

Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Man Deluded

The autumn of 2006 has seen the publication of Professor Richard Dawkins' latest book, *The God Delusion* (Bantam, £20) in which the well-known Oxford God-basher takes his most detailed and comprehensive swipe yet at the follies of 'religion', something which he cordially detests in all its many shapes and sizes. The book is being promoted as a manifesto which will bring atheists out of the closet and sweep all before them. The fact that it has sold 10,000 copies in the first fortnight and already been reprinted four times is held up as proof that this is the new wave of enlightenment which will finally slay the wicked dragons of faith, whose evil devotees have wreaked endless havoc on the world over the centuries. Professor Dawkins has all the assurance of a crusader, or indeed of a fundamentalist evangelist for his cause, and spares no-one's feelings in setting out his case. This is a battle in which no quarter can be given, because the enemy is so terrible that only its total annihilation can assure the safety and well-being of the rational(ist) creatures whom Professor Dawkins has reportedly attracted to his sect.

As always, the hype is one thing but the reality is something rather different. So far, sales of the book amount to just one per incumbent in the Church of England, and it is quite likely that a large number of those who have bought it are believers of various kinds who want to see what the other side is saying and who intend to refute it as best they can. Happy atheists are unlikely to waste their money on something which says what they already think, unless they need extra arguments to use against persistent God-botherers who keep knocking at their doors, and the book's tone is such that probably only schoolboys and undergraduate debaters could get away with using it as it stands.

Even when divested of its invective though, the book's content is hardly worth a serious refutation. Words like 'religion' and 'science', always extremely difficult to define, are bandied about as if everyone knows exactly what is being discussed, and the rules of the game are such that the former invariably comes off worse. One almost feels that in Professor Dawkins' opinion, anyone

intelligent enough to be able to read will be an atheist already, so why bother with a book which merely states the obvious? Anyone can attack 'religion' by having a go at unsophisticated American evangelists, and bomb-throwing Islamists are another easy target for those convinced that all religious people are irrational fanatics. What Professor Dawkins does not say is that atheism has enjoyed vast political power for most of the past century, and that regimes professing it have killed at least a hundred and perhaps as many as a thousand times more people than all religious fanatics put together since the beginning of time. What is more, these same regimes have done much of their dirty work in the name of science, and have even been supported by academics whose personal views scarcely differ from those of Professor Dawkins.

Religious people, and Christians in particular, do not claim to be perfect (or even superior to others) and we recognise that human sinfulness is such that the highest ideas and ideals have sometimes become tragic excuses for the bigoted and unbalanced to do what damage they can. We might even say that Jesus Christ was put to death by people like that, though with results which were the opposite of what they intended. That misdirected religious prejudice should have produced a gospel of love and reconciliation is a transformation which lies beyond Professor Dawkins' mental horizon, and it is here that Christians must take issue with him. We do not dispute most of his science, and are as glad as he is to acknowledge that there are rational explanations for what takes place in the universe. We regret that misguided religious leaders have sometimes stood in the way of scientific development and deplore the uninformed interventions in such matters which are occasionally made in the name of 'faith'. We have nothing to fear from the truth and want it to be exposed and celebrated every bit as much as Professor Dawkins does.

What we cannot accept is his reductionist vision of what constitutes 'truth'. Reason is a valuable and necessary tool, but it is not an absolute. There is much more to the world than the merely rational, and any philosophy which tries to base itself exclusively on 'reason' will end in tyranny, as both Platonism and its modern descendant Marxism have demonstrated. Scientific theories can explain the 'how' of creation but not the 'why'; in the end, no-one on earth can say why the world exists or whether it has a purpose. Only God can tell us that, but the God we have met in Jesus Christ has a good deal more to teach us than mere biology, chemistry or mathematics. He tells us that we have been

made in his image, with the express intention that we should dwell in eternal fellowship with him. The rebellion of our first parents made that impossible, but God did not give up on us. He knew what we would do with our freedom, and had already planned to save us by the sacrificial death and resurrection of his Son, who became a man in order that we might become like him.

Christians do not sit around speculating about this; they experience it in their daily lives and get on with making it work in the situations in which they are placed. The results are there for all to see – transformed lives, even transformed societies, as the light of the glorious gospel of Christ penetrates the citadels of deepest darkness, even those of Oxford, as the late C. S. Lewis so memorably testified. Look around you and you will see what this means – some of the greatest works of human culture in art, music, architecture and literature bear witness to this reality. Massed choirs will be singing the ‘Hallelujah chorus’ long after Professor Dawkins has been forgotten, and it would become him to recognise that fact.

Perhaps before writing yet another diatribe against God, the good professor might also reconsider what it is that he is supposed to be doing as the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science in the University of Oxford. According to the official website: ‘it is imperative for the post holder to avoid oversimplifying ideas and presenting exaggerated claims. The limits of current scientific knowledge should always be made clear to the public.’ The manifesto for the professorship adds that: ‘the holder will be expected to make important contributions to the public understanding of some scientific field rather than study the public’s perception of the same. By “public” we mean the largest possible audience, provided, however, that people who have the power and ability to propagate or oppose the ideas (especially scholars in other sciences and in humanities, engineers, journalists, politicians, professionals and artists) are not lost in the process.’ It is hard to see how, on even the most charitable reading of *The God Delusion*, Professor Dawkins has come anywhere near to fulfilling these goals. If he thinks that an intemperate rant against ‘religion’ in all its forms is a contribution to the public understanding of science, then he is quite simply deluding himself. If he believes that his attempt to kill off religious faith will be any more successful than similar efforts made over the past two hundred years and more, then we must be honest and say that he is well and truly deluded. The message of Christ will

never give way to a reductionist competitor, however determined and abrasive he may be, and in the end we can rest assured that it is Professor Dawkins and not the Lord Jesus who will end up in the dustbin of history. Let us hope and pray that he realises this before it is too late and that he too will bow the knee to his Saviour and King, and come to know in his life that peace of God which passes all understanding – even his.

GERALD BRAY