



ELSEVIER

GfÖ

GfÖ Ecological Society of Germany,
Austria and Switzerland

Basic and Applied Ecology 9 (2008) 791

Basic and
Applied Ecology

www.elsevier.de/baae

BOOK REVIEW

The God Delusion. R. Dawkins. Black Swan, London (2007). 464 pp., Paperback with new foreword, €8.99, ISBN: 978-0-552-77331-7

Why bother, as an ecologist, to read and think about God and religion? Because science and logical reasoning have always been bedevilled by religious leaders, even (or particularly?) by revolutionary zealots such as Martin Luther (quoted from Dawkins book, p. 221): “Reason should be destroyed in all Christians”. The more interesting question is: Is Dawkins’ book helpful in this debate?

Chapter 1 sets the stage using Einstein’s metaphorical use of the word “God” for an orderly principle of nature’s working, as opposed to a personal, interfering, prayer-answering god. In Chapter 2 Dawkins formulates the “God Hypothesis”, basically: “There is no god”, and the alternative: “Evolution can explain all patterns in living nature”. It follows a brief outline of religious beliefs, from (ancient to catholic) polytheism, through monotheisms onto the Spaghetti-Monster. Chapter 3 reviews arguments in favour of God’s existence, which he dismisses, one by one, as illogical, circular reasoning or – mostly – irrelevant: Most are based on the desire that there must be a sense in life – which adds nothing to the question of God’s existence.

Chapter 4 collects arguments against God’s existence, thus probably the pivotal chapter in the book. As that, it is also its weakest. Firstly, Dawkins correctly states (a) that it is impossible to disprove God’s existence, and (b) that onto believers falls the burden of prove for their “grotesque” claim, not on atheists the disprove. He then offers two lines of argument to show that God’s existence is unlikely. (I) If God made the universe, who made God? This argument basically says that assuming God as existing is not a “simple” explanation, as his provenance must be explained by invoking a more complex “super-creator”, which in turn requires a “super-super-creator” and so forth, into infinite regress. (II) Everything that needs to be explained can be, in principle, explained by natural selection and the anthropic principle. Thus, God is not necessary and not the most parsimonious explanation for natural

phenomena. Dawkins also uses the chapter to do what he does best, to defy creationist attacks against science.

Chapter 5 seeks to understand how religions came into being, for example as by-product of the evolutionary useful faith of young children in their parents. Chapters 6 and 7 show first that “religious moral” is not really derived from scripture (but rather that bible, koran and alike are written to express a set of moral values already existent); that religions and their representatives pick and choose from the diversity of rules scripture offers; and finally that moral – religious or not – changes through time. In Chapters 8 and 9 Dawkins justifies his hostility towards religions by giving examples of hate, intolerance, discrimination and mental abuse by religious leaders around the world and particularly in present-day United States. He closes, in Chapter 10, with an encouragement to break free from religious restrictions and enjoy the “wonders” of the world untarnished by superstition and absurdity-ridden religious ballast.

Overall, the book makes good reading to any (near) atheist. Since many pro-God arguments are contrasted with evolutionary theory, this book requires a proper understanding of evolution through natural selection, for which his “The Blind Watchmaker” is a more thorough treatment. Will this book change the world to the better? That is very unlikely: Dawkins generally argues on logical reasoning, as did the also famous Bertrand Russell 80 years ago. Why did he, then, not succeed in making the world atheistic? Because, as believers argue, logical reasoning is not the way to investigate faith. So really, the world seems to be divided into those who accept logic as a method to assess the truth in everything, and those who limit logic’s realm to the material world (whatever that may be in an age of quantum mechanics). For the former, the book will be either entertaining or controversial, for the latter it is simply inaccessible.

Carsten F. Dormann
Leipzig, Germany

E-mail address: carsten.dormann@ufz.de