
INTRODUCTION

Why argue with an Atheist?

We live at a point in history where atheism is shoving its way into the public square, and noisily declaring the need to remove religion. A cadre of militant unbelievers calling themselves The Four Horsemen—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett—have assumed the leadership of a growing Anglo-American movement, releasing volley after volley of bestsellers and DVDs into the Christian culture.

Gone are the days of polite atheism. Christianity is under attack.

What to make of it? In one sense, not much at all. We are reminded of the demon Screwtape's words in C. S. Lewis' brilliant and biting "Screwtape Proposes a Toast." Apologizing to his fellow demons for the meagerness of the fare of souls at the annual dinner of the Tempters' Training College, he remarks "it would be vain to deny that the human souls on whose anguish we have been feasting tonight were of pretty poor quality....Oh, to get one's teeth again into a Farinata, a Henry VIII or even a Hitler!...Instead of this, what do we have tonight?" Mere little sinners but lots of them. "The quality may be wretched," remarks Screwtape to cheer his fellow demons up, "but we never had souls (of a sort) in more abundance."¹ Well, the general quality of the atheists'

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters, with Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York: MacMillan, 1961), 154–155.

arguments now on the market is decidedly low, but “we never had souls (of a sort) in more abundance.” Gone are the days of such atheist giants as Friedrich Nietzsche; here are the days of mass-produced unbelief.

Yet there is cause for worry precisely because we live in an age that judges things more by quantity rather than quality. Judging solely in terms of bulk, some might think atheists had won a decisive intellectual victory as if there was a direct correlation between the number of atheist books being hawked in the public square and the number of atheists actually among the public. Even more disturbing, the lack of quality in the atheist fare may all too regrettably be a sign of a corresponding lack of quality in arguments offered by theists, or at least a lack of sufficient intellectual preparation on the part of the audience.

Whatever the cause and despite their quality, the rash of books by atheists has indeed had the effect of bringing some to lose their faith. We offer a personal story from one of us (Scott Hahn), worth telling because it was an important impetus to our writing this book together.

~: ~

One of my normally cheerful colleagues in the theology department at Franciscan University came into my office quite agitated one afternoon this last fall semester. As he reported it, a student had come to him, distressed because several of her fellow theology majors were losing their faith after reading Dawkins’ *God Delusion*. My colleague considered the book to be so poorly argued that it was entirely without danger. But what he didn’t count on—and what I didn’t yet fully comprehend myself—was the power of Dawkins’ rhetoric. As a result, they fell entirely under the spell of his words.

Franciscan University of Steubenville is as excellent a faith-filled Catholic college as you’ll find. If Dawkins’ apology for atheism is creat-

ing casualties at Franciscan University, can you imagine what effect it's having at other colleges and universities?

Upon talking over this bad news, Benjamin Wiker and I decided we had to do something. We felt that we have a moral burden of providing sufficient rebuttals to the kinds of arguments that atheists are now offering, especially those of Dawkins, the most popular. We had to write a book, and get it out near the time for the release of the paperback version of *The God Delusion*, an event sure to make Dawkins' book a bestseller twice over.

~: ~

Why not answer every atheist book? It would obviously be too burdensome a task, given that there appears to be no end of new atheist books in sight, to attempt a point-by-point refutation of every one as it appears. Since Dawkins' book is the most influential and the arguments of all the atheists including Dawkins tend to be quite repetitious, we will focus on *The God Delusion* (as supplemented by his other writings). If readers know where Dawkins' flaws are, they will be fairly well-immunized against the other atheists' books as they continue to roll off the presses.

Before leaping into a deeper analysis, we'd like to offer a few words about Dawkins' approach, as well as our own. As our mention of *Screwtape* implies, Dawkins' *God Delusion* is rather disappointing, and we are not alone in that assessment. Both Christians and atheists, non-scientists and scientists, have panned it. Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga warns readers that "one shouldn't look to this book for even-handed and thoughtful commentary. In fact the proportion of insult, ridicule, mockery, spleen, and vitriol is astounding."² One of Dawkins' fellow atheists, philosopher and Darwinist advocate Michael Ruse, has

2 Alvin Plantinga, "The Dawkins Confusion: *Naturalism ad absurdum*," *Books and Culture* (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html>).

said even more harshly, "*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist..."³ Christian Terry Eagleton notes sarcastically that "Such is Dawkins's unruffled scientific partiality that in a book of almost four hundred pages, he can scarcely bring himself to concede that a single human benefit has flowed from religious faith, a view which is as a priori improbable as it is false." The problem, Eagleton points out, is that Dawkins is ignorant of the very subject he is so at pains to criticize.⁴ Atheist Thomas Nagel notes that since Dawkins aims "to overturn the convention of respect toward religion that belongs to the etiquette of modern civilization," he resorts to "persistently violating the convention, and being as offensive as possible..."⁵ Nagel is obviously not in sympathy with Dawkins' crude assaults. Evolutionary geneticist H. Allen Orr states, "Despite my admiration for much of Dawkins's work, I'm afraid that I'm among those scientists who must part company with him here. Indeed, *The God Delusion* seems to me badly flawed. Though I once labeled Dawkins a professional atheist, I'm forced, after reading his new book, to conclude he's actually more an amateur....The most disappointing feature of *The God Delusion* is Dawkins's failure to engage religious thought in any serious way. This is, obviously, an odd thing to say about a book-length investigation of God."⁶

∴ ∽

For anyone who has read his other works, *The God Delusion* is a decided letdown. It is caustic and peevish, rather than being genuinely witty or insightful, and has the feel of a book dashed off by someone

3 From the cover of Alister McGrath and Joanna McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

4 Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching," *London Review of Books* (October 19, 2006).

5 Thomas Nagel, review of *The God Delusion*, "The Fear of Religion," *The New Republic* (10/23/2006): 25–29.

6 H. Allen Orr, "A Mission to Convert," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 54, no. 1 (Jan. 11, 2007).

who is annoyed that his opponents still exist and can barely condescend to dismiss them. As a result, *The God Delusion* is filled with self-congratulatory smugness appropriate to gala dinners thrown by people of the same tightly-wound intellectual circle who, after too much wine, trade in spiteful quips about the incomprehensible stupidity of anyone not sharing their opinions.

And Dawkins has no trouble being nasty. A few examples will give the flavor. While he hopes that “religious readers who open it [*The God Delusion*] will be atheists when they put it down,” he realizes, of course, that “dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument” because “their resistance [has been] built up over years of childhood indoctrination.”⁷ Of course, “people of a theological bent are often chronically incapable of distinguishing what is true from what they’d like to be true.”⁸

And the spite continues. To the question of whether religion contributes to a more healthy life, Dawkins finds it “hard to believe...that health is improved by the semi-permanent state of morbid guilt suffered by a Roman Catholic possessed of normal human frailty and less than normal intelligence.”⁹ In regard to the cross-cultural appearance of belief, Dawkins admits that “no known culture lacks some version of the time-consuming, wealth-consuming, hostility-provoking rituals, the anti-factual, counter-productive fantasies of religion.”¹⁰ The very title itself belies any hint that Dawkins is seriously engaging those with whom he so passionately disagrees, for a delusion is “a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence,” and as Dawkins (borrowing from another author) quips “When one person suffers from

7 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 5.

8 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 108.

9 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 167.

10 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 166.

delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion.”¹¹

In addition to the caustic tone, Dawkins has a tendency to slip into logical fallacies and factual errors that are nothing short of astounding. As we point out at several places, he continually assumes what he would have to prove, the fallacy of *petitio principii* or begging the question. Even stranger is his casual treatment of the facts regarding the 20th century’s atheistic regimes, which we now know wiped out tens upon tens of millions of lives in the name of unbelief. This leads him to make statements that display a disregard of well-known facts. Given that the Soviet destruction of Orthodox churches is so copiously attested, it is hard to know what to say to someone who could write in all seriousness, “I do not believe there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca—or Chartres, York Minster or Notre Dame, the Shwe Dagon, the temples of Kyoto or, of course, the Buddhas of Bamiyan.”¹²

We would wish for the kind of philosophical acumen and gracious reasonableness in Dawkins that one finds in Antony Flew, who until quite recently was the world’s most famous atheist, the successor of Bertrand Russell and the predecessor of Dawkins himself. For Flew, his “conversion” from atheism to belief in God was rational. “I must say,” he states near the end of his last book, *There is a God*, “that the journey to my discovery of the Divine has thus far been a pilgrimage of reason. I have followed the argument where it has led me. And it has led me to accept the existence of a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient Being.”¹³

This conclusion is anathema to Dawkins. As a consequence, his response to Flew’s intellectual conversion was to insinuate that it was a

11 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 5.

12 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 249.

13 Antony Flew, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 155.

product of senility, and to resort to parody and summary dismissal of the arguments that Flew found persuasive.¹⁴ This follows his general pattern. Having neither patience nor sympathy with his opponents renders Dawkins almost completely incapable of presenting the arguments of believers in anything more than an inaccurate caricature.

Ironically, one is reminded in reading Dawkins of the kind of acrimony that is often found among fundamentalist preachers who douse their opponents with scorn and ignite them with rhetoric to create a spectacle of combustion for their audience. The preacher seems thereby to be a true prophet, calling fire down from the heavens to consume the unbelievers in righteous conflagration. Dawkins preaches to his audience in much the same way. Filled with contempt for his opponents, he seems unable to fathom that anyone could rationally disagree with him. Since his opponents must therefore be unreasonable, then they are fit only for a rhetorical scorching that reduces them to pitiable ashes. Over and above all this, just as with the fundamentalist preacher, Dawkins resorts to continual dire, semi-apocalyptic warnings about the impending afflictions that will surely occur if the “mind virus” of religion is not soon cured by atheism—a situation so ominous that it calls for the active intervention by some unnamed official power so that religious indoctrination of children by parents (which Dawkins terms child abuse) can be stopped before humanity’s doom is sealed. One feels him to be unknowingly but continually slipping into self-parody.

It might be tempting for believers to respond with equal bitterness and inflamed rhetoric. We think that is as unwise as it is unhelpful. Instead, we shall examine the caliber of Dawkins’ statements and arguments on their own merits. As the great Greek philosopher Plato once said, the best way to assess the argumentative core of largely rhetorical speeches, is to strip them of all their rhetoric and analyze the bare argu-

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 82.

ments. We believe that once this is done, and the caliber of his arguments is gauged, then the very weakness of Dawkins' *God Delusion* will be exposed. That is the main goal of our book.

We must emphasize that our main goal is not to make a case for Christianity or even theism (those interested in these kinds of arguments should read Scott Hahn, *Reasons to Believe*¹⁵), but to expose the weaknesses of Dawkins' atheism. On his part, Dawkins states that his case against religion is mainly a case against Christianity,¹⁶ and we will assume this as well. But we assume it, for the most part, to assess the caliber of his attack. This means that our defined task is largely negative. Yet, the reader will become aware of a general, natural theological position that emerges from our analysis, and in fact, halfway through this book we do provide a different kind of proof of God's existence after exposing the faults of Dawkins' attempts to disprove the existence of God.

Readers may wonder why we end with faith rather than beginning there. The reason is quite simple. The way to meet an opponent like Dawkins is on *his* ground. If his arguments fail on his own terms, then they are of little use as weapons against the faith. There is another reason to proceed this way, one pointed out by St. Thomas many centuries ago. There is no sense arguing on the basis of Catholic doctrine or Holy Scripture with someone who accepts neither as true.¹⁷ Arguing with an atheist on matters of revelation is an enormous, energy-consuming waste of time. Thus, we lay aside all matters of Divine Revelation, and argue solely on the basis of reason alone.

It is our hope that this book finds its way to those shaken by Dawkins' *God Delusion* so that they may see how shaky his arguments

15 Scott Hahn, *Reasons to Believe: How to Understand, Explain, and Defend the Catholic Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), esp. pp. 15–55.

16 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 37.

17 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.8.

actually are. We shall proceed in a gentlemanly way. If we might borrow from Dawkins, who says before he begins “I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else,”¹⁸ we too shall be as gentle as we can be with Dawkins’ atheism—but no more. His arguments may seem strong, as long as he can hold forth without an adversary to call his position into question, and we think that he may well realize this. We offer our book for all those swayed into doubt by Dawkins, so that reason may triumph over rhetoric.

18 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 27.