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Richard Dawkins:

My Encounter with a Heartthrob

THE IRONY that he had come to speak to nearly a thousand admirers and detractors at the First Parish Church in Harvard Square was not lost on the world's most vociferous God-basher. As I watched my crush Richard Dawkins take to the pulpit that night to promote his new work *The God Delusion*, I felt a kind of electromagnetism charge the air inside the church. Dawkins looked gorgeous in tweed and dark jeans, his stride princely, almost divine. He said he understood why so many preachers brim with self-righteousness, glow with self-importance: the architecture, the lights, and all those gawking faces staring down from the balconies allow one a sense of grandiosity. They stroke the ego, turn a person into a rock star in the susceptible caverns of his own mind. And, of course, Dawkins would contend that pastors, priests, bishops, and popes are every bit as moronic as your average, drug-addled rock star. For years I wanted to be that rock star, a Mick Jagger or Axl Rose; and now, there in front of him, I wanted to be only Richard Dawkins. He made God-killing endeavors seem sexy; never mind that he is a bigmouth who panders to the semi-educated and has a very shaky grasp on theology. Yes, never mind. The Catholic in me found it excitingly dangerous to flirt with Richard Dawkins. Most straight young men have crushes on Hollywood babes; Scarlett Johansson, say. Mine was on an Oxford scientist.

Harvard Bookstore sponsored Dawkins's appearance, and someone in charge felt obliged to retain a Cambridge cop. This sentry stood near Dawkins, scanning the pews for those Harvard students and Cambridge residents who might deem the scientist worthy of a bullet or a blade. They are many. But to those who champion evolution, to lovers of Darwin and all things Darwinian, and to the lonely crowd of Americans who have discarded—in what is repeatedly called the most God-happy nation on earth—first-century fairy tales and Hebrew myths in favor of rationality and reason, Dawkins is a deity unlike any other. As a semi-lapsed Catholic, my obsession with God, and with Christ's suffering, has taken on some hefty manifestations, the most notable of which is the religion section of my home library, a section that outweighs the other topics by half a ton. Friends and visitors are baffled as to why a reluctant atheist would have so

many titles that contain the words “God” and “Christ.” I have a special shelf reserved for Dawkins alone. Sometimes, when my wife is not looking, I stroke the spines of his books or put my nose to the paper and inhale deeply, trying, by some trick of physics, to ingest the sexiness in his pages.

What public intellectual on either side of the Atlantic stirs up such venom, incites the droves and even fellow thinkers to view him as a fiend in need of smiting? Peter Singer? Christopher Hitchens? Perhaps Noam Chomsky? But Singer and Chomsky have no public quarrel with religion, and Hitchens’s targets are all over the map. Dawkins solicits ire as no other intellectual can, and not because his enemies pipe with envy, because he is the inventor of “memes”—whatever they are—or the brain behind the seminal studies *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, and *Climbing Mount Improbable*, or the revered subject of a recent book subtitled “How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think,” or a best-selling author in several countries, with such a handsome mug to boot. It’s the handsome mug I want to emphasize.

No, Richard Dawkins solicits ire because he excoriates religion without remorse or reserve, and in a prose style that often matches some very impressive second- or third-rate poetry—Swinburne say (and Dawkins would approve of my lumping him into the same sentence with Swinburne: the nineteenth-century English mutant was as hostile to religion as Dawkins—he dubbed God “the supreme evil”; see his “Hymn of Man” for a pleasant romp in the glory of humanism). Such brazenness does not sit well with many, especially when those many are being told in an angry blaze that everything they hold dear is a shameless lie, a deceptive human concoction designed to quell fear and confusion, to offer cheap solace the way Starbucks hands you bad coffee. (Dawkins’s anger is juvenile, you say? Yes, true, but so what. He’s handsome.)

That’s what the adolescent dissenter in me, the seditious punk, likes the most about him: the volatile manner in which he attacks the squeaky-clean status quo, the sanctimonious establishment, his pigheadedness in the face of the fact that religion is interwoven with the human animal. In the mid-1980s my teenage self embraced rock ’n’ roll for precisely the same reason: to delight in the smashing of idols. My parents had raised me and my siblings on Catholicism, and then my family fell to pieces after my parents’ divorce. Catholicism, I saw, was a feeble glue. Flirting with Dawkins is my way of gaining revenge against my mother and father. See Freud for an explanation of that.



Okay, a point of contrast: several months before the Dawkins appearance at the First Parish Church in Harvard Square, I went to see the eminent Tufts philosopher Daniel Dennett speak at Harvard to peddle his new study *Breaking the Spell*, a book that was supposed to cause riots because it resurrected Hume's old argument, relegating religion to a by-product of Darwinian natural selection. There is a reason we have religion, and that reason has nothing at all to do with the truth of it. The propensity for belief was chosen by natural selection because it offered our ancestors an edge over those who didn't believe, who didn't have ritualized supernaturalism at the core of their society: for a multitude of reasons—and Dennett is sometimes articulate about these—belief in the otherworldly presented an adaptive advantage for those early humans doing battle with the unkind elements. For me—when I'm feeling frisky—this is the most airtight argument against God's existence. As any visitor to my library will notice, the second largest section is dedicated to human evolution, and oftentimes I choose to believe (naively, I admit, but also in pretty good company) that every aspect of the human being—the emotional, the intellectual, the spiritual, etc.—can be explained by looking at our birthplace on the African savanna some 5-7 million years ago. My parents knew nothing of the African savanna 5-7 million years ago.

Now, Dennett is Dawkins's chum; in their books they frequently quote each other approvingly. When a religious heckler sitting next to me confronted Dennett that night about his audacity in belittling religion with scientific verity, "like Richard Dawkins does"—Dawkins's BBC television documentary *The Root of All Evil?* had recently aired in England and people were hopping mad about the manner in which Dawkins denigrated an American clergyman—Dennett shrank from the contest by admitting that although he and Dawkins are chums, he does not agree with the disrespectful method of Dawkins's delivery. Although he is a large man who sometimes sounds strident enough in his prose, Dennett does not offend. That much was obvious, and disappointing; I like to see fireworks and people uncomfortable. He then went on to suggest that Dawkins's flamethrower of facts does more harm than good, creates gullies instead of bridges. The late Stephen Jay Gould, beloved Harvard paleontologist who made great efforts to popularize science, felt the same way: we must walk quietly in slippers when trying to unite, or discussing the possibility of uniting, religion and science.

Well, friends, Richard Dawkins does not own slippers (although I sometimes imagine him in pink ones); when he struts into a debate he does so in giant, shit-kicking moon boots. We're talking about the survival of the species here, about truth and lies, about our capacity to ruin the future as we have done the past—there is no time for pleasantries, people, for sweet talk and

kindness. The crisis is dire, says Dawkins. Stop being a bunch of ostriches and get your heads out of the collective hole. Islamic fascists are assembling nukes in someone's basement in the Middle East. Creationists in Kansas and Intelligent Design theorists in Pennsylvania (they are one and the same, yes) want to brainwash your tiny children with harmful mendacity and anti-intellectual propaganda, turn them into automatons for the cross. They might also boil the tykes for broth. Do you not see the emergency here? My Roman Catholic grandmother doesn't, but do *you*?

A second point of contrast: the American atheist and soldier for evolution Michael Shermer appeared in 2004 on a PBS broadcast called *The Question of God*. The name of the broadcast is also the title of a book by Armand Nicholi, and this book studies closely the divergent paths of Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis: one a scathing critic, the other an ardent believer. PBS used Nicholi and his book as occasion to gather a variety of individuals with the necessary race, gender, and religious differences. The mission: to get a diverse group together and, with the specters of Freud and Lewis hovering just over the table, get them chatting about faith or the lack of it. Shermer is no novice when it comes to debate; as the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, the founder of the Skeptics Society, and the author of such notable books as *Why People Believe Weird Things* and *Why Darwin Matters*, Shermer has cut his teeth disputing with those he would call numbskulls. Why, then, is Shermer of little concern to fundamentalists? Why does he not rouse the animus of believers everywhere?

Answer: because of the manner in which he debated on PBS, which is to say, did not debate much, if at all. He rather sat there like a doe, looking flush as sentimental new age spiritualists and the pious of every stripe blathered on about personal encounters with the divine. I shouted at the TV screen during that program, something I hadn't done since I was an idiotic sports fan in my youth: "Stand up for yourself, you boob! Don't just *sit* there!" But alas, nothing. Shermer poses no threat because he has no charisma (and no English accent); he may be right, with heaps of proof on his side, but as every successful preacher knows, the contest has nothing at all to do with being right, and everything to do with the inferno you bring to your convictions. That's why Dawkins has raised the fury of the faithful, and why I find him so sexy: he brings considerable charisma together with erudition and lots of hatred and then lets fly. Preachers want him dead because he challenges them at their own game. If Dawkins had been present at the PBS roundtable, believers would have got skewered, which is precisely the reason PBS refused to invite him. I suppose it would have been intellectually responsible to invite an Englishman to offer English insight into C.S. Lewis. Responsible but dangerous. Most people don't mind debate as long as it doesn't turn overly truthful. This was

something I learned in my religiously cloistered family life: don't speak of animus or strife; smile and pretend all is well. Say a prayer and Jesus will send you a present (the car I wanted never came). In other words, I was taught to pretend that my emotions and ideas didn't have value.



When *The God Delusion* hit bookstores in 2006 I wasn't too agog to see that America's leading magazines and newspapers were largely dismissive. *The New York Times Book Review* put out a front page marquee announcing the arrival of the book, although Jim Holt, the critic, accused Dawkins of smugness (true enough, but he's handsome too) and sloppy logic (yes, sometimes true, okay, I admit it). *Wired* magazine ran a cover story called "The New Atheism," which ended up being a shameless display of malarkey: the writer feigned allegiance to Dawkins and company only to turn coats in the final two paragraphs by branding them extremists and fundamentalists. Thomas Nagel penned a mixed but mostly derisive review for *The New Republic*; he charged Dawkins with "amateur philosophy"—leave it to a professional philosopher to charge someone else with amateur philosophy.

Harper's magazine ran a review by the humorless, Pulitzer-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson in which she accused Dawkins of not knowing science, history, or the history of science, which is rather like accusing Tiger Woods of never having studied the swing of Jack Nicklaus. Robinson—a Christian—also permitted herself the audacity to criticize Dawkins's prose style, and then affronted readers with this travesty of English: "Yet the image of deeper reality invoked by him here suggests a basis for the ancient intuition of the persistence of the self despite the transiency of the elements of its physical embodiment." The *what?* Robinson's review was a masterwork of spurious sentiment against a handsome man.

Most amusingly, *Time* magazine, that paragon of conformity, ran a cover story with the flaccid title "God Vs. Science," under which lay the enticing clause: "A spirited debate between atheist biologist Richard Dawkins and Christian geneticist Francis Collins." A *spirited* debate? First the editors of *Time* exercise their disingenuousness by hunting down a euphemism for "nasty," and then they engage in not-so-clever irony or pun-making. The only time a term with the root *spirit* can apply to Dawkins is when he's stumbling home from an Oxford pub. But the excerpted conversation between Dawkins and Collins never devolves into real nastiness (aside from Dawkins calling fundamentalists "clowns"). Rather, their talk is a little embarrassing for Collins (who authored a book with the mysterious title *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*); he resorts to defending himself against Dawkins's science with theological statements

such as “God is outside of nature”—which has no meaning whatsoever, not even a strand of spittle connecting it to known logic—and glaring contradictions such as “Faith rests squarely on reason,” a contention tantamount to keeping ice cream in the oven. Amidst all the media coverage of Dawkins’s book I found myself wishing I had had him when I was a child in Catholic school—preferably right there in my seat with me—a shield to deflect all that dogma radiating my way like so much toxic waste. All that dogma that turned me into a Catholic for life.

Dawkins argues in *The God Delusion* that his real mark is not God or religion per se—that’s a lie, Rich—but rather all forms of supernaturalism, anything that lies outside known physics, and this includes ghosts and goblins and the vampires I once adored. You would not have known, judging from his reading at the First Parish Church in Harvard Square, that God—or Yahweh in particular—is not his real mark. And a reading is what he gave: not a lecture, not a talk or discussion, but a reading, as if he were a novelist or poet. When he read this obnoxious sentence he did so with a relish that caused my blood to warm a little:

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. (31)

Several clumps of people cheered, I loudest of all, even though I recognized how ridiculous it sounded. It was a triumphant moment for humanism, for truth, for, well, for intellectual bullying. Dawkins excels at that. He would no doubt argue that intellectual bullying is perfectly permissible since spiritual leaders of all kinds, in every century of recorded history, have used emotional bullying to siphon money from and exert dominance over their aggrieved flocks; that is, they exploit the baser emotions of anger and fear in order to gain allegiance and maintain obedience. This was exactly how our local Catholic church roped my young, ignoramus parents into joining their flock and committing me and my siblings to an anti-flesh doctrine for ten straight years. Even as a child I could sense that there was something erroneous and egregious about dropping fistfuls of cash into a basket every Sunday. That was my bike money, my toy and candy money, and those two jokers who pushed me into the world were handing it over to a freak in a Halloween costume!

Fundamentalism, says Dawkins, “is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds.” This is Dawkins the defender of children everywhere, the Dawkins

I want to cradle me in his arms. The claim would seem easy and empty if he didn't insist on it often, and if he hadn't dedicated an entire chapter of *The God Delusion* to children and the abuse they suffer under religious indoctrination. One of the most touching pieces of writing in Dawkins's large canon is the letter to his ten-year-old daughter, Juliet, that comes at the end of *A Devil's Chaplain*, a letter urging her always to use her own mind, and written with a father's unrestricted love. I can't read it without reaching for a tissue. When I wrote Dawkins my own letter of love he did not respond.

Why did those critics spilling so much awful ink over *The God Delusion* not see fit to praise Dawkins's unrelenting defense of children, of gay rights, of women's intellectual equality? Because they took it for granted that everyone supports the well-being of children and the liberty of gays and women, and so singling out Dawkins for praise was not necessary? If so, that qualifies as an assumption of perverse idiocy. No, commending Dawkins for his compassion and his vision of a purer world seemed impossible to some critics because Dawkins the brawler made them feel as if they too must enter the ring with a taste for blood. This was Daniel Dennett's point about Dawkins the night I saw him speak: vitriol breeds vitriol, even from members of one's own camp. The topic of religion simply puts people in a bellicose temper, believers and unbelievers alike, and even those indifferent agnostics who have no emotional or psychological investment in whether or not God is a fairy tale. Everyone, it seems, has something to say about religion, and because Dawkins says it louder than many, and often with a uniquely English humor, he riles up even secular critics who refuse to tout his most praiseworthy endeavors. Why should they extol a pompous loudmouth? Answer: well, because they, like all of us, have an intellectual and moral responsibility to the chastisement of mendacity and exploitation, and because each monotheism is fundamentally and unarguably anti-human, as I discovered in the care of a Catholic grade school education.

Dawkins's devotees know this well enough, and they can be as fanatical as his adversaries; they regard him with the reverence usually reserved for saints, which of course is very odd. While his opponents remained overwhelmingly silent that night in Harvard Square, his aficionados were out in full bloom. After his impassioned reading and the eruption of applause, a lengthy Q&A ensued; scores of people formed a line to the microphone down the center aisle of the church. I could see that Dawkins seemed tired now and perhaps a bit ornery from jet lag and the demands of a book tour, but nevertheless he stood willing to engage the questions, none of which was even remotely aggressive. These were his people: Harvard students, liberal Cambridge and Boston residents, aspiring scientists and writers. A disheveled,

hirsute hippie approached the microphone, thanked Dawkins profusely for his work, and then asked for a hug. Over the giggles Dawkins said, “What?” and the hippie replied, “A hug. Can I have a hug?” “Oh come on!” Dawkins shrieked, less good-humoredly than I had hoped. He sounded like a jerk; how could my crush sound like a jerk? The cop took several steps toward Dawkins and placed his hand on his hip near the pistol in anticipation of... what? A hippie assault with flower petals?

The most enthusiastic of Dawkins’s admirers that night were two young women—airline stewardesses—who had flown in from Canada exclusively to meet Dawkins. They were the equivalent of rock band groupies; one wore a T-shirt with Nietzsche’s famous “God is dead,” and the other with Marx’s “Religion is the opiate of the people.” Neither wore brassieres and both seemed proud of their enormous breasts. I had some trouble diverting my gaze and felt suddenly thirsty for milk. After the Q&A Dawkins sat to sign books; a line formed around the church and out the door. I had to elbow my way to the front of the line; I wanted a photo taken with Dawkins, one I could tape to my fridge and e-mail to lots of friends. The two Canadians, their overnight bags strapped across their backs, had elbowed up front with me and jittered with anticipation and excitement. Their digital cameras kept flashing behind me. The Cambridge cop stood so close to Dawkins that it seemed as if he too had shown up to endorse a book. It fell to him to escort me and the two young women away from the table when we refused to move on after only a signature. Dawkins wasn’t posing for photos. One of the stewardesses wished to hand Dawkins a manuscript—no doubt her own excoriation of God. The world’s most renowned scientist appeared nonplussed by us, by them. His wife is reportedly a first-class beauty, and so desirous young women with philosophical inclinations and unsupported breasts do not tempt him.



I heard a rumor circulating that Dawkins would be dining at a Harvard pub, and so I and a score of fans, including the two Canadian women and their breasts, congregated there in hope of seeing him. I walked across Harvard Square with the two stewardesses and spoke to them about their bizarre lives up in the air. Of course Dawkins never arrived at the pub, but the Canadians were reason enough to be there, if only because they were colorful examples of how intellectuals can still inspire fervor. We sat down and ordered a late dinner. The one with Marx’s dictum on her chest told me that Dawkins changed her life and made her realize just how poisonous religion really is. She had penned a weighty volume about the nefarious influence of all belief, and she was convinced that it would find publication, that she would become as monumental a figure as Dawkins himself. She had given herself

the name Nish—one word, like Madonna. “Be on the lookout for Nish,” she said to me. “Nish’s books will alter all consciousness.” She had set out on a mission to destroy religion, and she appeared confident that she would succeed. Those breasts kept nodding at me.

“Why do you love Dawkins?” she asked me.

“Well, you know, he’s so handsome,” I said. “And because I’m still seeking revenge against my parents,” and they both chuckled at this, unaware that I was only partly joking.

I wonder if Nish and her comrade saw, later that night, an independent cable channel showing a documentary called *Searching For the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*. It is a film of stunning beauty that follows a musician through the destitute Pentecostal South as he seeks the impetus behind grotesquely bizarre beliefs. This impetus turned out to be what I’d expected, nothing other than poverty and desperation among low-luck people who were never given a chance to better themselves and so resort to belief in the devil and the laying on of hands. The film highlights the reason religion will never die, despite so loudmouthed a force as Richard Dawkins and the silly efforts of a brainless disciple named Nish. In order to do away with religion—especially the extreme Christianity of the Pentecostal South—one would need to do away with an entire culture, all the music, art, and literature that fuels that culture. More important, one would need to alter economics. The task is too daunting ever to succeed.

Watching this film, I felt an overbearing sympathy for those churchgoers in Louisiana who raise their hands to the heavens as a red-faced preacher spits and yelps into a microphone. Dawkins’s indignation all of a sudden seemed to me unfair, mismatched, even ridiculous. This does not amount to fence-sitting; some of us can say unequivocally that Dawkins is right and the supernaturalists are wrong. Let’s indeed round up all the sanctimonious ministers and politicians who prey on the weak, all those psychopathic jihadists with a fondness for decapitation, and drop them into a smoking volcano. But the dispossessed folks in the South, all those sad souls documented in the film? They are a threat only to themselves; they deserve our pity and our help but not our scorn. Dawkins, in his privileged ivory tower, cannot relate. His argument that the world overall would be a better place without religion does not apply to them: they are not the world overall, and their own miserable little worlds will probably never be a haven of enlightenment and economic success, the two factors most instrumental for shedding belief. Without a colossal effort at social restructuring, some people are too far down to rise. Dawkins would no doubt holler: Those are the very people electing and empowering harmful politicians and preachers! Enlighten them and you enlighten the world!

But they care nothing for enlightenment, for electing officials, only for a little ease, a little luck to come their way. And they, like so many of us, look for that ease wherever they've been told it resides, in the churches and pubs. They believe God and Satan remain locked in perpetual war because they're baffled and about to die and so wake each morning more afraid than they ever wished to be. Mythology is born of that fear, and Richard Dawkins's facts cannot communicate with it.

As for me: I've gotten over my crush on Dawkins and instead turned to more orthodox crushes for a straight man my age: chicks in rock bands, Meg White from the White Stripes and Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. But I still look at Dawkins's photo often, and, yes, wonder if he remembers me from that night in Harvard Square, standing before him waiting to get a book signed, asking for a photo. If you see him out there God-bashing, tell him I've moved on, but would still love to sit on his lap.

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