

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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PROFESSOR DAWKINS AND THE APPLIANCE OF SCIENCE

Professor Richard Dawkins' two programmes entitled *The Root of All Evil* were breathtakingly poor. They set out to demonstrate that religious faith and practice is the root of all evil. Instead, they simply showed that Professor Dawkins was incapable of constructing any sort of rational argument to support his contention.

Surely this must be an aberration? How can someone holding the Charles Simonyi Chair in the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford possibly present so ragged a viewpoint?

CHANNEL 4	9 January – <i>The God Delusion</i>
The Root of All Evil	16 January – <i>The Virus of Faith</i>

It was, of course, always going to be difficult, in an age of sound-bite television with just two one-hour programmes – especially in an 8.00pm slot competing against East Enders and Coronation Street. Nevertheless, the primary goals of a professorial post include avoiding over-simplifying ideas and exaggerated claims, and making clear the limits of current scientific knowledge. Viewed even in the most sympathetic of lights these programmes fell well short.

All religion was evil, we were told, because some religious beliefs led to conflicts and death. Are there not some tenets in rational thought and the scientific method that require consideration of all the relevant evidence and options before reaching a conclusion? Can we not find examples in our history of non-religious forces and motives leading to conflicts and death? If so, how do we reconcile this with those of a purely religious origin? Might it not lead one to consider the possibility of a deeper, underlying source of evil? Professor Dawkins appears not to think in this way, preferring instead to rely on unsupported assertion.

Teaching the Bible to children is, in Professor Dawkins' opinion, the equivalent of spreading a dangerous virus. Children absorb unquestioningly what they hear, we were told. Since the Bible

was myth, he said, they would absorb this myth, and come to untold (and unspecified) harm in later years. What evidence did he supply to support his biblical myth theory? None. What evidence for harm? One lady psychologist who still faltered at the images of hell recalled from her childhood. Despite this genuinely sad example, does one swallow make a summer? Was the way this lady was taught examined in the light of examples of children who were taught biblical truths and have no such problems? How many have anguished over the prospect of an eternity without God and wept with joy over a found Saviour?

Evidence, theses, rational thought, systematic arguments, and challenge – were these great principles of scientific method applied in the programmes? Unfortunately, no. In fact, it is hard to imagine a better example of the post-modern mentality. In the hands of Professor Dawkins, rational thought was simply a resounding gong and a clanging cymbal – just noise. His programmes, however, are not without value. As educational tools they instruct us in how not to think rationally, how not to construct an argument and how not to use and present evidence.

Ironically, in spite of all this, Bible-believing Christians could agree with many of his criticisms. Religious faith and practice *has* often turned away from the one true God and his word with predictable and in many cases awful consequences. Faith schools, even Bible-centred ones, may not always combine Bible and science coherently. However, there are clearly other avenues of recovery than the ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’ approach of Professor Dawkins.

Dawkins began his programmes by pronouncing science to be under great threat. It certainly is. Any secondary school pupil thinking about a scientific career might well think again, if this is how one of its greatest protagonists pursues argument. Purveying nonsense under the guise of science does science, and the truths which science seeks to reveal, no good at all.

Peter Fearnley

Professor Dawkins has been lambasted for these programmes by a significant voice within his own constituency of atheistic humanism. A contributor to the magazine *Spiked* described Professor Dawkins as showing ‘all the insight of a saloon-bar loudmouth.’ Instead of engaging in a rational substantiation of humanism, Dawkins had merely ‘flashed the “You must be stupid” card.’ The contributor concluded: ‘There is a programme to be made on critically examining religion, but this was not it.’

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Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.