

## In Defense of Dawkins: A Response to Jason Giannetti

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In the previous issue of this journal Jason Giannetti launched a vigorous attack against Richard Dawkins's best-selling book *The God Delusion*. Giannetti assailed Dawkins on three primary grounds: his understanding and definition of God, his understanding of truth, and his interpretation of religious morality. In response, I will address each of these three areas in turn and demonstrate how Giannetti's critiques of Dawkins fail.

### I. God

Giannetti begins his assault against Dawkins by attempting to show that Dawkins's very idea of God is flawed. He accuses Dawkins of "set[ting] up and then rigorously and devastatingly destroy[ing] a number of straw men."<sup>1</sup> Dawkins accepts a traditional definition of God which is that God is an omniscient being that is also the supernatural creator of the world and is deserving of worship. This conception of God Giannetti ridicules as "The Great Santa Claus in the Sky." This, according to Giannetti, distorts the true meaning of "God" and serves only as a straw man which Dawkins can easily tear apart.

Yet strangely, Giannetti then admits that "Dawkins's simplistic portrayal of God as Santa Claus in the Sky does accurately describe many people's vague image of what God is."<sup>2</sup> But if this depiction of God *is* how many people imagine him to be, how can it then be a straw man (or should I say "straw god")? It may not depict how *Giannetti* views God, but that doesn't thereby make it a straw man. Rather, Dawkins simply uses the definition of God that is most commonly accepted by the majority of theistic believers and, incidentally, a great many prominent philosophers of religion. In fact, the idea of God as an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being is often referred to as the "god of the philosophers."

Now Giannetti may be correct in arguing that this common definition of God is insufficiently sophisticated (we will get to that claim presently) but he can't get away with claiming that Dawkins sets up a straw man when he himself admits that this particular understanding of God is widespread. Whether or not Dawkins is using a "correct" definition of God, we at least know that he is using a definition that is broadly held to and accepted—and therefore isn't a straw man.

Additionally, Dawkins goes out of his way to point out that he is *only* targeting a literalistic conception of God. In the first chapter of the book, in a subsection titled "Deserved Respect," Dawkins makes a distinction between what he calls Einsteinian religion (which rejects the idea of a personal god) and literalist or supernaturalist religion. He specifically warns the reader: "bear in mind that I am calling only

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<sup>1</sup> Giannetti, Jason, "Richard Dawkins: Vox Populi," *The Journal of Liberal Religion* 8, No. 1 (Winter 2008), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Giannetti, p. 3.

*supernatural* gods delusional.”<sup>3</sup> Dawkins, therefore, does not reject the possibility of other ways of thinking about God in particular or religion in general but instead straightforwardly asserts that they are not the subject of his book or its criticisms.

Giannetti should then be thanking Dawkins for demonstrating the absurdity of what he himself calls “vulgar views”<sup>4</sup> about God. Although Dawkins exempts nonliteralist notions of God from the overall critiques of his book, he does not let them go totally unscathed, however, and perhaps this is what Giannetti is reacting negatively to. Dawkins quotes, for example, physicist Steven Weinberg’s statement that:

Some people have views of God that are so broad and flexible that it is inevitable that they will find God wherever they look for him. One hears it said that “God is the ultimate” or “God is our better nature” or “God is the universe.” Of course, like any other word, the word “God” can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say that “God is energy,” then you can find God in a lump of coal.<sup>5</sup>

Giannetti’s conception of God is in fact highly susceptible to this criticism. He argues that the common conception of God as a particular being is profoundly mistaken. God should not be seen as an actual being with attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence, says Giannetti, but rather as Being itself. He points out that the four letters in the word usually translated in King James Versions of the Bible as “Lord”—*yud, hey, vav, and hey*—have an etymological relationship with the words for “was,” “were,” “will be,” and “been.” Hence, he argues, one could understand this word to translate not as “Lord” but as “Being.” God is Being and therefore, “to demand a proof of the existence of God is as nonsensical as asking for the proof of the existence of existence.”<sup>6</sup> In a perfect example of exactly what Weinberg had in mind, Giannetti goes on to say that “you and I are each manifestations of ‘God’ as Being, and everything you say and I say, as well as the songs of the birds and the screams of those dying in concentration camps, is ‘the voice of God.’”<sup>7</sup>

Having equated God with Being (and therefore with any and everything, including Weinberg’s coal), Giannetti takes a Wittgensteinian stance and describes religious belief as a sort of feeling and expression of mystical awe at the fact of existence. “The universe, life, and particularly my life, are absolute gifts—yet gifts which, unlike our usual way of thinking, require no ‘gift-giver.’ To follow Wittgenstein’s suggestions in his lecture, religious language is, in some strange sense, an attempt to express the ineffable which stems from the (strictly speaking) illogical thought of wonder at the existence of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

This idea of God being rooted in the concept of life as a gift is common among Wittgensteinian theists. Wittgensteinian scholar William H. Brenner, for example, writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Giannetti, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Dawkins, pp. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Giannetti, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Giannetti, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Giannetti, p. 4.

our life, our being in the world, is seen as a free, unearned and—yes—amazing grace. And some of us learn to express gratitude for this gift when we learn how to thank God in prayer. Nourished by religious instruction, the initial reaction may grow into a way of being in the world—“a faith to live by.” Such a faith will become for the believer part of that “given” for which she thanks God in prayer.<sup>9</sup>

This idea of God, however, is, to many people at least, highly unsatisfying. Certainly anyone can be awed by the brute fact of existence and the many beauties of the natural world, and in fact this is exactly what many scientists, including Dawkins, point to as a primary motivation for their interest in science. As Dawkins points out, “a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief.”<sup>10</sup> Such scientists are so overcome by the glory and mystery of existence that they are driven to plumb its depths and explore it in the most rigorous way possible—through science.

It is arguable (and this, I think, is what Weinberg was getting at) that the equation of God with Being, or the gift of existence, is nothing more than a linguistic trick that doesn't leave much substance (either literally or figuratively) to the notion of God. Philosopher Paul Cliteur asks “what justification do we have to identify such vague concepts with 'god'? Would not that be a kind of verbal inflation?”<sup>11</sup> Why not just say that the fact of existence is amazing and that we should feel awestruck in the face of being and existence. Doesn't appending the label “God” to this feeling or idea simply invite confusion?

As I understand Giannetti, and others who share his theology, he is not so much expressing a belief *in* something as having a reaction *to* something—whether it be truth, beauty, existence itself, or something else. As Wittgenstein puts it, “it strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation.”<sup>12</sup>

If this view is right, and belief in God is best described as a way of living, or as a certain reaction to life, or as a certain gratitude or awe in the face of existence, then why go on calling it belief? Why continue stating “I believe in God” in the same way as those who *really do* believe in an actual supernatural being called God? Perhaps this is an instance of believing in belief.

In his book *Breaking the Spell* philosopher Daniel Dennett discusses what he calls “believing in belief.” This phenomenon occurs when a person no longer actually believes in a particular doctrine or tenet but does believe that the person *should* believe in it or that believing in it is important for society or for achieving certain moral ends.

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<sup>9</sup> Brenner, William H., “D.Z. Phillips and Classical Theism,” *New Blackfriars* 90, Issue 1025 (January 2009), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Dawkins, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Cliteur, Paul, “The Definition of Atheism,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 11 (2009), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Culture and Value*, G.H. Von Wright; ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 64.

This can occur with all kinds of belief—political beliefs, cultural beliefs, philosophical beliefs—but religious beliefs are particularly prone to it. Dennett writes:

What do people do when they discover that they no longer believe in God? Some of them don't do anything; they don't stop going to church, and they don't tell their loved ones. They just quietly get on with their lives, living as morally (or immorally) as they did before. Others...feel the need to cast about for a religious creed that they can endorse with a straight face. They have a firm belief that belief in God is something to preserve, so when they find the traditional concepts of God frankly incredible they don't give up. They seek a substitute. And the search...need not be all that conscious or deliberate. Without ever being frankly aware that a cherished ideal is endangered in some way, people may be strongly moved by a nameless dread, the sinking sense of a loss of conviction, a threat intuited but not articulated that needs to be countered vigorously. This puts them in a state of mind that makes them particularly receptive to novel emphases that somehow seem right or fitting.<sup>13</sup>

I am not saying that Giannetti has fallen into this trap, I don't know his religious motivations, but it is a danger for liberal theists that they should be watchful of. "Nothing is so difficult," Wittgenstein warns, "as not deceiving oneself."<sup>14</sup>

## II. Truth

Some of Giannetti's harshest criticism of Dawkins has to do with his idea of truth, or at least Giannetti's idea of Dawkins's idea of truth. Giannetti at some points verges on the *ad hominem*, even questioning in one instance whether Dawkins has ever been in love (though perhaps this insult was simply meant to be taken metaphorically?).<sup>15</sup> Giannetti complains that Dawkins "leaves no room for any allegorical, metaphoric, or other nonliteral interpretations of the Bible or God or religious ritual and then he goes on to ferociously attack fundamentalists/literalists."<sup>16</sup>

According to Giannetti there is a distinction between metaphorical and literal truth which Dawkins simply does not take enough account of. This is despite the fact that Dawkins clearly and explicitly states that the purpose of his book is *only* to address fundamentalist/literalist interpretations of God as pointed out in the previous section. Giannetti either missed that passage or willfully ignores it when he writes, "based on his narrow understanding of theists (and his clumping in with them anyone who believes in God), he finds *all* religion to be simple-minded fundamentalist/literalist extremism, and therefore worthy of 'enlightened' scorn and ridicule."<sup>17</sup> This is simply a mischaracterization of Dawkins's position.

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<sup>13</sup> Dennett, Daniel C., *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York: Penguin, 2006, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Giannetti, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Giannetti, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Giannetti, p. 5.

Despite Dawkins's disclaimer, Giannetti is determined to attack him on this front. He even goes so far as to say that Dawkins doesn't even understand the *idea* of metaphor. He gives the hypothetical example of Dawkins having read *Moby Dick* "and found it hard to believe and so he proposed to set out from Gloucester, Mass., on a fishing expedition in search of the White Whale in order to either prove or disprove the 'truth' of the text."<sup>18</sup> Yet here Giannetti is surely setting up a straw man of his own.

All one need do in order to instantly grasp Dawkins's frequent use of metaphor is glance over the titles of his many books, which include: *Climbing Mount Improbable*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, and *Unweaving the Rainbow*. One of his books, *River out of Eden*, even makes use of a Christian metaphor. It's unlikely that Dawkins is literally postulating the existence of a river flowing out of Eden, a particular mountain named "Improbable," or a real blind watchmaker; rather, he is engaging in the use of metaphor. One of the reasons that many people find Dawkins's work so much more enjoyable and compelling than that of other scientists is precisely because of his adept use of metaphor.

Dawkins understands, and often uses to great advantage, the power of metaphor and the truths that they can contain. What he quite simply rejects is the notion that most religious propositions are indeed metaphorical. This especially applies to the statement "God exists" which, at least in its ordinary usage, is not a metaphor but rather a proposition. Dawkins doesn't say "a blind watchmaker exists," instead he uses the metaphor of a blind watchmaker to make a larger point. If that's what religionists such as Giannetti want to do (i.e., find larger truths in the metaphorical meanings of the Bible and in God's 'existence'), then that is fine, and again, Dawkins specifically excludes these people from the criticisms detailed in his book, but that is not the common understanding of the phrase "God exists" and that is not what Dawkins is speaking to.

### III. Morality

Giannetti's third area of contention with Dawkins has to do with morality. He concedes that Dawkins rightly points out that many people view the Bible's moral lessons literally but again argues for a more symbolic or metaphorical interpretation. In the case of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, for example, Giannetti argues that the passage can be justified because Abraham is demonstrating his selflessness. He points out that Abraham was willing to risk his own well-being when he argued with God on behalf of the Sodomites to grant them mercy. "Abraham took his life in his hands and was prepared to sacrifice it on behalf of the sinners," says Giannetti.<sup>19</sup> The situation was different with Isaac, however, because in that case "Abraham would be a beneficiary of such a petition," and "now, such pleas would appear selfish. To follow through with the command from God proved Abraham's selflessness."<sup>20</sup>

So Abraham was willing to kill his son simply so as not to appear selfish? This hardly seems like a sufficient justification for killing one's own child. It also points to one of the primary problems of religious, and particularly Christian, morality. That problem being that in order to maintain the sacred status of the religion and its holy texts, any

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<sup>18</sup> Giannetti, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Giannetti, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Giannetti, p. 10.

lengths will be gone to in order to rationalize and justify passages which are on their face reprehensible. In fact, whole traditions have been developed around the need for doing so, which gets us to Giannetti's next criticism.

Giannetti disparages Dawkins for not taking into sufficient account the role that traditions play in the development of Christian morality. He takes issue with Dawkins's assertion that

Apologists cannot get away with claiming that religion provides them with some sort of inside track to defining what is good and what is bad—a privileged source unavailable to atheists. They cannot get away with it, not even if they employ that favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as “symbolic” rather than literal. By what criterion do you *decide* which passages are symbolic, which literal?<sup>21</sup>

Such decisions, Giannetti insists, are not made solely by individuals but rather come about through religious tradition. He points out that “religious traditions, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, have, over the centuries, established not only certain sanctioned modes of interpretation, but also canons of law and ethical behavior.”<sup>22</sup> People are not free to decide how they will personally interpret scripture; rather, they are constrained by the interpretation of whatever tradition they happen to belong to. “Love the tradition or hate it, agree with it or disagree, there are rules of the game which, if one chooses to play the game, one must follow.”<sup>23</sup>

There are at least two problems with this defense of religious tradition, however. The first is that the traditions themselves are continually modified and reinterpreted as they adjust to the times and what Dawkins refers to as the changing moral *Zeitgeist*. This means that these religious traditions become influenced by social and other forces that are *outside* of the religion itself. If the religious tradition is shaped and molded by outside secular forces and influences then it loses whatever authority it may claim as a religious, as opposed to secular, morality. In fact, a strong case can be made that many of the most important reforms that Christianity and its many traditions have undergone in recent centuries have been the result of rational, secular, humanistic, and Enlightenment influences. Bertrand Russell makes this point when he concedes that Christian morality is not as reprehensible as it once was but:

that is no thanks to Christianity; it is thanks to the generations of freethinkers, who, from the Renaissance to the present day, have made Christians ashamed of many of their traditional beliefs. It is amusing to hear the modern Christian telling you how mild and rationalistic Christianity really is and ignoring the fact that all its mildness and rationalism is due to the teaching of men who in their own day were persecuted by all orthodox Christians.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Dawkins, pp. 246-47.

<sup>22</sup> Giannetti, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Giannetti, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957, pp. 36-37.

The second problem with tradition, especially religious tradition, has often been one of the largest stumbling blocks in the way of moral progress. Precisely because people are expected to abdicate their own moral decision-making and rely instead on traditions, wicked traditions have been more difficult to overcome and immoral behaviors and ideologies (such as the divine right of kings, the treatment of women as property, and slavery) have become further entrenched. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, excoriated the role that the white churches played in defending the tradition of racial segregation: “So often the contemporary Church,” he wrote in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church’s silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.”<sup>25</sup>

Giannetti next takes Dawkins to task for not developing a complete or sufficient secular theory of morality. Giannetti says of Dawkins, “he never even attempts to claim that in the absence of *both* God and the police people would not resort to the worst sorts of selfish behavior, nor does he attempt to explain why, in such absence of any form of external punishment, we *should* be just.”<sup>26</sup> In the first instance Giannetti is simply wrong, Dawkins does in fact address the issue. “It seems to me,” he says,

to require quite a low self-regard to think that, should belief in God suddenly vanish from the world, we would all become callous and selfish hedonists, with no kindness, no charity, no generosity, nothing that would deserve the name of goodness....Do we really need policing—whether by God or by each other—in order to stop us from behaving in a selfish and criminal manner? I dearly want to believe that I do not need such surveillance—and nor, dear reader, do you.<sup>27</sup>

As to Giannetti’s second question, why we should be just in the absence of external punishment, the answer seems obvious: because it is just! The judgment that something is just is plenty of justification for doing it. One should do what is right because it is right, no further justification is needed—or even possible. As soon as one begins giving reasons for why one should be just, one’s motivations begin to be suspect. If I am doing what is just because I think it will benefit my own self-interests, or because I think someone (even God) is watching me, then I am no longer doing it because it is just but because I have some ulterior motive. No more justification is needed for doing what is right and what is just beyond the fact that it is right and just to do so.

## Conclusion

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<sup>25</sup> King Jr., Martin Luther, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” quoted in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Clayborne Carson, ed., New York: Warner Books, 1998, p. 201.

<sup>26</sup> Giannetti, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Dawkins, pp. 227-28.

Giannetti's critique of Dawkins is useful in that it brings to the fore several issues that can certainly benefit from further elucidation. His critiques are undermined, however, by his frequent use of straw man arguments, *ad hominem* attacks, and occasionally outright (though I would like to think inadvertent) misrepresentations of Dawkins's positions. Even if Giannetti is right and Dawkins (and I) are wrong, I think Giannetti fails to give Dawkins his due as someone who has brought forward important challenges to contemporary religious orthodoxy and has given us all much to ponder. I do agree with Giannetti and other theists, both liberal and conservative, that issues pertaining to God are of ultimate significance to humanity and that it is essential to maintain a continuous and open dialogue concerning them. Whether one believes in God or not, the issue is a crucial one that demands our greatest exertions of thought and reasoned argumentation.