

RICHARD DAWKINS

Atheists for Jesus?

Like a good recipe, the argument for a movement called “Atheists for Jesus” needs to be built up gradually, with the ingredients mustered in advance. Start with the apparently oxymoronic title. In a society where the majority of theists are at least nominally Christian, the words *theist* and *Christian* are treated as near synonyms. Bertrand Russell’s famous advocacy of atheism was called *Why I Am Not a Christian* rather than, as it probably should have been, *Why I Am Not a Theist*. All Christians are theists, it seems to go without saying.

Of course Jesus was a theist, but that is the least interesting thing about him. He was a theist because, in his time, everybody was. Atheism was not an option, even for so radical a thinker as Jesus. What was interesting and remarkable about Jesus was not the obvious fact that he believed in the god of his Jewish religion but that he rebelled against Yahweh’s vengeful nastiness. At least in the teachings that are attributed to him, he publicly advocated niceness and was one of the first to do so. To those steeped in the Sharia-like cruelties of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, to those brought up to fear the vindictive, Ayatollah-like god of Abraham and Isaac, a charismatic young preacher who advocated generous forgiveness must have seemed radical to the point of subversion. No wonder they nailed him.

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard

Photo by Lalla Ward



that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. . . . [Matt. 5:38–44, King James Version]

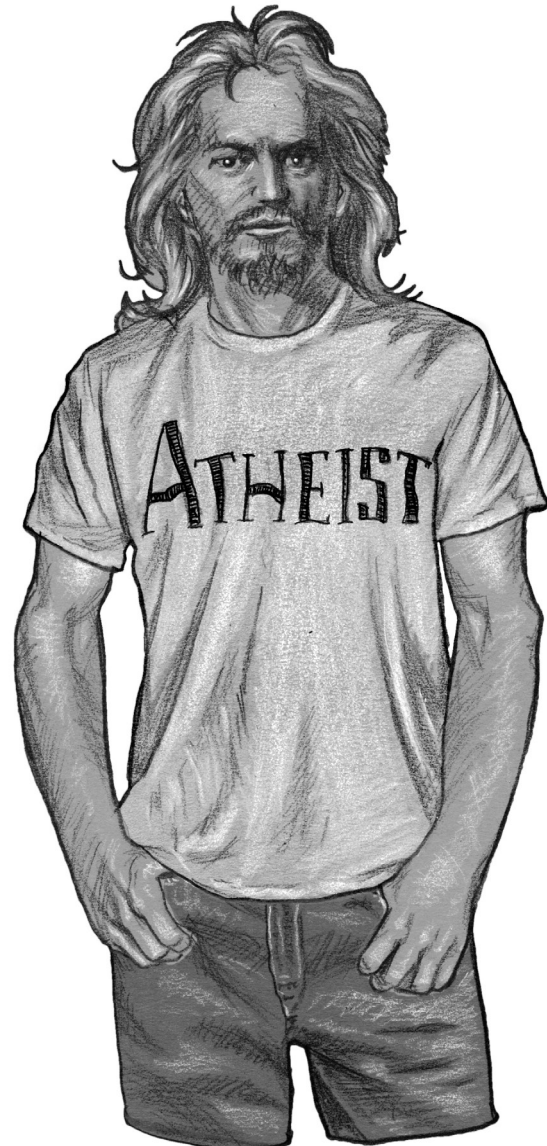
My second ingredient is another paradox and originates in my own field of Darwinism. Natural selection is a deeply nasty process. Darwin himself remarked:

What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horribly cruel works of nature. [Quoted in Richard Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).]

It was not just the facts of nature, among which he singled out the larvae of ichneumon wasps and their habit of feeding within the bodies of live caterpillars. The theory of natural selection itself seems calculated to foster selfishness at the expense of public good; violence, callous indifference to suffering, short-term greed at the expense of long-term foresight. If scientific theories could vote, Evolution would surely vote Republican. My paradox comes from the *un-Darwinian* fact, which any of us can observe in our own circle of acquaintances, that so many individual

people are kind, generous, helpful, compassionate, nice—the sort of people of whom we say, “She’s a real saint,” or, “He’s a true Good Samaritan.”

We all know people (Is it significant that the ones I can think of are mostly women?) to whom we can sincerely say: “If only everybody were like you, the world’s troubles would melt away.” The milk of human kindness is only a metaphor, but, naïve as it sounds, I contemplate some of my friends, and I feel like trying to *bottle* whatever it is that



makes them so kind, so selfless, so apparently un-Darwinian.

Darwinians can come up with explanations for human niceness: generalizations of the well-established models of kin selection and reciprocal altruism, the stocks-in-trade of the “selfish gene” theory, which sets out to explain how altruism and cooperation among individual animals can flow from self-interest at the genetic level. But the sort of superniceness I am talking about in humans goes too far. It is a misfiring, even a perversion of the Darwinian take on niceness. But if it is a perversion, it’s the kind of perversion we need to encourage and spread.

Human superniceness is a perversion of Darwinism, because, in a wild population, it would be removed by natural selection. It is also, although I haven’t the space to go into detail about this third ingredient of my recipe, an apparent perversion of the sort of rational choice theory by which economists explain human behavior as calculated to maximize self-interest.

Let’s put it even more bluntly. From a rational choice point of view, or from a Darwinian point of view, human superniceness is just plain dumb. But it is the kind of dumb that should be encouraged—which is the purpose of my article. How can we do it? How shall we take the minority of supernice humans whom we all know, and increase their number, perhaps until they even become a majority in the population? Could superniceness be induced to spread like an epidemic? Could superniceness be packaged in such a form that it passes down the generations in swelling traditions of longitudinal propagation?

Well, do we know of any comparable examples, where stupid ideas have been known to spread like an epidemic? Yes, by God! *Religion*. Religious beliefs are irrational. Religious beliefs are dumb and dumber: superdumb. Religion drives otherwise sensible people into celibate monasteries or crashing into New York skyscrapers. Religion motivates people to whip their own backs, to set fire to themselves or their daughters, to denounce their own grandmothers as witches, or, in less extreme cases, simply to stand or kneel, week after week, through ceremonies of stupefying boredom. If people can be infected with such

self-harming stupidity, infecting them with niceness should be a doddle.

Religious beliefs most certainly spread in epidemics and, even more obviously, they pass down the generations to form longitudinal traditions and promote enclaves of locally peculiar irrationality. We may not understand why humans behave in the weird ways we label religious, but it is a manifest fact that they do. The existence of religion is evidence that humans eagerly adopt irrational beliefs and spread them, both vertically in traditions and horizontally in epidemics of evangelism. Could this susceptibility, this palpable vulnerability to infections of irrationality, be put to genuinely good use?

Humans undoubtedly have a strong tendency to learn from and copy admired role models. Under propitious circumstances, the epidemiological consequences can be dramatic. The hairstyle of a football player, the dress sense of a singer, the speech mannerisms of a game-show host—such trivial idiosyncrasies can spread through a susceptible age-cohort like a virus. The advertising industry is professionally dedicated to the science—or it may be an art—of launching memetic epidemics and nurturing their spread. Christianity itself was spread by the equivalents of such techniques, initially by St. Paul and later by priests and missionaries who systematically set out to increase the numbers of converts in what turned out to be exponential growth. Could we achieve exponential amplification of the numbers of supernice people?

This week, I had a public conversation in Edinburgh with Richard Holloway, former bishop of that beautiful city. Bishop Holloway has evidently outgrown the supernaturalism that most Christians still identify with their religion (he describes himself as post-Christian and as a “recovering Christian”). He retains a reverence for the poetry of religious myth, which is enough to keep him going to church. And, in the course of our Edinburgh discussion, he made a suggestion that went straight to my core. Borrowing a poetic myth from the worlds of mathematics and cosmology, he described humanity as a “singularity” in evolution. He meant exactly what I have been talking about in this essay, although he expressed it differently. The advent of human superniceness is

something unprecedented in four billion years of evolutionary history. It seems likely that, after the *Homo sapiens* singularity, evolution may never be the same again.

Be under no illusions, for Bishop Holloway was not. The singularity is a product of blind evolution itself, not the creation of any unevolved intelligence. It resulted from the natural evolution of the human brain, which, under the blind forces of natural selection, expanded to the point where, all unforeseen, it overreached itself and started to behave insanely from the selfish gene’s point of view. The most transparently un-Darwinian misfiring is contraception, which divorces sexual pleasure from its natural function of gene-propagation. More subtle overreachings include intellectual and artistic pursuits that squander, by the selfish genes’ lights, time and energy that should be devoted to surviving and reproducing. The big brain achieved the evolutionarily unprecedented feat of genuine foresight: it became capable of calculating long-term consequences beyond short-term selfish gain. And, at least in some individuals, the brain overreached itself to the extent of indulging in that superniceness whose singular existence is the central paradox of my thesis. Big brains can take the driving, goal-seeking mechanisms that were originally favored for selfish-gene reasons and divert (subvert? pervert?) them away from their Darwinian goals and into other paths.

I am no memetic engineer, and I have very little idea how to increase the numbers of the supernice and spread their memes through the meme pool. The best I can offer is what I hope may be a catchy slogan: “Atheists for Jesus” would grace a T-shirt. There is no strong reason to choose Jesus as icon instead of some other role-model from the ranks of the supernice such as Mahatma Gandhi (not the odiously self-righteous Mother Teresa, heavens no). I think we owe Jesus the honor of separating his genuinely original and radical ethics from the supernatural nonsense that he inevitably espoused as a man of his time. And perhaps the oxymoronic impact of “Atheists for Jesus” might be just what is needed to kick-start the meme of superniceness in a post-Christian society. If we play our cards right,

could we lead society away from the nether regions of its Darwinian origins into the kinder and more compassionate uplands of post-singularity enlightenment?

I think a reborn Jesus would wear the T-shirt. It has become a commonplace that, were he to return today, he

would be appalled at what is being done in his name by Christians ranging from the Catholic Church to the fundamentalist Religious Right. Less obviously but still plausibly, in the light of modern scientific knowledge, I think he would see through supernaturalist obscurantism. But, of course, modesty would compel

him to turn his T-shirt around to read, "Jesus for Atheists." **ff**

Richard Dawkins's most recent book is The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution. He is the Charles Simonyi Professor of Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University.

WENDY KAMINER

America's Fear Factor

By the time this column appears, the 2004 presidential election will be history (so long as we don't have another prolonged post-election period of uncertainty). I'm not sufficiently foolhardy to attempt to predict the winner, but I am confident that the results will be decided by the public's fears. "Vote your hopes, not your fears," is a politician's cliché, but I doubt many people expect George Bush (or any other incumbent) to be reelected or unelected in a sudden outburst of hope. These days, of course, fear is palpable



and not unreasoned.

In general, fear seems to favor incumbency. People are already frightened enough of another terrorist attack, perhaps an even more catastrophic one. How much more frightened would they be if they agreed with the president's detractors that his administration was not protecting them, that his policies were maximizing, not minimizing, the terrorist threat? For many people, I suspect, the fear that follows not believing in the competence, toughness, or essential rightness of the president would be intolerable.

How does a challenger convince voters that the sense of security they derive from believing in an incumbent is false? First, he tries to establish himself as a reliable protector, so that voters susceptible to doubting the incumbent can acknowledge their doubts, in the belief that they have a replacement. (That's why John Kerry spent the early months of the campaign polishing his medals.) Then he has to persuade them to acknowledge what they have been either willfully or instinctively avoiding: bad, scary news about the bloody debacle in Iraq, the increased power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the nuclear powers of North Korea or Iran, and the failure to make significant improvements in security at home (among other threats). He has to scare voters, with precision. Scare them too much, and they'll turn off the news and revert to watching *The Bachelor* and taking solace in the status quo. Scare them too little, and they'll turn off the news and revert to watching *The Bachelor* and taking solace in the status quo.

The incumbent walks a similar but

