

## ***The God Delusion: Dawkins on Religion***

**Elizabeth Burns, Heythrop College, University of London**

Richard Dawkins hopes that religious readers who open his book *The God Delusion*<sup>1</sup> ‘will be atheists when they put it down’ (5). The book appears to have made a significant impact; at the time of writing it is positioned at numbers three and eight respectively in the bestseller lists of amazon.com and the *New York Times*.<sup>2</sup> The book has already been reviewed and discussed in many places. The purpose of this further contribution to the debate is partly to offer a systematic summary of the arguments of this substantial book, partly to assess those arguments with the help of some of his most incisive critics, and partly to suggest that, while at least some of Dawkins’ arguments are weak, there may be some aspects of his critique of religious belief which believers need to take seriously.

Dawkins rejects the view that ‘there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us’ (31). He thinks that religion is a delusion, at least in the sense that it is ‘a persistent false belief held in the face of contradictory evidence’ (5). He is agnostic about God ‘only to the extent that [he] is agnostic about fairies’ (51). To illustrate his point, Dawkins cites Bertrand Russell’s parable of the celestial teapot. Russell suggested that, although no one can disprove the claim that there is a teapot orbiting the sun, this is no reason to believe it. Similarly, although we cannot disprove God’s existence, his existence is so improbable that we can reasonably assume that he does not exist. In response to the suggestion that science and religion are ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ – i.e. that they are concerned with different realms, science with what the universe is made of and why it works this way, religion with questions of ultimate meaning and moral value (55) – Dawkins claims that questions about the existence or otherwise of a creative super-intelligence are, in fact, scientific questions about which theologians have nothing worthwhile to say (56-59).

Dawkins is often criticised for the manner in which he conducts the debate. He sometimes employs rhetoric rather than logical argument – indeed, he admits this at one point (360-361). He is undeniably discourteous towards his opponents. For example, although he expresses surprise at his reputation for ‘pugnacity towards religion’ (281) and objects to Anselm’s biblical reference to the atheist as a ‘fool’ (81), he says of a view he rejects: ‘Even I, with my long experience, have never encountered wishful thinking as silly as that’ (85), and describes those who ‘leap from personal bafflement at a natural phenomenon straight to a hasty invocation of the supernatural’ as ‘no better than the fools who see a conjuror bending a spoon and leap to the conclusion that it is “paranormal”’ (129). And he dismisses the book of perhaps his most significant critic, Alister McGrath,<sup>3</sup> with a single mention, to the effect that McGrath has only ‘one point in rebuttal’ to offer, namely ‘the undeniable but ignominiously weak point that you cannot disprove the existence of God’ (54). None of this, however, rules out the possibility that Dawkins’ objections to religious belief may be valid, since the book does contain – or, at least, refer to – substantial arguments, and it is these to which we now turn.

### 1. The failure of philosophical arguments for God’s existence (chapter 3)

Dawkins considers a range of arguments, including Aquinas’ Five Ways, the ontological argument, arguments from beauty, personal ‘experience’, scripture, and admired religious scientists, Pascal’s Wager, and Bayesian arguments. In most cases, Dawkins cites standard objections which will come as no surprise to the thinking, reading theist.

In his fourth Way, Aquinas claims that, since we can recognise degrees of goodness, there must be a maximum standard of goodness, and that this is what we call God. Dawkins responds that people vary in smelliness but there is no maximum standard of smelliness. Although Dawkins may be right to say that it is difficult to conceive of a maximum standard of smelliness, however, we do need to have a conception of smelliness in order to recognise examples of it. It may be, therefore, that God is the idea of goodness which enables us to identify examples of goodness.

Aquinas' fifth Way is a version of the teleological or design argument. Aquinas argues from the appearance of design in living things to a designer which we call God. The argument was popularised by William Paley in his *Natural Theology*. Darwin was initially impressed by this, but, since evolution by natural selection explains the appearance of design, Dawkins claims that 'the mature Darwin blew it out of the water. There has probably never been a more devastating rout of popular belief by clever reasoning than Charles Darwin's destruction of the argument from design' (79). McGrath points out, however, that Paley's argument had already been rejected by leading theologians of the day; for example, John Henry Newman described it as 'a false gospel' which 'cannot tell us one word about Christianity proper' (quoted in McGrath: 67). A refutation of Paley's argument is not, therefore, a refutation of Christianity.

Dawkins objects to arguments for God's existence based on alleged experiences of God on the grounds that some of these experiences are clearly not caused by a benevolent divine being since they lead people to commit terrible crimes. For example, Peter Sutcliffe, the 'Yorkshire Ripper', allegedly heard the voice of Jesus telling him to kill women (88). But Dawkins neglects to mention that it is possible to test whether a religious experience is likely to be genuine – for example, by asking whether it causes the person to lead a better life, or whether it conflicts with our moral values. And while, in some cases, there may be alternative, secular explanations for so-called religious experiences, Dawkins does not consider the possibility that there may be some experiences which are genuinely religious and some which are not.

Dawkins argues that apparent inconsistencies and historical inaccuracies in the Bible suggest that it is not a reliable historical record. This is a complex issue which cannot be dealt with adequately in a single paragraph. But possible responses which do not require us to conclude that the Bible is merely 'invented, made-up fiction' (97) include:

- i. The inconsistencies and inaccuracies may be only apparent. Scholars are working on these texts and it is possible that a better understanding of them may eventually enable us to harmonise accounts which now appear to be incompatible.
- ii. The inconsistencies and inaccuracies do not constitute a significant part of the biblical record.
- iii. At least some of the conflicting texts were written independently of each other and we do not know which give us the correct account.
- iv. The later texts were written partly to correct inaccuracies and misunderstandings in the earlier texts.
- v. The ancient world did not share our modern conception of 'history' and, in trying to convey the importance of Jesus, it would have been regarded as perfectly acceptable to record what must have been the case in the light of the texts of the Jewish Bible/Old Testament.
- vi. The biblical texts are records of human attempts to understand God. Our understanding of God is still developing today.

Dawkins claims that the argument from admired religious scientists fails because, of those scientists who have been elected to the National Academy of Sciences, only about 7 per cent believe in a personal God (100). Unfortunately, the argument from admired atheistic scientists

fails, too. The number of people who believe something does not make it true. There are, however, many intelligent people who do believe in God and such belief may be justified on the basis of argument; since scientists sometimes explain their observations in terms of a cause they know little about, it is presumably acceptable for religious believers to do the same.

Dawkins also objects to Pascal's Wager which recommends that, in the absence of conclusive evidence on either side, one should 'bet' that God exists because there is more to lose if one wagers incorrectly that God does not exist. This, according to Dawkins, suggests that God cares more about belief in himself than he does about kindness, generosity or humility. If we believe only in order to achieve some kind of personal 'salvation', this may, indeed, be regarded as morally dubious. But this is less clearly the case if we interpret the Wager as a commitment to a religious way of life which is likely to be beneficial not only for ourselves but for the society to which we belong.

## 2. The argument from improbability – 'the Ultimate Boeing 747 gambit' (chapter 4)

This is the central argument of Dawkins' book and, he claims, comes close to proving that God does not exist. He begins from Fred Hoyle's claim that the probability of life on earth is no greater than the chance that a hurricane sweeping through a scrapyard would assemble a Boeing 747. Dawkins argues that this cannot be used to support belief in a designer because, however improbable life on earth is thought to be, the existence of a designer is even more improbable. The existence of life is improbable, but not impossible; we have evolved by means of natural selection on a planet which supports life (the anthropic principle), but it was not God who made our environment just right; we just happen to be on the one planet of billions (the multiverse theory) which is able to support life. A God capable of designing a universe tuned to lead to our evolution would be 'a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide' (147). God himself is 'the Ultimate Boeing 747' (114) because his existence is even less likely than that of life on earth.

Thomas Nagel<sup>4</sup> points out, however, that evolution depends upon the prior existence of genetic material with the ability to survive mutation and create a new organism with its mutated characteristics. This means that we have 'explained the complexity of organic life in terms of something that is itself just as functionally complex as what we originally set out to explain. So the problem is just pushed back one step: how did such a thing come into existence?' (27) Dawkins says that it is necessary to predict only 'that life will arise on *one* planet in a billion billion to give us a good and entirely satisfying explanation for the presence of life here', although he does not 'for a moment believe the origin of life was anywhere near so improbable in practice' (Dawkins: 138). But Terry Eagleton<sup>5</sup> notes that the multiverse theory is merely a 'suggestion' (Dawkins: 145), and that a suggestion does not constitute a scientific rebuttal (Eagleton: 4-5). And Nagel claims that 'no one has a theory that would support anything remotely near such a high probability as one in a billion billion' (28). The origin of life is 'an event that could not have occurred by chance and to which no significant probability can be assigned on the basis of what we know of the laws of physics and chemistry' (ibid).

Even if we are prepared to accept that God is the ultimate explanation for the origin of life on a hospitable planet, we still have no explanation for the existence of God. Whether or not one decides in favour of theism then depends upon whether one is prepared to accept that whatever caused the creation and ordering of the universe and the life within it is what we mean by 'God', and that God is unique in being the only entity which requires no explanation in terms of something external to itself.

If the God hypothesis makes sense, it offers a different kind of explanation from those of physical science – ‘purpose or intention of a mind without a body, capable nevertheless of creating and forming the entire physical world. The purpose of the explanation is to claim that not all explanation is physical, and that there is a mental, purposive, or intentional explanation more fundamental than the basic laws of physics, because it explains even them’ (Nagel 26)

We have more than one kind of understanding for different kinds of subject matter. Physical science cannot encompass everything; ‘We have no reason to dismiss moral reasoning, introspection, or conceptual analysis as ways of discovering the truth just because they are not physics’ (Nagel 29).

### 3. Faith is not a virtue

Since, on Dawkins’ view, there is no evidence or argument which can even support belief in God, let alone offer conclusive proof of God’s existence, the believer must rely on faith alone. This is regarded as a virtue, for which the believer will be rewarded. But, Dawkins thinks, it is ‘one of the truly bad effects of religion ... that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding’ (126); ‘[t]o suggest that the first cause ... is a being capable of designing the universe and of talking to a million people simultaneously, is a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation [for the existence of everything]. It is a dreadful exhibition of self-indulgent, thought-denying sky-hookery’ (155). [Sky-hooks are magic spells which ‘do no *bona fide* explanatory work and require more explanation than they provide’ (73)].

By contrast, for McGrath, faith begins from adequate evidence. Although some writers do seem unwilling to examine their beliefs, presumably because they are afraid that this will weaken their faith, such questioning represents a threat only to ‘intellectually deficient and half-baked ideas’. But there are ‘intellectually robust forms of faith – the kind of thing we find in writers such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and C S Lewis’ (83). Something may lie ‘beyond the present capacity of human reason to grasp; that does not mean it is contrary to reason’ (154). Quantum mechanics can say the same. Both are examples of people wrestling with the ambiguities of experience and offering ‘best possible explanations’ (155). Christian theology is “‘taking rational trouble over a mystery” – recognizing that there may be limits to what can be achieved, but believing that this intellectual grappling is both worthwhile and necessary. It just means being confronted with something so great that we cannot fully comprehend it, and so must do the best we can with the analytical and descriptive tools at our disposal’ (158).

### 4. Religion is a by-product of psychological dispositions produced by natural selection (chapter 5)

Dawkins argues that natural selection produces people who are:

- i. Obedient – children believe what their parents and elders tell them because obedience is valuable for survival. But this also leads to ‘slavish gullibility’.
- ii. Dualists – they believe that the mind is a disembodied spirit that inhabits the body and could leave it and exist somewhere else. So we easily believe in a soul which inhabits the body and moves on after death, and in a deity existing as pure spirit.
- iii. Teleologists – they assign purpose to everything. Assuming that situations imply intentions has survival value – assuming that a tiger intends to eat you will cause you to run away, for example; it speeds up decision making in dangerous circumstances and crucial social situations. But this tendency also causes us to assume intentions

when there are none. This is why many assume that the world exhibits God's purpose.

Dawkins also suggests that religion is the by-product of our tendency to fall in love. This irrationally strong conviction prevents us changing our partner during the period in which a stable relationship is necessary for child-rearing, but it also leads us to have irrationally strong convictions about other matters, including the existence of God.

Dawkins acknowledges that, while natural selection may have produced the psychological dispositions of which religion is a by-product, it is unlikely to have shaped the details. He therefore suggests that religions are 'memes', or units of cultural inheritance, ideas which are passed on like genes from one person to the next and one generation to the next because they have some kind of survival value.

McGrath had already argued that, if all ideas are memes, or the effects of memes, Dawkins' 'own ideas must also be recognised as the effects of memes' (124). And there is no reason why only those memes which conform to scientific criteria can be regarded as 'good' or 'useful'; he suggests that it would be more natural or obvious to regard as 'good' or 'useful' a meme which 'promoted harmony, gave someone a sense of belonging, or increased life expectancy' (ibid). In addition, McGrath argues that, although genes were initially hypothetical constructs they can now be observed; by contrast, we do not need memes to explain the transmission of ideas (we have books, rituals, institutions and oral traditions for this), and there is no evidence for their existence (129 and 133).

## 5. We do not need religion to explain human goodness (chapter 6)

Dawkins argues that human goodness is not explained by religion. He suggests, instead, that there are four Darwinian reasons for individuals to be altruistic or 'moral'.

The survival chances of our genes may be enhanced by:

- i. Altruistic behaviour towards those who are likely to carry our genes (kin altruism)
- ii. Altruistic behaviour towards those who may be able to help us in return (reciprocal altruism)
- iii. Acquiring a reputation for generosity and kindness
- iv. Altruistic giving which advertises our dominance or superiority.

Our so-called 'Good Samaritan urges' – like the reed warbler's care for a young cuckoo, or the human urge to adopt a child – may be 'misfirings' of these general rules. Until recently we had the opportunity to be altruistic only to close kin and potential reciprocators. This is no longer the case, but the rules persist and their influence is filtered through literature and custom, law and tradition, and religion.

Dawkins cites the research of Mark Hausner who found that, when presented with various moral dilemmas, most people make the same decisions, which suggests that there is a moral sense built into our brains. Further research, with Peter Singer, suggested that there is no significant moral difference between theists and atheists. Dawkins concludes from this that we do not need God in order to be good (226).

Dawkins objects to those who argue that there would be no reason to be good if there were no God, on the grounds that this is not moral. He says that 'If ... you admit that you would continue to be a good person even when not under divine surveillance, you have fatally undermined your claim that God is necessary for us to be good' (227). Dawkins admits that religious people are not obliged to say that belief in God provides the motive for doing good;

they need say only that, without God, there would no standard for deciding what is good. But this, he thinks, is an attempt to justify an absolute morality based on holy books whose authority cannot be justified.

Here Dawkins refers, although apparently without knowing it, to Plato's Euthyphro dilemma, which questions whether there is an independent standard of goodness to which everyone, including the gods, must conform, or whether goodness is whatever the gods deem it to be. In the first case, the divine is superfluous; in the second, morality becomes arbitrary. One possible response is to say that God *is* the moral standard, even if atheists do not describe the moral standard in such terms, and that holy books endeavour to convey what that standard requires of us. This does, however, raise questions about the morality of these holy books, and these form the substance of Dawkins' next objection.

#### 6. Religious texts contain immoral stories and teachings (chapter 7).

Dawkins cites many instances of immoral stories and teachings from the Old Testament. For example, he refers to the account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in order to please God as a 'disgraceful ... example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying ... and the first recorded example of the Nuremberg defence: "I was only obeying orders"' (242). And yet, he says, this is 'one of the great foundational myths of all three monotheistic religions' (ibid). In response to the objection that such passages are not to be taken literally, Dawkins claims that many people (including about 50% of the US electorate (238)) do understand their scriptures literally and that these people often have political power over us. But even if scriptural texts are not understood as literal truth, it is not clear how to decide which parts give us moral guidance; this is just as much a personal decision as the atheist's decision to follow particular moral precepts.

Dawkins is less negative about the New Testament; he refers to Jesus as 'surely one of the great ethical innovators of history' (250). He expresses some misgivings about Jesus' family values, particularly in view of his teaching that, in order to follow him, one must 'hate' one's father and mother, sisters and brothers.<sup>6</sup> However, Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests that this should be interpreted to mean that one must put aside loyalty to the patriarchal family in favour of the new community of brothers and sisters, a community of equals<sup>7</sup>. And Jesus does show concern for his mother when he is dying on the cross<sup>8</sup>. But Dawkins objects particularly to the doctrine of atonement for original sin which, in his interpretation, teaches that every child inherits the sin of a remote ancestor (Adam) and that God became incarnate in Jesus in order to be tortured and executed in payment for this sin. If the actions of Judas and the Jews were part of God's plan, he asks, why have those who were redeemed persecuted generations of Jews as 'Christ-killers'? (253). And if God wanted to forgive sins, why could he not simply do so? Eagleton responds that 'It's a safe bet that the Archbishop of Canterbury couldn't agree more. It was the imperial Roman state, not God, that murdered Jesus'. Jesus died not 'because he was mad or masochistic, but because the Roman state and its assorted lackeys and running dogs took fright at his message of love, mercy and justice, as well as at his enormous popularity with the poor, and did away with him to forestall a mass uprising in a highly volatile political situation' (3). In Eagleton's view, '[s]alvation for Christianity has to do with caring for the sick and welcoming the immigrant, protecting the poor from the violence of the rich. It is not a 'religious' affair at all' (4).

#### 7. Religion is divisive and leads to wars and moral atrocities (chapters 7 and 8)

Following John Hartung, Dawkins claims that 'Thou shalt not kill' referred only to Jews, and that this attitude is still common today; an experiment by George Tamarin showed that, of over a thousand Israeli children questioned about the biblical story of Joshua destroying the

city of Jericho, 66% approved of his actions because those he exterminated were of a different religion. Dawkins acknowledges that Palestinian children might disagree, but says that such considerations fill him with despair; 'They seem to show the immense power of religion, and especially the religious upbringing of children, to divide people and foster historic enmities and hereditary vendettas' (257).

Dawkins admits that not all conflicts which appear to be about religion are actually about religion. But, he argues, religion exacerbates conflicts in at least three ways: By labelling children as 'Catholic', 'Protestant', and so on; by running segregated schools; and by maintaining taboos against 'marrying out' (260-1). Religion panders to 'humanity's natural tendency to favour in-groups and shun out-groups' (262). And some wars really are fought in the name of religion, whereas there is no evidence to suggest that atheism influences people to do bad things; Stalin was an atheist, but he did not do evil in the name of atheism.

Dawkins also cites the many atrocities for which religious people have been responsible. For example, of the 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center he says that 19 men died in order to kill thousands because they believed they would go to paradise for doing so. Such terrorists 'perceive their acts to be good ... because they have been brought up ... to have total and unquestioning *faith*' (304). And, of the 2005 London bombings he says: 'Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people.' (303).

But Dawkins objects not just to religious extremism, but also to the teachings of 'moderate' religion. These, he thinks, are 'an open invitation to extremism' partly because they promise 'that death is not the end and that a martyr's heaven is especially glorious', and partly because they teach 'that unquestioned faith is a virtue' (306).

We have already seen that, for the thinking theist at least, blind faith is not a virtue; faith must be supported by argument and tested by argument. And any form of faith which leads to atrocities of the kind Dawkins describes rests on a misunderstanding of what belief in God requires or a misappropriation of religious belief. If God is goodness, the way of life based on faith in that God must also promote goodness; it fails as faith in the extent to which it fails as goodness.

Andrew Brown<sup>9</sup> notes that religion does not on its own cause suicide bombers, as Robert Pape, who has a database of every known suicide attack since 1980, has shown. McGrath admits that some religious people do dreadful things, but says that Dawkins gives no indication of the number of incidents involved, and that others do wonderful things (111-112). Stephen Tomkins<sup>10</sup> mentions medieval hospitals, Wilberforce's fight against the slave trade, the work of monasteries and Islamic scholars who saved Greek philosophical writings, Christian Aid, nineteenth-century reformers and philanthropists such as Shaftesbury, Fry, Muller, Barnardo, Christian peace-building organisations, and Martin Luther King. Atheists, too, do dreadful things. Several reviewers have argued that, contra Dawkins, Stalin did, in fact, do evil in the name of atheism. For example, John Cornwell<sup>11</sup> claims that Stalin's atheism was 'a violent feature of his ideology. He oppressed, imprisoned, tortured and murdered the Orthodox faithful, destroying their icons and their churches, throughout the length and breadth of Russia' (5). And McGrath suggests that the victims of Communism numbered between 85 and 100 million (113). But this does not mean that all atheists are bad; rather, 'there seems to be something about human nature which makes our belief systems capable of inspiring both great acts of goodness and great acts of depravity' (114). McGrath points out that it is not only our beliefs systems which can be used for evil ends; science can also be used for evil purposes. For example, Napalm may have killed as many as 100,000 in Tokyo on 9/10 March 1945. But this does not entail that science and scientists are evil and the same must be said of religion and believers. It does, however, raise the question of 'how some of those who are inspired and uplifted by a great vision of reality end up doing such dreadful

things' (117). This is a truth about human nature and we need to discuss how to avoid violence and aggression.

#### 8. Teaching children to hold beliefs about God is a form of child abuse (chapter 9)

Dawkins claims that it is 'a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about' (315). He argues that teaching children to believe in hell is a form of mental abuse, and gives a number of examples of physical abuse arising from religious beliefs, including the ritual sacrifice of an Inca girl, female circumcision, and the deprivations experienced by Amish children who are obliged to live as if they were living in the seventeenth century with none of the advantages of modern technology. Dawkins says that such things should not be allowed in the interests of diversity: 'A child is not a Christian child, not a Muslim child, but a child of Christian parents or a child of Muslim parents' (339). Children should be taught not what to think but how to think.

No doubt there are many believers who would agree that children should be given the tools with which to make up their own minds when older. But it is difficult to live in a vacuum and it may, therefore, be reasonable to teach one's children one's own beliefs, provided they are not harmful, at least until they are old enough to decide for themselves. Even Dawkins seems to think it acceptable to teach children the truth of atheism. Visitors to his website are invited to help promote the book and website, and flyers are provided 'to stack at your local coffee shop or school event desk', or hand out 'outside your local school or church'<sup>12</sup>.

#### 9. 'God' is like a child's imaginary friend (chapter 10)

Finally, Dawkins argues that God is like a child's imaginary friend, playing a consoling and counselling role; he suggests that both may be by-products of the same psychological disposition. But religion's power to console does not make it true. He suggests that religion, in fact, has little power to comfort the dying (358), and that it is infantile to assume that God gives life meaning and point; our life is as meaningful, full and wonderful as we choose to make it (360). The atheist view is life-affirming and life-enhancing and not tainted with self-delusion, wishful thinking or 'the whingeing self-pity of those who feel that life owes them something' (361). Science makes life more fulfilling: 'We are liberated by calculation and reason to visit regions of possibility that had once seemed out of bounds or inhabited by dragons' (374).

Jim Holt<sup>13</sup> responds that Dawkins is too hasty in dismissing the practical benefits of religion. He points out that surveys have shown that religious people live longer and feel happier (5). And McGrath lists three ways in which Christians can experience a sense of awe: 'An immediate sense of wonder at the beauty of nature' which is not diminished by belief in God; '[a] derived sense of wonder at the mathematical or theoretical representation of reality which arises from this'; and '[a] further sense of wonder at what the natural world points to' (148-149).

Despite his lengthy tirade of objections, Dawkins is not entirely negative about religion. As we have seen, it is supernatural religion to which he objects. He is less hostile to the religion of Einstein (except insofar as it might be deceptive (99)). He suggests that 'science finds itself in alliance with sophisticated theologians like Bonhoeffer' (127), and that 'Bishop Spong ... is a nice example of a liberal bishop whose beliefs are so far advanced as to be almost unrecognizable to the majority of those who call themselves Christians. A British counterpart is Richard Holloway, recently retired as Bishop of Edinburgh.' (237) Neither does he reject



Buddhism and Confucianism, although he sees them not as religions but as ethical systems or philosophies of life (38).

Dawkins also sees much that is of value in religious scriptures, particularly the King James Bible of 1611 which, he thinks, includes passages of outstanding literary merit. 'But the main reason the English Bible needs to be part of our education is that it is a major source book for literary culture' (341). The same applies to legends of Greek and Roman gods which we learn without having to believe. Ignorance of the Bible impoverishes appreciation of English literature (343-4). An atheistic world-view does not justify cutting the Bible and other sacred books out of our education. We can retain sentimental loyalty to the cultural and literary traditions of Judaism, Anglicanism or Islam 'and even participate in religious rituals such as marriages and funerals, without buying into the supernatural beliefs that historically went along with those traditions' (344).

Nevertheless, Dawkins' attack on what he sees as 'mainstream' religion is scathing and, to those for whom religious belief makes a difficult life bearable, potentially devastating. As we have seen, his account of religious belief often fails to do justice to the views he rejects. That which is profound often needs much exploration and explanation, as Dawkins has illustrated so admirably in his own field of expertise. Thus it may be that theology is concerned with matters so profound that Dawkins has not yet managed to grasp what is really being said. But if this is so, the popularity of his book – and the many who do accept the kind of beliefs which Dawkins finds objectionable – suggests that he is not alone. The consequences of this are not insignificant. Not only does it open the rational believer to the ridicule of those who misunderstand the nature of their beliefs and consider them to be foolish and dangerous. It can also lead to the divisions and atrocities which Dawkins so powerfully describes. Dawkins – and those to whom he objects – may not be taking the world's best theology seriously, but it would seem that our best theology is not having an impact on the majority of believers and non-believers. Religious professionals – both theologians and community leaders – and religious believers have a responsibility to think carefully about their beliefs and practices. Preserving and promoting irrational beliefs may ultimately cause their faith to die out. Failure to live peaceably with those who worship other deities in other ways, and the perpetration of moral atrocities in the name of religious ethics may lead the religiously misguided not to heaven or paradise, however these may be understood, but to the suffering, for themselves and many others, which it must be the aim of all religions ultimately to overcome. Thirdly, many individuals and societies will lose the beneficial and civilising aspects of religious belief because, in such a climate, they can conceive of no alternative to the kind of belief which the theophobic Dawkins describes. Dawkins is Professor for the Public Understanding of Science. Perhaps we need now, more than ever, a Professor for the Public Understanding of Religion.

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<sup>1</sup> London: Bantam Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> [www.RichardDawkins.net](http://www.RichardDawkins.net), accessed 1 January 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> 'The Fear of Religion', in *The New Republic*, October 23, 2006, 25-29.

<sup>5</sup> 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28 No. 20, October 19 2006, [www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/print/eag101\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/print/eag101_.html).

<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:26; Matthew 10:37-38.

<sup>7</sup> *Sexism and God-Talk*, extract in Peterson, Michael, Hasker, William, Reichenbach, Bruce, and Basinger, David, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 389.

<sup>8</sup> John 19:26-27.

<sup>9</sup> 'Dawkins the dogmatist', in *Prospect Magazine*, Issue 127, October 2006, [www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/printarticle.php?id+7803](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/printarticle.php?id+7803).

<sup>10</sup> 'One and a half cheers for Richard Dawkins', <http://ship-of-fools.com/Features/2006/dawkins.html>, accessed 28 January 2007.

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<sup>11</sup> 'A Christmas thunderbolt for the arch-enemy of religion', in *The Sunday Times*, December 24 2006, [www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-525-2517335,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-525-2517335,00.html).

<sup>12</sup> Accessed 1 January 2007.

<sup>13</sup> 'Beyond Belief', *New York Times*, October 22, 2006, [www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/books/review/Holt](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/books/review/Holt).