

NEW INTRODUCTION FROM THE AUTHOR
AFTERWORD BY DANIEL DENNETT

RICHARD
DAWKINS
THE
GOD
DELUSION

'A magnificent book, lucid and wise,
truly magisterial' Ian McEwan

About the Book

The God Delusion caused a sensation when it was published in 2006. Within weeks it became the most hotly debated topic, with Dawkins himself branded as either saint or sinner for presenting his hard-hitting, impassioned rebuttal of religion of all types. Ten years on it has been revised and updated with new material.

Dawkins attacks God in all his forms. He eviscerates the major arguments for religion and demonstrates the supreme improbability of a supreme being. He shows how religion fuels war, foments bigotry and abuses children. His argument could hardly be more topical. While Europe is becoming increasingly secularized, the rise of religious fundamentalism, whether in the Middle East or Middle America, is dramatically and dangerously dividing opinion around the world. In America, and elsewhere, a vigorous dispute between 'intelligent design' and Darwinism is seriously undermining and restricting the teaching of science. In many countries religious dogma from medieval times still serves to abuse basic human rights such as women's and gay rights. And all from a belief in a God whose existence lacks evidence of any kind.

'An entertaining, wildly informative, splendidly written polemic' Rod Liddle, Sunday Times

'A spirited and exhilarating read . . . Dawkins comes roaring forth in the full vigour of his powerful arguments' Joan Bakewell, Guardian

'Passionate, clever, funny, uplifting and above all, desperately needed' Daily Express

'A wonderful book . . . joyous, elegant, fair, engaging, and often very funny . . . informed throughout by an exhilarating breadth of reference and clarity of thought' Michael Frayn

'Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* should be read by everyone from atheist to monk. If its merciless rationalism doesn't enrage you at some point, you probably aren't alive' Julian Barnes

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THE GOD DELUSION

Richard Dawkins

In Memoriam
Douglas Adams (1952-2001)

'Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful
without having to believe that there are fairies at
the bottom of it too?'

A new introduction for the 10th anniversary edition

The fact that you exist should brim you over with astonishment. You and I, and every other living creature, are machines of ineffable complexity, complexity of a magnitude to challenge credulity. Complexity here means statistical improbability in a non-random direction, the direction of seeming designed for a purpose. The ultimate purpose (gene survival) hides behind a more up-front 'design', details of which vary from species to species. Whatever its specialism – wings for flying, tails for swimming, hands for climbing or digging, galloping legs for prey-catching or predator-escaping – every animal embodies a statistically improbable complexity of detail which approaches (but revealingly falls short of) perfection as an engineer might judge it. 'Statistically improbable' means 'unlikely to have come about by chance'. The God Temptation here is the temptation to evade, by invoking a designer, the responsibility to explain. The point is that the designer himself, in order to be capable of designing, would have to be another complex entity of the kind that, in his turn, needs the same kind of explanation. It's an evasion of responsibility because it invokes the very thing it is supposed to be explaining.

I'm a biologist, so I speak first of the biological version of the God Temptation, the false argument destroyed by Darwin. There is also a cosmological version, which lies outside the Darwinian domain and precedes it by ten billion years. The cosmos may not look so obviously designed as a

peacock or its eye. But the laws and constants of physics are fine-tuned in such a way as to set up the conditions under which, in the fullness of time, eyes and peacocks, humans and their brains, will come into existence. The God Temptation here is to invoke an Intelligent Knob-Twiddler who adjusts the dials of the physical constants so that they have the exquisitely precise values required to bring evolution, and eventually us, into being.

To succumb to the God Temptation in either of those guises, biological or cosmological, is an act of intellectual capitulation. If you are trying to explain something improbable, it can never suffice to invoke an entity that is, in itself, at least as improbable. If you'll stoop to magicking into existence an unexplained peacock-designer, you might as well magic an unexplained peacock and cut out the middleman.

Nevertheless, it's hard not to feel sympathy for such capitulation. The complexity of a living body, indeed of every one of its trillion cells, is so mind-shattering to anyone who truly grasps it (not all do) that the temptation to buckle at the knees and succumb to a non-explanation is almost overwhelming. Even a magic trick can draw the same reaction. There's an old card trick where the conjuror invites a member of the audience to pick a card and show it to the audience. He then burns the card, grinds the ash to powder and rubs it on his forearm. The image of the card appears on his arm, picked out in ash. A conjuror recently told me he performed the trick to a band of Arabs round a camp fire. The tribesmen's reaction made him fear for his life. They sprang up and reached for their guns, thinking he was a djinn. You can see why. You have to smack yourself and shout, 'No! However loudly my senses and my instincts are screaming "Miracle!", it really isn't. There really is a rational explanation. The conjuror prepared the ground in some unknown way before the trick started, and then did some clever prestidigitation while he cunningly distracted

my attention.’ It’s almost as though you have to have ‘faith’ that it really is only a trick. Faith that nothing supernatural has happened. The laws of physics have not been suspended.

In the case of conjurors we know this to be the case because the best and most honest ones, like Jamy Ian Swiss, or James Randi, or Penn and Teller, or Derren Brown (as opposed to spoonbending charlatans) assure us it is so.^{fn1} Even if they didn’t, the rational thinker falls back on the elegant parsimony of the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume. Which should surprise you more – that you have been fooled by a trick, or that the laws of physics really have been violated?

When we contemplate the vertebrate eye, or the fine structure of a cell, once again our instincts scream ‘Miracle!’ and once again we need to smack ourselves. Darwin plays a role akin to the honest conjuror – but he goes further. The honest conjuror tells us it is only a trick but risks expulsion from the Magic Circle if he reveals how it’s done. Darwin patiently tells us exactly how the Trick of Life works: cumulative natural selection.

Admittedly that isn’t (or probably isn’t) how the Cosmological Trick is done. Natural selection explains the miracle of life but it doesn’t explain the apparent fine-tuning of the laws and constants of physics – unless you count as a version of natural selection the multiverse theory: there are billions of universes having different laws and constants; with anthropic hindsight we could only find ourselves in one of the minority of universes whose laws and constants happen to be propitious to our evolution. There is a weak sense in which you could regard that as a kind of Darwinism: anthropic *post hoc* selection among universes. The physicist Lee Smolin has provocatively suggested a stronger analogy in which universes give birth to daughter universes with mutated laws and constants.

In any case, Darwin can fairly be said to have done the heavy lifting. Before he came along, any impartial judge would have agreed with Archdeacon William Paley (1743–1805) that the apparent design of physics would be a doddle to explain compared with almost any biological organ, let alone the whole magnificent diversity of purpose-ridden life. Both these versions of the God Temptation are logically fallacious but one of them – the biological one – was so eloquently strong before Darwin, it would tempt one to defy even logic itself. The fact that Darwin solved it so convincingly should now stiffen our confidence to reject the much weaker cosmological version too. Darwin is a role model to inspire all who follow the logical and courageous compulsion to explain complex things in the only legitimate way, which is in terms of simpler things and their interactions.

The publication of *The God Delusion* provoked a swarm of what I came to call ‘fleas’: religious books with plagiaristic jacket designs and parasitic titles like *The Dawkins Delusion*, *Deluded by Dawkins*, *God is no Delusion*, *The Atheist Delusion*, *Atheist Delusions*, *The Devil’s Delusion*, *The God Solution*, *The God Delusion Revisited*, *Is God an Illusion?* The ‘flea’ name came from a line of W. B. Yeats: ‘But was there ever dog that praised his fleas?’ (Incidentally, there was even a book published called *The Dog Delusion*, with the same cover design as mine, but it isn’t a religious book and doesn’t qualify as a flea.) Not only the fleas but other religious critics of my book homed in on what they rightly saw as its central and most damaging point, the one briefly reiterated above, dubbed in the book ‘the Ultimate Boeing 747’. Grasping at straws, they tried to deny that a god capable of designing something complex must himself be complex.

Dawkins may know something about science, they bent over backwards to concede, but he’s no theologian, and theologians are the professionals qualified to tell us what

God is like. Some of our best theologians have told us that, far from being complex, God is supremely simple. No less a theologian than Richard Swinburne, then Oxford's Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion, said it beautifully clearly. In his 1996 book *Is There a God?*, reissued in 2010, Swinburne endears himself to scientists by praising the virtue of simple explanations but then, astonishingly, goes on to claim that God is the ultimate simple explanation for everything:

Theism claims that every other object which exists is caused to exist and kept in existence by just one substance, God. And it claims that every property which every substance has is due to God causing or permitting it to exist. It is a hallmark of a simple explanation to postulate few causes. There could in this respect be no simpler explanation than one which postulated only one cause. Theism is simpler than polytheism. And theism postulates for its one cause, a person [with] infinite power (God can do anything logically possible), infinite knowledge (God knows everything logically possible to know), and infinite freedom . . . (p. 43)

As I wrote in my review of the book for the *Sunday Times*,

Swinburne generously concedes that God cannot accomplish feats that are *logically* impossible, and one feels grateful for this forbearance. That said, there is no limit to the explanatory purposes to which God's infinite power is put. Is science having a little difficulty explaining X? No problem. Don't give X another glance. God's infinite power is effortlessly wheeled in to explain X (along with everything else), and it is always a supremely *simple* explanation because, after all, there is only one God. What could be simpler than that?

Swinburne's is the clearest expression of the remarkably feeble point made later by fleas and others, in reply to my 'Ultimate 747' argument. By theological fiat, God is *declared* to be 'simple'. Theologians are the ones who can speak with authority on God, theologians decree that God is simple, therefore God is simple, therefore the Ultimate 747 argument fails. Such brazen sophistry is beyond astounding. It calls to mind Julian Huxley's satire of Bergsonian vitalism: to postulate a mysterious *élan vital* in

explanation for life is like saying that a railway engine is powered by *élan locomotif*. Actually Swinburne's sophistry is worse, because at least Bergson could claim that his *élan vital* was complex, as might be revealed by further investigation. Swinburne, and the fleas that agree with him, have the effrontery to decree by fiat that their *élan théologique* (as we might term it) is not only mysterious (like Bergson's *élan*) but also simple.

God is simple, for Swinburne, because there is only one of him. Polytheism, he states explicitly, is less simple than (mono)theism. Yet that one entity, unitary though he be, has to be clever enough to calculate, with exquisite and prophetic precision, the exact values of the physical constants that would fine-tune a universe to yield, 13.8 billion years later, a species capable of worshipping him. You call that simple? At the same time, in his singular simplicity, he had to foresee that the nuclear force must be set 10^{36} times stronger than gravity; and he had to calculate with similar exactitude the precisely requisite values of half a dozen critical numbers, the fundamental constants of physics.^{fn2} You and I both possess prodigiously complex brains evolved over hundreds of millions of years, but do you understand quantum mechanics? I certainly don't. Yet God, that paragon of ultimate pure simplicity, not only understands it but invented it. Plus Special and General Relativity. Plus the Higgs boson and dark matter. Finally, the icing on the cake: on top of being the ultimate mathematics and physics genius, God has enough bandwidth to listen to the prayers and praises of billions of people simultaneously (plus how many on other planets, and how many already dead and in Heaven?). He hears their confessed sins and decides which ones should be forgiven, weighs up which cancer patients shall recover, which tsunami or earthquake victims shall be spared, even (according to his more naïve but still numerous followers) who shall win Wimbledon and who shall be vouchsafed a

parking space. Yes, I'm straying into sarcasm territory now, which might seem unfair, but the point about simplicity remains. God may be almighty, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, but the one thing he cannot be, if he is to match up even minimally to his job description, is *simple*. The 'Ultimate 747' argument remains intact and inescapably devastating.

So much for the two scientific versions of the God Temptation. There is also a moral version. Without God, it is said, where is the inducement to be good, what are the sanctions against bad behaviour? How do we even know what is good and what bad? The temptation here is to abdicate the responsibility to think clearly and consistently about morality, and instead take the lazy route of slavishly following an ancient book of rules, rules invented by fallible men (and they *were* men) and tailored to very different times and conditions. Or, worse, to base our moral decisions on the fear that our every move is watched by a great surveillance camera in the sky and so we need to suck up to an obsessively vigilant God, a celestial Nosy Parker, inexhaustibly interested in what goes on in our beds – and even our minds. As for the suggestion that we can't define good and bad without God, it is falsified by the honourable and sophisticated discipline of moral philosophy. But even if it were true, the fact would have no bearing on whether God exists. Maybe there really is no ultimate way to define good and bad. Why should there be, any more than an ultimate way to define beauty?

God also presents a temptation to lazy and sloppy use of language when defining our allegiances.

'I'm Christian. Well of course I don't believe any of that supernatural stuff but I was baptized, we go to church at Christmas and I'm certainly not Jewish or Muslim, so I guess that makes me Christian.'
'I'm Catholic.'

'Ah, I see, so you believe wine turns literally into blood, bread into body, and Mary never died but was assumed bodily into Heaven.'

'No, that's just ridiculous, of course I don't believe that.'

'Oh, so you're not Catholic after all.'

'Well, my family has been Catholic for generations, so doesn't that make me Catholic?'

'That's lazy, sloppy abuse of language. My family has been farming for generations but that doesn't define me as a farmer.'

'By the year 2050 the population of Ruritania will be predominantly Muslim. It's simple demography. Just compare the birth rates of the different communities in Ruritania.'

'But you're making the lazy assumption that a child of Muslim parents is defined as a Muslim. Would you define a child of logical positivist parents as a logical positivist? Would you define a child of Keynesian parents as a Keynesian?'

This kind of laziness was documented by a 2011 opinion poll in which I was involved. The decennial UK National Census fell in March 2011. As with previous censuses, everyone was asked to specify their religion ('no religion' was one option). It seemed likely that many of those who ticked 'Christian' had in fact succumbed to the 'lazy temptation': baptized Christian, perhaps, but what did they really believe? This was where I, or rather my charitable foundation, came in. Publication of *The God Delusion* in 2006 had generated two foundations, one in Britain, one in America, sharing the same name, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS). In 2011, the UK Foundation commissioned the respected polling organization Ipsos MORI to survey the actual religious opinions held by those who self-identified as Christian, and we deliberately chose to do it in the very week following the census. A summary of the findings can be seen here: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/ipsos-mori-religious-and-social-attitudes-topline-2012.pdf>.

Only people who ticked the 'Christian' box in the census were sampled. 1,136 of them responded. Given that they self-identified as Christian, I was especially surprised - even shocked, to be honest - by their ignorance of the Bible. 'What is the first book of the New Testament?' they were asked. They didn't have to name 'Matthew'; the task

was easier than that. They were given a choice of only four: Matthew, Genesis, Acts of the Apostles or Psalms. Only 35 per cent chose Matthew. A massive 39 per cent ticked 'Don't know'. Ignorance of the Bible doesn't rule out sincere religious belief, but it is sobering and it indirectly supports the case for 'laziness' where declarations of religious affiliation are concerned. These were not just any UK citizens, remember. They were specifically those who had self-identified as Christian in the official census a week earlier.

When asked to choose the single main reason for thinking of themselves as belonging to their religion, only 18 per cent said it was because they believed in its teachings. The most popular answer to the question was 'I was christened/baptized into this religion'. That accounted for 46 per cent. Other reasons given included 'One or both of my parents are/were members of this religion' and 'As a child I went to a Sunday school run by this religion'. Compatibly, 17 per cent of these self-described Christians attended church weekly, while 55 per cent never did, or only at Christmas or Easter. Just 35 per cent prayed at least once a week, whether or not they bothered to go to church; 43 per cent prayed never, or less than once per year.

These figures, and the answers to other questions in our survey, seem to support the 'lazy' version of the God Temptation. It is therefore a matter of some interest to know why, given their evident lack of genuine religious belief, these respondents had chosen to tick the 'Christian' box. What did they think it means to call yourself a Christian? The answers to this question are revealing:

Which is the ONE statement that BEST describes what being a Christian means to you personally?

	%
I try to be a good person	40

It's how I was brought up	24
I have accepted Jesus as my Lord and Saviour	15
I believe in the teachings of Jesus	7
It's a British tradition	4
It gives me hope in an afterlife	3
Something else	0
Don't know	2
Prefer not to say	4

Only 22 per cent cited belief in the teachings of Jesus or accepting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour as their primary understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The 28 per cent who chose 'It's how I was brought up' or 'It's a British tradition' exemplify the lazy misuse of language that I have been talking about. So does the answer which I was shocked to see was the most popular: 'I try to be a good person' - and that also illustrates the moral version of the God Temptation which I mentioned earlier.

I do not, of course, deny that many Christians are good people and many good people are Christians. There is no persuasive evidence for any significant association between the two, however. Indeed, it wouldn't surprise me to discover that atheists are more likely to be good than religious people. There is some weak evidence pointing in that direction.^{m3} But what distresses me is that at least 40 per cent of our respondents seemed to take the alleged positive association between 'Christian' and 'good' for granted, almost as a matter of definition. In the same vein, when thanking somebody for doing a good turn, people often say something like: 'That's very Christian of you.' Or: 'You, Sir, are a gentleman and a Christian.' It is in the same spirit that many people refuse to vote for an atheist in political elections because they think a believer in a higher power - any higher power, it doesn't matter which one - is more likely to take moral decisions.

We chose the very week following the census to run our poll because we suspected - rightly, as it turned out - that

the official census would give results that could be misleading. We also feared that such misleading inferences would be used by interested parties, as they undoubtedly were after the 2001 census, to influence policy, perhaps to argue for government-supported faith schools, or bishops in the House of Lords. 'Mr Speaker, Honourable Members, the census shows that Britain is a predominantly Christian country, therefore it's only right that . . .' You can see how it might play.

Actually, the census showed a dramatic drop in the number of professed Christians, from 71.7 per cent in 2001 to 59.3 per cent in 2011. The number professing 'No religious belief' increased over the decade from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent. Parallel counts in the United States show the same trends, but the absolute numbers of religious believers are higher. American religiosity has become legendary. I suspect it is inflated by the same lazy temptation as our UK poll demonstrated, powerfully reinforced by what could be called, with scarcely any exaggeration, intimidation. 'What church do you go to?' The question is presumptuous to the point of rudeness - or so a European would find it. Yet I'm told, again and again, that it is likely to be thrown at newcomers to a neighbourhood in certain states of America as casually and automatically as a solicitous inquiry after health, or a comment on the weather. That the newcomer might not attend a place of worship at all often doesn't cross the Friendly Neighborhood Mind.

It doesn't cross the mind of a typical American politician either, which is why so many of them drag God into every speech, and why they bend over backwards to appease religious lobbies when talking about important issues such as abortion, stem cell research and the teaching of evolution. And this brings me to my American Foundation, that other spinoff from the publication of *The God Delusion*.

RDFRS (US) has a number of projects going (see www.RichardDawkins.net) and the number has increased since our recent happy union with the Center for Inquiry (CFI). The one I want to focus on here is Openly Secular, a campaign launched with three other important American secular organizations, the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, the Secular Student Alliance and the Secular Coalition for America. Openly Secular is a sophisticated marketing and public awareness campaign designed to raise consciousness of the fact that America is not nearly as religious as politicians, and most other people, think it is. Politicians themselves cannot possibly be as monolithically religious as they pretend. Of the 535 members of the combined houses of Congress, not a single one admits to not believing in a higher power. That is statistically beyond implausible, verging on impossible. More than 20 per cent of the US population at large now tell pollsters they have no religious belief. The figure swells to 40 per cent for American scientists and to 90 per cent for elite scientists (those elected to the National Academy of Sciences), and is probably similar for other educated elites such as top philosophers, historians and other scholars including (for sure) many biblical scholars. In the face of these numbers, how is it even remotely plausible that the figure for the US Congress is zero? The conclusion is glaring: a substantial number of US politicians are simply lying when they profess religious faith.^{fn4} To put it in starkly cynical terms, a successful US politician is either religious or a well-educated and intelligent liar.

It's hard to blame them for lying. They have bought into the widely held belief that it is impossible for a non-believer to win election to high office. None seem to take courage from the fact that the one Congressman who did dare to come out as an atheist, Representative Pete Stark, was repeatedly re-elected (he eventually lost his seat in 2012, aged eighty, for unrelated reasons).^{fn5} Have US politicians

simply not caught up with the fact that the 'nones' (having no religious affiliation), at 23 per cent of Americans, now outnumber Roman Catholics (21 per cent)? Of course most 'nones' would not go so far as to claim the dread word 'atheist'. But avowed atheists combined with agnostics are more than three times as numerous as adherents to the Jewish faith.^{fn6} And American Jews, to their credit, command attention in the corridors of power.

Our Openly Secular campaign, encouraged by the earlier success of the gay movement, aims to raise consciousness (not least among politicians) by inviting people in all walks of life to 'come out' as non-believers. Those who have made short videos for us include not only celebrities such as Bill Maher, Julia Sweeney, Penn & Teller, John Davidson, Killah Priest, Chris Kluwe, Arian Foster, John de Lancie and principals of the band Nightwish but, of equal importance, 'ordinary nice people from next door'. While resolutely opposed to 'outing' people against their wishes, we hope to give them the courage to come forward and take a stand for truth, in the same way as the Gay Pride advocates of an earlier decade did. It is our (plausible) hope that a tipping point will be reached, whereupon floodgates will be opened and even politicians will realize that they no longer need to vote against their consciences in order to suck up to religious lobbies.

The legendarily high religiosity of the United States is at least partly a manifestation of succumbing to the 'lazy' temptation uncovered in Britain by the RDFRS UK poll. But there does seem to be a real difference as well. America really is more religious than Britain and western Europe. Why this should be is one of the commonest questions I am asked, especially by American audiences.

I used to answer with a paradox. Britain, Scandinavia and other countries with an established church are the least religious. Religion has become boring. Churches are places you visit only to be baptized, married or buried, perhaps

also to carol some Christmas nostalgia. But in America, precisely because the constitution bans the establishment of religion, religion has become free-enterprise, entrepreneurial, competitive, charismatic, exciting, a vibrant and lucrative branch of show business.

I still find that argument somewhat plausible, especially when I look at megachurch televangelists with their mansions and Lear jets, preaching a 'Jesus wants you to be rich' gospel of self-interest. I suspect that it represents a part of the truth. However, Gregory Paul, Jerry Coyne and others have persuaded me of a different hypothesis, for which there is positive statistical evidence. This has been called the Existential Security Hypothesis. Coyne attributes it originally to Karl Marx, who famously stated in the 1840s:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Marx's recognition of this aspect of the God Temptation is tinged with sympathy for its victims and in this, if in nothing else, I join him. No wonder religion was popular among the slaves of America (and remains so among their descendants to this day). No wonder the pacifying opium of religion was actively pushed by oppressors, then and down the ages.

Greg Paul's exhaustive research looks across countries and finds that religiosity increases with various indices of social malaise - measures, we might say, of 'existential insecurity'. The correlation of religiosity with income inequality, for example, is 0.707. With infant mortality it is 0.746; with abortion rates among teenagers it is 0.825; with rates of gonorrhoea infection it is 0.643. The idea is that people tend to resort to religion in countries where they feel insecure in their lives, unsupported by health care and other social welfare provisions; more at risk in this

world, so more tempted to place their forlorn hopes in a mythical next world.

Correlation can suggest causation but cannot prove it, and it doesn't tell us which way, if any, the causal arrow points. Does social malaise cause religiosity or the other way around? Coyne favours the former, on persuasive grounds.^{fn7} The evidence is interesting. When income inequality changes, religiosity changes too, in the predicted direction but with a one-year time lag. Societal despair provides a climate in which religion flourishes. So, while I am still committed to persuading people on intellectual grounds that God is indeed a Delusion, it can be argued that a better route to killing religion is to abolish poverty and especially inequality. Working to improve education fosters both routes.

Jerry Coyne's book *Faith versus Fact* should be added to the list of so-called 'horseman' books, as should Lawrence Krauss's *A Universe from Nothing*. One of the achievements of RDFRS (US) was to get the original 'Four Horsemen of Atheism' (Sam Harris, Dan Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and me) together under one roof (Christopher's) for an unchaired and unscripted filmed conversation.^{fn8} I think the lack of a chairman improved the conversation, as it usually does. I don't object to the horseman label, by the way. I'm less keen on 'new atheist': it isn't clear to me how we differ from old atheists.

Another successful enterprise of RDFRS (US) has been the Clergy Project (TCP). Dan Barker (*Losing Faith in Faith*) made us aware that there are clergy who have become atheists but feel, for evident reasons, unable to come clean. Dan himself concealed his apostasy for a year, even continuing to write hymns (he's a talented musician) before finally breaking free and joining his now wife Annie Laurie Gaylor in the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF). From the inception of RDFRS it was my dream to find a way of rescuing these honourable renegades. My original

hope was to finance scholarships for atheistic clergymen and women, retraining them to make their living in a more reputable career - carpentry, perhaps. It soon became clear that we couldn't raise enough money to do this on anything other than a token scale. The Clergy Project was something we could do: a small but significant step in the right direction. We provided a website where atheistic clergy could meet each other, under false names, in conditions of complete confidentiality. They could discuss their shared problems, getting advice from each other and from Dan Barker and others who had already 'come out'.

Membership of TCP is strictly controlled. New members are carefully vetted for fear of fifth columnists who might 'out' people before they are ready to face the world and risk losing friends, family, their livelihood and the respect of their community. TCP has now constituted itself as a charity, independent of its parent organizations (RDFRS and FFRF) and entirely governed by its members.

From a handful of founder members known to each other only by *noms de guerre* like 'Adam' and 'Chris', TCP has ballooned to the point where in 2016 membership stands at nearly 700, mostly ex-Christians but including people from all the other major religions too. That's an impressive number. If there are 700 clergy who have actually heard about the secret club for atheist clergy and are prepared to take the risk of joining it, think how much larger must be the total number out there. There are probably many who scarcely dare admit their non-belief even to themselves, and need only the reassurance of knowing they are not alone to allow themselves to do so. I take great encouragement from that thought.

For an insightful account and analysis of what makes these apostates tick (their stories are quite variable), see *Caught in the Pulpit* by Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola.^{fn9} Also available and listed on the TCP website^{fn10} are personal memoirs by TCP alumni who have made the

courageous leap and 'come out'. Catherine Dunphy, for example, in *From Apostle to Apostate*, well conveys the harrowing personal difficulties faced by her and her colleagues, and she gives an especially well-informed history of TCP.

One other spin-off from *The God Delusion* is unusual enough to be worth mentioning. The book has been widely denounced (mostly by critics who haven't read it but only read other critics) as 'strident' and 'shrill'. One critic, who cannot possibly have read it, went so far as to suspect me of 'Tourette's Syndrome'. In fact the book's tone is mostly rather mild - certainly milder than many of the 'fleas' that responded to it. The illusion of stridency arises because of the long-standing convention, observed by believers and non-believers alike, that you are not allowed to criticize religion in polite society. 'Why not [to quote Douglas Adams]? Because you're not.' The result is that people literally hear mildly expressed criticism as strident, even though it isn't by the normal standards of other fields such as politics, journalism or (as I pointed out in the preface to the paperback edition) restaurant criticism.

But there is one passage whose tone could fairly be heard as strong by any standards: the opening sentence of chapter 2.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

The sentence even provoked an accusation of anti-semitism by Britain's most senior rabbi. The accusation was made in the heat of a moment and he soon withdrew it with a characteristically gracious and charming apology. He had misunderstood me as singling out the (Jewish) Old Testament God by contrast with the God of the Christian

New Testament, whereas I actually think the central 'atonement' dogma of Christianity (due to Paul rather than Jesus) is obnoxious even by the elevated standard set in the Old Testament (see chapter 7).

Strong though it sounds, that sentence from the beginning of chapter 2 can be amply justified, word for word - every single one of them - from the Bible itself. Repeated accusations of stridency against my infamous sentence provoked me to plan a lecture in which I would cite chapter and verse for every one of my seventeen adjectives and three nouns. It soon became clear that the sheer number of verses cited would prolong the lecture far beyond a mere hour. The material was rich enough for a whole book, and I knew just the man to write it: Dan Barker, the ex-preacher who, by his own account, had been the sort of zealot you wouldn't want to sit next to on a bus: the sort of preacher who would thrust a bible in the face of a perfect stranger and ask if he were saved. Dan knows his Bible like a London cabbie's hippocampus knows 'The Knowledge'. I put it to him. He jumped at the idea and the result is his splendid book *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*. There's a chapter for every one of the words in my list, each chapter filled with verses from scripture, interspersed with Dan's entertaining and well-informed commentary.

The God Delusion has sold more than three million copies so far, a paltry number compared to the Bible's five billion, or the slightly lower figure for the Qur'an. I like to think most of my three million copies have actually been read. If only we could say the same of the billions of Bibles and Qur'ans, the need for my book might be sensibly diminished. For, on the face of it, you could plausibly argue that the best antidote against all three of the Abrahamic religions is a thorough reading of their holy books. The nasty bits are seldom mentioned in churches or Sunday schools, and many devout believers are blissfully unaware

of their existence.^{fn11} Even when their existence is admitted, they are bowdlerized by a piece of intellectual sleight of hand, and this is yet another version of The God Temptation that I wish to mention. The wolfish horror of the worst scriptural verses is cloaked under various forms of sheep's clothing: the words are not meant to be taken literally, they are 'metaphorical'.

'Not meant' by whom? Nobody knows who originally invented the myth of Abraham's cruel abuse of Isaac (Ishmael in the Islamic version). Modern theologians don't take this shocking story literally but excuse it as a parable admonishing the Israelites to stop sacrificing children.^{fn12} Did the anonymous scribe who first turned oral legend into writing believe it was literally true? We don't know. But no reasonable person could deny that the vast majority of ordinary followers of the religions concerned have down the centuries believed it literally happened. And still persisted in worshipping the psychotic monster who, they sincerely believed, gave Abraham his orders. And the same for the other horror stories of scripture.

The claim of some modern apologists that literal interpretation of the Bible is a recent phenomenon is unpersuasive, to say the least. Take just one highly influential example. Archbishop Ussher's 1650 calculation of the date of Creation (4004 BC) is based on a literalistic adding up of the ages cited in the list of 'begats'. Metaphorical? Er, no, you don't meticulously add up a lot of *metaphorical* numbers to come up with the *actual* date of an alleged historical event. Ussher's ludicrous calculation also incidentally shows up the presumptuous arrogance typical of the theological mind. Not only did Creation fall in 4004 BC (as opposed to 4003 or 4005). It was Saturday, 22nd October if you please, not the 21st or 23rd. The archbishop's effrontery is matched only by that of modern theologians who claim that biblical literalism is a recent aberration.

In my personal view, illustrated by the final chapter of this book, the saddest version of the God Temptation is the temptation to forgo the spiritual – yes, spiritual – joy of a rational, scientific understanding of life, and of the universe in which life finds itself, in favour of a primitive, superstitious supernaturalism. And to tempt children down the same barren path is a sin so grievous that, if wilfully and knowingly perpetrated, it brings millstones fleetingly to mind.

^{fn1} Jamy Ian Swiss ends his emails with a quotation from the celebrated illusionist Karl Germain: ‘Conjuring is the only absolutely honest profession – the conjuror promises to deceive, and does.’

^{fn2} A beautifully clear exposition of the fundamental constants is *Just Six Numbers* (1999) by Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal. Rees does not, of course, draw any theological conclusion. He favours the multiverse.

^{fn3} See <http://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822%2815%2901167-7>.

^{fn4} We have off-the-record private information from many of them that this is indeed the case.

^{fn5} Representative Barney Frank, publicly ‘out’ as gay (an extreme rarity in Congress), was repeatedly re-elected by his liberal and sophisticated constituency. Nevertheless he withheld his atheism until after he retired.

^{fn6} <http://www.religionnews.com/2015/05/12/christians-lose-ground-nones-soar-new-portrait-u-s-religion/>.

^{fn7} <https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2015/09/15/will-nonbelief-replace-religion-within-25-years/>. Coyne’s main source is the 2004 book by Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*.

^{fn8} <https://richarddawkins.net/2009/02/the-four-horsemen-hd-hour-1-of-2-discussions-with-richard-dawkins-ep-1-2/>.

^{fn9} This book has been turned into a play by Martin Gazzaniga, sponsored by RDFRS (US).

^{fn10} <http://clergyproject.org/booksandblogs/>.

^{fn11} For an entertaining illustration of this, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEnWw_lH4tQ. A pair of Dutch investigators wrapped a bible in a Qur’an cover, and read selected horrible

verses to random people in the street. Their victims were flabbergasted when they eventually discovered the truth.

fn12 By the way, why express such an important lesson in a parable? Why not just say, more clearly and directly: 'Stop sacrificing children, chaps. Do sheep instead.'

Preface to the paperback edition

The God Delusion in the hardback edition was widely described as the surprise bestseller of 2006. It was warmly received by the great majority of those who sent in their personal reviews to Amazon (more than 1,000 at the time of writing). Approval was less overwhelming in the printed reviews, however. A cynic might put this down to an unimaginative reflex of reviews editors: It has 'God' in the title, so send it to a known faith-head. That would be too cynical, however. Several unfavourable reviews began with the phrase, which I long ago learned to treat as ominous, 'I'm an atheist BUT . . .' As Daniel Dennett noted in *Breaking the Spell*, a bafflingly large number of intellectuals 'believe in belief' even though they lack religious belief themselves. These vicarious second-order believers are often more zealous than the real thing, their zeal pumped up by ingratiating broad-mindedness: 'Alas, I can't share your faith but I *respect* and sympathize with it.'

'I'm an atheist, BUT . . .' The sequel is nearly always unhelpful, nihilistic or - worse - suffused with a sort of exultant negativity. Notice, by the way, the distinction from another favourite genre: 'I *used* to be an atheist, but . . .' That is one of the oldest tricks in the book, much favoured by religious apologists from C. S. Lewis to the present day. It serves to establish some sort of street cred up front, and it is amazing how often it works. Look out for it.

I wrote an article for the website RichardDawkins.net called 'I'm an atheist BUT . . .' and I have borrowed from it