

The Dawkins Delusion

... when scientists get to be rock stars, who needs God?

By Shannon Melnyk

In the timeless quest to learn why we are here, while we busy ourselves watering our lawns, wondering if the US Presidential bid will ever end, or contemplate crackberries vs. iphones, the God debate has somehow yet again reached a feverish state of purgatory. Apparently some of us have booked a first-class flight to hell, Mother Theresa and Tony Soprano are kissing cousins, Fitna is the new dirty word or we should be meditating our troubles away, depending upon which way you sway — and I don't mean on the Kinsey scale. All the best laid theories born out of a controversy older than, shall we say, God himself — seem rekindled and dare I say trendy, what with our global woes and the runaway best sellers a la the cantankerous Christopher Hitchens and Darwin's Rottweiler, Richard Dawkins.

All of this hoo-ha makes me think there was a reason our mothers taught us not to discuss religion in polite company. The imperative notion of freedom of speech, however, inevitably seems to attract the righteous, and Dawkin's "God Delusion" is no exception. The evolutionary biologist makes a splashy



encore to the 70's popular science breakout "The Selfish Gene" with the four hundred page deconstruction of religion using science to debunk the possibility of the existence of a God amongst us or any apparent such silliness, all while enjoying the everyday mysteries the earth offers until, of course, physicists can get up to speed with the accomplishments of biologists.

Since we are not at the dinner table with mom, I don't mind saying I'm all for a little organized religion-bashing

now and again; but after reading "The God Delusion", my brow remained raised over the attempt to use an intellectual approach to matters of the spirit. Dogma aside, given the very real possibility that in our lifetime we will be unable to prove there is a God or conversely, prove there is not, I couldn't help but think that although Dawkins has set aside most of his life to consider evolution — perhaps his time and massive brain power could have been more productive in an endeavour to help us sorry mortals cure cancer or global hunger and call it a day.

Alas, I do appreciate passion. And challenging, provocative discourse is generally a writer's idea of a good time. Add food, and an RSVP is a no-brainer. An opportunity to break bread with the man arose on his recent trip to Vancouver. Before Dawkins addressed a friendly academic crowd at UBC, he addressed an even friendlier crowd at a relatively intimate dinner at the Four Seasons Hotel as a guest of The Fraser Institute. For roughly five hundred dollars, a patron of this ongoing speakers' series entitled Illuminismo would receive a piece

of fish, a signed copy of “The God Delusion” and a very nice slideshow courtesy of Mr. Dawkins himself.

Dawkins embarked on a talk he called “Purpose of Purpose”. He reminded us with various images of knuckle draggers that we are apes, and more importantly “goal-seeking machines”; “human purpose is itself an evolved adaptation”, he explained, and humans seek goals that have nothing to do with survival, be it religion or what have you, due to our brains being subjected to the “subversion of purpose”. He then sited *The Bridge on the River Kwai* as a perfect example, with poor Colonial Nicholson and his spit and vinegar haplessly aiding the barbarians. Moving on, he reiterated comments similar to that of his international sensation — that women are a part of the furniture in Islam, that education is where battles are won and lost in the evolution of global common sense, that raising a family with religion is akin to child abuse and lest we not judge those who find comfort in religion-based falsehoods in times of grief, as they know not what they do. Dawkins also burned Texan murderer Andrea Yates at the stake — citing Christianity as the regrettable antagonist in the drowning of her five children. He conveniently forgot to mention, however, that Yates was having a postpartum psychotic episode at the time and was found not guilty by a Texas jury by reason of insanity.

Nevertheless, the fare was all pretty much par for the pulpit; what was the real attention-grabber was not Dawkins at all, but the ambience he created in a room. I made a confident assessment that most of these people’s underwear cost more than my entire ensemble and probably had more money, than, well, God. In making polite conversation with my dinner companions and enjoying a lively Q&A session, I was struck by the irony of the evening. While I did not take a poll, the ballroom was stacked with atheists. I know this to be true because there were many proclamations that echoed: “My name is Bob, and I’m an atheist!” Many stood to announce their persuasion, ask a question or hear themselves speak, but with hardly an exception they stood to adore, laud, and dare I say worship the author. Had I not known the subject matter, the gathering could well have been a church congregation and the cerebral love-fest made me see with sudden clarity that we, as humans, or apes, or machines, are much more alike than we are different in the need to believe in something. Even if it is to believe in nothing.

Dawkins took the time to congratulate atheists for being skeptics trying to understand; courageous not to need the security blanket of delusion, and above all, “open”. Open, however, did not appear to be the order of the day. When the slightest voice of dissension occurred, the well-behaved room disapproved. A man wondered

aloud whether or not the atheism movement was guilty of condemning others just as all other religions appeared to, and the crowd groaned. Dawkins glibly retorted that perhaps the man should read the book. While he sat back down slightly red-faced, it was then that I thought twice about asking my question: if raising your kids with the delusion of religion was abusive, I was curious as to his take on the tooth fairy. Open also does not describe the British ethologist’s refusal to interview with the Vancouver Sun’s religion writer; instead Peter McKnight was assigned the task and curiously reported Dawkins to be “more open-minded than his critics would have you believe”.

Like Mick Jagger, Richard Dawkins is a famous Brit with a long history of accomplishments and as he keeps ticking along, creates a stir wherever he goes. I saw with my own eyes the cooing, the fawning, the fussing. But me - I was there for the science, and became a believer in my own theory: delusion is subjective, and when scientists get to be rock stars, false Gods may be equally alive and well in the atheist community.