

“The God Delusion”
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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It was wonderful to travel to the northeastern part of Northern Ireland and to the southwestern part of Scotland on my recent vacation. The itinerary was planned with an eye toward exploring the territory where my family’s Scots Irish Stewart ancestors lived before they came to the United States in 1843. So far as I know, my Stewart ancestors lived neither in Edinburgh, Scotland nor in Dublin, Ireland. Nevertheless, Edinburgh and Dublin are fascinating cities, and in each city we climbed aboard the double decker sightseeing bus and soaked in the sights.

I knew that there were Unitarians in Scotland and not only because there is a Unitarian minister who proudly wears a kilt during the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. At one of the official stops on the Edinburgh bus tour, at St. Johns the Evangelist Scottish Episcopal Church, I picked up a flyer titled “Christian Worship in Edinburgh: Churches in Central Edinburgh, with the times of their Sunday Services.” After 31 listings categorized under Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopal Church, Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Church, United Reformed Church, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Salvation Army, Baptist Church, Free Church of Scotland, and Free Church of Scotland Continuing, there was one more category: “Other Churches.” There, alongside the First Church of Christ, Scientist, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Apostolic Church, and the Albany Deaf Church, was listed “Unitarian Church,” with “St. Mark’s” in parentheses. I high-tailed it to 7 Castle Terrace. Built in 1835, the church has an inscription high above its entrance. The inscription is a Bible verse: 1 Timothy, chapter 2, verse 5. The inscription reads “There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the *man* Christ Jesus (emphasis added).” According to the congregation’s website, this verse is a Unitarian “proof text,” that is, a Bible verse that “proves” a theological point.

I thought about “proof” regarding religion quite a bit during my vacation, for, besides sightseeing, I was reading *The God Delusion*, the recent book by British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. He is a professor at Oxford University. Dawkins is a prominent atheist and a

prolific author.¹ Not long ago, the *Los Angeles Times* published this Op-Ed piece by him: “Gods and Earthlings: The ‘Science’ of Intelligent Design” is Science Fiction.”² Richard Dawkins is passionate about the scientific method in general, and he is passionate about the power of natural selection, in particular, to explain why things are the way they are.

It grates on Richard Dawkins to have people attribute to God or to “intelligent design” (God’s surrogate) that which is explained by natural selection. Dawkins is not afraid to point out the violence (the psychological damage, in particular) done in the name of religion. “What is really pernicious,” he writes, “is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument.”³ Do *not* talk about Christian children, Muslim children, Jewish children, Buddhist children, Hindu children, he says. Instead, say “children of Christian parents, children of Muslim parents, children of Buddhist parents, children of Hindu parents, and so on. Until a child is old enough to decide upon matters of belief for himself or herself, it is not fair to claim that the child belongs to *any* religious group.

I agree with many of the points raised by Richard Dawkins, including his bewilderment at the automatic respect often given to clergy and to “believers” above and beyond the respect due to anyone simply by virtue of being human. “As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it is hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers,” he writes. “The alternative, one so transparent that it should need no urging, is to abandon the principle of automatic respect for religious faith.”⁴ I appreciate Dawkins’ distinction between religion’s consolation content and its truth value. “I must repeat, yet again, that the consolation-content of a belief does not raise its truth-value,” he writes.⁵ Many of Dawkins’ views are in alignment with this source of our living Unitarian Universalist tradition: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

¹ See www.richarddawkins.com.

² See <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-dawkins18apr18.0.2798612.story>.

³ *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 2006, (preface copyright 2008), paperback edition, p. 347.

⁴ page 345

⁵ page 21

For me, in the most intriguing part of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins wonders, from the point of view of evolutionary psychology, whether religion evolved as a byproduct of something else. “I believe that we who speculate about Darwinian survival value need to ‘think by-product.’ When we ask about the survival value of anything, we may be asking the wrong question. We need to rewrite the question in a more helpful way. Perhaps the feature we are interested in (religion in this case) doesn’t have a direct survival value of its own, but is a by-product of something else that does.”⁶ Specifically, Dawkins wonders whether religion might be a byproduct of the survival value of children obeying parents. “Theoretically, children might learn from personal experience not to go too near a cliff edge, not to eat untried red berries, not to swim in crocodile-infested waters,” he writes. “But, to say the least, there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grownups tell you.”⁷ Interesting!

Richard Dawkins thoroughly and convincingly trashes the “God Hypothesis” – the hypothesis of an external, supernatural God. Count me among the celebrants of the death of an external, supernatural God. However, Dawkins too neatly “brackets” (or sets aside) what he calls “Einsteinian religion.” Einstein wrote, “I don’t try to imagine a personal God; it suffices to stand in awe at the structure of the world, insofar as it allows our inadequate senses to appreciate it.”⁸

In my experience, Einsteinian religion is precisely the kind of religion which many Unitarian Universalists find attractive – a religion which is *of* nature, not separate from it; a religion which evolves; a religion in which God’s feelings are not hurt if God (Himself, Herself, Itself, or Themselves) is ignored. The Unitarian Universalist poet Patrick Murfin puts it this way in his poem entitled “I Do Not Have a Personal Relationship with God”⁹ [The poem was recited here.]

“Admits me to a fleeting union with the Greater” – I, too, use metaphors of magnitude (larger or smaller, contracted or expansive) to talk about God, when I talk about God. When I was a Unitarian Universalist lay person, it used to annoy me that ministers, when preaching, often

⁶ page 200

⁷ page 203

⁸ page 31

⁹ See <http://patrickmurfin.livejournal.com/>. That is where the poem was first posted.

seemed to dance around theologically sensitive issues and cloak or hide their own personal views. I may annoy you, but I will not annoy you that way this morning.

In terms of my own theology or philosophy, God exists inside the natural world, not outside of it. For me, in most contexts, God is nothing more or less than a synonym for “highly evolved human consciousness.” I do not believe that God created the world in six days. I believe that consciousness evolves as living organisms evolve. I believe that there are living human beings (and also deceased human beings) whose consciousness is more evolved than mine will ever be. That is good news. The bad news? I believe that evolution is a movement in no particular direction. In the short term anyway, “more evolved” is not necessarily better than “less evolved.” Evolution has no preordained direction. With apologies to those who are easily shocked by irreverence and to those who are easily shocked by intrusion of concepts from the world of business into religious life, I go so far as to say that God is like the stock market: Past performance is no predictor of future performance. God has good days and bad days, just like the rest of us.

Richard Dawkins objects to those who posit a “God of the Gaps” (those who point to God as the mechanism for something that is not presently understood). I suppose that I am guilty of positing a version of God of the Gaps for I believe that there are mechanisms of consciousness in sentient beings that I do not understand.

Richard Dawkins emphasizes the importance of *evidence* in drawing conclusions. We should always be willing to change our stance if the evidence changes, he says. However, in the laboratory, at the archeological dig, in religious congregations, and in the private recesses of our hearts and minds, evidence needs to be *interpreted*. Dawkins underestimates the difficulty of interpretation. I offer this as an example from my own life of the difficulty of interpretation. Over 10 years ago, there was a time in my life when I was worried sick about something. I was preoccupied, frantic, distraught. I was so worried about a complicated situation involving loved ones that I lost any sense of balance or perspective.

One day after a lunchtime meeting of Toastmasters (an organization which helps people to increase their skill in public speaking), I was talking to another Toastmasters member in the parking lot. I had known him for a year or so, just in the context of weekly meetings. We were friendly but not close. He inquired about the matter that distressed me.

I no longer remember exactly what I said, but I do remember this. All of a sudden, I felt a “lightning bolt” of energy strike me in the chest. This was in Florida, where lightning strikes are common, even if rain has not yet begun to fall. I was sure that I had been struck by lightning.

The next thing I remember is total darkness in my field of vision, except for a pinprick of light. The pinprick rapidly expanded (much like a camera lens aperture), and soon I saw the familiar parking lot before my eyes. I was standing exactly where I had been standing before the “lightning bolt” hit my chest. The man I was talking to? He was nearby, but now he was sitting in his car. At a minimum, I had “lost” the time it took for him to walk from where he was and to sit down inside his car.

I drove the couple of miles back to work. As I drove, I noticed a feeling of peace, lightness, and wellbeing that I had not felt for weeks. This feeling of wellbeing persisted. It remains my “body memory” of what healing can feel like. The next day, I called this man up and said, “Are you responsible for what happened yesterday?” He hesitated, then said, “People don’t usually know that anything happened.” He talked briefly about his gift for healing and about how the healing energy did not originate within him but moved through him.

This experience is “evidence” of something, but what in the world is it evidence of? Perhaps I was stressed out beyond my capacity to bear it. Perhaps he hypnotized me in broad daylight. I know nothing for a fact. What I believe is this: Some human beings can manipulate or move energy in unusual ways, probably because their consciousness has evolved in ways that make this possible. There is room in my world view for things to happen which cannot be explained by mechanisms which are understood. Just because a mechanism isn’t understood doesn’t mean that the mechanism doesn’t exist.

Dawkins would call this argument for God's existence "the argument from personal experience." Dawkins responds to this argument by describing how the human brain works. He describes its excellent capacity to construct models of reality and how it excels as simulation software and how foolish we are to draw supernatural conclusions from the thoroughly natural processing of our brain. Regarding personal "experiences" of gods or other religious phenomena, he writes, "If you've had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings."¹⁰ Fair enough.

Someone who is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (that is, a Quaker) once described the taking in of diverse opinions regarding religion this way: as "*listening* in tongues."¹¹ "Listening in tongues" is "speaking in tongues" in the middle of a summersault on a warm summer night in the Midwest, with fireflies gently lighting the way. Inside this congregation and outside of it, may we listen for the meaning beneath labels, and may we listen for the meaning beneath words. May it be so!

¹⁰ page 117 in *The God Delusion*

¹¹ See <http://friend-in-need.blogspot.com/2007/05/listening-in-tongues.html>.