

# Preface

As a child, my wife hated her school and wished she could leave. Years later, when she was in her twenties, she disclosed this unhappy fact to her parents, and her mother was aghast: 'But darling, why didn't you come to us and tell us?' Lalla's reply is my text for today: 'But I didn't know I could.'

*I didn't know I could.*

I suspect - well, I am sure - that there are lots of people out there who have been brought up in some religion or other, are unhappy in it, don't believe it, or are worried about the evils that are done in its name; people who feel vague yearnings to leave their parents' religion and wish they could, but just don't realize that leaving is an option. If you are one of them, this book is for you. It is intended to raise consciousness - raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled. That is the first of my consciousness-raising messages. I also want to raise consciousness in three other ways, which I'll come on to.

In January 2006 I presented a two-part television documentary on British television (Channel Four) called *Root of All Evil?* From the start, I didn't like the title. Religion is not the root of *all* evil, for no one thing is the root of all anything. But I was delighted with the advertisement that Channel Four put in the national newspapers. It was a picture of the Manhattan skyline with the caption 'Imagine a world without religion.' What was the connection? The twin towers of the World Trade Center were conspicuously present.

Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers', no Northern Ireland 'troubles', no 'honour killings', no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money ('God wants you to give till it hurts'). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public

beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it. Incidentally, my colleague Desmond Morris informs me that John Lennon's magnificent song is sometimes performed in America with the phrase 'and no religion too' expurgated. One version even has the effrontery to change it to 'and *one* religion too'.

Perhaps you feel that agnosticism is a reasonable position, but that atheism is just as dogmatic as religious belief? If so, I hope Chapter 2 will change your mind, by persuading you that 'the God Hypothesis' is a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analysed as sceptically as any other. Perhaps you have been taught that philosophers and theologians have put forward good reasons to believe in God. If you think that, you might enjoy Chapter 3 on 'Arguments for God's existence' - the arguments turn out to be spectacularly weak. Maybe you think it is obvious that God must exist, for how else could the world have come into being? How else could there be life, in all its rich diversity, with every species looking uncannily as though it had been 'designed'? If your thoughts run along those lines, I hope you will gain enlightenment from Chapter 4 on 'Why there almost certainly is no God'. Far from pointing to a designer, the illusion of design in the living world is explained with far greater economy and with devastating elegance by Darwinian natural selection. And, while natural selection itself is limited to explaining the living world, it raises our consciousness to the likelihood of comparable explanatory 'cranes' that may aid our understanding of the cosmos itself. The power of cranes such as natural selection is the second of my four consciousness-raisers.

Perhaps you think there must be a god or gods because anthropologists and historians report that believers dominate every human culture. If you find that convincing, please refer to Chapter 5, on 'The roots of religion', which explains why belief is so ubiquitous. Or do you think that religious belief is necessary in order for us to have justifiable morals? Don't we need God, in order to be good? Please read Chapters 6 and 7 to see why this is not so. Do you still have a soft spot for religion as a good thing for the world, even if you yourself have lost your faith? Chapter 8 will invite you to think about ways in which religion is not such a good thing for the world.

If you feel trapped in the religion of your upbringing, it would be worth asking yourself how this came about. The answer is usually some form of childhood indoctrination. If you are religious at all it is overwhelmingly probable that your religion is that of your parents. If you were born in Arkansas and you think Christianity is true and Islam false, knowing full well that you would think the opposite if you had been born in Afghanistan, you are the victim of childhood indoctrination. *Mutatis mutandis* if you were born in Afghanistan.

The whole matter of religion and childhood is the subject of Chapter 9, which also includes my third consciousness-raiser. Just as feminists wince when they hear 'he' rather than 'he or she', or 'man' rather than 'human', I want everybody to flinch whenever we hear a phrase such as 'Catholic child' or 'Muslim child'. Speak of a 'child of Catholic parents' if you like; but if you hear anybody speak of a 'Catholic child', stop them and politely point out that children are too young to know where they stand on such issues, just as they are too young to know where they stand on economics or politics. Precisely because my purpose is consciousness-raising, I shall not apologize for mentioning it here in the Preface as well as in Chapter 9. You can't say it too often. I'll say it again. That is not a Muslim child, but a child of Muslim parents. That child is too young to know whether it is a Muslim or not. There is no such thing as a Muslim child. There is no such thing as a Christian child.

Chapters 1 and 10 top and tail the book by explaining, in their different ways, how a proper understanding of the magnificence of the real world, while never becoming a religion, can fill the inspirational role that religion has historically - and inadequately - usurped.

My fourth consciousness-raiser is atheist pride. Being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of, standing tall to face the far horizon, for atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind. There are many people who know, in their heart of hearts, that they are atheists, but dare not admit it to their families or even, in some cases, to themselves. Partly, this is because the very word 'atheist' has been assiduously built up as a

terrible and frightening label. Chapter 9 quotes the comedian Julia Sweeney's tragi-comic story of her parents' discovery, through reading a newspaper, that she had become an atheist. Not believing in God they could just about take, but an atheist! An *ATHEIST*! (The mother's voice rose to a scream.)

I need to say something to American readers in particular at this point, for the religiosity of today's America is something truly remarkable. The lawyer Wendy Kaminer was exaggerating only slightly when she remarked that making fun of religion is as risky as burning a flag in an American Legion Hall.<sup>1</sup> The status of atheists in America today is on a par with that of homosexuals fifty years ago. Now, after the Gay Pride movement, it is possible, though still not very easy, for a homosexual to be elected to public office. A Gallup poll taken in 1999 asked Americans whether they would vote for an otherwise well-qualified person who was a woman (95 per cent would), Roman Catholic (94 per cent would), Jew (92 per cent), black (92 per cent), Mormon (79 per cent), homosexual (79 per cent) or atheist (49 per cent). Clearly we have a long way to go. But atheists are a lot more numerous, especially among the educated elite, than many realize. This was so even in the nineteenth century, when John Stuart Mill was already able to say: 'The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments, of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue, are complete sceptics in religion.'

This must be even truer today and, indeed, I present evidence for it in Chapter 3. The reason so many people don't notice atheists is that many of us are reluctant to 'come out'. My dream is that this book may help people to come out. Exactly as in the case of the gay movement, the more people come out, the easier it will be for others to join them. There may be a critical mass for the initiation of a chain reaction.

American polls suggest that atheists and agnostics far outnumber religious Jews, and even outnumber most other particular religious groups. Unlike Jews, however, who are notoriously one of the most effective political lobbies in the United States, and unlike evangelical Christians, who wield even greater political power, atheists and agnostics are not organized and therefore exert almost zero influence. Indeed, organizing atheists has been compared to

herding cats, because they tend to think independently and will not conform to authority. But a good first step would be to build up a critical mass of those willing to 'come out', thereby encouraging others to do so. Even if they can't be herded, cats in sufficient numbers can make a lot of noise and they cannot be ignored.

The word 'delusion' in my title has disquieted some psychiatrists who regard it as a technical term, not to be bandied about. Three of them wrote to me to propose a special technical term for religious delusion: 'relusion'.<sup>2</sup> Maybe it'll catch on. But for now I am going to stick with 'delusion', and I need to justify my use of it. The *Penguin English Dictionary* defines a delusion as 'a false belief or impression'. Surprisingly, the illustrative quotation the dictionary gives is from Phillip E. Johnson: 'Darwinism is the story of humanity's liberation from the delusion that its destiny is controlled by a power higher than itself.' Can that be the same Phillip E. Johnson who leads the creationist charge against Darwinism in America today? Indeed it is, and the quotation is, as we might guess, taken out of context. I hope the fact that I have stated as much will be noted, since the same courtesy has not been extended to me in numerous creationist quotations of my works, deliberately and misleadingly taken out of context. Whatever Johnson's own meaning, his sentence as it stands is one that I would be happy to endorse. The dictionary supplied with Microsoft Word defines a delusion as 'a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder'. The first part captures religious faith perfectly. As to whether it is a symptom of a psychiatric disorder, I am inclined to follow Robert M. Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, when he said, 'When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion.'

If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. What presumptuous optimism! Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination using methods that took centuries to mature (whether by evolution or design). Among the more effective immunological devices is a dire warning to avoid even opening a book like this, which is surely

a work of Satan. But I believe there are plenty of open-minded people out there: people whose childhood indoctrination was not too insidious, or for other reasons didn't 'take', or whose native intelligence is strong enough to overcome it. Such free spirits should need only a little encouragement to break free of the vice of religion altogether. At very least, I hope that nobody who reads this book will be able to say, 'I didn't know I could.'

For help in the preparation of this book, I am grateful to many friends and colleagues. I cannot mention them all, but they include my literary agent John Brockman, and my editors, Sally Gaminara (for Transworld) and Eamon Dolan (for Houghton Mifflin), both of whom read the book with sensitivity and intelligent understanding, and gave me a helpful mixture of criticism and advice. Their whole-hearted and enthusiastic belief in the book was very encouraging to me. Gillian Somerscales has been an exemplary copy editor, as constructive with her suggestions as she was meticulous with her corrections. Others who criticized various drafts, and to whom I am very grateful, are Jerry Coyne, J. Anderson Thomson, R. Elisabeth Cornwell, Ursula Goodenough, Latha Menon and especially Karen Owens, critic *extraordinaire*, whose acquaintance with the stitching and unstitching of every draft of the book has been almost as detailed as my own.

The book owes something (and vice versa) to the two-part television documentary *Root of All Evil?*, which I presented on British television (Channel Four) in January 2006. I am grateful to all who were involved in the production, including Deborah Kidd, Russell Barnes, Tim Cragg, Adam Prescod, Alan Clements and Hamish Mykura. For permission to use quotations from the documentary I thank IWC Media and Channel Four. *Root of All Evil?* achieved excellent ratings in Britain, and it has also been taken by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. It remains to be seen whether any US television channel will dare to show it. \*

This book has been developing in my mind for some years. During that time, some of the ideas inevitably found their way into lectures, for example my Tanner Lectures at Harvard, and articles in newspapers and magazines. Readers of my regular column in

\*Bootleg copies are being downloaded from numerous US websites. Negotiations are under way for legitimate DVDs to be marketed. At the time of going to press these negotiations are incomplete - updates will be posted at [www.richarddawkins.net](http://www.richarddawkins.net).

*Free Inquiry*, especially, may find certain passages familiar. I am grateful to Tom Flynn, the Editor of that admirable magazine, for the stimulus he gave me when he commissioned me to become a regular columnist. After a temporary hiatus during the finishing of the book, I hope now to resume my column, and will no doubt use it to respond to the aftermath of the book.

For a variety of reasons I am grateful to Dan Dennett, Marc Hauser, Michael Stirrat, Sam Harris, Helen Fisher, Margaret Downey, Ibn Warraq, Hermione Lee, Julia Sweeney, Dan Barker, Josephine Welsh, Ian Baird and especially George Scales. Nowadays, a book such as this is not complete until it becomes the nucleus of a living website, a forum for supplementary materials, reactions, discussions, questions and answers - who knows what the future may bring? I hope that [www.richarddawkins.net/](http://www.richarddawkins.net/), the website of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, will come to fill that role, and I am extremely grateful to Josh Timonen for the artistry, professionalism and sheer hard work that he is putting into it.

Above all, I thank my wife Lalla Ward, who has coaxed me through all my hesitations and self-doubts, not just with moral support and witty suggestions for improvement, but by reading the entire book aloud to me, at two different stages in its development, so I could apprehend very directly how it might seem to a reader other than myself. I recommend the technique to other authors, but I must warn that for best results the reader must be a professional actor, with voice and ear sensitively tuned to the music of language.