

# Essays in Honor of Alister McGrath

with Bethany Sollereider, "Introduction to Essays in Honor of Alister McGrath"; Peter Harrison, "What is Natural Theology? (And Should We Dispense with It?)" ; John Hedley Brooke, "Revisiting William Paley"; Helen De Cruz, "A Taste for the Infinite: What Philosophy of Biology Can Tell Us about Religious Belief"; Michael Ruse, "The Dawkins Challenge"; Donovan O. Schaefer, "The Territories of Thinking and Feeling: Rethinking Religion, Science, and Reason with Alister McGrath"; Andrew Pinsent, "Alister McGrath and Education in Science and Religion"; Andrew Davison, "Science and Specificity: Interdisciplinary Teaching between Theology, Religion, and the Natural Sciences"; Victoria Lorrimar, "Does an Inking Belong in Science and Religion? Human Consciousness, Epistemology, and the Imagination"; and Alister E. McGrath, "Response: Science and Religion—The State of the Art."

## THE DAWKINS CHALLENGE

by Michael Ruse

*Abstract.* Richard Dawkins, in his *The God Delusion*, argued strongly for atheism. Alister McGrath picked up the challenge and argued that Dawkins is wrong and that his arguments are very weak. This article, part of a symposium honoring McGrath looks in detail at the God Delusion, and at two books by McGrath, *Dawkins' God*, written before *The God Delusion* appeared but addressing the arguments of that book, and *The Dawkins' Delusion*, co-authored with his wife Joanna Collicutt McGrath that appeared after *The God Delusion*. It is argued that the debate is still timely and that sociological factors are extremely important.

*Keywords:* Richard Dawkins; God Delusion; Alister McGrath

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The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Thus, Richard Dawkins (2006, 31), justifiably the most popular science writer of the age, against the God of the Ancient Jews and by implication, at least in Dawkins' mind, the whole rotten edifice of the Christian religion.

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## NEW ATHEISM

The God of the Calvinists decreed that this could not pass unnoticed. Christianity's champion, the leading science—religion theologian of our day, Alister McGrath, answered the challenge. (Although he is an Anglican, McGrath comes from Northern Ireland. I smell predestination here.) The gauntlet is thrown down, as vividly as by Ivanhoe in the movie of Walter Scott's novel of that name. The quoted passage by Dawkins comes early in his *The God Delusion*, one of several books by the so-called "New Atheists," penned in response to the 2001 attack, by Muslim fanatics, on the twin towers in New York City. These books, especially that by the then graduate student Sam Harris (2004), *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, are grotesquely anti-Islam. Of concern to us here, however, is that this hostility is extended to all religions, including Christianity, the background subject of this essay.

I shall start this discussion with a brief overview of the *God Delusion*. As I do so, I will make some comments along the line. I stress very strongly that this is not an essay on Michael Ruse. It is on Alister McGrath. However, whereas McGrath is a theologian, I am a philosopher. To bring out the full force and meaning of McGrath's response to Dawkins, it will be helpful to see how someone from a different discipline finds the *God Delusion*. What I have to say about my own reactions is intended simply and solely to uncover and discuss McGrath's thinking.

As it happens, McGrath has long been interested in Dawkins' thinking on the God question. Even back in 1978, Oxford University Press had approached him about writing, from a Christian perspective, a response to the early Dawkins. At the time, McGrath did not feel ready to do so. But some twenty-five or so years later, 2005, the year before the appearance of the *God Delusion*, McGrath did put together his thinking on the subject. He published *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. (Published by Blackwell, not Oxford University Press. He did use the Oxford Comma in his subtitle.) *Dawkins' God* will be the second book I shall discuss in this essay. Then, expectedly, the year after the *God Delusion*, McGrath (co-authoring with his wife Joanna) published a direct response to the *God Delusion*. This, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, will be the third book of the trilogy that comprise this essay.

A declaration of interest is appropriate. I was raised (very intensely) as a Quaker (Ruse 2017b). However, around the age of twenty, my faith faded away. I did not have a Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus experience. My faith softly and silently vanished away. The snark was a boojum you see. I am not sure if I ever became an atheist; but, certainly, by the age of twenty-five I had slipped into agnosticism. This, however, was not the agnosticism

of many, my wife for instance, where basically one is uninterested in the whole matter. (I swear to my nonexistent God that my wife is so indifferent she might well think Abraham and Isaac were gay lovers.) I truly thought that, by the age of seventy, my faith would return. You cannot be too careful in these matters. But, as I move through my ninth decade, I remain an agnostic; yet, like the man who invented the term “agnostic,” Thomas Henry Huxley, I am as interested and concerned about these issues as McGrath and Dawkins.

I should say also that Dawkins has a nasty jab at me in the *God Delusion*, likening me to Neville Chamberlain, the Munich appeaser, for my ongoing efforts to engage in dialogue with Christians—atheists too, but Dawkins does not mention that. And, to get all true confessions out on the table, in the preface of *Dawkins' God*, I am thanked. Worse is the cover of *The Dawkins Delusion?* There is a quote from me: “*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist, and the McGraths show why.” I realize that this is somewhat untrue. Although I am quoted correctly, as I have said, I have never been an atheist. It seemed better (more forceful) to say I was, than to say: “*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be a wishy-washy agnostic, who sits on the fence and cannot make up his mind.” I should add, finally, that Dawkins and I have been friends in the past and I still consider us to be so. Like McGrath, I still consider the *Selfish Gene*, although written at a popular level, to be one of the most important contributions to evolutionary thinking since the *Origin of Species*.

#### THE GOD DELUSION

My first reaction to the *God Delusion*, given what I have just said about my thoughts on the *Selfish Gene*, is the surprised sentiment that it is pedestrian from beginning to end. For all that it has been a smash-hit best seller—three million copies is the usual estimate—it really is uninspiring. (To put matters in context, the *Da Vinci Code* has sold forty million copies. But it is a good read.) Dawkins goes from one topic to another, giving surveys, and there is no genius connecting-link, like the idea that genes might be selfish. At best there is: “God is a moral monster, and, in any case, He doesn’t exist.” But this idea is not, as it were, used imaginatively to connect things up. We just get one topic after another. God is not necessary for existence. God is not needed for morality. God is bad for children. And so forth.

Let me pick out four things that struck me on reading the *God Delusion*. First, there is the uncritical statement that: “God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice.” This is jaw dropping. What about what Martin Heidegger (1959) has called the fundamental question of metaphysics: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” This is not about what came before

the Big Bang, but rather why is there anything at all. This simply does not come across as a scientific question. A reason for Dawkins' inadequacy here is that he is simply contemptuous of philosophy. Hence, he dismisses, with a sneer, things like the ontological argument, which may or may not work but which point to serious issues about the nature of existence. Can something exist necessarily? And so forth. Just not scientific questions. Dawkins' flip response is that: "I mean it as a compliment when I say you could almost define a philosopher as someone who won't take common sense for an answer" (83). With friends like this, who needs enemies?

Second, there is an adolescent attitude to theology, revealed and natural. It totally escapes me, how one could even start to discuss God's existence and nature without raising the question of evil—especially of moral evil. You might well feel, I certainly feel, that Hitler and Himmler raise serious questions about the existence of God and even more about whether He is good. But they should surely be looked at, as well as at the Christian responses, starting with free will. I guess if you have Dawkins' attitude to philosophy, David Hume and Immanuel Kant are irrelevances from the past.

Third, like everyone I have worries about some of the stories of the Old Testament, starting with Abraham and his behavior to his close family, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael. But surely a paragraph or two should have been given over to those prepared to speak up for the Old Testament. For instance, that much is allegorical and not intended literally. It always struck me that the story of Noah and the Flood has nothing to do with meteorology and everything to do with the stupidity of simplistic answers. God saw people were behaving badly, so he wiped almost all of them out, and what happened? Sin remained. Noah got blind drunk, his kid saw him naked and went out and told everyone. Would that Bush and Blair had thought on the Noah story before they invaded Iraq. And what about the beautiful story of Ruth and her dedication to her mother-in-law? Or the story of Job and the sophisticated theological discussions of that book of the Bible?

Fourth, I simply do not understand why Dawkins is not an agnostic. God is put on the level of the tooth fairy, Mother Goose, the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Possible, perhaps, but not something a sensible person would embrace. And yet it is Dawkins of all people who makes much of J. B. S. Haldane's (1927) famous quote: "Now, my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose." If that is not a compelling invitation to agnosticism, I do not know what is. We just do not know and down here we never will know. Agnosticism.

So much for my reaction—so much for a philosopher's reaction—to the *God Delusion*.

*DAWKINS' GOD: GENES, MEMES, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE*

What struck me most forcefully, on picking up McGrath's book, is how utterly and completely we agree about the level at which Dawkins—Dawkins the God critic—operates.

Dawkins writes with erudition and sophistication on issues of evolutionary biology, clearly having mastered the intricacies of his field and its vast research literature. Yet when he comes to deal with anything to do with God, we seem to enter a different world. It is the world of a schoolboy debating society, relying on some rather heated, enthusiastic overstatements, spiced up with some striking oversimplifications and more than an occasional misrepresentation (accidental, I can only assume) to make some superficially plausible points—the sorts of arguments that once persuaded me that atheism is the only option for a thinking person when I was a schoolboy. (McGrath 2005, 9)

McGrath then picks up on my worry about how Dawkins seems to think that science can answer everything. “The real issue for me is how Dawkins proceeds from a Darwinian theory of evolution to a confident atheistic worldview, which he preaches with messianic zeal and unassailable certainty” (10). He reaffirms this. “Natural science leads neither to atheism nor Christianity” (53). Continuing: “If the scientific method can neither prove nor disprove the existence or nature of God, then either we abandon the question as unanswerable (something Dawkins certainly does not choose to do) or we answer it on other grounds” (54).

Something I have already agreed with. Yet, as a philosopher, I wonder if here there is, perhaps not so much a sin of commission but a sin of omission. Why is it that science cannot answer these questions that the religious put forward? Why is there something rather than nothing? Is there any point to it all? And so forth. Stephen Jay Gould in his *Rocks of Ages* (1999) put forth the idea of “Magisteria”—different perspectives, a bit like Kuhnian paradigms—which simply cannot show the other side wrong or inadequate, because they are asking and answering different questions. Gould claimed that science is trying to answer factual questions—“How old is the universe?”—whereas religion is trying to answer moral questions—“What is the right thing to do about abortion?” But that sort of thinking does not seem to be a great help here. Why is there something rather than nothing? This does not strike me as a moral question. It is about a fact. Things exist. Why?

The suggestion I have made—and I offer it not because it is right but as an example of the sort of thing a philosopher would worry about and about the sort of answer a philosopher would think appropriate, even if not right—is that it is all a matter of metaphor. Science is ruled by what linguists call root metaphors. Until the Scientific Revolution, the root

metaphor was that the world is an organism. After the Scientific Revolution, the root metaphor was that the world is a machine.

At all times there used to be a strong tendency among physicists, particularly in England, to form as concrete a picture as possible of the physical reality behind the phenomena, the not directly perceptible cause of that which can be perceived by the senses; they were always looking for hidden mechanisms, and in so doing supposed, without being concerned about this assumption, that these would be essentially the same kind as the simple instruments which men had used from time immemorial to relieve their work, so that a skillful mechanical engineer would be able to imitate the real course of the events taking place in the microcosm in a mechanical model on a larger scale. (Dijksterhuis 1961, 497)

Now the point about metaphors, as Thomas Kuhn pointed out about paradigms—which in later writings he identified with metaphors—is that they close off certain questions as irrelevant. If I say my love is a red, red rose, I am talking about her beauty, her freshness. If I am joking, that she can be a bit prickly at times. I am not talking about her political affiliation or her ability at mathematics. They are matters outside my domain. Going back to machines, you can ask where the parts came from, but eventually you must take them as given. It is like the cookbook: First, take your hare. So, the fact that science does not and cannot answer why there is something rather than nothing is simply out of the domain, the scope, of its root metaphor of the world as a machine (Ruse 2010).

As I say, I am not offering this as the right answer, more as a question a philosopher feels needs answering and I am not sure the same is true of a theologian. But then we come to something where McGrath, the theologian, scores well over Ruse, the philosopher. The question of faith. Like all the New Atheists, Dawkins is unbelievably hostile to faith.

Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to avoid the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, perhaps indeed because of, the lack of evidence... Faith is not allowed to justify itself with argument.

And again:

It is fashionable to wax apocalyptic about the threat to humanity posed by the AIDS virus, “mad cow” disease and many others, but I think a case can be made that *faith* is one of the world’s great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate. Faith, being belief that isn’t based on evidence, is the principle vice of any religion.

Summing up:

As a lover of truth, I am suspicious of strongly held beliefs that are unsupported by evidence. (85)

Science wins. Religion loses.

McGrath takes on this sort of stuff with vigor. Most importantly, he sees significant parallels between the faith of the believer and the faith of the atheist. Dawkins, like all humanists, denies this down the line. But I think that McGrath makes some killer points, especially when, toward the end of his book, he comes to the topic of “awe.” McGrath quotes with strong approval from an article by Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt. Awe involves “anything that is experienced as much larger than the self, or the self’s ordinary level of experience or frame of reference” (150). He follows this with a powerful reflection by the thirteenth-century theologian Bonaventure.

The creatures of the world lead the souls of the wise and contemplative to the eternal God, since they are the shadows, echoes, and pictures; the vestiges, images, and visible images of the most powerful, wise and best first instance of that eternal origin, light and fulness; of that productive, exemplary and order-inducing art. They are set before us in order that we might know God. We are given signs by God... every creature by its very nature and kind of depiction and likeness of that eternal wisdom. (153)

Obviously, we are talking about—or at the very least touching close to—faith. It is not irrational, but in some sense moving beyond the rational. Or, perhaps more precisely, incorporating the rational as it puts it all in a broader sense. Emotional, yes. What is awe otherwise? But not quite the emotion of a soccer fan, when his or her team scores against a hated rival. Somehow more ethereal, all encompassing. (Although try telling the soccer fan that the emotion is not ethereal.) John Henry Newman—the great nineteenth-century theologian who moved from the Anglican church to Catholicism—is a great hero of McGrath. Newman is famous for saying: “I believe in design because I believe in God; not, I believe in God because I believe in design” (Newman 1973, 97). This is not turning your back on rationality. It is putting it in a broader, a deeper context.

It will be no surprise to learn that McGrath sees Dawkins as much committed to faith, to a religion, as the Christian! Dawkins is always talking of the sense of mystery, of awe, that the physical world, the understood-by-science physical world, evokes in him. McGrath (2005) quotes Dawkins, speaking of the Romantic poet and artist William Blake.

The impulses to awe, reverence and wonder which led Blake to mysticism... are precisely those that lead others of us to science. Our interpretation is different but what excites us is the same. The mystic is content to bask in the wonder and revel in a mystery that we were not “meant” to understand. The scientist feels the same wonder, but is restless, not content, recognizes the mystery as profound, then adds, “But we’re working on it”. (156–57)

Of course, Dawkins and fellow travelers, the humanists, deny vigorously that they are into the faith business, and by implication, are religious. For nearly forty years now, I have been arguing that too many people turn

Darwinian evolutionary theory into a religion—giving answers to origins, meaning, morality, sex, sin, and the future (Ruse 2005, 2017a, 2018). Expectedly, I am disliked even more than the Creationists. Dawkins' sneer in the *God Delusion* is but the tip of the iceberg. But, returning to the *God Delusion*, McGrath's insights make so much sense of what is occurring. That initial passage (opening this essay), about the evil ways of the God of the Old Testament, could have been penned by one of the minor prophets. And the constant belittling of Christians is the mirror image a fundamentalist preacher, going on about the inequities of the Anglicans and Methodists and anyone else who suggests that women might be preachers or that gays and lesbians might be normal human beings like the rest of us.

Bringing this section to an end, let me pick up on one final topic, anticipated in his title, discussed (at length) by McGrath. I refer to Dawkins' claim, in the *Selfish Gene*, that there are "memes," units of culture, analogous to genes, units of biology. McGrath confesses how seductive he once found them.

When I first encountered the idea of the "meme" in 1977, I found it immensely exciting. Here was something that potentially open to rigorous, evidence-based investigation, offering new possibilities for the study of intellectual and cultural development. (125)

Alas, all that glitters is not gold. Soon the problems started to emerge. Perhaps above all else, that whereas the mutations of the genes are random—not uncaused, but not appearing according to need—the "mutations" of the memes are very much not random. Darwin became an evolutionist in the spring of 1837. He then worked flat out for eighteen months looking for a cause. This was natural selection, discovered at the end of September 1838 (Browne 1995). It was a new, needed variation. Its discovery was anything but random. It involved a lot of hard work, primary sorting through the work and discoveries of animal and plant breeders, in the farmyard and in the dwellings of fanciers of pretty or songful birds and of tougher fighting dogs and the like (Ruse 1975). Memetics, so called, was a dud from the beginning.

I find it interesting that, in my synopsis of the *God Delusion*, I was not led as was McGrath to discuss memes, even briefly. Indeed, I had to go back to the *God Delusion* to see if there was any reference to them at all! There is in fact a ten-page interlude devoted to them. I cannot say that there is much related to the general theme of the book, but a page or two are squeezed in. We learn for instance that some religious memes have survival value.

Faith (belief without evidence) is a virtue. The more your beliefs defy the evidence, the more virtuous you are. Virtuoso believers who can imagine



something really weird, unsupported and insupportable, in the teeth of evidence and reason, are especially highly regarded. (Dawkins 2006, 199)

Here, as always in meme discussions, I feel that rather than doing real science—prediction and so forth—we are just redescribing what is known. I will say that, although Daniel Dennett (1990) seems enthused by memes, my attitude is very much the attitude of most philosophers. Memes by another name are an old hat, as are the Lamarckian-type objections. Back around 1880, the Pragmatist William James tried out the hypothesis.

The mutations of societies, then, from generation to generation, are in the main due directly or indirectly to the acts or the examples of individuals whose genius was so adapted to the receptivities of the moment, or whose accidental position of authority was so critical that they became ferments, initiators of movements, setters of precedent or fashion, centers of corruption, or destroyers of other persons, whose gifts, had they had free play, would have led society in another direction. (441)

There have been many similar attempts. Karl Popper (1974) tried his hand at the project. As did his contemporary Stephen Toulmin (1972). Always, they came up against the devastating problem of the nondirectedness of biological variations and the directedness of cultural variations. There are other problems too. The nineteenth-century philosopher William Whewell (1840) pointed out that some of the greatest advances in science occur when disparate areas of study are brought together under one uniting hypothesis. His prime example was of Newton's law of gravitational attraction explaining both the heavens, Copernicus's heliocentric theory, and the Earth, Galileo's physics of motion. Whewell called this a "consilience of inductions," and it was very influential on Darwin as he put together his theory showing how natural selection explained behavior and the fossil record and biogeography and anatomy and systematics and embryology and more. But, generally, this kind of uniting, a kind of hybridization, is not that significant in biology, at least not the major moves of evolution—the arrival of mammals, for instance. The tree of life is branching not uniting. In light of problems like these I find it unsurprising that when, in 1986, I wrote a book with a chapter on "evolutionary epistemology" I had no mention at all of memes. We philosophers could have saved McGrath the time and effort of wandering off down a false trail.

#### *THE DAWKINS DELUSION?*

I have just co-edited the *Cambridge History of Atheism* (Bullivant and Ruse 2021). It has 60 contributors and is over 400,000 words long (1000+ pages). It is heavyweight, literally and metaphorically. It is not a punchy polemic, meant to be read at one or two sittings. *The Dawkins*

*Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, is co-authored by the husband-and-wife team of Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (2007)—although, somewhat curiously, written in the first person as though one person (I presume Alister) was the sole author. (He is not married to Lizzie Ruse; I can tell you that!) It is everything that the *Cambridge History of Atheism* is not. It is short, 118 pages (no index), it is punchy, and it is polemical. It is meant to be read at one or two sittings. It refers not only to the *God Delusion* but to earlier works, particularly those by Alister McGrath. It is also written with a bitterness that is missing from *Dawkins' God*. This is the work of someone who realizes that no meeting place is possible. We have the Greeks and the Trojans, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, the Democrats and the Republicans. In 1981, in the State of Arkansas, I was a witness for the ACLU, along with such luminaries as the biologist Stephen Jay Gould and theologian Langdon Gilkey, when we fought in court (successfully) against a law that mandated the teaching of Genesis in biology classes (Ruse 1988). There was never the bitterness between our side and their side. I have indeed an autographed copy of Duane T. Gish's *Evolution: The Fossils say No!* (1973) autographed by Gish to his "good friend, Michael Ruse." The bibliophile within me prays for the day when Darwin will be overthrown, and Creationism will rule okay. In the next decade, I was good friends with the leader of the Intelligent Design Movement, Phillip Johnson. I even contributed to his Festschrift. (Honesty compels me to add that in the same year I contributed to the Festschrift of Richard Dawkins! Violetta in *La Traviata* has nothing on me.) Those happy days are over. We are in the trenches of Flanders, looking at the enemy across no-man's land.

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 clearly are 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! [Stand up Michael Ruse. Don't hide behind Lizzie!] They are appeasers! *Amen!* Real scientists reject belief in God! *Hal-lelujah!* The God Jews believed in back in Old Testament times is a psychotic child abuser! *Amen! You tell them, brother!* (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 12)

Expectedly, Alister McGrath was both "saddened and troubled" when he read *The God Delusion*. One is comforted to learn that one is not going to get, in response, the Christian equivalent to the *God Delusion*: "that would be pointless and counterproductive, not to mention intellectually

dishonest.” Tempting though it is to go on teasing my good friend Alister McGrath, let me make it very clear that *The Dawkins Delusion?* is not such a book. Rather, McGrath’s approach followed my approach in the first section of this essay—more accurately, my approach followed McGrath’s approach, offering no précis, picking out important items in the *God Delusion* and commenting on them.

McGrath plunges in by taking up that all-important topic of faith. Dawkins is withering on the subject. It is stupid and dishonest and those who teach their children to take it seriously are, literally, child abusers. McGrath runs through a number of criticisms, offering counters to each. Faith is infantile. Dawkins undercuts his case by having absolutely no idea of the nature and claims of Christian doctrine. Faith is Irrational. Again, Dawkins is out of his depth. He criticizes Tertullian for saying we should believe things because they are absurd. Dawkins is unaware that Tertullian is making something of an in-joke playing on Aristotelian rhetoric. Same with Dawkins taking Luther out of context. Arguments for God’s Existence. Dawkins is unaware that Aquinas’ five proofs are not intended to stand on their own but to reinforce and illuminate faith. The Extreme Improbability of God. Dawkins thinks God must be unacceptably complex. He is right off base here. “We may be highly improbable—*yet we are here*. The issue then is not whether God is *probable* but whether God is *actual*” (29). The God of the Gaps. Serious theologians simply do not take this seriously. It is a favorite of unacceptable offsprings of Christianity like Intelligent Design Theory.

I would be less than candid if I did not say that, over time, this chapter has not stood up that well. It scores off points without going into real detail. Far better to go back to *Dawkins’ God*, where the discussion is significantly deeper. For instance, after reading the (not long) discussion of Tertullian, I felt that I—who had shared Dawkins’ prejudices based on a superficial knowledge—had a much better grasp of what was going on.

For reason is a property of God’s, since there is nothing which God, the creator of all things, has not foreseen, arranged and determined by reason. Furthermore, there is nothing which God does not wish to be investigated and understood by reason. (McGrath 2005, 101)

The next chapter of the *Dawkins Delusion?* takes up the question of whether science has disproved God. I should say that McGrath really starts to get into his stride here as he explores the question of whether—as Dawkins asserts—science can explain everything. Here, he seems much more aware of the point I made in my discussion in *Dawkins’ God*. It is not simply, by chance as it were, that there are questions beyond science. The real point is that science simply does not set out to explain everything. I was amazed to find McGrath turning to the Nobel Prize winner Peter Medawar for support here. Amazed, because as a philosopher, I knew that

Medawar (1961) is the author of the cruelest review ever to appear in a philosophy journal, and in the leading journal *Mind* no less. It was of the *Phenomenon of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and certainly leaves the impression that Medawar has nothing but contempt for my side of the campus. (As it happens, it was not Teilhard that Medawar was really going after, but Julian Huxley who wrote a glowing introduction to the English translation of Teilhard).

There was another, more philosophically sensitive, side to Medawar.

That there is indeed a limit on science is made very likely by the existence of questions that science cannot answer, and that no conceivable advance of science would empower it to answer... I have in mind such questions as:

How did everything begin?  
 What are we all here for?  
 What is the point of living?

Doctrinaire positivism—now something of a period piece—dismissed all such questions as nonquestions or pseudo-questions such as only simpletons ask and only charlatans profess to be able to answer. (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 39, quoting Medawar 1985, 66)

Well said—as it was by Michael Ruse, much later!

My natural modesty—a characteristic noted by all my friends—should not stop me from saying that McGrath in this chapter has a highly favorable (to me) discussion of Dawkins' charge that I am a modern-day Neville Chamberlain. I invite readers to look at the pertinent passages themselves. "Dawkins's argument is so muddled here that it is difficult to identify the point at issue. Was it that Ruse dared to criticize Dawkins, an act of *lèse magesté*?" (47) That thought has crossed my mind, often. McGrath (legitimately) uses Dawkins' attack on me to underline how Dawkins himself is in the religion business. He is an atheistic fundamentalist.

In his third chapter, McGrath turns to the origin of religion. Dawkins, in the tradition of Marx and Freud and others, offers a naturalistic explanation for religion. It is a byproduct of being open to indoctrination by one's parents and other grownups. If a berry is poisonous, you need to learn this fast, without too much questioning. Unfortunately, religion slips in along the way.

The main criticism of this accidental-byproduct theory is the lack of serious evidence offered on its behalf. Where's the *science*? What's the evidence for such a belief? We find speculation and supposition taking the place of the rigorous evidence-driven and evidence-based arguments we have a right to expect. (56)

In any case, Dawkins' definition of religion, a matter of God belief, is crude beyond words. "Dawkins deals with this serious problem by evading it, choosing not to engage with the issues that have famously destroyed

previous attempts to generalize about the roots of religion” (59). Continuing:

There are many who believe passionately in God but eschew religious behavior—evangelicals represent a case in point. Again, it is possible to have religious attitudes without any attending belief in God—Buddhism is a case in point. Many individuals have a reverential attitude towards nature that is not ultimately theistic [Richard Dawkins?] but could still reasonably be termed religious [Richard Dawkins?]. (63)

And so to memes. Perhaps the less said the better.

The meme is a biological answer to an anthropological problem, which simply disregards and discounts the major successes of the discipline of anthropology in the explanation of cultural development—which took place without needing to bother with the unsubstantiated idea of a meme. The meme is conceptually redundant. (73)

At this point, McGrath on memes reminds me of several of my ex-girlfriends who once loved me passionately, and now have very different opinions. “You are the scum of the earth! The scum of the earth!” (This was said after she just learned that I was off to Harvard for a year’s sabbatical with a new girlfriend. Lucky Harvard! Lucky me—the new girlfriend is now my wife Lizzie!)

Finally, *Is Religion Evil?* McGrath writes with some authority here, having grown up in Northern Ireland during the troubles. But, as he points out, although religion does clearly lead sometimes to violence, it is far from the case that it always does—think of pacifists like the Amish—and, in any case, at least as much violence comes from the nonreligious. Think, most obviously, of Russia under Stalin. Dawkins says: “I do not believe there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca—or Chartres, York Minster, or Notre Dame.” McGrath asks simply: Has Richard Dawkins absolutely no idea of what happened to so many churches in the Soviet Union from 1920 on? Place of worship after place of worship was burnt down or dynamited. And do not forget the French Revolution.

Madame Rolande was brought to the guillotine to face execution on trumped up charges in 1792. As she prepared to die, she bowed mockingly towards the statue of liberty in the Place de la Révolution and uttered the words for which she is remembered: “liberty, what crimes are committed in your name”. (81)

One important matter taken up by McGrath is Dawkins’ reading of the Old Testament. (Remember, I regretted there was nothing on this in *Dawkins’ God*). Most obviously, Dawkins’ reading is highly selective. What about Leviticus 18:21? “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.” Or Leviticus 25:39? “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor

and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves.” In any case, it is the New Testament and the story and meaning of Jesus that is the determining factor for Christians. “To use a familiar New Testament image, Jesus did not create the wine of the Gospels *de novo*, but took the water of the Jewish law and transmuted it to something better. The Hebrew Scriptures are read and interpreted through a Christological filter or prism” (91).

Enough! “Ironically the ultimate achievement of the *God Delusion* for modern atheism may be to suggest that this emperor has no clothes to wear. Might *atheism* be a delusion about God?” (97).

### REFLECTIONS

Thus, Dawkins on religion, and McGrath on Dawkins on religion. I am not sure of the value of a conventional conclusion, giving a quick overview and some thoughts on the ultimate truths of the matter. If what we have seen tells us anything, there may be truths of the matter. It is highly improbable that they are “ultimate,” if that means “final, once and for all.” I will conclude with two personal reflections.

A month or two back, I was roped into a Department of Philosophy PhD dissertation examination. The external examiner—someone from the Department of Religion (in North America, the external examiners are usually on campus)—asked the candidate why he did not refer to a certain prominent, certainly pertinent, piece of work. “In philosophy, we never look at anything more than ten years old,” came the reply. I was made extremely uncomfortable—apart from anything else it means that already four-fifths of my work is out of date—but I was not entirely surprised. In the light of this kind of sentiment, is the Dawkins–McGrath clash (I will not call it a debate) long past its sell-by date? Fun at the time, but now confined to the archives, to be unearthed only by the next cohort of history-of-ideas doctoral candidates looking for promising dissertation material?

I wondered about this. Fortunately, I was in a good position to put this question to the test. Earlier this year, I published a book—*Taking God Seriously: Two Different Voices*—co-authored with a Dominican, a world-expert on Aquinas (Davies and Ruse 2021). We wrote our chapters separately, and in writing this essay I turned to look at what I had to say on such matters as faith and the different natures of science and religion, if such there be. I was astounded to see how heavily I had relied on the writings of Richard Dawkins, the *God Delusion* in particular. Again and again, I cited him as my authority. I start my sections right off with a discussion of faith and quote the *God Delusion*: ““Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument” (1, quoting Dawkins 2006, 308). Then I get into reasons for religious belief. “To say

the least, there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you. Obey your parents, obey the tribal elders, especially when they adopt a solemn, minatory tone. Trust your elders without question” (10, quoting Dawkins 2006, 174). And it keeps going. As you might expect, I could not resist Dawkins on the ontological argument: “an infantile argument.” Take that St Anselm. Take that René Descartes. Nor could I resist the wise reflections on philosophy as a group: “I mean it as a compliment when I say that you could almost define a philosopher as someone who won’t take common sense for an answer” (60, quoting Dawkins 2006, 83).

For me, at least, a philosopher writing on the science/religion interface, Dawkins and the *God Delusion* are alive and well—at least, they are alive. As you might expect from what you have learnt of my craven nature, I was not altogether sympathetic to Dawkins’ position and, as I read my treatment, although not much cited, I could clearly see the influence of Alister McGrath. This was especially true of my treatment of faith. I should say, however, that putting things in context, for me by far my greatest debt to Alister McGrath is to his text books: *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (1997) and *The Christian Theology Reader* (1995). I explained at the beginning of this essay that I was raised, intensely, as a Quaker. That meant I knew a lot about Christianity; but, my knowledge was, let us say, idiosyncratic. Quakers put much emphasis on the third arm of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost. The Inner Light or “that of God in every person.” This means, apart from literalistic readings of the Sermon on the Mount, Quakers are not much into Bible reading. Most of what I knew (and still know) comes from conventional Church of England teachings in primary schools in Britain after the Second World war. (England does not have a strict separation of church and state. Senior bishops are in the House of Lords, helping to govern Britain.) Added to this are the effects of long sleepless nights in hotels, in alien time zones, when I was off at conferences and the like. The only reading material was the Gideon Bible and I spent many a long hour with my nose right in it. (For this reason, I cannot stand any translation other than the King James Version).

Around 2000, I was asked by my editor at Cambridge University Press to write a short book on Darwinism and Christianity. I never say “no” to a suggestion by a press editor. But, then, I realized I was totally ignorant of conventional Christian theology. A year or two back, a good friend—a female Lutheran minister—had told me about the Augustinian doctrine of substitutionary atonement. I was as appalled as I was amazed. I knew therefor that, if I was to write this book—that appeared as *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?* (2001)—I had to bone up on Christian theory. To this end, thanks to a fortuitous find in a university bookstore, I read McGrath’s introduction and collected readings. I can say simply, entirely

without flattery, I have never read texts so clear, so comprehensive, so inspiring. They came from the pen of a master teacher.

What I am asserting, therefore, is that for me today, not only is Dawkins' the *God Delusion* important—in the sense I have now explained—but so also are the writings of Alister McGrath. His books on Dawkins are not the masterpieces of his text and readings, but they are very important in the understanding of Dawkins and in grasping how mistaken he was (and still is). As far as I am concerned, that graduate student, who was so toffee-nosed about older writings, could not have been more wrong. The Dawkins-McGrath clash is as vital today as it was back then.

My second reflection is rather different, more sociological than philosophical or theological. How could such a shabby book as the *God Delusion* have sold so many copies? It simply could not have been simply on the basis of its inherent worth and scholarship. There is none. The answer must lie elsewhere, and—having spent some considerable time on a soon-to-appear book on war and prejudice (*Why We Hate: The Roots of Human Conflict*, 2022)—I believe it does and I know where. The big sociological event, in Britain and the United States (and elsewhere) in the last half century, is the loss in the 1970s of secure, working-class jobs. No longer could you expect lifelong employment at, say, General Motors—good pay, medical benefits, decent holidays, generous pension. Outsourcing to countries with less expensive labor and automation simply destroyed the status quo. Moreover, despite the promises of Potemkin villages like Brexit, these jobs are never to return. Even if work is forced to return home, things have changed. The old jobs will never come back. In my state of Florida, when I arrived here twenty years ago, alongside the little park where I walk my dogs, at least twice a week there would be a train pulling a hundred hoppers filled with coal from West Virginia. No more. All along I10 there are new fields filled with solar panels. No sentimentality about avoiding global warming. In the “Sunshine State,” solar provides cheaper power than coal.

Naturally, the working class are resentful and inclined to strike out, and what better targets than the comfortable, well-educated middle class? How else did Trump get elected?

Status has always been part of American politics, but right now a variety of social changes have threatened the status of working class and rural whites who used to feel they had a secure, middle status position in American society—not the glitzy top, but respectable, ‘Main Street’ core of America. The reduction of working-class wages and job security, growing demographic diversity, and increasing urbanization of the population have greatly undercut that sense and fueled political reaction. (Edsall 2020, quoting sociologist Cecelia L. Ridgeway)

To every action, there is a political reaction. The middle class, the “meritocracy,” strikes back. Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel



(2020) writes: “It is important to remember that most Americans—nearly two-thirds—do not have a four-year college degree. By telling workers that their inadequate education is the reason for their troubles, meritocrats moralize success and failure and unwittingly promote credentialism—an insidious prejudice against those who do not have college degrees.” Adding: “Survey research bears out what many working-class voters intuit: At a time when racism and sexism are out of favor (discredited though not eliminated), credentialism is the last acceptable prejudice.” Referring to a recent survey: “Beyond revealing the disparaging views that college-educated elites have of less-educated people, the study also found that elites are unembarrassed by this prejudice. They may denounce racism and sexism, but they are unapologetic about their negative attitudes toward the less educated.”

New atheism is caught up in all of this. Canadian sociologist Stephen LeDrew (2016) argues the debate sparked by the New Atheists—Richard Dawkins of the *God Delusion*, Sam Harris of *The End of Faith*, and others—is better understood as a manifestation of class issues than of something directly involving religious prejudice, for or against. On the one side, in America especially, those losing out in the class wars are often those drawn to a simplistic evangelical Christianity. Conversely, the New Atheists are anything but a representative group of citizens. They are very well-educated, with jobs of high social status—professorships at leading universities and the like. LeDrew claims: “The key idea within this [New Atheist] ideology is the evolution of society from the premodern phase of religious superstition to the modern phase characterized by scientism and its application to social and political questions and problems. This involves a teleological vision of human progress, with ‘premodern’ giving way to ‘modern’ ways of thinking and living” (59). As the working class look down on those better off and better educated, the New Atheists are a leading part of the ideology of those looking down at those less well-off and less well-educated. Buying and reading the *God Delusion*—if that indeed was what you did, rather than just put it on your coffee table—was not about science and religion, at least not primarily. It was far more a question of confirming your superior status.

Let us end with this conclusion. Alister McGrath was doing his Christian duty in opposing and criticizing Dawkins and the *God Delusion* from a science—religion perspective. He was also doing his Christian duty in opposing and criticizing Dawkins and the *God Delusion* from the perspective of one who thinks these class differences are a terrible scar on our civilizations and we should do all we can to bring them to an end.

And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more.

His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

(Matthew 25:20–21, King James Version!)

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