

'This' isn't wonderful

by Steve Kryger, 19 March 2010

One of the more staggering comments made by Richard Dawkins during the recent Q&A debate on ABC1 was in response to the question "Do you wish for or hope for an afterlife?". Of all the possible atheist responses Dawkins could have chosen, he said:

"When you say - is this it? How much more do you want? This is wonderful!"

His naivety was staggering. As my friend commented, "Take him to the Congo and see how that statement goes down." About 1.4 billion people in the world live on less than US \$1.25 a day. Most of the world will go to bed hungry tonight. More children, women and men are held in slavery right now than over the course of the entire trans-Atlantic slave trade. One in 5 women is a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime. More than 2 million children are exploited in the global sex trade. And that's not to mention the struggles in our own nation with mental illness, loneliness, homelessness, domestic violence, cyber-bullying, financial insecurities - insert your own struggles here. Wonderful? Only a wealthy Westerner would consider that 'this' existence is wonderful.

When I made mention of this reality-check on Twitter, an atheist responded:

"They are also not saying 'pass me a bible'."

I assumed that the 'they' he was alluding to, were the world's poor, oppressed and exploited. I also assumed that his reference to the Bible was Christian missionaries and aid organisations who assist the world's poor, and share with them the Bible's news that salvation and hope are found only in Jesus.

It's a common argument - if you want to help the world's poor, go right ahead, but don't you dare tell the recipients why you are helping them in the first place.

This argument is flawed on several levels. First of all, it's presumptuous, even rude, to tell people who are giving of themselves, their time and their money for those in need, precisely how they should be doing that and on what conditions their assistance should be provided. Back-seat driving from the comforts of middle-class suburbia carries little weight. Secondly, the opportunities to do good whilst sharing an explanation of your motivating worldview are available to people of all faiths (or people of no faith, as atheists assure me they are). If atheists want to start their own aid organisations to help the world's poor and at the same time tell them that there is no God, they are more than welcome.

Christians can never separate the message of the Bible from our desire to help those in need. This is because of our Bible-inspired understanding that as humans we are not (as we in the West are more inclined to consider) simply physical entities who live each day with the sole purpose of ensuring that we are breathing again tomorrow. Whilst our basic material needs are undeniably vital, we are relational beings with emotional and spiritual needs that are just as important for a life that extends beyond mere existence. We need salvation, not just from material poverty, but spiritual poverty as well. As Christians, we

desire to care for the whole person, and not single out one aspect of our humanity to preserve. And it is the combined physical and spiritual assistance, delivered by Christians, that transforms communities.

Matthew Parris is an atheist, and a journalist who came to this very conclusion. His observations of Christian aid organisations in Africa led him to be "...embarrassed [by] my growing belief that there is no God". In fact, he became "convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts". The impact of Christianity was undeniable, and as Parris explained:

"In Africa, Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good."

Matthew concluded with a challenge to those who think that aid should only be delivered in material form:

"Those who want Africa to walk tall amid 21st-century global competition must not kid themselves that providing the material means or even the knowhow that accompanies what we call development will make the change. A whole belief system must be supplanted".

Dr Catherine Hamlin AC is a hero in the sense that the word used to have, before Australian cricketers started to receive this title. In 1959 she left Australia with her husband Reg to care for Ethiopian women with fistula - a condition that is considered 'a fate worse than death'. For years she has toiled to alleviate the suffering of women with this condition that has often left them alienated from their families, without a future and without hope.

How did it all start? When Dr Hamlin was 17 she met Jesus, committed her life to him, and determined to do something for him. She has been doing something for Jesus for many years, and his help has not gone unnoticed:

"I feel that God is behind this work. I know that from my own experience, I've prayed for things earnestly and I've received them and I know that God is real and somebody who loves these women far more than I do."

Why Shouldn't Catherine, and Christian farmers, mechanics, sanitation engineers, missionaries, teachers and aid workers be able to share Jesus with these people - the Jesus who brought them to Africa to care for them in the first place, the Jesus who provides hope in the darkness of life, and who loves them more than any person ever could?

About the author

Steve Kryger runs *Communicate Jesus* [LINK: www.communicatejesus.com] - a consultancy to assist churches and Christian organisations with their marketing and communication.