

The God Delusion Richard Dawkins, Bantam Press, London, 2006. 406pp. Price: £20 and of *The Dawkins Delusion* Alister McGrath with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, SPCK, London, 2007. 78pp. Price: £7.99

'Dawkins, Richard: Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science, Oxford University; Fellow of New College, Oxford; zoologist, with high reputation in the field of ethology (see his *The Extended Phenotype*); highly successful author of numerous popular works on science; his writings characterised by clarity and elegance; style marred somewhat by a literary pugilistic streak, most in evidence when words such as 'God', 'Jesus', 'religion', and related terms are in view; this tendency borders on the manic when the words 'creationism' and its cognates and 'intelligent design' appear; this lapse in style could be a worrying sign of Obsessional Compulsive Disorder (OCD); this could have been brought on by a mental virus or 'meme' (though there is no real evidence for such entities); his OCD tendency very pronounced in his most recent work, *The God Delusion*; humanly speaking, not a lot can be done about it, though recovery or deliverance may be aided by frequent exposure to Christian kindness, courtesy, and to a robust exposure of the falsity of his ideas; . . .'

The following review of *The God Delusion* is intended to equip those called to help any who may have caught the 'virus' from Dawkins. (The Dawkins variety seems to be an extremely nasty, mutant form of the virus.)

The God Delusion was written in a very specific cultural context. First, the religious context: political correctness has spread through secular society an idea which has been widespread in the ecumenical religious world for a very long time,

namely, that all religions are really saying the same kind of thing. The fact that 'ordinary', pleasant people can wire themselves to explosives and blast a few dozen people into shards and shreds of flesh comes as a nasty jolt to those who have bought into this kind of nonsense, so there then follows a furiously frantic, government attempt to distinguish 'extremists' (or 'fundamentalists': for many people the terms are synonymous) from 'mainline' religion, where all is sweetness and light. Running parallel to this is the philosophical context. The 'conflict thesis' invented by T.H. Huxley in the nineteenth century (that religion and science are necessarily sworn enemies), though merely a piece of political propaganda, (after all, Faraday, Maxwell, and Lord Kelvin were the premier 'scientists' of the nineteenth century and were devout Christians) filtered through to the public consciousness and became widely accepted earlier in the twentieth century. The rise of an articulate body of Christian research scientists, now with their own journal, as well as the obvious fact that many 'ordinary' scientists happened also to be Christians proved to be something of a body blow to the 'conflict thesis'. Add to this the growing popular influence of 'creationist' literature and ideas, and the rise of 'intelligent design' arguments, and you have the explanation why some have been galvanised to try to flog new life into the dying conflict thesis. Dawkins is the most celebrated or notorious advocate of this thesis. He is Huxley redivivus.

The book is really a curate's egg. Since Dawkins has also authored *A Devil's Chaplain* (the phrase was Darwin's), perhaps I should say it is 'a devil's curate's egg'. Much worse than the ordinary variety! Let me identify some points of agreement between Dawkins and readers of this magazine. First, Dawkins finds fault with religion and with a lot of

religious people. But then, so does the Bible. Jesus' severest words of denunciation were of the religious leaders of His day and of the kind of religion they promoted. Paul's sermon on the Areopagus and his letter to the Romans, like much of the Old Testament before him, indicts not the atheism of the day (atheism was very much a 'minority interest') but the false religions of that time and the correspondingly warped lifestyles to which they gave rise. Indeed, there is surely something ironic about the fact that the Romans regarded the early Christians as atheists because they did not have images of their God. If, fired by a misguided zeal to oppose all that Dawkins says, we simply defend 'religion' and 'God', without defining these terms, we shall be unfaithful to the testimony of Jesus. (Did He not warn that some would think they were serving God by killing His disciples?) We shall also box ourselves into an intellectual corner.

I presume that every reader of this magazine will be as appalled (no, that's wrong: far more appalled) than Dawkins at the insane rantings, violent, offensive, and obscene language with which some so called 'Christians' have attacked Dawkins and his atheist colleagues. Dawkins is surely aware of this. He does not, I presume, receive such letters from Alistair McGrath or from Paul Helm (who was involved with him on BBC's Brains Trust back in the 90s). So while one agrees with him at one level, one has to ask why he seeks to create the impression that every Christian is tarred with the same brush.

Dawkins' treatment of Thomas Aquinas's arguments for God's existence and Anselm's ontological argument is an attack upon what Dawkins evidently considers religious people to believe to be strong arguments for God's existence. He is, presumably, ignorant of the fact that many Christian apologists would agree with him as to the inadequacy of these

arguments. Mind you, philosophy is not Dawkins' strong point. Aquinas was a medieval philosopher, as well as a theologian, and he was writing as much as a philosopher to produce philosophical arguments to justify beliefs held on other grounds. Dawkins is evidently ignorant of the presuppositionalist school of apologetics and of the rise of a school of apologetics which is severely critical of foundationalism.

Now to the bad parts of this curate's egg. I shall have to be extremely selective. First, the 'tone' of the book. Robert Thouless's justly famous work *Straight and Crooked Thinking* identified the use of emotive language as being singularly inappropriate when seeking to discover the truth or falsity of propositions. Having established a case, emotive language may then be suitable; but not until then. The opening paragraph of chapter two of *The God Delusion* is jam-packed with emotive, not to say vitriolic, language. Dawkins is 'having a go' at the God of the Old Testament. This is not calm and rational enquiry: it is Dawkins trying to prove a case and using gutter language (which I shall not repeat) to try to prove it. If you have the book, mark the margin of the page, AWSLH ('Argument weak, shout loudly here'). A Sunday School teacher could have informed him that the 'jealousy' of God is not the 'I-hate-you-because-you've-got-a-bigger-house-and-thinner-waistline-than-mine' variety, but the kind of jealousy which a husband has for his wife or even a professor for the reputation of his department. As for some of Dawkins' other ravings about the Old Testament, a five minute walk from New College to the Bodleian library would put at his disposal a wealth of literature on the Old Testament and on Canaanite society, not to mention Mary Douglas's ground breaking application of the insights of cultural anthropology to the laws of

Leviticus, that might just make him realise that he is making himself look more of an ignorant ass rather than the religious iconoclast of popular reputation. But then, if you want to prove a case, facts which rather dent it are best left ignored. 'Where ignorance is bliss . . .' It's that old mental virus again.

One would have expected the New Testament to have fared better at his hands, but such expectations are quickly disappointed. He raises old canards as to historical gaffes in Luke's account of Jesus' birth (is he really that ignorant of the work of first class New Testament scholars such as Darrell Bock, just to name one?), while he makes the rather foolish observation that most of the birth narratives were borrowed from other religions. This is just to resurrect the 'history of religions' approach to Christian origins, an approach which was popular in the early twentieth century but which, by now, has been largely discredited as a result of extensive scholarly work in this field. He devotes only seven pages to the historical reliability of the New Testament, in which he displays appalling ignorance of the arguments and reasons for belief in the historical trustworthiness of the Gospels and of the reasons for believing that Jesus did claim divine status. Apart from a few brief references throughout the book to Geza Vermes, the only New Testament scholar who gets a mention in this section is Bart Ehrman. Ehrman is hardly representative of New Testament scholarship. Otherwise, Dawkins refers to A.N. Wilson's 'biography' of Jesus. He really ought to know that Tom Wright, who was still at Oxford when Wilson's book came out, did a demolition job on Wilson. In his popular work, *Who was Jesus?*, Wright pointed out that Wilson was guilty of a considerable number of basic, factual errors, ranging from the geographical location of John the Baptist's imprisonment, to the howler that Jesus got some of

His ideas from reading the Talmud! Since, as readers of this magazine will know, the Talmud was not written down until about AD 400, this, says Wright, is akin to suggesting that Shakespeare got his ideas from Tom Stoppard! There is so much more of this kind of thing in Wilson's book. I assume that Dawkins is on speaking terms with the theology tutor in New College. He could have been saved from making such gaffes if he had consulted those more widely read in these matters than himself.

Perhaps we should not be surprised at Dawkins being out of his depth in these areas, when one realises that he seems pretty ill-informed about those matters concerning which one would expect him to be 'in the know'. He conveys the impression that there are not many distinguished scientists who are Christian believers. Why no mention of Sir John Houghton in the book? He held a chair at Oxford, is a fellow of the Royal Society, and was awarded an honorary D.Sc. at Oxford last year. No mention of Denis Alexander's *Rebuilding the Matrix*, which was highly recommended by Professor Brian Heap, Vice-President of the Royal Society, as compulsory reading for believer and unbeliever, scientist and non-scientist. I could mention much, much more, in this vein but space forbids me. Dawkins is shooting a line, so his work is characteristically tendentious.

His case for the 'improbability' of God is based on the fact that something more complex than the universe (God) is invoked to explain something less complex. This, Dawkins contends, will not do because one is then left with no explanation for God. Furthermore, Dawkins believes that processes which explain a phenomenon render the 'God explanation' redundant. On the second point Dawkins is extraordinarily reductionistic. Even within scientific discourse there are levels of

explanation, but one level of explanation does not render another level as being redundant. Furthermore, as Michael Poole pointed out in his exchange with Dawkins in the journal *Science and Christian Belief* back in the 90s, the notion of 'explanation' is somewhat multi-faceted: you will not find Sir Frank Whittle in one of the components of the jet engine and you can explain the jet engine's functioning in terms of the laws of physics and engineering, but you have not thereby made Sir Frank Whittle redundant to the existence of the jet engine. The average Christian who works in science, whether as a teacher or researcher, does not engage in theological explanations of the circulation of the blood, the nature of ionic bonding, and so on, but he/she nevertheless believes that the Lord made everything and upholds everything by His powerful Word. Why does Dawkins not refer to his exchange with Poole? Might it be because he seemed to get the worse of it?

As for the idea that invoking God is to 'explain' the complex by something more complex, Dawkins does not take account of the fact that one is invoking a different order of being to explain another order of being. We regularly do this. Hebrews 3:3-4 uses the analogy of the builder and a house to explain the nature of God's creation of the world. The builder is more complex than the house which he builds and is a different order of being. Yet the difference between God and His universe is far greater than that which exists between the builder and the house. (The builder, like the house, is composed of atoms, will decay, etc., whereas these things are not true of God). One does not, therefore, need to account for God's origin for, by definition, He is uncreated. These are fairly basic philosophical points which Dawkins does not address. But to hold (as his fellow Oxford professor and comrade-in-arms, Peter Atkins, holds) that the universe came from nothing

and that there is nothing more simple than nothing is hardly an explanation at all. For it is a basic philosophical point that nothing is not an order of being and one cannot, therefore, predicate anything of it: if one could, it would not be nothing. This is the 'ultimate free lunch' theory of the universe's origins; in this case the adage holds true, 'There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.'

Dawkins' treatment of the nature of good and evil is appallingly shallow. He appears to confuse an account of the origin of our sense of good and evil with the nature of good and evil: in other words, he is confusing epistemology (how we know something) with ontology (what a thing is). He shows himself to be a child of the Enlightenment, who has never felt the force of Nietzsche's observation that if God is dead, we must create our own values. But if this be so, there is no adequate moral basis for saying that the morals of Richard Dawkins are superior to those of Mao Tse Tung. Dawkins, from the comfort of the Oxford Common Room, may regard it as axiomatic that it is wrong to go around killing people in order to get your own way. If you are in the employ of Robert Mugabe or are living on an estate where you get your living from peddling crack cocaine, you may be inclined to reply, in the words of one of Mark Twain's characters, 'You're saying so, don't make it so.' Indeed.

Dawkins does not seriously address the question of evil committed in the name of atheism, nor the great good that has come about as a result of Christian conversion. Good for him that his book came out last year, before the bicentenary of the death of John Newton and the abolition of the slave trade.

Terry Eagleton (with no brief for Christianity) hammered Dawkins' book in his review for *The London Review of Books*. Michael Ruse wrote: '*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist

Let me refer to the *Who's Who* style profile with which I began:

If Professor Dawkins' present position is a sinecure, we may well expect more of the same (OCD and all that). If not, he could well find himself removed and replaced by Denis Alexander or by Alister McGrath.

Alister McGrath and Richard Dawkins are well known protagonists: but whereas Dawkins comes out of his corner like a bare-knuckled pugilist, 'lunging, flailing, mispunching', McGrath weighs up his opponent, takes measured steps, lands deft but damaging blows, and altogether outclasses atheism's most strident polemicist. It is very much a case of the iron fist but in a deliciously smooth, velvet glove.

Whereas McGrath's 2004 *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* was a comprehensive study of Dawkins' ideas, the present volume is a specific response to *The God Delusion*. While most of the book is Alister McGrath's own work, his wife has contributed those parts which deal with the psychology of religion. Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. Starting undergraduate life as a Marxist atheist, he became a Christian before graduating in chemistry and taking a doctorate in molecular biophysics. He also obtained a doctorate in theology. His wife studied experimental psychology at Oxford, before going on to specialise in clinical neuropsychology. She subsequently studied theology and currently lectures in the Psychology of Religion at London University.

The book is intentionally selective: it is not a point-by-point rebuttal of Dawkins, but an analysis of some of the key themes of his book and a response to what Dawkins says about them. The McGraths have, therefore, succeeded in writing a book which is neither boring nor tedious – a fault which is, alas,

all too common in books which 'respond' to what others have written.

Unlike Dawkins, McGrath displays considerable knowledge of the philosophy of science and is widely read in the literature. He is able, therefore, to make short shrift of the idea that science has 'disproved' God. He also sets the record straight on what Thomas Aquinas was about, as well as what he was not about, in his famous 'Five Ways'.

The chapter on the origin of religion will make painful and uncomfortable reading for Dawkins: for the McGraths use the evidence-based, scientific method to demonstrate that Dawkins has simply not done his homework in this area. They do not, as Dawkins rhetorically pleads in *The God Delusion*, 'tread softly on my memes'. The idea of a 'meme', as well as Dawkins' suggestion that religion could be a 'virus of the mind', is shown to lack any real scientific basis. 'Dawkins the dogmatist' could have been the title for this chapter, for that is what Dawkins is shown to be.

Similarly, the fine chapter, 'Is Religion Evil?' amply demonstrates Dawkins' prejudice, selective use of evidence, and special pleading, as well as the fact that he has a blind eye and a deaf ear to the great good which has been done in the name of religion and the great good that has been received from religion.

I have, however, three concerns. First, while the McGraths show that a religious account of the universe is coherent, I am not so sure that they have demonstrated it to be compelling. My guess is that this is the area where Dawkins is most likely to punch back at them.

Secondly, in their desire to be scholarly, fair-minded and objective in their consideration of atheism (something which Dawkins', protestations to the contrary, most certainly is not), I fear that they have

overcooked things and conceded too much. They appear to suggest that this is simply an intellectual affair, of assessing the relative merits of arguments for theism and for atheism. But as far as Paul was concerned, both at the Areopagus and in his Letter to the Romans, failure to discern something of the being and character of God from the universe around is both the result and evidence of wilful rebellion against God. And this means that we are not neutral observers of what goes on around us. Recognition of this fact should not, as it sometimes has, lead to a short-circuiting of intellectual argumentation in the presentation of the gospel and in the apologetic task; it is, however, the context in which evangelism and apologetics takes place. I hope I am not being unfair to the McGraths. Alister McGrath certainly makes the point in other books he has written and makes it well. He may simply have thought it to be inappropriate in the present book. If so, I would query the rightness of that judgment.

My final concern is more of a general point than a criticism of the McGraths' book. The Christian writers who are truly engaging with the secular world at the interface of science and faith are invariably those who are committed to a theistic evolutionary framework. (The McGraths are a good example: atheist philosopher, Michael Ruse, said that *The God Delusion* made him embarrassed to be an atheist and the McGraths' book showed why. Denis Alexander's *Rebuilding the Matrix* is another good example.) Such Christian, theistic evolutionists usually display a knowledge and understanding of the history of ideas and the historical context in which science has been practised, and display this knowledge with a degree of sophistication, which is usually lacking from the 'creationist' literature, which, one has to say, frequently looks rather

amateurish by comparison. Even when the creationist literature is technically very competent and compelling, it too frequently lacks this broader perspective. Furthermore, there is often a woeful ignorance of the history of Christian thinking concerning creation, and a lack of sensitivity to the diverse literary genres found in Scripture. While 'creationism' may be making political headway and have a political profile, especially in the States, it is doubtful if it is seriously making much intellectual headway in the secular world. (How frequently is creationist literature published in peer reviewed science journals?) This is worrying because creationism is being routinely lined up with fundamentalism, not only by atheists, but by the likes of McGrath and Alexander. Yet for all the good work done by Alexander, McGrath, et al., it is difficult to see how the New Testament treatment of the creation and fall narratives found in Genesis 1–3 can be fitted into the evolutionary framework or vice versa.

In other words, this approach raises serious hermeneutical and theological problems. In the long haul, it could prove to be a 'Trojan Horse' for evangelicalism. Just as devout, well meaning evangelical scholars conceded far too much to liberal methodology with respect to biblical studies in the nineteenth century, with catastrophic consequences in the twentieth century, so the same thing could be happening again in a different area of thought.

We need writers with a robust, biblical doctrine of origins who are also well versed in intellectual history and the history of interpretation, scientifically expert and possessed of an ability to communicate at a number of levels. Of course, that is a tall order. But then, one only needs one David to fell a Goliath and to rout the Philistines.