

**Excerpt from *The God Delusion*
by Richard Dawkins**

CHILDHOOD ABUSE AND RELIGION

The fear of hell-fire can be very real, even among otherwise rational people. After my television documentary on religion, among the many letters I received was this, from an obviously bright and honest woman:

I went to a catholic school from the age of five, and was indoctrinated by nuns who wielded strap, sticks and canes. During my teens I read Darwin, and what he said about evolution made such a lot of sense to the logical part of my mind. However, I've gone through life suffering much conflict and a deep down fear of hell fire which gets triggered quite frequently. I've had some psycho therapy which has enabled me to work through some of my earlier problems but can't seem to overcome this deep fear.

So the reason I am writing to you is would you send me please the name and address of the therapist you interviewed on this week's programme who deals with this particular fear.

I was moved by her letter, and (suppressing a momentary and ignoble regret that there is no hell for those nuns to go to) replied that she should trust in her reason as a great gift which she – unlike less fortunate people – obviously possessed. I suggested that the extreme horribleness of hell, as portrayed by priests and nuns, is inflated to compensate for its implausibility. If hell were plausible, it would only have to be moderately unpleasant in order to deter. Given that it is so unlikely to be true, it has to be advertised as very very scary indeed, to balance its implausibility and retain some deterrence value. I also put her in touch with the therapist she mentioned, **Jill Mytton**, a delightful and deeply sincere woman whom I had interviewed on camera. Jill had herself been raised in a more than unusually odious sect called the **Exclusive Brethren**: so unpleasant that there is even a website, **www.peebs.net**, entirely devoted to caring for those who have escaped from it.

Jill Mytton herself had been brought up to be terrified of hell, had escaped from Christianity as an adult, and now counsels and helps others similarly traumatised in childhood: 'If I think back to my childhood, it's one dominated by fear. And it was the fear of disapproval while in the present, but also of eternal damnation. And for a child, images of hell-fire and gnashing of teeth are actually very real. They are not metaphorical at all.' I then asked her to spell out what she had actually been told about hell, as a child, and her eventual reply was as moving as her expressive during the long hesitation before she answered: 'It's strange, isn't it? After all this time it still has the power to ... affect me ... when you ... when you ask me that question. Hell is a fearful place. It's complete rejection by God. It's complete judgement. There is real fire, there is real torment, real torture and it goes on forever so there is no respite from it.'

She went on to tell me of the support group she runs for escapees from a childhood similar to her own, and she dwelt on how difficult it is for many of them to leave: 'The process of leaving is extraordinarily difficult. Ah, you are leaving behind a whole social network, a whole system that you've practically been brought up in, you are leaving behind a belief-system that you have held for years. Very often you leave families and friends ... You don't really exist any more for them.'

Bold added