

## The Dad Confusion

Kris King – October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/10/the-dad-confusion/>

Before you get the wrong idea I should probably point out that the title of this post in no way refers to doubts that anyone may have in regards to my parentage (since there aren't any); neither does it refer to anyone else's, so there is no need to go calling "The Jeremy Kyle Show" asking for a DNA test, lie detector results, or a quick go on their "loud obnoxious dickhead" manufacturing plant. The title is, in fact, nothing more than yet another in a continuing series of weak puns, this time conjured up to reference Richard Dawkins' book, "The God Delusion", and the relationship my father, who this week celebrates his 65th birthday, has with it. Given that, this post is therefore mostly aimed at, and dedicated to, my dad, a man who is probably far from alone in wishing that Dawkins' most controversial work had, like his latest book, featured a larger number of illustrations and a smaller number of large words.

It was in late 2006 that my dad and I first talked about "The God Delusion", and its author, in a phone conversation that, as is so often the case, descends into the murky subjects of either religion or politics. He was talking about how "this guy's gonna get himself killed" because of some of the things he had been saying about the various faiths and, for some reason which is still unknown to me, I remember my mind going completely blank. I knew well who Richard Dawkins was, and I was all too aware of the book, yet my brain had momentarily decided to fuck off to the pub for a while and it had taken all of the useful knowledge with it. "Who's this now?" I asked. "Richard Dawkins", he replied, and it still didn't register. It wasn't until our subsequent conversation a week or two later that I was able to say, "Oh **that** Richard Dawkins!" While I still don't understand why I had initially drawn a mental blank, I have since had stern words with my brain about how it should always take me with it on any future jaunts to the local cerebral tavern.

Naturally, when my birthday rolled around in early 2007, it was with great delight that I opened the present from my dad to find a shiny new, hardback copy of "The God Delusion" peering out at me from underneath the equally shiny paper. Inside the front cover he had written, as he usually does, "To Kris, from Dad & Liz", only this time he had included his favourite line from what he had read of the book so far; "Being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about". Having myself now read through it a number of times, I have to say that I struggle to find a line I favour more – it neatly encapsulates much of my (and my dad's) attitude towards faith and how, for many hundreds of years, those of us not living under the spell of religion were often made to feel like it was something we should feel guilty about – as if we were in the wrong and that, whenever the question of faith came up, we were somehow *obligated* to prefix the answer, "I'm an atheist", with a humble "sorry" and a reluctant comma.

Although there are many areas on which we disagree, religion is the one subject where you will find my dad and I are almost always completely in-sync with one another. He has often said that there are three things he doesn't believe in; ghosts, god, and the monarchy (I reckon my dad's list used to contain five things, rather than three, and that he was forced to ditch "work-related stress" when he actually started suffering from it, and disbelief in "the idea that gay people aren't scary or potentially threatening" had to go pretty much the instant his eldest, smartest, and arguably handsomest, atheist-blogging child announced that he liked guys as well as girls). Since these are disbeliefs that my dad and I share, we have a significantly reduced scope for disagreement and conversations about the metaphysical, therefore, would usually involve telling one another about some ghastly religion-related thing we've read or heard about, followed by a few minutes of mild ranting (often involving the all-too casual use of words like "wankers" or "twats").

The only area of disagreement that has emerged at any point over the years (at least, as far as I can recall), has been as a result of my dad's experience with reading "The God Delusion". As with Dawkins' fellow horseman Christopher Hitchens' book, "God Is Not Great", my dad has said that he found himself having to read it with a dictionary close to hand, stopping every few pages to look up words that he wasn't particularly familiar with. Even when the words themselves didn't pose a

significant problem, the ideas expressed in the book sometimes did; there were a few occasions when my dad talked of how he felt that getting his head around some of them was rather like trying to push treacle uphill with a feather. "If only", he suggested, "Dawkins produced a more readable version of the book"; something that the average "idiot like me" (his words, not mine) could understand, he'd reach a far broader audience (or, as he succinctly put it, "make a shitload more money").

Now, I don't want you to get the wrong idea about my dad; none of this is meant, in any way, to suggest that he is at all unintelligent, illiterate, uneducated, or, as we say in our family, thicker than a cement and pig shit sandwich (for some reason it's also on the coat of arms). It's true that he didn't get to go to university, but then neither did all but three members of my family (including myself, and I only *just* scraped a degree out of it). It's true also that, in his youth, he joined the army at a time when it was considered the default option for anyone who failed their Woolworth's exam; and it's best if we avoid completely any discussion on what kind of lead paint drinking IQ is required for a 21 year old in 1967 to want to spend their time stationed in the middle east whilst everyone else was growing their hair long and screwing their way through an acid-induced haze. My dad may occasionally find himself lagging a little behind a world that's always moving forward, but he is by no means an idiot (he was smart enough to co-create me, after all).

I think part of the problem is that, while my dad is a keen reader, he was never really exposed to the kind of reading material that gets hurled at you when you go through higher education. The distinct learning curve you get put on as a child is further extended as you are given progressively more complex works to wrap your brain around, something you ordinarily wouldn't experience outside of academia (that is unless you take it upon yourself to always keep pushing your reading skills once you leave school). Most people, my dad included, will usually find a "level" of reading they are comfortable with and stick with it – if they come across anything more challenging, it's likely to end up unfinished and gathering dust; conversely, books that don't stretch your mind too much are likely to be well read, and often re-read. This explains why Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History Of Time" may have sold millions but no-one can describe its contents to you, whereas Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" could be fully explained on a fag packet by anyone in possession of a biro.

I'm not suggesting that I'm somehow better for having gone through university and advanced my reading skills to the point where "A Brief History Of Time" becomes a casual, straightforward read, because it isn't; it's bloody hard to get through, and nearly fucking impossible to comprehend for anyone who isn't Professor Brian Cox. All I'm saying is that perhaps the only difference between myself and my dad when it comes to reading something like "The God Delusion" is that I was *forced* to take that challenge by virtue of having gone through further education. I had to forge the necessary discipline that would allow me to understand more complex ideas by, in a roundabout sort of way, making sure I had a dictionary to hand so that I could look up words I wasn't particularly familiar with. This is what the whole process of learning is all about, and it's the root of probably the only disagreement my dad and I have when it comes to things like this.

To me, you shouldn't have to have a "simplified" version of Dawkins' book, or any other for that matter. Education is about raising people up, not dumbing materials down. If you don't understand something, you *should* have to go and look it up, either in a dictionary, or in an encyclopaedia, or online. When you choose to condescend down to someone's current level of understanding, rather than advancing it, you begin a process of intellectual retardation; you extinguish the fires of curiosity by replacing a desire to know how something works with a childish, fluffy pseudo-answer that gives them the illusion of understanding while imparting no real information whatsoever. If this sounds vaguely familiar to some of you, it should, because this is essentially what religion does; rather than giving you an actual answer that enhances your knowledge of the world around you, it gives you a box of nothing with "Answer" written on it instead. No one ever said learning was easy ... it's understandable why so many people are content to simply not bother.

And, again, I'm not trying to imply that my dad is some kind of educational retard who'd rather play "Who can eat the most mud?" than dissect and debate the works of Noam Chomsky (who, incidentally, really fucking **does** need to learn to write something readable). It's more that my dad, and many many others, were never really taught or encouraged by the education system to get into the habit of always pushing yourself further. For most of us, it was always, "read this, memorise it, write it back out again in your exams"; there was never sufficient emphasis on getting children to explore knowledge, to go to the library, to adventure down other avenues of enquiry and discover something new. Once you get into that mindset, it's incredibly hard to break out, either because it's too much effort or because you've got more important things to worry about – in my dad's case it

was earning a living and looking after two screaming children who stomp sugar into the carpet for a laugh.

This is why, in a perverse reversal of roles, I've so often felt the urge to help push my dad in certain intellectual directions; if he ever showed interest in some area that I was knowledgeable about, I would do my best to explain and expand on what he knew, hopefully in such a way that he could relate to it without feeling like he was being patronised by his poncey-arsed, university-bothering, degree-educated son, or wondering whether I was two derisory snorts away from saying, "Damn it all, father, you are such an ignorant oaf, sometimes!" While I still maintain that one should never be compelled to water down ideas such that they can be understood by those who don't constantly bury themselves in dense theological tomes that could be usefully employed to act as substitutes for breeze-blocks, I do concede that there is perhaps some considerable merit to the notion of *presenting* them in a way that makes them more palatable to the average reader.

It is, I feel, more than possible to write in such way that someone can easily get back on that upward learning curve without having to compress it to the point of total flat-line. It is perfectly conceivable that one could write a book that deals with the ideas expressed in works like "The God Delusion" that is neither mustily-scented, tweed-wearing Oxford professor theology, nor Sky Sports, pissed pub atheism (although I should point out that when I use words like "musty" or "tweedy", I'm not explicitly referring to Richard Dawkins; I'm sure he smells lovely, and I know I've seen a video of him wearing a Hawaiian shirt). I'm fairly confident that there is a way to write a book about heavy subjects like religion without dumbing down, condescending, or generally making the reader feel like a bit of a tit. If that is the case, then maybe that's what I should be doing?

I have often thought about writing a book or two, but I've never really been able to bring together enough of the many disparate ideas I've had in order to produce anything more coherent or substantial than a weekly 2,500 word rant. More importantly, I could never come to a firm decision as to who I would be writing it *for*; at whom would I be aiming this epic work? Since I started this blog I have naturally fantasised about getting an out-of-the-blue letter from some enormous publisher or other asking, "Could you do that blog thing of yours for a few hundred pages?" and offering me a massive advance as an incentive. While the buzz-killing realist in me knows deep down that that's not going to happen, it doesn't stop me seeing the idea as being a very attractive one, despite the fact that the rising tide of secularism means I'd be up against every atheist with a half-decent idea, a copy of WordPress, and the ability to create PDF files.

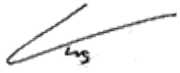
This desire has never gone away, if anything it's gotten stronger, and I'm wondering whether it's because I've come to the realisation over the past few months that both the idea for a book, and the potential target audience for it, have been staring me in the face for years. As well as being a keen reader, my dad has, like me, been something of a writer for as long as I can remember. When we were kids, he wrote many bedtime stories for my sister and I; some were about shady smugglers and buried treasure, others tell of a demented teddy bear called Boffles who comes alive with all the other toys when children are out of the room (this was a good 15 years before anyone had even thought of Woody and Buzz Lightyear). Since Peter Jackson unleashed his epic "Lord Of The Rings" movie trilogy, my dad and I have been collaborating, on and off, on a exposé, fan-fiction parody of Tolkien's classic work in which we reveal that the professor got the idea from ancient, historical figures (and events) that would have made hugely inappropriate reading material for almost everyone.

While we will, some day, get around to finishing our Tolkien epic (especially if I have anything to do with it), I do find myself thinking whether I have been writing all these blog posts as some kind of subconscious preparation for a book on religion aimed squarely at my dad. "Rant In A-Minor: Why Religion Needs To Shut Up And Bugger Off" (obviously that's just a working title) would be specifically intended to introduce ideas like Pascal's Wager (and other logical fallacies), the problem of evil, and why children should be taught all about The Hitch-Slap from their first day in kindergarten, to the kind of person who drives a truck for living, but is able to do so without needing to keep a copy of The Sun on the dashboard, silhouettes of naked women on the mud-flaps, or have his arse hanging out of the window like a gibbon with an HGV licence.

If I do ever decide to write a few hundred rambling, ranting pages on religion into a book of some kind (and, bizarrely, a few mad visitors to this blog have seriously suggested it), then it makes perfect sense that I should be writing it for my dad; after all, he used to write for me (and my sister) and it's surely, therefore, only right that I should one day return the favour? And, seeing as how it's his birthday, what better present could I give than to dedicate to him a hypothetical book that I may

or may not write at some point in the future? Yes, okay, a Morgan Aero 8 would be a better present, but I don't have £70,000. And, yes, tickets to the Speedway Grand Prix would be a better present, but I can't afford that either! Yes, alright, a DVD of Ronnie Barker's greatest "raised eyebrow" moments would be better, why don't you shut up and let me figure it out? Whose dad is he anyway, mine or yours? Yeah, *exactly!*

Happy birthday, dad ... I'll try and have the book ready for next weekend 😊

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LMS' or similar, written in a cursive style.