

Born in war-torn Germany and raised in the Lutheran faith, I immigrated as a young woman to marry an American who, it happened, was Methodist. In California we belonged to a church group that studied the writings of Paul Tillich and the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the former a theologian whose vehement opposition to racism made him persona non grata in Nazi Germany, forcing him into U.S. exile; the latter a pastor and member of the Resistance who was murdered by the Nazis 23 days before the Reich collapsed. Our group offered nuanced readings of the Bible, allowing that Jesus may be considered God's son insofar as we are all God's children.

Back then German journalist Werner Keller's *The Bible as Story* introduced archeological findings that documented a history of the Jews as they lived long ago in the Middle East, sometimes conquering, sometimes conquered and dragged into slavery. Another of his books, out-of-print *Diaspora*, presented an incisive reading of European and Eastern Jewry through the ages, including moving accounts of pogrom-persecutions of Jews, from Germany to Russia. The volume also documented the rich Jewish contribution to German science, philosophy, music, and the arts. It added an impressive list of Nobel-Prize-winning German Jews. All the same I agonized over American military backing of Jewish refugees cum settlers who appropriated for themselves the homes and fields of indigenous Palestinians, rounding up and confining the natives into camps where they languish to this day, seething against their Israeli oppressors and American enablers.

Along comes Richard Dawkins, a well-known scientist and author who likes to explain himself within a trendy scientific agenda, as in *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Selfish Gene*. His 2006 *The God Delusion* has become an international bestseller. He illustrates his views with a quote from Gore Vidal:

“The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal—God is the Omnipotent Father—hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates.”

I have known women who claim that we females are well off and male oppression is a myth, but to read the accounts of women who protested and sought to rectify the injustices against them might give us pause. *Women Without Superstition* would be a good start; its 650 pages contain writings from Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” to Taslima Nasrin's 1996 “On Islamic Fundamentalism,” the latter a Bengali physician forced into hiding abroad after a holy man issued a fatwa (death decree) on her for daring to write about ghastly, widespread, incestuous abuses of her country's women and girls. In between we hear of the horrors of the Inquisition; the torture and burning of women as witches; the holding of slaves by Puritan pastors in 18th-century New England; the wrath of American clergy over the 1848 Seneca Falls convention that called for suffrage and women's rights; papal outrage at women speaking in public within the Female Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. When Margaret Sanger wrote about syphilis and, in 1914, began to provide inexpensive, safe birth control to poor women desperate to escape serial pregnancies, she was repeatedly jailed under an obscenity law. It was male physicians—the American Medical Association—who opposed her.

“Throughout this protracted, disgraceful assault on American womanhood, the clergy baptized each new insult and set of injustices in the name of the Christian religion,” writes Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who organized Seneca. They “condemned any public role for women, quoting Scripture and Divine Will.” Clerical attack on women’s reproductive rights continues today via Catholic bishops lobbying Congress against family planning and reproductive health care.

The New Testament does not fare well in *The God Delusion*. Reputable biblical scholars do not regard the New Testament as “a reliable record of what actually happened” in long-ago history, states the author. “The only difference between ‘*The Da Vinci Code*’ and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while ‘*The Da Vinci Code*’ is modern fiction.” On the matter of today’s political climate as against that of the Founders, Mr. Dawkins cites from a Thomas Jefferson letter to David Carr: “Question with boldness even the existence of a God.”

Regrettably, Mr. Dawkins’ own boldness often takes the form of polemic. He has been criticized by British scholar and literary critic Terry Eagleton in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. While acknowledging that Dawkins has a point when he addresses religious violence, he points out that atheism can be just as cruel, as in Maoist China and Stalinist Russia. British Oxford don Alister McGrath together with spouse Joanna, a scholar in the psychology of religion, in *The Dawkins Delusion?* provide a critique of what they term “atheist fundamentalism,” saying he misjudges the possibilities for dialogue between religion and science.

My thought is, while humans may be “of God,” neither individuals nor groups of people ought to proclaim themselves “the chosen.” God, whatever s/he may be, seems equally inattentive to all.