

“We have enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.”

I came across this quote from Jonathon Swift, the 18th century author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, the other day. I don’t remember exactly where I read it, but I was reminded of it yesterday when someone sent me a newspaper article on the subject of religion and science by one of the trustees of the Richard Dawkins foundation.

The general theme of the article was to argue that from an evolutionary perspective religion could have some survival value in terms of natural selection, and therefore human beings could have evolved a sense of religious belief ‘for the good of the tribe independent of whether or not God might actually exist in an objective sense. Therefore, no need for God.

The last paragraph of the article started with these words: ***We can be better as a species if we recognize religion as a man-made construct.***

Interesting.

If we lay aside *as a species* which seems to contribute nothing to the argument, the writer seems to be saying that we can actually be better people without religion than we are with religion. In other words, presumably, that religion is better at teaching us to hate than it is at teaching us to love. Well—Swift, the devout Christian, would endorse that one! Finally, the Christian and the atheist agree on something!

So, is there anything in here to help us to relate to Dawkins and his writings?

Let me start by saying that I have considerable sympathy with Dawkins and his approach. I reminds me of myself as a schoolboy 45 years ago, in the years before I came to know Christ as a first year University student. My general acidity, intellectual arrogance, worship of Science as the god that could and would solve everything for the human race, are fairly well mirrored in Dawkins’ views. Not to mention my ability to argue the back legs off a donkey on any sort of spurious issue that took my fancy. Had I not become a Christian when I did, I can see that I would very well have evolved into a Dawkinsian type of character, if I’d survived that long—though I don’t think I’d have done it half so well or half so successfully as Dawkins himself.

Since my conversion was engineered almost entirely by outside forces—God, and the godly people I encountered at that time—I can certainly claim no credit for the episode at all. Had I been in Dawkins shoes, and been through the experiences he went through, I most probably would never have become a Christian at all; and had Dawkins been in my shoes and been exposed to the influences that I was exposed to, who knows how that might have ended. So on that basis, I can see no ground for any critical or negative thoughts on Dawkins, however much I may disagree with the conclusions he comes to.

As it happens, I don’t regard *The God Delusion* as being a particularly good book. My primary recollection of it (I don’t have it in front of me now, and so can’t check it) is of a chapter on biblical Christianity in which Dawkins sets up a position of extreme, literalistic biblical interpretation, and then proceeds to demolish it. That’s a rather cheap, underhand way of arguing, and not really worthy of a man of Dawkins’ intellect. Apart from anything else, it conveniently ignores the fact that millions of Christians have abandoned that literalistic view of biblical interpretation for precisely the same reasons as has Dawkins, but see nothing in that abandonment to cause them to reject Christianity.

For me, perhaps most interesting part of the whole book (apart from an intriguing short discussion of Adolf Hitler’s “Catholicism”) came right at the end. Here Dawkins admits with commendable honesty that nothing he has said actually *proves* that God doesn’t exist. Rather, he says, it demonstrates that the probability of God existing is low.

My immediate reaction to this is to ask myself—**is this a legitimate use of probability theory?**

Probability theory deals with the likelihood of events occurring that can, in principle at least, be ascribed a numerical value. If I toss a coin, then I can say confidently that the probability of a 'heads' or a 'tails' is 50%. Does this apply to the existence of God?

If I could talk with Dawkins, my first question would be, *if the probability of God existing is low, what numerical value might one put on that? 5%? 10%? More? Less?*

My second question would be, in reply to his reply of—for the sake of argument—5%, *how on earth can you arrive at that value?*

The answer—of course—is that you can't. It's impossible. Conceptually impossible. None of the Dawkinsian arguments adduced can in any way lead us to a precise or even an imprecise numerical value of the probability of God existing.

My last question—if it's conceptually impossible to put a numerical value on the probability of God existing, then how on earth can I say that the probability is low? To say that the probability is low seems to imply that, conceptually at least, there is a calculable numerical value, even if I lack the information to make that calculation.

But if it's conceptually not calculable, then what business do I have to say that it's low?

I'd like to discuss this one. Firstly with a proper statistician to see if there's any real merit in my line of argument. And then with Dawkins himself—but hopefully in a spirit of brotherly love and curiosity, not one of hate and confrontation!