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THE DAWKINS
DELUSION?

*Atheist fundamentalism and
the denial of the divine*



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and
Joanna Collicutt McGrath



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Introduction



Since the publication of *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Richard Dawkins has established himself as one of the most successful and skilful scientific popularizers. Along with his American colleague Stephen Jay Gould, he has managed to make evolutionary biology accessible and interesting to a new generation of readers. I and other admirers of his popular scientific works have long envied their clarity, their beautiful use of helpful analogies, and their entertaining style.

Yet his latest book marks a significant departure. *The God Delusion* has established Dawkins as the world's most high-profile atheist polemicist, who directs a withering criticism against every form of religion.¹ He is out to convert his readers. 'If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.'² Not that he thinks that this is particularly likely; after all, he suggests, 'dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument'.

Yet the fact that Dawkins has penned a 400-page book declaring that God is a delusion is itself highly significant. *Why is such a book still necessary?* Religion was meant to have disappeared years ago. For more than a century, leading sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have declared that their children would see the dawn of a new era in which the 'God delusion' would be left behind for good. Back in the 1960s, we were told that religion was fading away, to be replaced by a secular world.

For some of us, that sounded like a great thing. I was an atheist back in the late 1960s, and remember looking forward to the demise of religion with a certain grim pleasure. I had grown up in Northern Ireland, and had known religious tensions and violence at first hand. The solution was obvious to my freethinking mind. Get rid of religion, and such tensions

and violence would be eradicated. The future was bright – and godless.

Two things have changed since then. In the first place, religion has made a comeback. It is now such a significant element of today's world that it seems strange to think that it was only a generation ago that its death was foretold with such confidence. The humanist writer Michael Shermer, perhaps best known as the director of the Skeptics Society and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, made this point forcefully back in 2000,³ when he pointed out that never in history have so many, and such a high percentage of the American population, believed in God. Not only is God not 'dead' – as the German philosopher Nietzsche prematurely proclaimed – he never seems to have been more alive.

Second, and rather less importantly, my own attitudes have changed. Although I was passionately and totally persuaded of the truth and relevance of atheism as a young man, I subsequently found myself persuaded that Christianity was a much more interesting and intellectually exciting world view than atheism. I have always valued free thinking and being able to rebel against the orthodoxies of an age. Yet I never suspected where my free thinking would take me.

Dawkins and I have thus travelled in totally different directions, but for substantially the same reasons. We are both Oxford academics who love the natural sciences. Both of us believe passionately in evidence-based thinking, and are critical of those who hold passionate beliefs for inadequate reasons. We would both like to think that we would change our minds about God if the evidence demanded it. Yet, on the basis of our experience and analysis of the same world, we have reached radically different conclusions about God. The comparison between us is instructive, yet raises some difficult questions for Dawkins.

Dawkins, who is presently Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, holds that the natural sciences, and especially evolutionary biology, represent an intellectual superhighway to atheism – as they did for him in

his youth. In my own case, I started out as an atheist, who went on to become a Christian – precisely the reverse of Dawkins’ intellectual journey. I had originally intended to spend my life in scientific research, but found that my discovery of Christianity led me to study its history and ideas in great depth. I gained my doctorate in molecular biophysics while working in the Oxford laboratories of Professor Sir George Radda, but then gave up active scientific research to study theology.

I have often wondered how Dawkins and I could draw such totally different conclusions on the basis of reflecting long and hard on substantially the same world. One possibility might be that, because I believe in God, I am deranged, deluded, deceived and deceiving, my intellectual capacity having been warped through having been hijacked by an infectious, malignant God-virus. Or that, *because* I am deranged, deluded, deceived and deceiving, my intellectual capacity having been warped through having been hijacked by an infectious, malignant God-virus, I believe in God. Both those, I fear, are the substance of the answer I find in the pages of *The God Delusion*.

This may be an answer, but it’s not particularly a persuasive answer. It might appeal to diehard atheists whose unbending faith does not permit them to operate outside the ‘non-God’ box. But I hope that I am right in suggesting that such non-thinking dogmatists are not typical of atheism. Another answer to my question might be to repeat the same ridiculous nonsense, this time applying it to Dawkins. (Although in this case, I suppose that we would have to posit that his mind had been hijacked by some kind of ‘no-god-virus’.) But I have no intention of writing such implausible rubbish. Why insult Dawkins? Even more importantly, why insult the intelligence of my readers?

The beginnings of a real answer lie in some wise words of Stephen Jay Gould, whose sad death from cancer in 2002 robbed Harvard University of one of its most stimulating teachers, and a popular scientific readership of one of its most accessible writers. Though an atheist, Gould was absolutely clear that the natural sciences – including evolutionary theory – were

consistent with both atheism and conventional religious belief. Unless half his scientific colleagues were total fools – a presumption that Gould rightly dismissed as nonsense, whichever half it is applied to – there could be no other responsible way of making sense of the varied responses to reality on the part of the intelligent, informed, people that he knew.⁴

This is not the quick and easy answer that many would like. But it may well be right – or at least point in the right direction. It helps us understand why such people hold such fundamentally different beliefs on these matters – and why some others consequently believe that, in the end, these questions cannot be answered with confidence. And it reminds us of the need to treat those who disagree with us on such questions with complete intellectual respect, rather than dismissing them as liars, knaves and charlatans.

Whereas Gould at least tries to weigh up the evidence, Dawkins simply offers the atheist equivalent of slick hellfire preaching, substituting turbocharged rhetoric and highly selective manipulation of facts for careful, evidence-based thinking. Curiously, there is surprisingly little scientific analysis in *The God Delusion*. There's a lot of pseudoscientific speculation, linked with wider cultural criticisms of religion, mostly borrowed from older atheist writings. Dawkins preaches to his god-hating choirs, who are clearly expected to relish his rhetorical salvos, and raise their hands high in adulation. Those who think biological evolution can be reconciled with religion are dishonest! *Amen!* They belong to the 'Neville Chamberlain school' of evolutionists! They are appeasers! *Amen!* *Real* scientists reject belief in God! *Hallelujah!* The God that Jews believed in back in Old Testament times is a psychotic child abuser! *Amen!* *You tell them, brother!*

When I read *The God Delusion* I was both saddened and troubled. How, I wondered, could such a gifted popularizer of the natural sciences, who once had such a passionate concern for the objective analysis of evidence, turn into such an aggressive anti-religious propagandist, with an apparent disregard for evidence that was not favourable to his case? Why were the

natural sciences being so abused in an attempt to advance atheist fundamentalism? I have no adequate explanation. Like so many of my atheist friends, I simply cannot understand the astonishing hostility that he displays towards religion. Religion to Dawkins is like a red rag to a bull – evoking not merely an aggressive response, but one that throws normal scholarly conventions about scrupulous accuracy and fairness to the winds. While this embittered book is written with rhetorical passion and power, the stridency of its assertions merely masks tired, weak and recycled arguments.

I'm not alone in feeling disappointed here. *The God Delusion* trumpets the fact that its author was recently voted one of the world's three leading intellectuals. This survey took place among the readers of *Prospect* magazine in November 2005. So what did this same *Prospect* magazine make of the book? Its reviewer was shocked at this 'incurious, dogmatic, rambling, and self-contradictory' book. The title of the review? 'Dawkins the dogmatist'.

Responding to Dawkins

It is clear that a response of some sort is needed to *The God Delusion*, if only because the absence of one might persuade some that no answer could be given. So how is one to reply? One obvious response would be to write an equally aggressive, inaccurate book, ridiculing atheism by misrepresenting its ideas and presenting its charlatans as if they were its saints. But that would be pointless and counterproductive, not to mention intellectually dishonest.

It is, in fact, actually rather difficult to write a response to this book – but not because it is well argued, or because it marshals such overwhelming evidence in its favour. The book is often little more than an aggregation of convenient factoids, suitably overstated to achieve maximum impact, and loosely arranged to suggest that they constitute an argument. To rebut this highly selective appeal to evidence would be unspeakably tedious, and would simply lead to a hopelessly dull book that

seemed tetchy and reactive. Every one of Dawkins' misrepresentations and overstatements can be challenged and corrected. Yet a book that merely offered such a litany of corrections would be catatonically boring. Assuming that Dawkins has equal confidence in all parts of his book, I shall simply challenge him at representative points, and let readers draw their own conclusions about the overall reliability of his evidence and judgement.

Anyway, Dawkins clearly has little interest in engaging religious believers, who will simply find themselves appalled by the flagrant misrepresentation of their beliefs and lifestyles. Is the case for atheism really so weak that it has to be bolstered by such half-baked nonsense? Dawkins pays his readers the highly dubious compliment of assuming that they will share his prejudices and ignorance about religion. Any criticisms of his analysis will simply be met with the riposte: 'Well, that's what you *would* say, isn't it?' Objections to his analysis are likely to be dismissed and discounted in advance, precisely because they are made by 'biased' religious people who are foolish and arrogant enough to criticize 'objective' and 'rational' atheists.

This is a very serious and troubling point. The total dogmatic conviction of correctness which pervades some sections of Western atheism today – wonderfully illustrated in *The God Delusion* – immediately aligns it with a religious fundamentalism which refuses to allow its ideas to be examined or challenged. Dawkins is resistant to the calibration of his own certainties, seeing them as being luminously true, requiring no defence. He is so convinced that his own views are right that he could not bring himself to believe that the evidence might legitimate any other options – above all, *religious* options.

What is particularly worrying is that, without seeming to realize it, Dawkins simply treats evidence as something to shoehorn into his preconceived theoretical framework. Religion is persistently and consistently portrayed in the worst possible way, mimicking the worst features of religious fundamentalism's portrayal of atheism. When some leading scientists write in support of religion, Dawkins retorts that they simply

cannot mean what they say. Dawkins clearly feels deeply threatened by the possibility of his readers encountering religious ideas or people that they might actually like – or even worse, respect, and regard as worthy of serious attention.

All this seems to make writing books like this somewhat pointless. *Except that once I too was an atheist, and was awoken from my dogmatic slumbers through reading books that challenged my rapidly petrifying world view.* This book, I suspect, will be read mainly by Christians who want to know what to say to their friends who have read *The God Delusion*, and are wondering if believers really are as perverted, degenerate and unthinking as the book makes them out to be. But it is my hope that its readers may include atheists whose minds are not yet locked into a pattern of automatic Dawkinsian reflexes. There are many who are deluded about God, and I used to be one of them.

This is a short book, with annotation kept to a minimum to save space. Its primary focus is simple and consistent: a critical engagement with the arguments set out in *The God Delusion*. Readers may wish that this book had been expanded to deal with other topics – such as a commendation and exploration of the intellectual resilience and spiritual power of Christianity.⁵ Those books will be written, in due course. But this one is simple, short, and directly to the point. There are no digressions and no diversions. It sets out to do one thing, and one thing only – assess the reliability of Dawkins' critique of faith in God.⁶ Although written in the first person for historical and stylistic reasons, the views and arguments set forth are those of both authors.

But enough by way of introduction. Let us turn immediately to the themes of *The God Delusion*.

1

Deluded about God?



God is a delusion – a ‘psychotic delinquent’ invented by mad, deluded people.¹ That’s the take-home message of *The God Delusion*. Although Dawkins does not offer a rigorous definition of a ‘delusion’, he clearly means a belief that is not grounded in evidence – or, worse, that flies in the face of the evidence. Faith is ‘blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.’² It is a ‘process of non-thinking’. It is ‘evil precisely because it requires no justification, and brooks no argument.’³ These core definitions of faith are hard-wired into Dawkins’ world view, and are obsessively repeated throughout his writings. It is not a Christian definition of faith, but one that Dawkins has invented to suit his own polemical purposes. It immediately defines those who believe in God as people who have lost touch with reality – as those who are *deluded*.

Dawkins rightly notes how important faith is to people. What you believe has a very significant impact on life and thought. That makes it all the more important, we are told, to subject faith to critical, rigorous examination. Delusions need to be exposed – and then removed. I agree entirely. Since the publication of my book *Dawkins’ God* in 2004, I am regularly asked to speak on its themes throughout the world. In these lectures, I set out Dawkins’ views on religion, and then give an evidence-based rebuttal, point by point.

After one such lecture, I was confronted by a very angry young man. The lecture had not been particularly remarkable. I had simply demonstrated, by rigorous use of scientific, historical and philosophical arguments, that Dawkins’ intellectual case

against God didn't stand up to critical examination. But this man was angry – in fact, I would say he was furious. Why? Because, he told me, wagging his finger agitatedly at me, I had 'destroyed his faith'. His atheism rested on the authority of Richard Dawkins, and I had totally undermined his faith. He would have to go away and rethink everything. How *dare* I do such a thing!

As I reflected on this event while driving home afterwards, I found myself in two minds about this. Part of me regretted the enormous inconvenience that I had clearly caused this person. I had thrown the settled assumptions of his life into turmoil. Yet I consoled myself with the thought that, if he was unwise enough to base his life on the clearly inadequate world view set out by Dawkins, then he would have to realize someday that it rested on decidedly shaky foundations. The dispelling of the delusion had to happen sometime. I just happened to be the historical accident that made it happen at that time and place.

Yet another part of me began to realize how deeply we hold our beliefs, and the impact that they make on everything. Dawkins is right – beliefs are critical. We base our lives upon them; they shape our decisions about the most fundamental things. I can still remember the turbulence that I found myself experiencing on making the intellectually painful (yet rewarding) transition from atheism to Christianity. Every part of my mental furniture had to be rearranged. Dawkins is correct – unquestionably correct – when he demands that we should not base our lives on delusions. We all need to examine our beliefs – especially if we are naïve enough to think that we don't have any in the first place. But who, I wonder, is really deluded about God?

Faith is infantile

As anyone familiar with anti-religious polemics knows, a recurring atheist criticism of religious belief is that it is infantile – a childish delusion which ought to have disappeared as humanity reached its maturity. Throughout his career, Dawkins has developed a similar criticism, drawing on a long-standing atheist analogy. In earlier works, he emphasized that belief in

God is just like believing in the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus. These are childish beliefs that are abandoned as soon as we are capable of evidence-based thinking. And so is God. It's obvious, isn't it? As Dawkins pointed out in his *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio in 2003, humanity 'can leave the crybaby phase, and finally come of age'. This 'infantile explanation' belongs to an earlier, superstitious era in the history of humanity. We've outgrown it.⁴

Hmmm. Like many of Dawkins' analogies, this has been constructed with a specific agenda in mind – in this case, the ridiculing of religion. Yet the analogy is obviously flawed. How many people do you know who began to believe in Santa Claus in adulthood? Or who found belief in the Tooth Fairy consoling in old age? I believed in Santa Claus until I was about five (though, not unaware of the benefits it brought, I allowed my parents to think I took it seriously until rather later). I did not believe in God until I started going to university. Those who use this infantile argument have to explain why so many people discover God in later life, and certainly do not regard this as representing any kind of regression, perversion or degeneration. A good recent example is provided by Anthony Flew (born 1923), the noted atheist philosopher who started to believe in God in his eighties.

Yet *The God Delusion* is surely right to express concern about the indoctrination of children by their parents.⁵ Their innocent minds are corrupted by adults cramming their pernicious and ridiculous religious beliefs down their throats. Dawkins argues that the biological process of natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents or elders tell them. This, he suggests, makes them prone to trust whatever a parent says – like Santa Claus. This is to be seen as one of the most significant factors involved in sustaining religious belief in the world, when it ought to have been wiped out ages ago. Break the intergenerational cycle of the transmission of religious ideas, and that will put an end to this nonsense. Bringing up children within a religious tradition, he suggests, is a form of child abuse.

There is, of course, a reasonable point being made here. Yet somehow it gets lost in the noise of the hyped-up rhetoric, and a general failure to consider its implications. Having read the ludicrous misrepresentations of religion which are such a depressing feature of *The God Delusion*, I very much fear that secularists would merely force their own dogmas down the throats of the same gullible children – who lack, as Dawkins rightly points out, the discriminatory capacities needed to evaluate the ideas. I do not wish to be unkind, but this whole approach sounds uncomfortably like the anti-religious programmes built into the education of Soviet children during the 1950s, based on mantras such as ‘Science has disproved religion!’, ‘Religion is superstition!’ and the like.

There is indeed a need for a society to reflect on how it educates its children. Yet no case can be made for them to be forced Dawkins’ favoured dogmas and distortions. They need to be told, fairly and accurately, what Christianity actually teaches – rather than be subjected to the derisory misrepresentations of Christian theology that litter this piece of propaganda. *The God Delusion*, more by its failings than its achievements, reinforces the need for high-quality religious education in the public arena, countering the crude caricatures, prejudicial stereotypes and blatant misrepresentations now being aggressively peddled by atheist fundamentalism.

For many years, I gave a series of lectures at Oxford University entitled ‘An introduction to Christian theology’. I cannot help but feel that these might have been of some use to Dawkins in writing his book. As the cultural and literary critic Terry Eagleton pointed out in his withering review of *The God Delusion*: ‘Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.’⁶

Dawkins quotes with approval the views of his friend Nicholas Humphrey, who suggests that parents should no more be allowed to teach children about the ‘literal truth of the Bible’ than ‘to knock their children’s teeth out.’⁷ If Humphrey is consistent here,

he should be equally outraged about those who peddle misrepresentations of religion as if they were the truth. Might he argue, I wonder, that parents who read *The God Delusion* aloud to their children were also committing child abuse? Or are you only abusive if you impose religious, but not anti-religious, dogmas and delusions?

Faith is irrational

There is, I suppose, a lunatic fringe to every movement. Having been involved in many public debates over whether science has disproved the existence of God, I have ample experience of what I think I must describe as somewhat weird people, often with decidedly exotic ideas, on both sides of the God–atheism debate. One of the most characteristic features of Dawkins’ anti-religious polemic is his presentation of the pathological as if it were normal, the fringe as if it were the centre, crackpots as if they were mainstream. It generally works well for his intended audience, who can be assumed to know little about religion, and probably care for it even less. But it’s not acceptable. And it’s certainly not scientific.

Dawkins insists that Christian belief is ‘a persistently false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence’.⁸ The problem is how to persuade ‘dyed-in-the wool faith-heads’ that atheism is right, when they are so deluded by religion that they are immune to any form of rational argument. Faith is thus essentially and irredeemably irrational. In support of his case, Dawkins has sought out Christian theologians who he believes will substantiate this fundamentally degenerate aspect of religious faith. In earlier writings, he asserted that the third-century Christian writer Tertullian said some particularly stupid things, including, ‘It is by all means to be believed because it is absurd.’ This is dismissed as typical religious nonsense. ‘That way madness lies.’⁹

He’s stopped quoting this now, I am pleased to say, after I pointed out that Tertullian actually said no such thing. Dawkins had fallen into the trap of not checking his sources, and

consistent with both atheism and conventional religious belief. Unless half his scientific colleagues were total fools – a presumption that Gould rightly dismissed as nonsense, whichever half it is applied to – there could be no other responsible way of making sense of the varied responses to reality on the part of the intelligent, informed, people that he knew.⁴

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