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Worksheet based on the article *'Faith, Hope and a Lack of Clarity'* by Keith Ward

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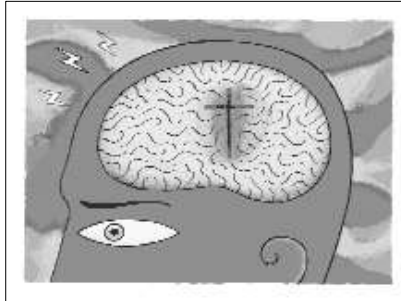
Worksheet

Charlotte Vardy, 2011

Faith, hype and a lack of clarity

Keith Ward - 21 January 2006

(Keith Ward is professor of Divinity, Gresham College, London, and Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus, University of Oxford. His latest book is 'The Case for Religion').



For the past two weeks, the Oxford professor Richard Dawkins has attacked religious faith on television as irrational, non-thinking and a suspension of critical faculty. Here, a leading theologian takes him to task.

Science and religion are in absolute conflict, according to Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. Furthermore, in *The Root of All Evil*, a two-part TV series this month, he has made the extraordinary claim that religion might be the root of all evil.

It seems that he thinks scientists are all reasonable, sceptical, honest people who insist on having evidence for all their beliefs. Religious believers, however, are irrational, and their faith discourages independent thought, is divisive, and dangerous. Faith, Dawkins said, is a process of non-thinking, or of believing because you have been told, without any evidence at all. Presumably scientists who have religious beliefs are rational during the week, and suddenly become insane on Sundays.

It takes only a little knowledge of history to undermine this black-and-white view of the world. It would be ludicrous to accuse Plato or Aristotle of non-thinking. But Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, to name just three Christian theologians, continued the Greek philosophical traditions, reflecting in detail on how these Greek views could be reasonably thought to be completed by Christian monotheism.

Today, if you take a course in theology at Oxford, Dawkins' own university, you will be challenged to think for yourself, to engage with the best philosophical minds of the past, and to decide for or against specific religious beliefs on the basis of the best reasons you can find.

Most believers do not get involved in such abstract intellectual arguments about God. Christians quite rightly sustain their faith by personal response to the love of God which they see in Christ, in the sacraments of the Church, and in their personal experience. But they do need to know that faith has a rational foundation, and that in fact most of the great classical philosophers, Christian or not, have thought that there are very good reasons for believing in God.

In fact modern philosophy and science have both arisen from a resolute attempt, initiated by theologians, to think hard about the nature of the universe, and to decide whether it is founded on a spiritual reality or is at base purely material. Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday, and the co-discoverer of the principle of natural selection, A.R. Wallace, were all explicitly motivated to pursue science by their religious beliefs. Of course you do not need religious beliefs to be a great scientist, but to say that having religious beliefs is incompatible with being a scientist is just historically false.

Dawkins may think that the spiritual hypothesis has been demolished by materialism. There are indeed some philosophers who think so. But, as anyone who teaches philosophy knows, there are also reasons for believing in God. Even scientists who are not avowed theists, such as Sir Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, usually accept that there are good reasons for believing in a designing intelligence, even if they think there are stronger reasons for declining that inference. There are reasons for belief in God, however, that can be intelligently believed and discussed, and to deny that is wilful prejudice and intellectual dishonesty.

When I watched the two programmes presented by Dawkins on Channel 4 this week and last, I could find only two reasons given by him for not believing in God. One was his misunderstanding that natural selection is an alternative to intelligent design. It is not. Natural selection can be intelligently designed. Almost all the theologians I know accept both natural selection and the intelligent design of the universe by its creator. This discussion has become confused because intelligent design has been used by some (such as the biochemist Michael Behe) for the thesis that there are identifiable biological phenomena that require all scientists to posit an intelligent designer.

Almost all Catholic theologians and scientists reject this thesis. But naturally they believe that the process of evolution is itself intelligently designed, as a way of generating a great diversity of emergent life-forms, culminating so far on Earth in intelligent human life.

The other reason is that a creator would be as improbable or complex as the complexity he was supposed to explain, so would not really be an explanation. This is more interesting, for it introduces a discussion about what an explanation is. A theist claims that scientific explanation, in terms of general laws and initial states, is not the only sort of explanation. There is also personal explanation, in terms of purposes and values. This is the sort of explanation used by historians, novelists, anthropologists, critics of the arts and ethicists. It is a perfectly familiar form of explanation. The question 'Could there be a personal explanation for the universe?' is one on which there is rational discussion, and on which different views are held. It does no service to clear thinking to say that if anyone thinks there is such an explanation for instance, that the universe exists because God chooses it, they are irrational, non-thinking, and have suspended their critical faculties. This is abuse, not argument.

What, then, about the claim that religion is the root of all evil? The twentieth century saw more people killed in warfare than any other century. Two world wars, the Falklands conflict, Vietnam and Korea, the massacre of dissidents in Russia the list is long and tragic, but religion does not figure as a significant factor. Ironically, science does, since it is scientists who have designed weapons of mass destruction that can destroy the world, and built the arsenals that have made modern warfare possible.

Has science, then, produced more evil than religion? Lazy thinking would undoubtedly say yes. But what we really need to do is distinguish, and point out that it is the use of science by those with a blind will for power that is evil, while science can be used for good in medicine and agriculture. So it is with religion. Religion can be used by those with a blind will for power (though the religious need scientists to make their bombs). But religion is also the source of immense good hospitals, hospices, relief organisations, universities and schools, great cathedrals, music, art and literature and philosophy. Would the world be better without such things?

What Dawkins' programmes lacked was any sense of complexity or discrimination. It was all uncomfortably like 1984, with its vastly over-simplified binary oppositions, 'science good, religion bad?' He did present some very creepy religious believers, but when he deigned to include a sensible one, Richard Harries, the Anglican Bishop of Oxford, he dismissed him as not really religious; betraying both reason and faith, he commented. The bishop betrayed reason just because he was religious, and betrayed faith because he did not seek to apply Old Testament injunctions without qualification to modern society.

And that, despite massive evidence to the contrary, is what Dawkins thinks faith is: taking a Holy Book literally, and applying all its principles unthinkingly to modern life. He did indeed find some people who apparently try to do that, though even they must do some thinking occasionally, since the Bible does not mention nuclear weapons or cloning, for instance.

Anyone with a little knowledge of moral theology will know that biblical literalism is alien to those who seek to make moral decisions for the Church. The papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, for example, is a rigorous and finely argued document on morality which makes clear that Christian moral decisions are made on grounds of reflection on natural human inclinations, in the light of belief in a creator God and the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ. When reference is made to the Bible, it is taken as a record of developing moral insights that culminated in the person of Jesus, who gave as his main principle of interpretation, Love God and your neighbour as yourself. That principle needs to be carefully worked out, but it certainly excludes applying ancient biblical texts literally without reference to the Church's long tradition of moral reflection.

Dawkins argues that morality can exist without religion, and the main Christian tradition would agree. God has planted some knowledge of natural moral law in the hearts of all. But Dawkins adds that Christian morality is cruel, brutish and poisonous because it seeks to make us moral by fear of Hell, and makes morality a matter of sucking up to a cruel and tyrannical God. We should seek good for its own sake, and affirm life in a way that religion never can.

Perhaps what Dawkins is doing is warning us of the pathologies of religion. Such pathologies exist, and they are to be eschewed. But virtually all the Christians I know do seek the good for its own sake, since God is precisely the Supreme Good. They affirm life and hold it precious because God creates and values life. They see in God a limitless, precarious and vulnerable love, in which they seek to participate. Whatever this is, it is not sucking up to a cruel sky-god.

So why can Professor Dawkins only see the bad in religion? Why is he incapable of making an objective, scientific, study of it, in all its diversity? Why is he unable to make distinctions between the many different forms of religious belief? I do not know the answer to these questions, but I do know this apostle of reason, when confronted with the word faith, suddenly becomes irrational, careless of truth, incapable of scholarly analysis. I really think it must be some sort of virus, and I wish my colleague a speedy recovery.

Test your Understanding

1. Whose work is Keith Ward reacting against? (1)
2. What 'extraordinary claim' did Dawkins make in his two-part documentary? (1)
3. What, according to Ward, does Dawkins suggest about religious believers? (2)
4. How, according to Ward, does Dawkins define faith? (2)
5. Which 3 examples of great scientists motivated by religious faith does Ward give? (3)
6. Which famous contemporary scientist, though not a theist, accepts that there are reasons for belief in a designing intelligence? (1)
7. To deny what is "wilful prejudice and intellectual dishonesty." (1)
8. Which scientist has suggested 'that there are identifiable biological phenomena that require all scientists to posit an intelligent designer'? (1)
9. What is Dawkins' first reason for not believing in God and his first misunderstanding according to Ward? (1)
10. What do almost all Catholic theologians and scientists believe? (1)
11. What is Dawkins' second and more interesting reason for not believing in God? (2)
12. What is 'abuse, not argument'? (1)
13. Why does Ward dismiss the argument that Religion produces evil, like the argument that science produces evil, as 'lazy thinking'? (1)
14. What did Dawkins' programmes lack, according to Ward? (1)
15. What does Dawkins think that faith is, according to Ward? (1)

Develop your Understanding

1. Watch the Dawkins' documentary "Religion: The root of all evil". It is available on You Tube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_1Gpt6dKFo&feature=related write a 500 word review of the documentary, as if for the television guide of a broadsheet newspaper. (10)
2. "It is simply irrational for a scientist to also be a Christian!" Do you agree? You must consider different points of view and give reasons and examples to support your answer. (10)
3. To what extent is Ward's accusation, that Dawkins is attacking a 'straw man' rather than making valid criticism of religious faith, valid? Refer to examples from the series and elsewhere. (10)
4. Write a 1500 word essay with the title "What is faith?" You should refer to as many different definitions of faith as you can, subjecting each to a critical evaluation, before coming to a conclusion and answering the question as best you can. (20)
5. "Intelligent Design" is the theory that some aspects of the world are too complex to have occurred simply through the process of evolution by natural selection – a designing mind would better explain their existence. Find out about 'Intelligent Design' arguments and produce a poster summarising the different forms of this argument. (10)
6. "Intelligent Design arguments are attempts to make crude design arguments seem acceptable in the 21st century world. They have no more credibility than the old claim that God is some divine watchmaker and so they must be dismissed by all thinking people!" Discuss. (12)
7. Keith Ward refers to the Catholic encyclical "Veritatis Splendor" (1993). Look up paragraphs 84, 85 and 86 of this letter at http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_jp02vs.htm . To what extent is Dawkins' criticism of Religion, that it encourages unthinking obedience to obscene and obsolete Biblical teaching, fair? (8)

Further Questions for Discussion

Read "Faith, Reason and Modernity" by Anthony Carroll (30th September 2006) <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/pdf/586> . Does the Pope's Regensburg argument, that Religion and violence are opposed because Religion and Reason are close allies, hold water?

Read "In the crossfire" by John Haldane (24th November 2007) <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/10659> . Would Anthony Flew's alleged position in the 2004 debate, that there may be a God who allowed evil and suffering and didn't care much for his creatures, be compatible with any form of Christianity or with any other mainstream religion? Would believing in this sort of God make any difference to one's life?