

Dawkins Preaches To The Deluded Against The Divine

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LIKE revivalists from an alternative universe, 2,500 hardcore believers in the absence of religion packed into the Global Atheists Convention in Melbourne last weekend to give a hero's welcome to the high priest of belief in unbelief, Richard Dawkins.

The bestselling author of *The God Delusion* was similarly fawned over by the Australian media, which uncritically lapped up everything he said.

This was even after (or perhaps because) he referred to the Pope as a Nazi, which managed to combine defamation of the pontiff with implicit Holocaust denial.

By comparison, Family First senator Steve Fielding may feel he got off lightly when Dawkins described him merely as more stupid than an earthworm.

'The fact is, however, the shine has come off Dawkins'

For someone who has made a career out of telling everyone how much more tolerant the world would be if only religion were obliterated from the human psyche, Dawkins manages to appear remarkably intolerant towards anyone who disagrees with him.

The fact is, however, the shine has come off Dawkins. For sure, he remains a superstar for the legions who loathe religion. But, nevertheless, a strong feeling has developed in less credulous quarters that he has gone too far.

While he was writing about the "selfish gene" and the "blind watchmaker", he received a respectful reception even from those who might have disagreed with him but were nevertheless impressed by the imaginative brio and dazzling fluency of his argument. But then he left biology behind and became the self-appointed universal crusader against God. Flying the flag of Darwinism, he went to war against religion on the grounds that any belief that did not follow the rules of scientific inquiry was *prima facie* evidence of imbecility or insanity.

He became the apostle of scientism, the ideology that says everything in the

universe has a materialist explanation and must answer to the rules of empirical scientific evidence; to believe anything else is irrational.

A second's thought tells one this is absurd. Love, law and philosophy are not scientific yet they are not irrational. So it is scientism that seems to be irrational.

As for Dawkins's claim that religion is responsible for the ills of the world, this is demonstrably a wild distortion. Some of the worst horrors in human history — the French revolutionary terror, Nazism, communism — have been atheist creeds. And although terrible things indeed have been done in the name of religion, the fact remains that Christianity and the Hebrew Bible form the foundation stone of Western civilisation and its great cause of human equality and freedom.

Through such hubristic overreach, Dawkins has opened himself up to attack from quarters that, unlike the theologians he routinely knocks around the park, he cannot so easily disdain.

These have itemised his many howlers

Books taking his arguments apart on his own purported ground of scientific reason have been published by a growing number of eminent scientists and philosophers, including mathematicians David Berlinski and John Lennox, biochemist Alister McGrath, geneticist Francis Collins, and philosopher and recanting atheist Anthony Flew.

These have itemised his many howlers, sloppy assertions, internal contradictions, unscientific reasoning and illogicality. His responses to these stellar intellects are fascinating. He claims they cannot possibly have meant what they wrote, or they are senile, or their scientific credentials are somehow obviated by the fact they are practising Christians.

Indeed, he seems almost to believe that, since everyone who believes in God is stupid or evil and Christians are stupid and evil because they believe in God, those who oppose him must be Christian and can be treated with contempt.

I had first-hand experience of this when, addressing an audience of US atheists, he accused me of "lying for Jesus" by misquoting him. This came as something of a surprise since I am a Jew. Moreover, far from me misquoting him, which was not the case, he had in fact ascribed to me words that had been written by someone else.

This anecdote raises in turn the most intriguing question of all about Dawkins.

Just why is he so angry and why does he hate religion so much? After all, as many religious scientists can attest, science and religion are — contrary to his claim — not incompatible at all.

A clue lies in his insistence that a principal reason for believing that there could be no intelligence behind the origin of life is that the alternative — God — is unthinkable. This terror of such an alternative was summed up by a similarly minded geneticist as the fear that pursuing such thinking to its logical ends might allow “the divine foot in the door”.

Such concern is telling because it suggests a lack of confidence by the Dawkins camp in its own position and a corresponding fear of rigorous thinking.

To stamp out the terrifying possibility of even a divine toe peeping over the threshold, all opposition has to be shut down. And so the great paradox is that the arch-hater of religious intolerance himself behaves with the zeal of a religious fundamentalist and, despite excoriating religion for stifling debate, does this in spades.

‘The Savonarola of scientism and an intolerant closer of minds’

An illuminating example was provided by an atheists summer camp for children last year in Britain that Dawkins backed. The children who took part were to be taught to be critical thinkers, yet all discussion of religion was ruthlessly excluded.

Far from opening young minds, this was shutting them in the ostensible cause of reason.

Such indoctrination is a hallmark of the fundamentalist who knows he is not just right but righteous. So all who oppose him are by definition not just wrong but evil. Which is why alternative views must be howled down or suppressed.

This is, of course, the characteristic of all totalitarian regimes, including religious inquisitions. Which is why Dawkins can lay claim to being not the most enlightened thinker on the planet, as his acolytes regard him, but instead the Savonarola of scientism and an intolerant closer of minds.

Melanie Phillips’s new book, The World Turned Upside Down: The Global Battle over God, Truth and Power, will be published by Encounter, New York, on April 20.