

The 'New Atheists' and the God Controversy

By Dennis Gordon

Just lately it feels like open season on Christianity. This has long been the case in parts of the world liberated—or still waiting to be liberated—from communism, and the past 20 years have seen a dramatic increase in the persecution of Christians in countries or states dominated by Muslims, Hindus, and even Buddhists. But now even in the western world, in countries with a long-standing Christian tradition, attitudes to Christianity have moved from indifference to open disrespect and even ridicule.

Print and entertainment media frequently portray the Christian laity and clergy as quirky, hypocritical, lacking integrity, or otherwise flawed (the 2006 movie *Amazing Grace*, which documented William Wilberforce's 26-year-long parliamentary campaign against the British slave trade, which ended in 1807, was a stunning exception). Christianity, and religion in general, are presented as ignorant, irrelevant, or worse, dangerous, offering nothing of substance or relevance to the real world, nothing historically truthful or reliable. An incarnate God? Crucified and resurrected from the dead? Come on, who are you kidding? It follows from this general spirit of unbelief that Christianity cannot ultimately have anything meaningful to say about the significance and purpose of life, about relationships, about morality.

Symptomatic of this malaise is the 2006 book by British atheist Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, as well as books in similar vein by Dawkins's 'New Atheist' colleagues Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens



Richard Dawkins at New York City's Cooper Union to discuss his book *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* on 29 September 2010.

(among others). 'New Atheism' is a social and political movement in favour of atheism and secularism, advocating the view that 'religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticised, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises'.¹

The impact of New Atheist writers continues to be felt. Dawkins, for example, hates religion, any religion, and he leaves no stone unturned in

marshalling evidence that supports his contention that religion, including Christianity, is pathological. He has some biting judgements on certain non-Christian religions, but one gets the impression that he was using his book as an opportunity to bludgeon the faith of his own Judeo-Christian culture, the very one that, ironically, nourished the science that he regards so highly and the democratic freedom that now allows him to attack the Bible. For Dawkins,

the God concept is a virus that infects otherwise healthy minds.

Dawkins invents his own definitions of faith in order to attack and demolish them. Faith is 'blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence',² a 'process of non-thinking',³ and 'evil, precisely because it requires no justification, brooks no argument'.⁴ These are not Christian definitions, but Dawkins makes no distinction between religions. He is right to express concern about indoctrination of children (which he regards as child abuse) but his arguments

apply equally to non-religious ideologies. He is highly selective in his illustrations. His tactic is to present the 'pathological as if it were normal, the fringe as if it were the centre, crackpots as if they were mainstream', as one commentary has noted.⁵

Criticism of the Old Testament God...

If Dawkins is to be believed, the Bible is one of the two most toxic books on the planet (the other being the Quran). Further, 'The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction:

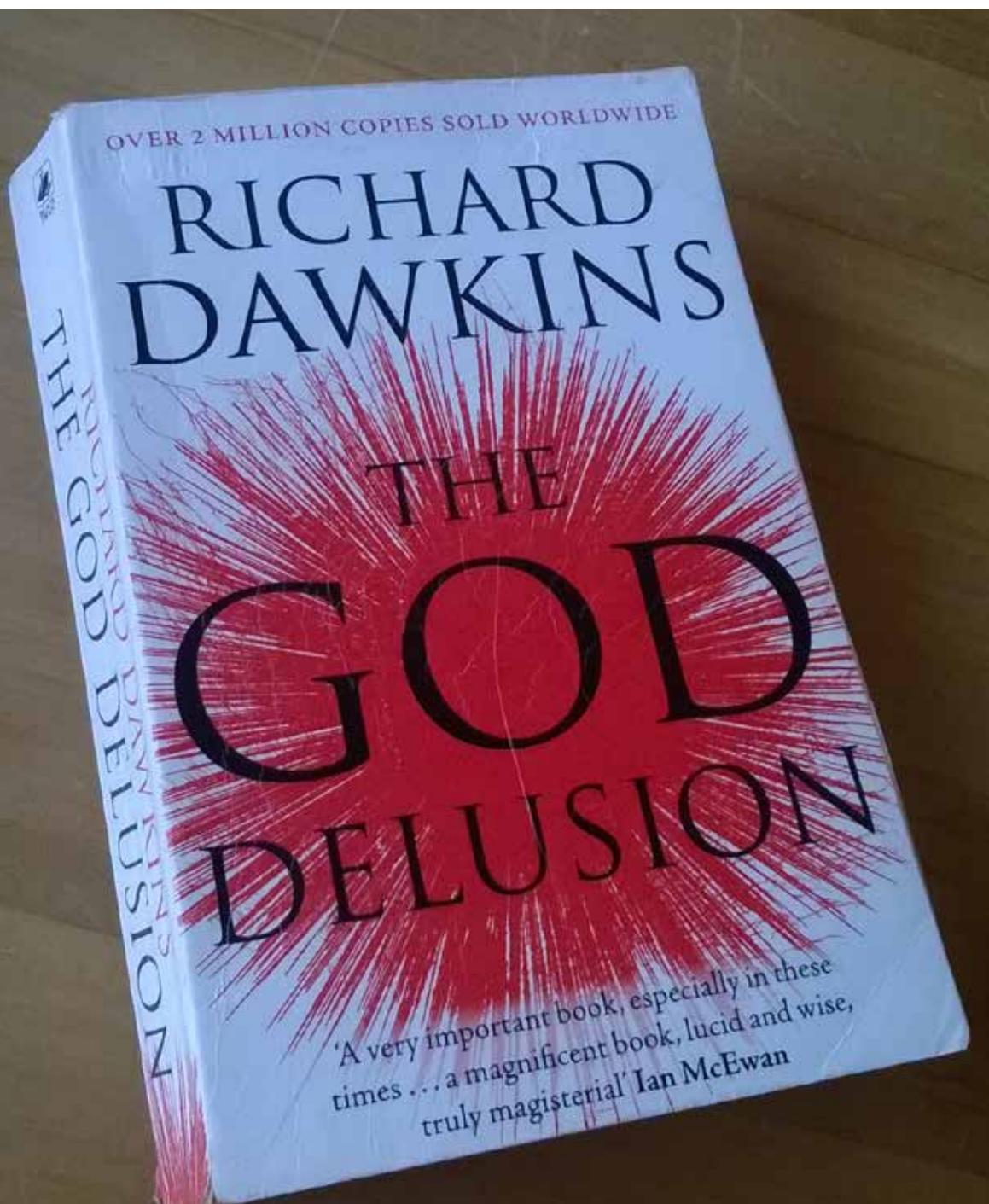
jealous and proud of it; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filocidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully'.⁶

In support, he quotes Thomas Jefferson: 'The Christian God is a being of terrific character—cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust'.⁷ Concerning a source of morality, he states that we can follow the instruction of the Ten Commandments or God as a role model, but both routes, he avers, 'encourage a system of morals which any civilised modern person, whether religious or not, would find—I can put it no more gently—obnoxious'.⁸

To support his contention, he does a potted history of the Pentateuch and Joshua (but not the Prophets and their calls for social justice), wherein he reveals his profound ignorance of the biblical books, the historical-cultural context in which they were written, and their literary brilliance. He fails to understand, in his selection of outrageous incidents from Scripture, that, far from describing God's nature, they illustrate or mirror human nature, and that in Jesus we see the true nature of God revealed.

In their book, *The Dawkins Delusion?*, scientist-theologian Alister McGrath (Professor of

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Historical Theology at Oxford University) and Joanna McGrath (Lecturer in the Psychology of Religion at the University of London) explain:

Historically, it is important to appreciate that these ancient texts arose within a people who were fighting to maintain their group or national identity in the face of onslaughts from all sides, who were making sense of their situation in relation to a God about whose nature their thinking became more and more developed in the millennium over which the material that makes up these Scriptures was being produced and...the external criterion for dealing with the interpretation of these texts is...the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.⁹

...and the New Testament Jesus

But Jesus and the New Testament do not get off lightly, either. Jesus' ethics are asserted to apply only to his Jewish in-group and Dawkins mischievously accuses Jesus of encouraging his disciples to

abandon their families in order to follow him—like some modern cult leaders. By virtue of the crucifixion, he regards the concept of atonement as 'vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent'¹⁰ and 'barking mad'.¹¹ Can Dawkins be deliberately ignorant that Jesus taught us to love even our enemies? And in this fact lies the paradox of the crucifixion, which few have explained as well as the late William Barclay:

Before Jesus came no man knew what God was like; men thought of God as king and judge, as justice and holiness, as wrath and vengeance; but they never conceived of the supreme wonder of the love of God. So in Jesus Christ God comes to men, and he says: 'I love you like that'. When we see Jesus healing the sick, feeding the hungry, being the friend of outcasts and sinners, this is God saying: 'I love you like that'... And, if Jesus had stopped before the cross, it would have meant that there was some point beyond which the love of God would not go...It means that God in Jesus Christ

says: 'You can betray me; you can hate me; you can misjudge me; you can scourge me; you can crucify me; and nothing you can do can alter my love...'

He died to show men what God is always like, not that he should threaten us into a prudential response, but that at the sight of him we should be moved and compelled to love him as he first loved us.¹²

Isn't that what 'amazing grace' is all about? It is God's love, in conjunction with the notion of justice served for humanity's appalling track record of violence, that makes the concept of substitutionary atonement comprehensible.

Dawkins finds it near impossible to concede that religion, including Christianity, has contributed anything positive to the human enterprise. This blindness in the face of abundant historical evidence and common sense leads him to make stupid and mean-spirited assertions, like: 'Sacred music and devotional paintings largely monopolised mediaeval and



Dawkins, many by his arguments

Renaissance talent',¹³ as though religion curbed creativity and that there were abundant other outlets for it. On the contrary, monastic communities, the antecedents of the first universities in Europe, evolved into places of writing, learning, and the arts, attracting some of the best and most cultivated minds and talents. It was out of devotion to God, empowered by inspiration, insight, and responsiveness to the highest ideals, that complex harmonies, melody, and musical notation were invented or perfected. One of Dawkins's devotees, Professor M.K. Jain of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at the University of Delaware, has made the equally ignorant, and insulting, statement: 'The very construct of Truth or God stifles reason, thought, inspiration, and imagination'.¹⁴ It's remarkable how some atheists can be so one-eyed while claiming to be objective scholars.

Limits of Science

Dawkins has such a high view of science that he seems unable to

accept that it may have limits or that there are questions science cannot answer. In a chapter titled 'Why there almost certainly is no God', he rejects all traditional arguments and 'proofs' from nature for the existence of God, which of course he is right to do, for God cannot be proven as though he were a mere scientific equation or something to be demonstrated by physical tools.

Jesus himself reminded us that 'God is spirit', to be 'worshipped in spirit'.¹⁵ This is made possible by the indwelling Spirit of God, who makes God known relationally,¹⁶ but how can an atheist understand or accept this? Dawkins and other atheists are bold enough to offer us a new set of Ten Commandments, but as philosopher Noam Chomsky, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has remarked:

On the ordinary problems of human life, science tells us very little, and scientists as people are surely no guide. In fact they are often the worst guide, because they often tend

to focus, laser-like, on their professional interests and know very little about the world.¹⁷

God is rejected by Dawkins as being 'very, very improbable'¹⁸ but his argument is weak. It turns along these lines: our own existence is highly improbable, but since a creator God must be even more complex to have created us, then his existence must be even more improbable. Curiously, it appears that one of the major reasons he rejects God as a Prime Mover or First Cause is because there is no way to explain where God came from—'Who designed the designer?'

'The theist's answer is deeply unsatisfying, because it leaves the existence of God unexplained.'¹⁹ For Dawkins, this is a problem. But it is hardly likely that a scientifically explicable God would be God. The 'I AM' God of the Bible claims to be the intrinsically self-existent Being that is eternal and unchanging and from which all things proceed—which is at least a philosophically logical claim concerning an astonishingly

information-rich and otherwise inexplicable universe—but this God also claims to be spiritually and relationally knowable and this is the experience of billions around the world. Dawkins is so convinced that science has completely disproved God, he cannot understand why so many scientists are religious. He is certain that atheism is the only option for the thinking person. But the fact is, as the McGraths point out, nature is ‘open to many legitimate interpretations...atheist, deist, theist, and many other ways’.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, Dawkins’s book has raised the ire of many critics, and not just religious scholars. Distinguished atheist philosopher Michael Ruse (Professor of Philosophy and Zoology at Florida State University) reported that *The God Delusion* makes him embarrassed to be an atheist.²¹ Other atheists, like Scott Atran, an anthropologist and psychology professor at the University of Michigan, have also pointed out the deficiencies in knowledge and scholarship in Dawkins’s book.²² But Dawkins has an enthusiastic following and has convinced many by his arguments, to the point where, amazingly, he is being cited as an authority on the subject of religion!²³

We may ask, ‘What are we all here for? What is the point of living?’ Rationalist Peter Medawar concedes science cannot answer these questions.²⁴ But Dawkins will have none of this. Without hesitation he asserts that we are not ‘here’ for anything, that our existence has no ultimate point or purpose, regardless of how we came to be. Likewise American astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson confidently proclaimed on the recent *Cosmos* series on television (quoting the late Carl Sagan): ‘The Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be’. But how can he possibly know? It is as much a metaphysical claim as the Judeo-Christian claim of the ‘I AM’ God.

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Dawkins seems blind to the reality of human nature. In his worldview, all religion is evil and when it is removed from the world we can all live in peace! He seems to believe that all religion necessarily leads to violence, as though religion were its root cause. (Compare Atran, who writes: ‘...if religion is primarily about what ought to be, including moral framing that convinces people to commit to others beyond the logic and evidence for advancing self-interest, then conflict is not inevitable’).²⁵

On the other hand, Dawkins naively presents atheism as benign, as though Soviet, Maoist, and Khmer Rouge purges never existed, that churches and synagogues weren’t razed, and that, throughout the atheistic communist world, children weren’t (and aren’t) indoctrinated in a worldview that subjugates the individual in favour of the state. Dawkins argues that, yes, the leaders of these purges may have been atheists, but they didn’t do evil things in the name of atheism, and asks (seriously!), ‘Why would anyone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief?’ Bizarrely,

Hitler is portrayed as having been religiously motivated, just because he claimed in several speeches (1922 and subsequently) that he was a Christian (Catholic). Ironically, although Dawkins rightly rails against mind control (citing Islamic persecution of anyone who would dare convert to another religion), in his brave new world (which clearly would be very controlling), the teaching of any religious concepts and precepts would be forbidden, science and ‘rationality’ would rule, we would all confidently face a purposeless future with equanimity, and presumably we would have no reason to go to war against one another! Now really, who is deluded?

The Christian Response

So, how should theists respond to Dawkins and the other New Atheists? Well, definitely not like the nominal Christian who wrote (to another atheist, but Dawkins quotes him): ‘Satan worshipping scum...Please die and go to hell...I hope you get a painful disease like rectal cancer and die a slow painful death, so you can meet your God,

SATAN'.²⁷ Expletives abound in the rest of this invective.

Surely grace must prevail, especially in wrestling with contrary views. I think of an interesting remark that the late Oxford University academic and lay theologian C. S. Lewis made through a fictional character in *That Hideous Strength*, the third novel of his Perelandra Trilogy. In the household of Dr Ransom is an Ulsterman, MacPhee, whose contrariness can be irritating to other members of the household (and the reader). In defence, Ransom comments: 'He is our sceptic; a very important office'.²⁸

The fact is, Dawkins scores some hits—not difficult to do when much silliness and patently unscriptural beliefs and practices exist in the collective enterprise known as Christianity. Was it wise for an Ohio family to send their 12-year-old son to school with a T-shirt reading 'Homosexuality is a sin, Islam is a lie, abortion is murder. Some issues are just black and white!'²⁹ The school told him not to wear the T-shirt and the boy's parents sued the school. Misplaced zeal, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse, power plays, sectarianism, and other expressions of human nature, plus the rejection of modern science in some parts of the evangelical world do not reflect the teachings of Jesus.

A pithy summary statement of Dawkins's book is that of Terry Eagleton, Professor of English Literature at Manchester University:

Dawkins, as one the best of liberals as well as one of the worst, has done a magnificent job over the years of speaking out against that particular strain of psychopathology known as fundamentalism, whether Texan or Taliban. He is right to repudiate the brand of mealy-mouthed liberalism which believes that one has to respect other people's silly or obnoxious ideas just because they are other people's....The book is full of vivid vignettes of

the sheer horrors of religion, fundamentalist or otherwise. Nearly 50 per cent of Americans believe that a glorious Second Coming is imminent, and some of them are doing their damndest to bring it about. But Dawkins could have told us all this without being so appallingly bitchy about those of his scientific colleagues who disagree with him, and without being so theologically illiterate. He might also have avoided being the second most frequently mentioned individual in his book—if you count God as an individual.³⁰

In the end, the God controversy is nothing new. It is as old, in fact, as the tension that existed between two brothers—Cain and Abel. Abel had a 'god-consciousness'; Cain did not. Feeling alienated from something he did not understand, Cain, the non-religious one, grew in hostility towards his brother and ended up taking his life.³¹

Perhaps there is a lesson here.

Notes

- ¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Atheism
- ² Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 198, cited in A. McGrath and J.C. McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), p. 17
- ³ McGrath and McGrath, p. 17
- ⁴ Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA and New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 308
- ⁵ McGrath and McGrath, p. 22
- ⁶ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 31
- ⁷ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 31
- ⁸ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 237
- ⁹ McGrath and McGrath, p. 90.
- ¹⁰ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 253
- ¹¹ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 253
- ¹² William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Apostles' Creed* (London & Glasgow: Collins, Fontana, 1967), pp. 331-332
- ¹³ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 164
- ¹⁴ M.K. Jain, 'Unleashing thought: taming brawn, grunt, and smarts. A review of *Before the Dawn: Recovering the Lost History of Our Ancestors* by Nicholas Wade, *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 82 (2007): pp. 131-139

- ¹⁵ John 4:24
- ¹⁶ See 1 Corinthians 12:3b; 1 John 3: 24b
- ¹⁷ 'An Edge Discussion of Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival', Salk Institute, La Jolla, (November 5-7, 2006). www.edge.org/discourse/bb.html [Accessed 16 March 2008].
- ¹⁸ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 109
- ¹⁹ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 143
- ²⁰ McGrath and McGrath, p. 45
- ²¹ Quoted on the dust-jacket of *The Dawkins Delusion?* and in publishers' blurbs.
- ²² See 'An Edge Discussion'
- ²³ See Jain.
- ²⁴ Peter B. Medawar, *The Limits of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 66
- ²⁵ S. Atran, 'The Nature of Belief, A Review of Six Impossible Things before Breakfast: the Evolutionary Origins of Belief by Lewis Wolpert', *Science* 317 (2007): p. 456
- ²⁶ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 278
- ²⁷ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 212
- ²⁸ C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (London: The Bodley Head, 1945), p. 184
- ²⁹ This was widely reported. See for example 'Court Sides with Student, OKs Wearing T-shirt to School Saying 'Homosexuality Is Sin. Islam Is a Lie. Abortion Is Murder'', *The Huffington Post* (24 August 2005). www.huffingtonpost.com/2005/08/24/court-sides-with-student-n6153.html [Accessed 21 March 2008]
- ³⁰ T. Eagleton, 'Lunging, flailing, mispunching: A review of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, *London Review of Books* (19 October 2006). www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eag01.html [Accessed 21 March 2008]
- ³¹ Genesis 4: 2-8; Hebrews 11: 4; 1 Jn 3:12



Dr Dennis Gordon FLS is a biodiversity scientist at a Crown Research Institute in Wellington. His specialist research includes the study of fossil marine organisms from

the Cretaceous to the present day. He edited the recently published three-volume *Inventory of New Zealand Biodiversity* and has been a member of the international project team of the online *Catalogue of Life*. He is an Associate Member of the UK-based Society of Ordained Scientists, served on the Council of Wellington Churches as Deputy Chairman, and teaches courses on specific books of the Bible at the Wellington Pacific Bible College.