

## ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 6 JULY 2008

Rev. Dr John Bodycomb

Psalm 97; Matthew 5: 13-16

### “Is Dawkins Right? What Atheists Say”

As Chaplain with the University of Melbourne, I visited all the religious clubs, including atheists. After one meeting of theirs, I said to my Catholic colleague, “That was one of the wettest efforts! How about we join the atheists and help them lift their game?” It was half tongue-in-cheek, but not entirely. See, atheists are God’s gift to the believers, to keep us on our toes.

Actually, they’re not doing too badly today. Led by Richard Dawkins, there have been some hearty attacks on us. Well, perhaps not *us*; more at the nuttier kinds of religion. But insofar as nutty religion can take root anywhere, and gather up quite unexpected followers, I’m proposing we take the atheist critique seriously, and see what we can say to it.

There are three main accusations: that religion is *neurotic* (sick), *narcotic* (like a drug) and *nonsensical* (illogical). There is a fourth; namely, that the claims of religion are ‘non-testable’ – that is, by scientific means. Richard Dawkins says if we can’t prove scientifically that God exists, then God doesn’t. I’ll leave that for the first three. They all fit *unhealthy* religion, and none fits *healthy* religion.

#### I

**First charge is that religion is NEUROTIC.** Sigmund Freud was the main proponent of this. He had grown up in Catholic Austria, and he called the Catholic Church ‘the enemy’. Some of his theories are a bit hard to explain briefly and simply, but let me note two things he said about religion. He saw it as returning to infantile helplessness: turning back the clock to protect us in the way our mothers protected us. He also wrote that *organized* religion, putting us with others similarly neurotic, allowed us to be that way in a socially acceptable manner – whereas it would look mad if we were doing it alone. There is enough truth in Freud’s critique that we should listen even if we don’t agree. A story.

‘Neil’ was twenty-three, a drop-out from church life and very angry with God. He was an only child in a conservative and protective household. He knew that if he behaved well he would be rewarded, and if he didn’t, he would be punished. He was taught that God was like that. Cycling home from university, he had been struck by a car and hospitalised for months with multiple injuries. A keen athlete, he had to face the fact that competitive sport was over. He felt he was unattractive to girls (there were some facial injuries) and he began to withdraw into himself. He became depressed, started drinking and ended up back in hospital, this time in a psych’ ward. When I met Neil he wanted nothing to do with God.

I mentioned he had grown up in a pious home. Parents watched over every move and took great care of him; you could say they were excessively careful. This built into his belief system the idea that God was like his parents, and would keep him safe. As in Psalm 121: “The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.” His religion was one of depending on God to look after him, come what may. This was the sort of God he needed and wanted. Point is that it did not serve him well. When things went bad, Neil found God was not there like his mother and father were. Hence the anger with God and the loss of faith.

At St Aidan's we face this issue. We've reminded you how Jesus said, "God sends his rain on the just and the unjust; makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good." The genius in those words is that rain and sun are ambiguous. Rain will fill your dam or drown your flock. Sun will bring out your flowers and give you skin cancer. In other words, we live in a world where good things and bad things fall indiscriminately on good and bad people alike. Knowing that and living accordingly is healthy religion, not neurotic religion.

## II

**Second, the charge that religion is NARCOTIC.** That was Karl Marx. He called religion 'an opiate' of the masses, because it dulled the pain of being downtrodden. It took attention off the real source of their troubles, diverted them from doing anything about it, and kept the ruling class in power. Religion made them less sensitive to the pain of poverty and less inclined to do anything about it. So said Marx. Is there any truth in his critique?

This kind of religion takes a bizarre form today. I refer to the fundamentalism that has no concern for the future of the planet – because the planet has no future. We are living in the 'end time', when Jesus will return, the righteous will enter heaven and sinners will be condemned to roast on the eternal barbecue. This is called 'the Rapture'. Some may also believe that environmental carnage is to be welcomed – as a sign of the coming end.

A big proportion of 50 million fundamentalists in the US believe in something like this. Such people cannot be expected to worry about the environment. Why care about planet earth when drought, flood and pestilence are signs of the end time forecast in scripture? Why care about global climate change when you and yours will be rescued in the Rapture? Ronald Reagan said in the 70s about events at the time in Libya, "For the first time ever, everything is in place for the Battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ." In 1981 his Secretary of the Interior (including the environment), said, "I don't know how many future generations we can count on until the Lord returns."

At St Aidan's we don't believe we can settle back and say of global malfunctions, "Don't worry; God will fix them." We believe and proclaim that God has appointed the Adams Family (that's us!) to be trustees and managers of his estate: to do all we can to ensure the planet is in good working order for the benefit of all. Nothing 'narcotic' about that.

## III

**Third accusation brought by atheists is that religion is NONSENSICAL.** That is a line taken by Richard Dawkins – and others. They pick out crazy, perverse and dehumanising features, focus on them and infer that all religion is nutty. Dawkins says "testosterone-sodden young men too unattractive to get a woman in this world might be desperate enough to go for 72 private virgins in the next." He is referring, of course, to Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers. Most Muslims find that expression of their religion as repellant as you and I do.

What else do atheists find nonsensical? I once heard Bishop Franklin Clark Fry, president of the Lutheran World Federation, talking about silly religion. He cited the woman who had tale after tale of God tinkering in the world to work little miracles for her and her friends. Every spot of good luck, every fortunate happening, was evidence of God fiddling things in her favour. She told Fry about her friend who was close to giving birth, while her husband was away. When the contractions began, she knew she must drive herself to the hospital. She circled the block in search of a parking spot; then asked Jesus to find one – and fast. As she neared the entrance again, a car pulled out of the kerb.

Proof, see. Bishop Fry told us he said, “Madam, when Mary – tired, hungry and uncomfortable – was jolting along on a donkey, contractions getting fiercer and more frequent, what do you think she would have been praying for?” The woman looked a bit perplexed, so Bishop Fry said, “If Jesus couldn’t find anything better than a stable for his mother, how do you figure he finds parking spaces for your friends!”

Another story. When I was university chaplain, I went one lunch hour to a meeting put on by a fundamentalist group; the topic was creationism. We were told that God had created everything six thousand years ago. The ‘big bang’ fifteen billion years ago was a delusion and a lie. Fossils made in creation week only ‘looked’ older. Moreover, the date of Noah and the great flood had been fixed, and traces of the ark found by bible-believing archeologists. I didn’t know that sitting three rows behind me was Ian Plimer, professor of earth sciences and arch debunker of this stuff. Plimer’s book *Telling Lies for God* is a ruthless demolition of it. As I neared the exit this stocky figure with mane of white hair backed me up against the wall. He obviously knew who I was; many did by now. “What are you going to do about this stuff?” “Who, me?” “Yes, you; this is the sort of stuff that gets religion a bad name!”

At St Aidan’s we take on board the atheist criticism that religion is nonsensical, and we work hard to enhance the good name of God. I close with a reminder of how I made this point in my book *The Prayer that could change the world*, which we studied last year. I said when we pray ‘hallowed be your name’, what we mean is ‘may all that is said and done in my life today bring honour (and not dishonour) to God’s good name.’ I cited Jesus’ words, “Your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do, and praise your father in heaven.”

I illustrated with a story told me by someone who had stayed in one of those European villages where old customs had survived. Out for a walk, she found this little ivy-covered chapel and went in to pray. It was quite dark, and even when her eyes adjusted, she could see very little. When she rose, she noted something she’d not seen on entering. On the back of each pew was a metal structure. Next day was Sunday. Around twilight the locals made their way to the chapel, and she went too. Most of the villagers carried lanterns and, as they entered, the purpose of the metal structure became clear. At first the stranger could see very little. However, as more came in, she made out the figure of Jesus above the altar, and other figures carved on the front of it. Finally she picked out the text above the altar. “You are the light of the world.”

The chapel had been established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by an old duke, who decided it would have no hanging lamps. Instead, he would provide small bronze lamps for every family in the village. These had been passed down from generation to generation, and were treasured. Each family knew that, if they were not there Sunday night, the light would be less.

God, may your good name be honoured by all we do and say!