

## DAN BARKER'S 'DECONVERSION'

Dan Barker's book, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists*, is a challenging read. Barker describes his "deconversion" from Christian believer to atheist. He says this was a move from faith to reason, from delusion, superstition and irrationality to sanity.

Barker is now the president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and hosts the Freethought Radio weekly atheist radio programme airing on Air America. No small fry amongst those I call 'evangelical atheists'!

The *Foreword* to Barker's book was written by none other than Richard Dawkins. Dawkins is himself one of the foremost in the club dubbed the New Atheists. Dawkins waxes lyrical that,

"The most eloquent witness of internal delusion that I know – a triumphantly smiling refugee from the zany, surreal world of American fundamentalist Protestantism – is Dan Barker." (1)

Describing his "deconversion" Barker testifies that,

"The motivation that drove me into the pulpit is the same one that drove me out. I was a minister because I wanted to know and speak the truth, and I am an atheist for the same reason. I have not changed; my conclusions have changed. When I learned that Christianity is not true, I had to decide: 'Do I want God, or do I want truth?' You can't have both." (2)

I admire the person who thinks for himself or herself, and who has the courage to change their mind based on new evidence. I find it difficult to respect the "blind faith" attitude that is not game to squarely face the hard questions that often lurk in unexamined traditions. Indeed, I wonder if the thoughtful atheist is not to be respected more than the theist who recites the creed(s) of Christianity with no more thought than the monk's prayer wheel whizzing round in the wind!

I am genuinely pleased that Barker has extricated himself from "the surreal world of American fundamentalist Protestantism." (There is much I abhor in that stream such as the doctrine of everlasting conscious torment in hell-fire, the mystery of the Trinity, etc.) I even agree with him that many in our churches are afraid to learn, afraid to ask decent questions. I have met many of the kind Barker describes in his book: The kind who are threatened to look outside their tiny "orthodox box".

Many Christians prefer the comfort of an unexamined belief. Some consistently resist honest investigation and robust discussion, preferring to maintain tradition for the sake of tradition alone. So, I find Barker's desire for tested truth refreshing. I agree with him that too often,

"We prefer truth to tradition, progress to precedent, learning to loyalty. When I was a minister, I was convinced that I was preaching truth. It didn't matter then, and doesn't matter now, that what I was preaching happened to be tradition. What matters is whether it is true. When I decided to follow truth and jettison God, I did not lose a thing. I simply gained a new perspective." (3)

Evidently Barker has paid a high personal price for his 'deconversion'. Because of his newfound "faith", he has lost some in his immediate family, including his first wife who refused to quit her Christian faith. He has gained any number of opponents who vilify him

in nasty ways, including 'Christians'. But kudos to Barker, for he says he tries to live by the (negative stating of) the Golden Rule, that whatever would hurt somebody else we must *not do* ... that's a far better version to him than the positive statement of the Golden Rule by Jesus, that we must *do* unto others as we want them to do unto us.

So my goal in this article is to stick with the issues and arguments, and to seek objective truth in the same manner Barker tries to do. I believe we can follow truth without jettisoning God, and without losing our cool in the bargain.

## **A False Dilemma**

Is Barker right to say we can't have God and truth? Perhaps Barker is presenting what is called a false dilemma. Why can't there be a third option? After all, for every story of "deconversion" there is an equal and opposite "conversion" from any number of scientists, philosophers, journalists and the like 'professionals', who are equally adamant their new-found faith in the God of the Bible and his Christ has liberated them from emptiness and deception. *They* say you can have God and truth in one bite!

## **The Complexity of God**

The child's question, "Daddy, who made God?" evokes a rather curious response from Dan Barker and Richard Dawkins:

"Any God capable of designing a universe ... must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide." (4)

So, according to the New Atheists, just because God is more complex than His creation, we can't invoke Him as the reason for the universe. This is begging the question, we are told, because it's bringing your desired conclusion into the argument before you have proved it. What the?

What would Dawkins say if we proposed that he himself could not possibly be the author of his own book *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence For Evolution*, because that would mean he would be more complex than the book he wrote? Hmm.

Or, if I may put the argument in the more eloquent style of John Lennox, (I know it's considered bad literary practice to cite long passages, but this one is a gem):

"Imagine an archaeologist who, pointing at two scratch marks on the walls of a hitherto unexplored cave, exclaims: 'Human intelligence!' Following Dawkins' logic we react: 'Don't be ridiculous. Those scratch marks are very simple. After all, there are only two of them. It is no explanation to postulate the existence of something as complex as a human brain to account for such simple scratch marks on a cave wall!' What would we then say if she patiently goes on to say that the two 'simple' scratches form the Chinese character (ren) for a human being, that is, they have a semiotic dimension – they carry meaning?

"Would we still maintain that explaining the scratch marks in terms of human activity 'explains precisely nothing'? Of course not. We would admit her inference to intelligent activity as legitimate. Furthermore, we would surely see that accounting for the scratches in terms of something more complex than the scratches themselves did not lead to the end of science. Those scratch marks could well be important clues as to the identity, culture and intelligence of the people that made them even though they could not tell us everything that might be known about those people.

“Incidentally, is it not to be wondered at that our archaeologist immediately infers intelligent origin when faced with two scratches whereas some scientists, when faced with the 3.5 billion letter sequence of the human genome, inform us that it is to be explained solely in terms of chance and necessity? Both the scratches and the DNA sequence have a semiotic dimension. It is not for nothing that we call the latter the DNA *code*.” (5)

Even Dawkins himself and atheists such as Barker admit the universe gives “the impression of being designed”! My question then is, why not just accept where the empirical evidence leads? Certain patterns, symbols, structures, and sequences are obvious pointers to intelligent minds being their creators and designers. The universe we live in gives ample indication of design, as the New Atheists admit, but won’t admit!

Please indulge me in citing one more of Lennox’s examples here. What would we in all likelihood deduce on visiting a remote planet ...

“If we found a succession of piles of perfect cubes of titanium with a prime number of cubes in each pile in ascending order – 2,3,5,7,11, etc. We would see at once that here was an artefact produced by an intelligent agent, even though we had no idea what kind of intelligent agent it could possibly be. The piles of cubes are in themselves much ‘simpler’ than the intelligence that made them, but that fact does not prevent our deduction of intelligent origin as a reasonable inference to the best explanation. We instinctively infer ‘upwards’ to an ultimately intelligent causation rather than ‘downwards’ to chance and necessity.” (6)

Carl Sagan mentions in his novel *Contact* that a signal consisting of a sequence of prime numbers would lead us to assume it was coming from an intelligent source. If such a signal were to be received, no scientist in the world would question that it was not proof of intelligence ‘out there’, because that would be proposing the source as being more complex than the signal! The best explanation is to postulate ‘upwards’ to complexity.

I also admit to finding it astounding that scientists who deny a Creator seriously propose that life in our world may well have been “seeded” by extra-terrestrial intelligence from outer space. The SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) project shows how natural science is prepared to infer design and supra-natural intelligence. Of course, not all scientists endorse SETI, but it is a serious branch of scientific endeavour proposing that life as we know it could have a “supra-natural” explanation ... but it cannot, must not be God.

If a scientist can postulate extra-terrestrial “seeding”, why is the theist poo-hoed for postulating a Creator? It’s one thing for scientists to dismiss the possibility of ultimate design, but quite another thing to dismiss design as wishful thinking because science cannot deal with it.

### **Aunt Matilda’s Cake**

I like the oft-used ‘parable’ of Aunt Matilda’s cake. (7) Let us imagine Aunt Matilda has baked a nice cake and we take it along to be scientifically analysed. We ask scientists for an explanation of the cake. The nutritionist investigates the number of calories and the nutritional benefits. The biochemist explains the structure of the sugars, the carbohydrates, etc. The chemist describes the elements and how they bond and react with each other. The physicist describes the cake in terms of its basic particles. Mathematicians will describe the formulas for the behaviour of those particles under heat, etc.

But have these scientists completely described the cake for us? They have each told us *how* the cake fits together and *how* its individual elements work together. But now let's ask the assembled scientists one last question: *Why* was the cake made? As Lennox says, the grin on Aunt Matilda's face indicates she knows the answer. After all, she made it, and she made it for a reason. But all the nutritionists, biochemists, chemists, physicists, and mathematicians in the world will not be able to answer the *why* question. Metaphysics is not the province of science.

Of course, this is no insult to their respective disciplines nor expertise. But unless Aunt Matilda reveals her reason for baking the cake to us, no amount of scientific investigation will enlighten us. Then, once Matilda explains she baked the cake for her favourite nephew Jimmy, we still must use that knowledge to investigate if she is telling us the truth. If she does not have a nephew by that name, her explanation does not ring true.

So, *unaided* reason cannot tell us about the *why*. And when scientists pronounce there is no *why* behind the order of the natural world they have wandered into metaphysics and are betraying a version of 'faith' that suits them.

### **"Multiverses"**

To get around this a growing number of scientists are proposing the 'multiverse' theory. Our universe is not the only universe, but is just one bubble among many bubbles in the champagne glass! They are forced to this supposition because once again, our universe gives the appearance of being finely tuned. Our planet earth seems to be 'tweaked' to support complex life. Apparently we live in the "Goldilocks Zone" which supplies *prima facie* evidence for theistic design.

Physicist Steven Hawking admits,

"Our universe and its laws appear to have a design that both is tailor-made to support us and, if we are to exist, leaves little room for alteration. That is not easily explained and raises the natural question of why it is that way ... the discovery relatively recently of the extreme fine-tuning of so many of the laws of nature could lead at least some of us back to the old idea that this grand design is the work of some grand designer ... That is not the answer of modern science ... our universe seems to be one of many, each with different laws."" (8)

But what is this if not pure imaginative speculation? I thought science dealt with the empirical and observable facts. I am not saying there are not "multiverses" out there, but I am saying what every scientist knows: We have no hard evidence that ours is not the only universe. Science is supposed to deal with the observation of facts, then go where the evidence leads.

The eminent quantum theorist John Polkinghorne rejects multiverse speculation:

"Let us recognize these speculations for what they are. They are not physics, but in the strictest sense, metaphysics. There is no purely scientific reason to believe in an ensemble of universes. By construction these other worlds are unknowable by us. A possible explanation of equal intellectual respectability – and to my mind greater economy and elegance – would be that this one world is the way it is, because it is the creation of the will of a Creator who purposes that it should be so." (9)

It seems that in order to explain the appearance of design in our universe, scientists who default to atheism because 'we can't prove God', do speculate about things they can't prove!

Dan Barker seems to be a fan of the 'multiverse' theory, where the number of universes is so inconceivably huge that "universes must repeat themselves, and you (or someone identical to you) have already read this book." (10) Wow, imagine that! That being possible, and on a humorous note (I can't remember where I read this), one clever wit wondered whether in the trillions of possible universes there might not be one with a "born again", Bible believing Christian named Richard Dawkins! Since writing this I have come upon Lennox's brilliant piece of humour that:

"I am tempted to add that belief in God seems an infinitely more rational option, if the alternative is to believe that every other universe that possibly can exist does exist, including one in which Richard Dawkins is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Christopher Hitchens the Pope, and Billy Graham has just been voted atheist of the year!" (11)

Even granting for the purpose of argument the potential for "multiverses", the atheist still has to explain the one that we now live in, that on their own admission, "gives the appearance of design." In the trillions of multiverses out there, why can't ours be the very one that God created ... that's got to at least be one of the possibilities if the atheist is honest!

### **Abracadabra**

Speaking about wishful thinking, Dan Barker says,

"Hebrews 11:1 says, 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.' In other words, faith is the evidence of non-evidence. Faith is what you use when you don't have knowledge ... It is a free lunch, a perpetual motion machine. It's a way to get there by not doing any work. Hebrews 11:6 says, 'Without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is.'" Even the Bible admits that you can't know if God exists. You have to "believe that he is." Abracadabra." (12)

Just who is conjuring up smoke and mirrors' magic here? Let's examine Barker's statement for a moment. First, he misquotes the Bible text by not finishing the sentence. He leaves off the end of Hebrews 11:6 which adds the vital words of explanation, "and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."

So, the Bible is not saying you can't know if God exists. It's saying the exact opposite, that if you want to experience the reality of God's Person and blessings, you must come to Him knowing He is there wanting to meet you. It's not saying you magically whip up a bit of abracadabra magic in the hope that God might exist. The Bible says that because God does exist you may seek Him with confidence when you do so with full diligence. How so?

Hebrews chapter 11 then goes on to list many examples of those in history who had this very confidence and who were not disappointed. Based on their testimonies (which of course, you may discount as historically unreliable if you wish) we too may adopt the same attitude of faith. Base your faith on the Bible's evidence of God working in history through men and women of faith and you will have the same reward.

That claim has to be judged on its merit, but for the moment all I am saying, is that we must accurately quote the Bible. Barker claims to know his Bible having preached it for many years, but he shows here at minimum his ignorance of what the Bible calls "faith".

Next, notice Barker uses the classic argument that "faith" and "knowledge" are opposites ... "faith is the evidence of non-evidence ... faith is what you use when you don't have knowledge." But I submit this is not what the Bible is claiming here at all.

The kind of faith the Bible calls for is not "blind faith", a hopeful stab in the dark, "a free lunch". It calls for faith that is evidence-based, that is, commitment to certain revealed facts. There is substance to our faith and evidence for what we currently do not see. This is not a claim that we can "prove" God exists, but it is a claim we can proffer good reasons that he does exist.

The kind of faith that qualifies as Bible faith is the kind John writes about. He claims first-hand eyewitness observation of Jesus, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God: and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

Christianity insists that faith and evidence are inseparable and that faith is a logical response to revealed facts. Nowhere does the Bible invite us to believe anything not backed up by evidence and rationality. And each of us has to make up our own minds as to the validity of that evidence. The strength of our supporting evidence will determine the validity of our faith, whether it be theism, atheism, or agnosticism, or any other 'ism'.

Of course many will object that an appeal to the Bible's account of history is flawed, being full of myths deliberately composed to make their God-story believable. This is not the time to enter that debate except to say that science itself does not object to induction from history. After all is said and done, it's impossible to repeat the Big Bang, or the origin of life on earth, or the history of the progress of that life, or the history of our universe, or any other one-off historical event, but this does not mean we cannot be sure of those events and have reasonable faith in them or their history.

That aside for the moment, what about the New Atheists? Don't they also exercise "faith" in science? They will hotly deny this, of course. But here is the truth: no scientist could study his field without believing in (i.e. having faith in) the rational intelligibility of the cosmos. Albert Einstein admitted the scientist has "profound faith" in the rational intelligibility of the universe, even famously stating, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." So, every scientist at minimum must believe he can be an objective observer within the natural world he observes. It takes faith to be a scientist! And it takes faith to be an atheist too.

Nevertheless the New Atheists insist on this 'furphy' that faith and knowledge are opposites. We are told that to believe in God is a wish fulfilment by those who have not yet grown up to be mature "freethinkers" --- much like children who want to believe in Santa Claus. Because we can't cope with the finality of death -- the reality of our own mortal extinction -- we need to invent the crutch of pie in the sky when you die.

OK, so let's turn the tables a bit here. What's good for the goose is also good for the gander. The New Atheists claim faith is the enemy of our souls, right? The whole "blind faith" in unobserved multiverses operating under different laws is a blatant appeal to abracadabra incantation, surely? (Where is Occam's Razor now? That's meant for those who use this argument against the theist. Let the reader understand!)

Yes, our New Atheists' creed is the unshakeable belief that the natural universe is accessible to human observation and understanding. Scientific endeavour proceeds on this unshakeable faith.

Oh, I agree. If God does not exist then faith in Him is a stupid delusion. But if he does exist then atheism is the delusion. If God does exist then atheism is a flight into fantasy, a failure to face the fact that I must one day meet Him and give account of my deeds. Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel Laureate knew this when he wrote,

"A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death – the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders, we are not going to be judged." (13)

So, are the New Atheists inviting us along the path of psychological escapism to avoid our ultimate moral accountability? I cannot conclude this section more eloquently than John Lennox:

"It is ironic that the New Atheists are classic examples of the very thing that they despise: they are characterized by the blind faith that all faith is blind. It is also ironic that the New Atheists do not even see that they themselves are driven by faith, even as they seek to destroy it. They believe that the world is rational, that truth is important. They have faith that their own minds can understand the things they are talking about. They also have faith that they can convince us by their arguments. If they think that their view is not a faith or belief system, why do they try to give evidence to get the rest of us to *believe* it? All of this they do, failing blissfully to see that their atheism cuts the rational ground from under them on which they so much wish to stand." (14)

### **Science is a Christian Brain-Child.**

Modern science has an unshakeable conviction that the universe is governed by regular, observable laws. The cosmos is ordered and predictable. So, where does this 'faith' come from?

Nobel Prize-winner in biochemistry, Melvin Calvin explains:

As I try to discern the origin of that conviction, I seem to find it in a basic notion discovered 2,000 or 3,000 years ago, and enunciated first in the Western world by the ancient Hebrews: namely that the universe is governed by a single God, and is not the product of the whims of many gods, each governing his own province according to his own laws. This monotheistic view seems to be the historical foundation for modern science." (15)

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) is regarded by many as the father of modern science, and he taught that God has provided us with two books -- the book of Nature and the Bible – and that to be properly educated man should devote his mind to studying both.

C.S. Lewis also agreed that modern science is the brain-child of a Biblical world-view:

"Men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a lawgiver." (16)

It may be objected that the Greeks or the Chinese were the first to do science like we do. But Joseph Needham, a student of Chinese culture, asks why Eastern culture never bequeathed us modern science, even though they developed a highly advanced form of mechanised culture. Needham says the reason is that the Chinese had no belief either in an intelligible order in nature nor in the human ability to decode an order should it exist. He writes:

"There was no confidence that the code of nature's laws could be unveiled and read, because there was no assurance that a divine being, even more rational than ourselves, had ever formulated such a code capable of being read." (17)

Indeed, in the Eighteenth Century when the Chinese first learned from Jesuit missionaries of the modern scientific discoveries in the West, the idea that the universe is governed by laws that men could discover was considered foolish. (18)

Have you ever wondered why modern science, which holds sacred the doctrine of a naturalistic universe that works according to predictable, observable, and reliable laws was able to develop at all? What was it that sparked the "scientific revolution" between Copernicus and Newton, and still marches on to this day?

Or, to pose the question from the other angle, why did our modern scientific worldview not develop from cultures that were animistic or pantheistic, or from any of the ancient civilizations where the human being is an expression of nature and incapable of transcending his environment? In these societies, the human mind is thoroughly embedded in nature and humans were interested in knowing nature only in order to adapt and conform to it. They never imagined for a moment that the forces of nature could be adapted and harnessed for man's benefit. But,

"By contrast, the Biblical view begins with a transcendent God and with the creation of humanity in His image. Humans find their essential kinship not with nature – as expressed in totems and idols – but with God. The human mind is thus capable of transcending and confronting it as subject. In this context, the individual is active *vis a vis* nature. Humans do not merely conform to nature but are free to manipulate it, both theoretically in mathematical formulas and practically by experiment. (19)

The early modern scientists from Copernicus on, to borrow their own phrase, believed the goal of science was the glory of God and the benefit of mankind. Christians found Biblical justification for this active scientific method in the account of the Genesis creation where God gave "dominion" to human beings "over the earth" (Gen. 1:28). This mandate was seen as a license to responsibly cultivate, care for, and harness nature for human benefit.

Also, in the Bible, God brought the animals to Adam for him to name (Gen.2:19-20). In Hebrew parlance to name something was to assert mastery over it. Naming the animals required careful investigation of them, studying their characteristics, and classifying them ... classic modern scientific endeavour.

It is a matter of historical record that scientists of this incipient scientific method had a worldview permeated with a Biblical view of mankind and his world ... theism.

"The very idea that the conditions of human life could be ameliorated was itself revolutionary --- and was rooted in Biblical doctrine ... the idea of improving one's life cannot occur to people trapped in a cyclic, fatalistic, or deterministic view of history... [If] God can create something genuinely new, so can human beings, who are made in His image. Both God and humans are first causes who can set in motion a new chain of secondary causes. Thus the Biblical view of history inspired the use of science and technology to improve the human condition." (20)

John Hedley Brooke's taxonomy outlines the ways Christian teachings historically served as *presuppositions* for the scientific enterprise (e.g. the conviction that nature is lawful was inferred from its creation by a rational God). Secondly, Brooke says Christian teachings *sanctioned* science (e.g. science was justified as a means of alleviating toil and suffering). Third, Christian teachings supplied *motives* for pursuing science (e.g., to show the glory and wisdom of the Creator). Fourth, Christianity played a role in *regulating* scientific methodology (e.g. voluntarist theology was invoked to justify an empirical approach in science). And fifth, Christianity played a *constitutive* role in theory formation. (21)

It is a matter of historic record that theism – and specifically Biblical monotheism – is not inimical to the scientific endeavour. (22)

Yes, if God does not exist then faith in Him is a stupid delusion. If God does not exist, what a waste of time, energy and money when we invest in His service. If God does not exist let's follow the-preacher-turned-atheist Dan Barker and 'deconvert'. But if God does exist then atheism is the delusion, and Barker's 'deconversion' means he has thrown out the gold with the dross.

Where is Aunt Matilda when you need her?

## ENDNOTES

1. Barker, Dan. *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists*. Ulysses Press, Berkeley, CA. 2008. Foreword by Richard Dawkins, p x
2. Ibid, p 67
3. Ibid, p.67
4. For a presentation of Dawkin's own view on "Irreducible Complexity" see chapter 4 "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God" in *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press, 2006.
5. Lennox, John. C. *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* Lion Hudson, Oxford, 2009. p 180
6. Ibid, p 181
7. A good version of it is told by Lennox in *God's Undertaker, Op.cit.* p 41
8. Hawking, Stephen & Mlodinow, Leonard, *The Grand Design*. Bantam Press. London, 2010. p 164
9. Polkinghorne, Sir John, *One World*, SPCK, London, 1986, p 80
10. Barker, Dan. *Op. cit.* p. 108
11. Lennox, John. C. *Gunning For God: Why The New Atheists Are Missing The Target*. Lion, Oxford, 2011. p 36
12. Barker, Dan. *Op. cit.* p 101
13. Quoted by Lennox in *Gunning For God, Op. cit.* p 47
14. Ibid, p 56
15. Calvin, Melvin. *Chemical Evolution*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969, p 258
16. Quoted by Lennox in *God's Undertaker, Op. cit.* p 21
17. Needham, Joseph. *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1969, p 327
18. Ibid, p 327
19. Klaaren, Eugene, M. *Religious Origins of Modern Science: Belief in Creation in Seventeenth-Century Thought*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977. p 15
20. Cox. "The Christian in a World of Technology," in *Science and Religion: New Perspectives on the Dialogue*. P 264 quoted in *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* by authors Pearcey, Nancy & Thaxton, Charles. Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1994. p 36
21. Brooke, John Hedley. *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991. p 88
22. For the reader interested in further study on the history of how modern science is rooted in the Christian worldview I recommend *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and natural Philosophy* (mentioned in footnote 19) and chapter 1 of *God's Undertaker* (mentioned in footnote 5).