumes* that what the bible reports is what the bible *commands*. Of course, that is wrong! The bible frequently tells us terrible stories because they are true and so we learn that God *condemns* these things rather than commanding them.

If we follow Dawkins' logic then we have to conclude that the *Daily Telegraph* is actually a Jihadist publication because its edition of 12th September 2001 had a front page spread on the Twin Towers terrorist attack. That is clearly nonsense!

(c) The Canaanite Genocide

He argues that the fact God commanded the genocide of the Canaanite nations in Joshua shows that actually God is evil. Admittedly to our eyes and ears this Canaanite genocide seems harsh. But Dawkins is either unaware or deliberately chooses to ignore the facts of the case and the purpose of this part of Israel's history. In reply, we need to say the following:

- This was a specific act at a specific period of time, so it can never be used to justify killing anyone today.

- It was specifically an act of judgement against the Canaanite races (see Genesis 15:16)
- The genocide did not change the death rate: 1 in 1 of these people were always going to die. God, their maker and judge, was just making them give account of their lives.
- The lesson we are to learn from this is that rebellion against God is a serious matter with serious consequences. We are not supposed to think how cute God is but how awesome He is and worthy of our obedience and devotion.
- The fact that we naturally want to accuse God of injustice actually shows that we are trying to run the world our way rather than bow to His rightful authority. This is the heart of sin
- Just because people don't like the Canaanite genocide doesn't mean it isn't true or right. We cannot stand in judgement over God. Rather, by definition, he must stand in judgement over us.

(d) Jesus supports his argument rather than undermines it

When he gets on to Jesus, Dawkins uses two of his daftest argument to date!

First, he claims that while the Sermon on the Mount was good stuff, actually it just proves his point that good morals don't come from religion. Let me quote him:

But the moral superiority of Jesus precisely bears out my point. Jesus was not content to derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing. He explicitly departed from them.... Since a principal thesis of this chapter is that we do not, and should not, derive our morals from Scripture, Jesus has to be honoured as a model for that very thesis.²

Contrast that to what Jesus himself said at the start of the Sermon on the Mount (which is the ethical teaching Dawkins mentions so approvingly):

“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Matthew 5:17)

Given that Jesus himself said this it seems a little presumptuous of Dawkins to assume he understands the source of Jesus' moral teaching better than Jesus does! Added to that, it is bizarre, to say the least, to claim that Jesus is unscriptural. Where, after all, do we read about his teaching if not within the scriptures?

He follows up this by claiming that Jesus' teaching to “love your neighbour” was actually just referring to Jesus' “in-group”. I quote again, so you can see I am not making this up!

² Dawkins. *The God Delusion*, p.250

“Jesus was a devotee of the same in-group morality – coupled with the out-group hostility – that was taken for granted in the Old Testament. Jesus was a loyal Jew. It was Paul who invented the idea of taking the Jewish God to the Gentiles.”³

This is so daft it is hardly worth replying to! The very parable Jesus used to illustrate the command to “love your neighbour” was the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which explicitly demonstrates love to someone in outside the group! Jesus clearly teaches his followers to love their enemies, he clearly loved non-Jews (e.g. John 4, Mark 7 & 8) and he sent his followers to take his message to the world (Mark 13, Matthew 28). All of this was in fulfilment of all the OT prophecies of people of all nations worshipping the God of Israel.

This takes us on to the second half of the chapter where he tries to show that our morality changes with changing times, and is not affected by religion.

2. Our morality has evolved over the last 100 years to be better, without religion

Here he argues that 200 years ago most people would have been in favour of slavery. 100 years ago most people would have been racist by today’s standards and even more recently most men were sexist (for example, women have only been able to vote in the relatively recent past). He claims this is evidence of the changing “moral zeitgeist” and is nothing to do with religion.

Of course, these changes are demonstrably true. However, for Dawkins’ argument to be true he needs show that:

- (1) Religious thought would go against these kinds of moral changes
- (2) It was solely intellectual advancement that makes us more “moral”

Of course, he cannot prove such things. The framework for all these improvements is Judeo-Christian ethical teaching. Certainly, down through the centuries there have been (and are) Christians who are racist, sexist or slave owners, however that doesn’t change the fact that by so doing they were behaving un-Christianly. It is the bible that emphasises the equality of all peoples regardless of race and gender as all were made in the image of God and descended from the same ancestor.

Strangely, Dawkins tries to argue that the “progress” in our morality might have come in part from “the increased understanding that each of us shares a common humanity with members of other races and with the other sex – both deeply unbiblical ideas”⁴ But he is wrong as these **are** in fact deeply biblical

³ Dawkins. *The God Delusion*, p.257

⁴ Dawkins, *Delusion*, p 271

ideas! They are both rooted in the doctrine of creation, which teaches us that men and women are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). It is only evolution that can (and has) been used to try to claim that other races are less human.

It is amazing that someone so intelligent can be so blind to this. But then again, this is just another example of Romans 1. Men do indeed suppress the truth about God, even though they know it instinctively.