

## **THE DAWKINS DILEMMA**

### ***THE BIG PICTURE***

***JOCK CHEETHAM***

The militant atheists' cheerleader-in-chief is locked in a tribal position, writes JOCK CHEETHAM. Richard Dawkins has a dilemma. On the one hand, his book *The God Delusion* has sold more than 2million copies. On the other hand, criticism of the book has been an avalanche, by believers and even atheists. So strong has been the response that a new publishing micro-niche has emerged, with titles such as *God's Undertaker*, *The Devil's Delusion* and *The Irrational Atheist*.

But does Dawkins's accusation that religion is dangerous actually increase division in the world? He appears to be locked in a tribal position from which scientific observation and discussion is difficult.

Dawkins - recently retired as professor of public understanding of science at Oxford University - tours the world like a rock star. His latest bestselling book, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, re-examines the evidence for evolution in the face of creationism's threat. He fronts a sold-out Opera House gig today and boasts top billing at the Rise Of Atheism: 2010 Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne next weekend.

The god that Dawkins calls a delusion is the supernatural God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In *The God Delusion*, he calls this god "a pernicious delusion", as in ruinous, deadly or evil. He argues that religion is "undoubtedly a divisive force" and evokes a classic pop song: "Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers ... no Northern Ireland 'troubles'."

Dawkins anticipates his critics' responses before they have even made them: "Yes, yes, of course the troubles in Northern Ireland are political." But, "without religion there would be no labels by which to decide whom to oppress and whom to avenge", he writes.

"Humanity's powerful tendencies towards in-group loyalties and out-group hostilities would exist even in the absence of religion," he concedes. But without religion, Catholics and Protestants would have intermarried, interbred and dissolved into each other. He blames segregated schools, religious taboos against marrying out and the practice of religious parents labelling children with their own religion.

But Dawkins's argument is too simplistic, says Dr David Tombs from the Irish School of Ecumenics.

Religion can help people shape a positive collective identity, one which is open to others, he says. And religion is a significant modifier. "The churches have all preached consistently against the conflict."

But Tombs agrees on one point: "If you are born Catholic or Protestant here in Northern Ireland your identity is likely to shape where you live, where you go to school ... to a large extent who you socialise with, the community you identify with." In supporting segregated schooling, the churches have been complicit in developing a culture of division, Tombs says.

But Catholic schools do not exist to divide, Cardinal Edward Cassidy told Extra. The schools, he says, exist to enforce the religion and help the young people grow up with "a basic understanding of the principles of life. Not just of religion but also of the ethics of life."

Cassidy, who worked in Ireland for five years, says the Protestants are the descendants of Scottish immigrants implanted in Ulster by the British to consolidate their power. "Religion wasn't part of it except that the people who came in were Presbyterians and the people who were pushed out were Irish Catholics," he says; a struggle for power and territory.

Critics say Dawkins ignores the positive sides of religion, such as its modifying influence in Northern

Ireland. Belfast Telegraph religion editor Alf McCreary, who has won many journalism awards for his reporting on Northern Ireland's politics, calls the no-religion, no-Troubles claim a simplistic analysis of a complex historical problem. For example, over the past 40 years there has been "a strong, active minority of Catholics and Protestants who meet and demonstrate and show what they have in common and what they believe in. There were some very fine church leaders who spoke out during times of crisis." All this helped keep a lid on the violence, to prevent it getting even worse, McCreary says.

Yet Dawkins's critique in *The God Delusion* is unrelenting: "Even if religion did no other harm in itself, its wanton and carefully nurtured divisiveness - its deliberate and cultivated pandering to humanity's natural tendency to favour in-groups and shun out-groups - would be enough to make it a significant force for evil in the world."

But human beings are by nature conflictual animals, says Dr David Stevens, the leader of the Corrymeela Community, an ecumenical group that works towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland. "So Dawkins's assumption that if you do away with religion we are in some sort of Utopia is a fantasy," Stevens says. "The difficulty is that religion can sacralise political positions, creating reasons for killing people. Dawkins's critique is partly right. But it's not the whole story."

Others see religious systems as central to maintaining group loyalty. An attraction to others who are perceived as similar contributes to group cohesiveness, writes Robert Hinde in *Bending the Rules: Morality in the Modern World*. "This is especially potent if the perceived similarity involves unverifiable attitudes and beliefs", such as religion.

However, while similarity attracts, difference is a potential source of conflict. Hinde writes that leaders of a group at war "do their utmost to emphasise differences between us and them by propaganda, national anthems, or exploiting differences previously not seen as divisive, such as religion".

This tendency to demonise outsiders leads to much of the violence around the world, Harvard University's Marc Hauser said on ABC radio last year. "Look at so many of these speeches by great leaders who have been dictators. They've recruited disgust as the emotion to push away the out-group," Hauser points out. "We should have alarm bells going off every time we see something that looks like disgust, because it will ultimately lead to removing 'the other'."

Disgust is one way to denigrate and stigmatise the other. So it is worth noting Dawkins's assertion in a video interview with Belgian journalists: "If you believe, for example, that Jesus turned water into wine, I think you've got to be fairly unintelligent." Similarly, Dawkins subscribes to a movement trying to rebadge atheists as brights. If you join the movement, you're a Bright. These examples seem to stigmatise the religious as less intelligent and therefore inferior.

To his own tribe, Dawkins talks up the threat, building a sense that atheists are besieged. "The status of atheists in America today is on a par with that of homosexuals 50 years ago," he writes. But this statement is dubious. Even in today's relatively liberal environment, homosexuals in the US suffered more than 1200 hate crimes in 2008, FBI statistics show. In contrast, there were 14 victims of anti-atheism/agnosticism hate crimes.

One of the crudest ways to stigmatise the other is to suggest they are not human, writes David Berreby in *Us and Them: The Science of Identity*. Examples include Europeans stigmatising indigenous people as savages. To stigmatise, we first label, defining people as in our group or out of it. Berreby calls these labels human kinds. They need not be negative. "Human kinds are what happens when the real world meets the human mind," he writes. "They aren't just perceptions. They're beliefs."

Tribalism - the tendency to form groups around characteristics - is the identifying of human kinds as Us or Them. Tribes can form temporarily or for the longer term around anything - hobby, nation, age, sexuality. Religion, says Dawkins, is one of these labels, not necessarily worse than others such as skin colour, language or preferred football team, "but often available when other labels are not".

But religion is not only a label. David Sloan Wilson writes in *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society*: "Religions exist primarily for people to achieve together what they cannot achieve alone." Religious groups function well because "the very beliefs and practices that make religion appear enigmatic to so many people who stand outside of them", Sloan Wilson writes. One person's god is another person's delusion.

If only the solution to the human predicament were as simple as doing away with tribalism. But our tribal impulses are fluid and necessary. The way we categorise people into kinds is flexible and allows us to re-categorise people as within the group, to be inclusive, Berreby asserts. The categories are so fluid that we manage to live in modern societies.

Reciprocal relations operate in these huge trust networks, our societies. This reciprocity helps us, says Professor Mark Pagel of Reading University. Pagel wrote in *Prospect* in 2007: "The psychology of the co-operative group, of how we can maintain it and equally how we can control its dangerous tendencies - parochialism, xenophobia, exclusion and warfare - will often be at the front door of 21st-century politics." This century, Pagel writes, widespread movements of people will increase multiculturalism and "repeatedly challenge the trust and sense of equity that binds together co-operative groups, unleashing instincts for selfish preservation".

But what if religion were one of the answers to the challenge of our tribal nature? John Shelby Spong argues in *Jesus for the Non-Religious* that far more than we care to admit, the religions of the world, including Christianity, "rise out of and undergird our tribal thinking. They are all very deep expressions of a tribal mentality that worships a theistic tribal protector."

But to Spong, Jesus is the great anti-tribal campaigner: "Something about this Jesus has been sufficiently unique and life-changing to enable us to set aside the million-year-old human survival characteristic of tribal identity and to feel his call to a new level of humanity." Spong, a retired Episcopalian bishop, sees this as "a call to share with all people the life-giving power of love".

Jesus also inspired Cardinal Cassidy, who says his work - in China, Bangladesh, India, Rome, Australia and elsewhere — has led him to believe we are one people, "no matter what differences we may have in origin, or even differences in religion".

"It struck me," he explains, "how often the wars took place and the only reason one could find was that they were communities that somehow or other resented the other community and didn't think the other community should be there." And the explanation? "They're not us, they don't belong to us, they are the others."

In 2006, Cassidy told a packed interfaith event at Dooleys Lidcombe Catholic Club in Sydney's west: "The 'other' in the true Christian message is to be loved, not ignored or badly treated. Love in this sense means respect. It means being concerned for the other, to be ready to stand by the other in difficulty, to care about the other in need, joining hands with those who suffer injustice or discrimination. Jesus told us to love our neighbour as ourself."

Dawkins has an opinion on love, too, in this case romantic love. "One intriguing possibility ... is that the irrationality of religion is a byproduct of a particular irrationality mechanism in the brain: our tendency, which presumably has genetic advantages, to fall in love."

Dawkins has been called a fundamentalist more than once. Stevens of the Corrymeela Community says Dawkins presents a fundamentalist scientism. Religious and scientific fundamentalism are attempts to respond to the modern world, Stevens argues: "We live in a world in some ways of profound uncertainty. One way to respond is to try to re-create certainty, which religious fundamentalists try to do. Another form of fundamentalism is to say that all these old explanations of the world are nonsense .. that science explains everything .. And there's no resolution to this."

Religion, says Stevens, can reinforce boundaries or motivate people to reach out to others in an inclusive way. "I think one of the challenges is to look at why some people reach out and why some people reinforce boundaries," he says. "I think what we should be encouraging is a sort of self-critical spirit here rather than polemics."

And that's the challenge for Dawkins: to consider whether he crosses the line that separates legitimate criticism from fiery, divisive rhetoric. The Dawkins dilemma is how to keep campaigning for what he believes while avoiding the tribalism he so condemns in others.

Jock Cheetham is an atheist. Richard Dawkins's publicist declined an interview request.