



VINTAGE

THE DOG ALLUSION

MARTIN ROWSON

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About the Book

'As with dogs, so with gods - by and large, you should blame the owners.'

A particular trait, common to all human civilisations, is the worship of non-human entities with followings of devotees who claim that their reverence can transport them to transcendental heights of complete and unfettered love.

Do we mean God? No - we mean Dog. Dogs and other pets we've been keeping and loving since we began walking on two feet. But why do we love God - and pets - so much when their capriciousness sometimes suggests that they don't love us back?

In this wise, witty and highly topical book, celebrated cartoonist and novelist Martin Rowson argues that, rationally, the whole enterprise of religion is a monumental and faintly ridiculous waste of time and money. But then again, so is pet-keeping.

About the Author

Martin Rowson is an award-winning political cartoonist whose work appears regularly in the *Guardian*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Scotsman*, the *Spectator*, the *Morning Star*, *Tribune*, *Index on Censorship* and *The New Humanist*. His previous publications include comic-book adaptations of *The Waste Land* and *Tristram Shandy*, and with Cape and Vintage a novel, *Snatches*, and a memoir, *Stuff. Fuck: The Human Odyssey* was published by Cape in October 2008. Martin Rowson is a former vice-president of the Zoological Society of London, a trustee of the Powell-Cotton Natural History Museum and an honorary associate of the National Secular Society. He lives with his wife and their two teenage children in south-east London.

Also by Martin Rowson

Scenes from the Lives of the Great Socialists

Lower than Vermin: An Anatomy of Thatcher's Britain

The Waste Land

The Nodland Express (with Anna Clarke)

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

The Sweet Smell of Psychosis (with Will Self)

Imperial Exits (with Julius Cicatrix)

Purple Homicide (with John Sweeney)

Mugshots

Snatches

Stuff

Fuck: The Human Odyssey

For Basil, Ginger and Pansy,
and in loving memory of Sybil, Fosco, Templeton, Snowy,
Snowy II, Mandy-moo-moo and the rest of them,
all of whom died without receiving last rites.

MARTIN ROWSON

The Dog Allusion

Pets, Gods and How to be Human

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

What follows is a considerably expanded version of a talk I originally gave on 15 March 2007 at a meeting of the Lewisham Humanist Group in an upper room at The Goose public house in Catford, South-East London. It's a pretty rough pub, but upstairs sat a small group of nice, kind, rather elderly people, numbering only slightly more than those who attended Jesus Christ's Last Supper.

The talk went down pretty well, even though I spoke for over an hour, and I suspect that they were expecting something more in line with my day job as a political cartoonist. The next day I emailed my script to my agent David Miller, a theology graduate with whom I've discussed religion and atheism at length since he first took me on in the summer of 2004. Despite his training, some of it at the hands of the former Dean of Trinity - the Very Reverend John Bowker - who once defined religions in the contemporary world as 'licenced insanities', Miller and I are pretty much of one mind as far as God is concerned. Given the current trend for books on the subject, he therefore sent the script to Dan Franklin at Jonathan Cape. Dan's already published two other books of mine, and he passed the script on to his colleagues at Vintage.

That, in short, is the genesis of what you now have in your hands.

A month or so after Vintage had bought the idea, I was whoring one of those previous books at a literary festival, this being the service which is perfect freedom that all

modern authors now enjoy or endure. Right at the end of the session someone asked what I was going to do next, so I answered that I was writing my God book, because everybody now had to write a God book. Mine, however, was at least in part taking a whack at Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens as well as God. But as I was trying to articulate this, being only human I got slightly tongue-tied and Dawkins and Hitchens came out as 'Hawkins and Ditchens'.

I liked that. The names suggested to me a firm of slightly old-fashioned gentlemen's outfitters in somewhere like Ludlow, working away in their low-ceilinged, oak-panelled shop, with Hawkins, the more serious and senior of the partners, rolling out the yards and yards of sober, serious, tough and impermeable cloth. And Ditchens, rather shakily, would then cut the cloth to suit whatever his mood happened to be that day.

That said, as there now seems to be a priesthood of all unbelievers, and if a geneticist and a journalist can encroach territory outside their specific areas of expertise and have their say about religion, then it's high time the satirists and cartoonists got in on the act too.

However, apart from the title, this book isn't a satire, although I hope you'll find parts of it funny. Nor is it a work of scholarship, because I'm no scholar. Nor am I a geneticist, a scientist, theologian, philosopher or anything else that might qualify me to add my bit to the ongoing and largely bogus debate between religion and atheism. I am, however, human like the rest of us, and the human element is something which has, so far, been conspicuously missing from the volleys fired by both sides.

Although this isn't a work of scholarship (there's no index, for a start), it is the result of me absorbing the thoughts and ideas of many other people, as you'll probably notice, although I don't think this particular synthesis of those ideas has been presented in quite this way before. If

it has, I can only apologise and make an insincere promise to widen my reading. The book's also meant to be playful, rude, sweepingly generalising, discursive and often digressive, as well as serious. This is an approach which I think fits the subject perfectly.

Finally, while not wishing further to try your patience before the main attraction, I'd like to thank the following people: Denis Cobell and everyone at the Lewisham Humanist Group for their hospitality and patience; David Miller and Hannah Westland at Rogers, Coleridge and White; my editors Ros Porter and Frances MacMillan at Vintage and everyone else at Random House who helped in the production of this book; Francis Wheen; Rosemary and James Furber; Malcolm Guite; the late Dr Robert Buttimore; Neil and Martin Simpson; Posy Simmonds; Laurie Taylor; Caspar Melville of *New Humanist* and Chris McLaughlin of *Tribune*, in whose pages some of the ideas in this book first appeared; my wife Anna Clarke and our children Fred and Rose Rowson; Rory Hodgson; and finally, obviously, my pets, who made no contribution to it whatsoever, beyond the central role I describe for them in the main body of the text.

There isn't an index, and there isn't a bibliography either. However, it seems to be obligatory in other books like this to burden the reader with further reading, so I'll recommend the following books which are germane in part to parts of my argument, and also worth reading in their own right when you get bored with this one. They are: *In the Company of Animals* by James Serpell; *The Last Revolution: 1688 and the Creation of the Modern World*, by Patrick Dillon; *A Revolutionary Rogue: Henry Marten and the English Republic* by Sarah Barber; *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* by Ruth Scurr; *Slaughterhouse 5* by Kurt Vonnegut Jnr (if only for the reference to Kilgor Trout's science fiction story about the crucifixion); and *My Last Breath* by Luis Buñuel. I also

strongly recommend that you watch the first *Alien* film, which ably demonstrates the lengths we'll go to on behalf of our pets when Ripley returns to the mother ship even though it's about to explode, to save Jones, the ship's cat.

In the end, I found no room in the book to include a story from *My Last Breath*, which shows how the latest row between religion and secularism is nothing new. It's about the anticlerical newspaper one of the local gentry owned when Buñuel was a child in rural Spain in the 1900s, which once described how four worker comrades were walking down the street when they saw a priest coming in the other direction. The report concluded thus: 'Faced with this overwhelming provocation, they beat him to within an inch of his life.'

Pax vobiscum.

Martin Rowson, Lewisham, Hallowe'en 2007

empathy *em 'pe-thi*, *n.* the power of entering into another's personality and imaginatively experiencing his experiences: the power of entering into the feeling or spirit of something and so appreciating it fully.

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary

For what man in the natural state or course of thinking, did ever conceive it in his power to reduce the notions of all mankind exactly to the same length, and breadth, and height as his own?

Jonathan Swift, from 'A Digression on Madness'
in *A Tale of a Tub*, 1704

Never obey orders, including this one.

Dr K. E. K. Rowson, MD, PhD, MRCS, LRCP, MB,
B.Chir., Dip.Bact. and MRCPATH, mid 1970s.

There is a particular human activity or trait with which I think we're all familiar. It is common to all human societies, and its ubiquity and universality might even lead us to assume that its very existence helps define what we actually mean by the term 'human'. It entails accounting to non- or, if you prefer, extra-human beings or entities a central and possibly pivotal role in human affairs. It also requires from us levels of commitment, attention, expenditure and devotion out of all proportion to the apparent benefits paid back to us in return.

Throughout History it has impelled us to channel precious resources, perhaps better directed towards our own well-being, into husbanding food, building massive edifices, creating entire industries as well as whole classes or castes of highly trained people whose sole function is to service and, indeed, venerate and propitiate this non- or extra-human phenomenon.

With depressing frequency this veneration and propitiation has led to unparalleled levels of callousness or cruelty, not least towards other people. And yet, not just frequently but usually, its subscribers claim that their veneration is actively good for them, and will therefore be good for everyone else as well. They argue that, if only the unconvinced would follow the example of their veneration, they too would become physically, mentally, morally and, dare I say it, spiritually healthier. And it follows from that that they'll be better people as a consequence. Moreover, the devotees claim that their devotions are capable of transporting them to what can only be described as transcendental heights of complete, unquestioning and unfettered love. This is despite the fact that we are in no more of a position today than we've ever been to judge

whether or not any of the attention or expenditure or veneration or propitiation or, indeed, love is reciprocated in any way whatsoever.

Objectively - rationally - the whole enterprise is a monumental and more than faintly ridiculous waste of time, money and energy. Rationally, we should abandon these practices forthwith, along with our deluded faith or trust in their efficacy, and instead concentrate our energies more profitably, sensibly, reasonably and humanely on our fellow human beings rather than continuing to make embarrassing fools of ourselves in the eyes of those wiser people who fail to share our faith.

And yet we persist. Worse, we become shrill and sometimes irrationally violent in insisting not only on our right to persist, but on the absolute rectitude in doing so, even in the face of all reason and common sense.

Just in case you're wondering, I'm talking here about the universal human trait of keeping pets.

There is a wealth of evidence to show that every human society has kept pets, those companion animals who coexist with humans for reasons beyond the rationally explicable purposes of protection, transportation, improved pastoral practices, vermin control or food. And we keep them, despite their rapacious appetites, their capriciousness, fickleness, cynical greed, capacity for random and uncontrolled violence and, of course, the vast amounts of uncompostable shit they produce. We do this because we love them.

Hunter-gatherers in the Amazon keep the orphans of their prey, just for company. The same imperative governs rich little old ladies on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to make them keep tiny dogs in tiny apartments and dress them up in designer clothes. Shortly before fleeing from the advancing forces of the US Army and the Afghan Northern Alliance on a motorbike, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar