

Hasn't Science disproved God?

In what ways might folks say science has disproved God? What might a Christian include in an answer to them?

Whenever talking about the faith somewhere along the line somewhere the idea that science has disproved God or something similar will be articulated. Whether, as in the case of the boys I play football with, when asked why they don't believe, the answer is given, 'It's evolution innit?' or by a complex set of assertions presented most persuasively by Richard Dawkins in his recent book, 'The God Delusion' and the television series 'The Root of all Evil'.

Science and religion are often set up as implacably opposed. Either you are a true scientist and make judgements based solely on facts or you are slightly soft in the head and believe by unsubstantiated faith there is a God.

A famous encounter that took place in Oxford 1860 in a debate between the Anglican Bishop Wilberforce and Evolutionary Theorist Thomas Huxley exemplifies this.

The encounter was recalled 9 years later by Miss Isabella Sedgewick. *"I was happy enough to be present on the memorable occasion at Oxford when*

Mr Huxley bearded Bishop Wilberforce...The Bishop rose and begged to know, was it through his grandfather or his grandmother the he claimed descent from a monkey?" Huxley rose and replied, "I would rather hear be descended from a monkey than hear such rubbish from a Bishop!"

And so in the popular mind science and Christianity are set at loggerheads.

We will come back to that story later. But what I want to do is focus this talk round the ideas popularised by Richard Dawkins who holds the Oxford Chair for the public understanding of science, is the foremost exponent of evolutionary theory in the Britain today and is probably the UK's leading Atheist.

Now most of the material I have taken for this evening is drawn from a lecture Alister McGrath gave at a conference last November which is readily available on the web at the following address

<http://www.cis.org.uk/centralsouth/dawkins-god-http.shtml>

I was speaking to a friend who lives in London who was standing in a bookshop and leafing through Dawkins latest book, 'The God delusion'. Some random guy was walking past and saw him reading it and stopped and said, 'oh, that is a great book. I really destroys all the arguments Christianity puts up.'

Here's how Dawkins describes the God of the Old Testament. **The** *God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.*"

After reading that I took out shares in the oxford dictionary 'cause I figures most people would be looking it up!

Dawkins main lines of criticism of religion are as follows:

1. **The** natural sciences make belief in God unnecessary or impossible.

(if you are a real scientist you will be compelled to atheism)
2. Religion makes assertions which are grounded in faith, which represents a retreat from a rigorous, evidence-based concern for truth.

(for Dawkins, truth is grounded in explicit proof; any form of obscurantism or mysticism grounded in mysticism is to be opposed vigorously)

3. Belief in God arises from a "meme", or a 'virus of the mind', which infects otherwise healthy minds.
4. Religion offers an impoverished vision of the world. "The universe presented by organised religion is a poky little medieval universe, and extremely limited". In contrast science offers a bold and brilliant vision of the universe as grand, beautiful and awe-inspiring."
5. Religion leads to evil.

(This is a moral rather than a scientific, objection to religion, which is deeply rooted within the western culture and history.)

These are helpful because I think in either a conscious or unconscious way they sum up what many people think. So we will look through each of these in turn.

1. **The** natural sciences make belief in God unnecessary or impossible.

Are Christianity and Science so implacably opposed?

In a word – No! Someone has said, science is just thinking God's thoughts after him. Science is just a tool, isn't it? A set of parameters created by man for

exploring God's universe at micro and macro level. The problem is that we have turned the tool or servant of our understanding into a master of our knowing.

At a personal level I have the greatest admiration for medical science because through medical scientific research I am still alive today. Only as far as 30 years ago if you developed testicular cancer your chances of survival were very slim. But my admiration of it is as a tool for life preservation and improvement. There is, however, on a wider level a lot of misunderstanding about science amongst Christians and there is a lot of misconception of how Christians view science by non-Christians.

It is typified in the **misrepresentation** of the debate between Bishop Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley. Miss Sedgewick's recollections have been proven to be completely false. Bishop Wilberforce actually said, Huxley's work had much to commend it but required some correction. Darwin listened to his observations and responded to them and made some minor amendments to his work based on them.

Actually Darwin on his voyage on the **Beagle**, stopped at Tahiti and went to the Christian Mission there for worship. He wrote in his diary how impressed by the Christian mission he was because he noted that if he had landed there 10 years

previously the locals would have eaten him! It was not evolution that civilised them but the gospel!

Now I am conscious that there is a big debate amongst Christians about the dating of the universe, evolution and so on. But what I want us to take from these illustrations is this : Wilberforce, as a man of God, listened and was prepared to make intelligent debate and contribution. He had a Christian worldview that gave science a place, not THE place, but a place. Evolutionary theory is just that – a theory and there are many aspects of it that should be considered but also rightly questioned whether you are a Christian or not.

Film part 1

So for example in the debate over teaching evolutionary theory in schools we should rightly protest at teaching macro evolution as a fete accompli, teaching that completely removes beliefs in e.g. Intelligent Design or a creator God. That is wrong. But as Christians there are things that we have to note such as micro evolution – that adaptability of species which has recently been shown can take place within 6 months in some cases. The bible doesn't teach that micro evolution or adaptation of species does not occur. There is quite simply no conflict there is there?

The point I want to make here is that I think sometimes ignorance and sweeping generalisations on both sides of the debate leads to unfounded conflict.

In addition science as a tool is incapable of determining whether there is a God or not. Here is a comment from Dawkins American equivalent, Stephen Jay Gould, who was a scientist, an atheist and the US leading promoter of Evolutionary Theory till he died in 2002. He wanted folks to be clear he did not derive his atheism from his science.

“To say it for all my colleagues for the umpteenth millionth time: science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can’t comment on it as scientists.”

In a recent study it showed that 40% of scientist believed in God, 20% weren’t sure and 40% did not. It is not then as Dawkins suggests inevitable that science will lead people to atheism!

Part 2

2. Religion makes assertions which are grounded in faith, which represents a retreat from a rigorous, evidence-based concern for truth.

In his book the Selfish Gene Dawkins states faith “means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence”.

Very interesting when you look at his journey. He started out in a conventional Anglican School therefore experiencing regular Christian worship. But folks like CS Lewis and McGrath were atheists and became Christians based on the evidence. In the same year as Dawkins produces the God delusion three other scientist produce books with the beginnings of assertions that it looks very like there is some form of intelligence behind the universe. Owen Gingerich, Professor of Astronomy, Harvard university, produced a book called ‘God’s Universe’. Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project, entitled his book, ‘God’s language’. And Paul Davis, Astrophysicist has written the ‘Goldilocks Enigma’. They are all able scientists who take a different view of the evidence. Why is that? Is it that it is not as simple as Dawkins makes out?

Unthinking faith must be criticised. It must consider the evidence. Evidence that in the end I believe centres round the person of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection and the subsequent experience of it’s reality today.

Science can neither prove nor disprove God so it is a step of faith to believe in him and it is a step of faith not to believe in him.

The question of God must be resolved on other grounds because there are limits to the explanatory powers of science.

Bertrand Russell, the atheist philosopher said, “**Whatever** knowledge is attainable, must be achieved by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover; mankind cannot know”

However Peter Medawar, Nobel prize winner for medicine wrote, “*The **existence** of a limit to science is, however made clear by it’s inability to answer childlike elementary questions having to do with first and last things – questions such as how did everything begin? What are we here for? What is the point of living?*”

That however, does not stop Dawkins pronounce, “*The **universe** we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference*”

Video part 2

Religion makes assertions which are grounded in faith, which represents a retreat from a rigorous, evidence-based concern for truth.

That is not a scientific statement because science cannot make comment on this authoritatively! The claim of Christianity is that is an evidence based faith! There is sufficient evidence to be convinced as Lee Stroble was that God exists and was revealed by Jesus Christ his son.

I will go briefly through last questions.

3. **Belief** in God arises from a “meme”, or a ‘virus of the mind’, which infects otherwise healthy minds.

By way of explanation a meme is a play on words. Just like things are passed down generations through our belief in God is passed on by memes. It “*leaps from brain to brain by a process which, in the broad sense of term, can be called imitation*”. It is not a term of Darwinian biological evolution but of cultural evolution thinking for which there is no direct evidence. Atheism is also a faith statement is it also a meme? Enough said on that it is simply **unfounded** on evidence.

4. **Religion** offers an impoverished vision of the world. “The universe presented by organised religion is a poky little medieval universe, and extremely limited”. In contrast science offers a bold and brilliant vision of the universe as grand, beautiful and awe-inspiring.”

It is said of one preacher that in the margins of his sermon notes he had written, argument weak, shout louder. I feel Dawkins is working on a similar principle. Surely whether you are a scientist or not you can appreciate the beauty diversity, vastness and complexity of the vastness of space as well as the view of a field of daffodils.

What I think he is reacting to is the way in which the bible makes observational comments such as the sun moving across the sky and so it appears the earth stands still. But that is how it observed. The bible is not meant a scientific textbook!

The reference to medieval is interesting because it was medieval scientists who told us that the earth was at the **centre**!

5. **Religion** leads to evil.

(This is a moral rather than a scientific, objection to religion, which is deeply rooted within the western culture and history.)

The God Delusion was written partly in response to 9/11. He declares that if there was no religion that would never have happened.

Now it is important to be upfront and acknowledge that people have done some very terrible things in the name of religion.

A recent study done by a chap Pape investigated the causal factors in suicide bombings. The results are interesting because they showed that the main casual factors were not religious motivation but rather oppression and lack of freedom. A sense of hopelessness and a desire to take radical action to correct it.

But also to say it would never have happened if religion wiped out. Has nothing bad been done by atheistic movements? Russian Communism, chechescu's Romania, the killing fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia.

Dawkins has himself said, "*science has no methods for deciding what is ethical*". How can he determine that scientifically? To say it is a bad thing is an ethical pronouncement.

The bible is composed of all sorts of characters. Leaders, theologians, fishermen, business women, Queens and a scientist. A Doctor at least. Here is what he said,

Luke 1:1-3 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. ³Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,

Are science and Christianity implacably opposed. No. Science is a noble cause but has its limits. It can never lead us to God because it cannot breach the infinite but God the infinite has breached our time and space and made himself known

John 1:18 ¹⁸ No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

John 20:31 ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.