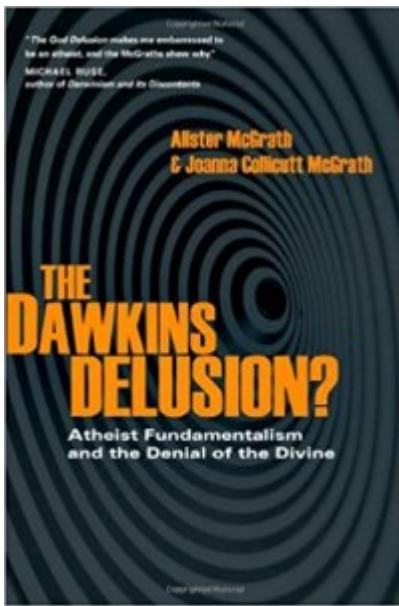


Book Report: The Dawkins Delusion?



The full title of this book is, “The Dawkins DELUSION? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine” by Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath. It is a commentary of Richard Dawkins’s book, *The God Delusion*.

The main thing I got from this book other than increasing my vocabulary is to learn that Richard Dawkins’s rants against God and religion are not considered to be a threat by the Intelligent Design movement. On the contrary, some academics who are leaders of this movement actually consider Dawkins’s work to be an asset to them! And yet other academics who are atheists consider his arguments to be weak and unscientific. And some then distance themselves from him saying, “Don’t judge the rest of us by this (Dawkins’s) pseudointellectual drivel.”

I also learned it was Dawkins who first coined the word “meme”. Now I understand why it rhymes with *gene*; it is based on that word. Dawkins’s worldview causes him to try to connect everything with Darwinian evolution.

Some of my favorite quotes from the book:

(Page 24) Dawkins’s inept engagement with (Martin) Luther shows how Dawkins abandons even the pretense of rigorous evidence-based scholarship. Anecdote is substituted for evidence; selective Internet trawling for quotes displaces rigorous and comprehensive engagement with primary sources. In this book, Dawkins throws the conventions of academic scholarship to the winds; he wants to write a work of propaganda and consequently treats the accurate rendition of religion as an inconvenient impediment to his chief agenda, which is the intellectual and cultural destruction of religion. It’s an unpleasant characteristic that he shares with other fundamentalists.

(Page 41) Science has, in Dawkins’s view, wrecked faith in God, relegating

God to the margins of culture, where he is embraced by deluded fanatics. There's an obvious problem, of course—namely, that rather a **lot of scientists do believe in God**. *The God Delusion* was published in 2006. In that same year three other books were published by leading research scientists. Owen Gingerich, a noted Harvard astronomer, produced *God's Universe*, declaring that “the universe has been created with intention and purpose, and that this belief does not interfere with the scientific enterprise.”¹⁷ Francis Collins published his *Language of God*, which argues that the wonder and ordering of nature points to a Creator God, very much along the lines of the traditional Christian conception. In this book Collins describes his own conversion from atheism to Christian faith. This hardly fits Dawkins's rigid insistence that real scientists are atheists.

¹⁷Bruce E. Blaine, *The Psychology of Diversity: Perceiving and Experiencing Social Difference* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 2000).

(Page 49) ...the intelligent design movement ... now regards Dawkins as one of its greatest assets. Why? Because his hysterical and dogmatic insistence on the atheist implications of Darwinism is alienating many potential supporters of the theory of evolution. William Dembski, the intellectual architect of this movement, constantly thanks his intelligent Designer for Dawkins.²⁷ As he put it recently in a somewhat sarcastic e-mail to Dawkins: “I regularly tell my colleagues that you and your work are one of God's greatest gifts to the intelligent-design movement. So please, keep at it!” I suspect that he's delighted by *The God Delusion*²⁸

²⁶*The God Delusion*, pp. 131-34, with reference to Michael Behe; William Dembski is not mentioned. For a somewhat more informed engagement with the movement, see Niall Shanks, *Cod, the Devil, and Darwin: A Critique of Intelligent Design Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁷For Dembski's approach, see William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

²⁸See Madeleine Bunting's perceptive article “Why the Intelligent Design Lobby Thanks God for Richard Dawkins,” *The Guardian* [London], March 27, 2006.

(Page 51) One of the most melancholy aspects of *The God Delusion* is how its author appears to have made **the transition from a scientist with a passionate concern for truth to a crude antireligious propagandist** who shows a disregard for evidence. This was evident in the TV series *The Root of All Evil?* which served as a pilot for *The God Delusion*. Here, Dawkins sought out religious extremists who advocated violence in the name of religion, or who were aggressively antiscientific in their outlook. No representative figures were included or considered. Dawkins's conclusion? Religion leads to violence and is antiscience.

Unsurprisingly, the series was panned by its critics, who saw it as intellectually risible (deserving to be laughed at). As one senior atheist scientific colleague at Oxford said to me afterward, “Don't judge the rest of us by this pseudointellectual drivel.” Yet *The God Delusion* simply continues this flagrantly biased approach to evidence, mocking and excoriating alternatives, refusing to take them seriously. Yes, there are religious people who are deeply hostile to science. And that number will, if anything,

simply increase due to Dawkins's polemical use of science in his epic struggle against religion. Perhaps it's time that the scientific community as a whole protested against the abuse of their ideas in the service of such an atheist fundamentalism.

(page 56) 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 that we have a right to expect. Dawkins's theories of the biological origins of religion, though interesting, must be considered to be highly speculative. His arguments about the psychological origins of religion are littered with "maybes" and "mights," verbal signposts that there is no substantial evidence for the highly tenuous and speculative ideas he explores with his readers.

On reading this section, I felt that I was being bludgeoned into submission to his ideas by the sheer force of his assertions rather than led along willingly on account of the weight of the evidence on the one hand and Dawkins's skill in presenting it on the other. The arguments begin with cautious "could be" statements, advancing tentative hypotheses for consideration. Yet they rapidly become bold "is" statements, making assertions without the firm evidence normally thought to be required for rigorous scientific argument.

(page 58) Yet there is a much deeper question here, one that Dawkins does not even begin to address. What is the difference between a worldview and a religion? The dividing line is notoriously imprecise and, many would say, is constructed by those with vested interests to defend. A worldview is a comprehensive way of viewing reality that tries to make sense of its various elements within a single, overarching way of looking at things. Some, of course, are religious; many are not. Buddhism, existentialism, Islam, atheism and Marxism all fall into this category. Some worldviews claim to be universally true; others, more in tune with the postmodern ethos, view themselves as local. None of them can be "proved" to be right. Precisely because they represent "big picture" ways of engaging with the world, their fundamental beliefs ultimately lie beyond final proof. And here is the point: worldviews can easily promote fanaticism. Dawkins treats this as a defining characteristic of religion, airbrushing out of his account of violence any suggestion that it might be the result of political fanaticism—or even atheism. He is adamant that he himself, as a good atheist, would never fly airplanes into skyscrapers or commit any other outrageous act of violence or oppression. Good for him. Neither would I. Yet there are those in both our constituencies who would. Dawkins and I may both disavow violence and urge all within our groups to do so. But the harsh reality is that religious and antireligious violence has happened, and is likely to continue to do so.

(Page 61) Dawkins identifies "wish fulfilment" as a global feature of religion. Now, there is a grain of truth in his analysis. The way human beings perceive the world is indeed colored by our agendas and expectations. "Cognitive bias" is indeed a fundamental characteristic of human psychology.¹⁶ Yet in general this unconscious bias is manifested not so much in our believing what we would like to be true as in maintaining the status quo of our beliefs. The driving force is not wishful thinking but

conservative thinking—that is, thinking that conserves an existing worldview.

(Page 62) We thus have a built-in resistance to change our position—a resistance that is underpinned by cognitive biases that predispose us to fail to notice or to discount data that are inconsistent with our view. On the whole we do this because it is efficient—it takes effort and is upsetting to have to change one's mind—even if the change is in a positive direction. *The God Delusion* is a wonderful case study of exactly this kind of unconscious bias. Without full awareness that he is doing so, Dawkins foregrounds evidence that fits his own views and discounts or distorts evidence that does not.

While cognitive bias helps us cope with a complex world, there are some situations where it is very important to minimize its effects. Scientific investigation is one of these. The entire point of the scientific method is to reduce, and where possible eliminate, such bias, to strive to give as objective and fair an account as possible. Dawkins does not apply this method to his consideration of religion.

Do cognitive biases play a part in religious belief? The evidence is that they are as important here as in any other area of life. An understanding of this aspect of cognitive processing may well shed light on the conservatism of established religion—the factors that maintain it in the face of threat.¹⁷ But they are less important in understanding the origins of religion and new religious movements, which are characterized by *opposition* to the status quo rather than conservatism.

¹⁷A classic study of this theme is Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

You can order the Dawkins Delusion from Amazon.

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Dawkins-Delusion-Atheist-Fundamentalism/dp/0830837213> No, I will not get a penny if you buy it.