

# Richard Dawkins

By Rhyne Putman

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**Date of Birth:** March 26, 1941, in Nairobi, Kenya.

**Selected Publications:** *The Selfish Gene* (1976); *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986); *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996); *A Devil's Chaplain* (2003); *The God Delusion* (2006); *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (2009); *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True* (2011).

**Affiliations and Organizations:** The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science; New Atheism; the Brights Movement.

## HISTORY

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English scientist Richard Dawkins (MA, DPhil, DSc, University of Oxford) is the most prominent—and most controversial—atheist intellectual of our time.

Raised by an agriculturalist working in the now-dissolved British protectorate of Nyasaland, Dawkins developed a deep appreciation for the natural sciences at an early age.<sup>1</sup> He had a nominal Anglican upbringing, but in his late teens, his increasing appreciation for evolutionary theory resulted in his abandoning belief in God altogether. As he describes this transformation, “I realised that Darwinism was a far superior explanation that pulled the rug out from under the argument of design. And that left me with nothing.”<sup>2</sup> After receiving his doctorate at the University of Oxford in 1966, Dawkins spent over forty years teaching and researching in biology and zoology related fields. He spent most of that time at Oxford, where he retired as the Charles Simonyi Reader in the Public Understanding of Science and Professor of Public Understanding of Science in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

Dawkins's earliest research was in the areas of animal behavior (ethology),<sup>4</sup> but it was his work in evolutionary biology that brought him notoriety in the scientific community. In his seminal 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins suggested that natural selection takes place primarily at the genetic level rather than at the level of individual organisms and organism groupings.<sup>5</sup> It was also in this book that he coined the term *meme* (from the Greek *mimeme*) to describe the way in which human ideas replicate themselves across time,<sup>6</sup> an idea Dawkins would later use to explain the growth and expansion of religion naturalistically.<sup>7</sup>

With his clarity, creative use of metaphor, colorful prose, and irreverent wit, Dawkins has since become one of the most prominent science writers in the world, popularizing contemporary evolutionary theory for non-specialist audiences.<sup>8</sup> Yet his celebrity status as a public intellectual has been solidified in recent years with his boisterous advocacy of atheism or materialism. His bestselling book, *The God Delusion* (2006), has served as a manifesto of sorts for a popular atheistic movement dubbed “The New Atheism.”

Unlike other well-known atheist thinkers in previous generations, the New Atheists have taken a decidedly hard-line, antireligious turn. Religious and nonreligious commentators alike have even charged this movement (especially Dawkins) with perpetuating a type of “atheistic fundamentalism” with their rhetorical and extremist tendencies.<sup>9</sup> Despite its lack of a formal organization, the New Atheism, under the charismatic leadership of figures like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, has become a widespread (anti) religious phenomenon.<sup>10</sup>

## DOCTRINE

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Dawkins does not have “doctrines” in the sense of having formal religious beliefs, but he does have beliefs shaped by his atheistic worldview that resemble religious beliefs. After all, even the belief that God does not exist is a belief about God. Despite his claim that he has “yet to see any

good reason to suppose that theology...is a subject at all," Dawkins has committed much of his recent writing to theology, albeit from an antireligious perspective.<sup>11</sup> *The God Delusion*, is, in some sense, an exercise in atheistic theology. There is even a sense in which one may call it "evangelistic." Dawkins admits that his intention is to make converts of his readers: "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down." He then goes on to dismiss any who would disagree with him as "dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads [who] are immune to argument" because "their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination."<sup>12</sup>

**Faith:** As Dawkins defines it, religious faith is "blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in his understanding of Christian belief, "faith...is a virtue" and the "more your beliefs defy the evidence, the more virtuous you are."<sup>14</sup> He believes that religious faith impedes the scientific process by ignoring the evidence in the world and preventing free thought: "As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise. It teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known. It subverts science and saps the intellect...Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds."<sup>15</sup>

**Science:** For Dawkins, science is the primary—if not the only—means by which we know anything about our world. All appeals to supernatural phenomena are, in Dawkins's estimation, intellectually lazy: "To say that [something] happened supernaturally is not just to say 'We don't understand it' but to say 'We will never understand it, so don't even try.' Science takes exactly the opposite approach. Science thrives on its inability—so far—to explain everything, and uses that as the spur to go on asking questions, creating possible models and testing them, so that we can make our way, inch by inch, closer to the truth."<sup>16</sup>

**God:** According to Dawkins, God does not exist, and any who would believe otherwise are under a form of "delusion" perpetuated by familial indoctrination or cultural superstition.<sup>17</sup> He is himself a *naturalist* or *materialist* who believes that all of reality is natural or material. This naturalistic worldview entails an atheistic denial of the existence of God and non-material entities like the soul or the mind. According to his own definition, "an atheist...is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles—except in the sense of natural phenomena we do not yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural."<sup>18</sup>

Dawkins does not mince words in his description of the God of Israel depicted in the Bible: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."<sup>19</sup>

**Jesus:** Consistent with his denial of God's existence, Dawkins clearly denies the deity of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> He likewise rejects the biblical accounts of the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Dawkins sees Jesus ("or whoever wrote his script if he didn't") as "one of the great ethical innovators of history."<sup>22</sup> He lauds Jesus as a revolutionary thinker who challenged the conventions of the Jewish religion of his day—suggesting that Jesus' religious teachings were so insignificant in His wider body of teaching that He may have been an atheist had He lived in a different period. Dawkins writes, "Of course Jesus was a theist, but that is the least interesting thing about him. He was a theist because, in his time, everybody was...What was interesting and remarkable about Jesus was not the obvious fact that he believed in the God of his Jewish religion, but that he rebelled against many aspects of Yahweh's vengeful nastiness...I think we owe Jesus the honour of separating his genuinely original and radical ethics from the supernatural nonsense which he inevitably espoused as a man of his time."<sup>23</sup>

**Salvation:** Dawkins unequivocally rejects the Christian doctrine of the atonement, stating, "I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sado-masochistic, and repellant. We should also dismiss it as barking mad, but for its ubiquitous familiarity which has dulled our objectivity. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment—thereby, incidentally, condemning remote future generations of Jews to pogroms and persecution as 'Christ-killers': did that hereditary sin pass down in the semen too?"<sup>24</sup>

**Religious "Child Abuse."** One of the more unique and controversial claims made by Dawkins is his idea that every form of religious upbringing is a form of child abuse. He writes, "I am persuaded that the phrase 'child abuse' is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and

priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell.”<sup>25</sup> Dawkins thinks this principle so important that he incorporates it into his own “revision” of the Ten Commandments: “Do not indoctrinate your children. Teach them to think for themselves, how to evaluate evidence, and how to disagree with you.”<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Dawkins does not believe raising children to be skeptics or atheists falls into the same category. He even encourages sending children to explicitly atheistic camps.<sup>27</sup>

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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**Faith:** Biblical faith is not irrational or contrary to reason. Rather, faith is *trust* in God that is rooted in our *knowledge* of him (Rom. 10:17). Even tremendous acts of faith in the Bible, such as Abraham’s obedience and willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, were the result of deliberation and reasoning (Rom. 4:20-21; Heb. 11:17-19). Biblical authors encouraged the people of God to pursue *truth* (Jn. 19:35; 1 Cor. 13:6; Gal. 2:5; Eph. 4:25; 2 Thess. 2:10-12; 1 Tim. 1:4) and *understanding* (Prov. 2:2-6; Eph. 1:8; Col. 1:9).

**Science:** While some Christians are dubious of modern science, this is an extreme position that most believers reject. Science is a gift from God that helps us understand the world He created and provides tremendous benefits for living, but it is not the only means of knowledge in the world. The scientific method alone is incapable of proving or disproving God’s existence, and even Dawkins’s arguments against God are predominantly non-scientific in nature.<sup>28</sup> One cannot ascertain certain truths, such as beauty, love, free will, numbers, and the existence of other minds by hard empirical data alone. Some truths come to us by observation, intuition, or reason, while other truths come through God’s special revelation in Scripture.

**God:** Contrary to naturalism, Christians assert that God exists. The Bible never explicitly argues for God’s existence but rather assumes it. The author of Hebrews states that “one who draws near to Him must believe that He exists and rewards those who seek Him” (Heb. 11:6b). However, Scripture does point to the various ways God reveals Himself in nature, conscience, and history. The apostle Paul tells us that all people know the truth about God’s existence and “what can be known about God is evident” to them “because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19). “His eternal power and divine nature” can be “understood through what He has made” (Rom. 1:20). Because of this ability to perceive God in nature, “people are without excuse” when they deny His existence (Rom. 1:21).

Dawkins asserts that the burden of proof falls on the theist, not the atheist, despite the fact atheism is a newer and far less prevalent worldview. In an oft-quoted section of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins writes, “None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon, Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further.”<sup>29</sup> Dawkins implies that we are all “atheists” when it comes to other gods that we do not consider our own, but he insists that it is necessary to go one step further and remove all gods (including the God of the Bible) from our worldview. While Dawkins may think this a rhetorically effective way of one-upping religious opponents, it is a nonsensical statement. Someone who affirms belief in God is by definition a *theist* and not an atheist. Someone who affirms belief in one God is a *monotheist* and not a *polytheist*.

**Jesus:** Dawkins’s attempt to limit Jesus to a radical ethical philosopher estranged from the Judaism of His day displays biblical and theological naiveté. Jesus’ belief in the God of Israel was not ancillary to His main message but central and essential. The ethics Jesus espoused were the ethics of the in-breaking kingdom of God/heaven—a term Jesus used to describe God’s sovereign rule in all things. From day one of his preaching ministry, he emphasized the kingdom of God (Matt. 4:17ff). Furthermore, Jesus did not reject the Old Testament Law but rather fulfilled it for us (Matt. 5:17).

Jesus did not leave us with the option of thinking of Him only as a good teacher. In the Gospel of John, He claims to be one with God the Father (10:30), preexistent with God (8:58; 17:5), the only way to God (14:6), and one with authority to judge the world (9:39). Even in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—gospels that skeptics tend to take with greater seriousness—Jesus says and does many things which imply that He believes Himself to be God, such as the ability to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-12; cf. Matt. 9:2-8; Luke 5:17-26) and claiming that rejection of Him was tantamount to rejecting God Himself (Luke 12:8-9). The way in which He reinterprets the Law of Moses testifies to His belief that He is God (e.g., Matt. 5:27-28; 38-39). Jesus refocused the Law not because He rejected Yahweh’s rule but because He possessed it. Most remarkably, Jesus claims to be the messianic “Son

of Man” figure described in Dan. 7:13-14—a claim considered blasphemous by the Sanhedrin because they understood Him to be claiming to be divine like God (Matt. 26: 62-66; Mark 14:62-65; Luke 22:66-71).

**Salvation:** Christians believe that Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin that every human being owed before God. God did not will this because He is spiteful or merciless. Rather, He did so because He is a just judge who cannot leave the guilty unpunished (Ex. 34:7) and a loving Father who wants to redeem us (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 Jn. 4:8).

It should come as no surprise that skeptics like Dawkins find the cross “repellent.” The Apostle Paul said that we who believe in Jesus preach “Christ crucified”—a doctrine that in the first century was a “stumbling block” to the Jewish religious elite and “foolishness” to Gentile intellectuals (1 Cor. 1:23). No matter his or her intelligence, the “natural man,” the person who is spiritually dead, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). According to Paul, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world”—like the doctrine of the atonement of Jesus Christ—“to shame the wise” (1 Cor. 1:27a). God, Paul tells us, baffles the “understanding of the experts” (1 Cor. 1:19; cf. Isa. 29:14).

**Religious Child Abuse.** The spiritual abuse of children seen in many cults and extremist groups should concern Christians. Paul himself warns parents about being too hard on or provoking anger in their children (Eph. 6:4a). But for Christians, raising children in light of the truth of Scripture is a necessary and vital part of parenting. If we really believe what the Bible says about the universal human need for the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will also desire our children to be fellow partakers in it. To neglect our children’s spiritual well-being would be abuse of the worst kind. In the same sentence that Paul discourages anger-provoking parenting, he also instructs parents to bring children “up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4b). The Law likewise encourages parents to bring the Word of God before their children continually, in every area and moment of life (Deut. 6:6-7). Godly parents and grandparents in the Bible modeled this practice, like those of Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5).

### Notes

- 1 See Richard Dawkins, *An Appetite for Wonder: The Making of a Scientist* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).
- 2 Simon Hattenstone, “Darwin’s Child.” February 9, 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/10/religion.scienceandnature> (accessed September 23, 2014).
- 3 Alister E. McGrath, “Dawkins, God, and the Scientific Enterprise: Reflections on the Appeal to Darwinism in Fundamental Atheism,” in *Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski and Michael Ruse in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 102-03.
- 4 See Richard Dawkins, *Selective Pecking in the Domestic Chick*, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1966.
- 5 See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); cf. idem, *The Extended Phenotype: The Long Reach of the Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 6 Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 189-201.
- 7 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 191-201.
- 8 See Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1996); idem., *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic, 1995); idem., *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 2009); idem., *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).
- 9 McGrath, “Dawkins, God, and the Scientific Enterprise,” 101; Alister E. McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).
- 10 Some New Atheists might shudder at the thought of being labeled “religious” because of their association of religion with belief in the supernatural and formal religious practices. However, not all religions hold supernatural beliefs (e.g., Buddhism), nor do all religious movements have centralized organizational leadership (e.g., the New Age Movement). Religion, as defined by sociologists, is “a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life.” See J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 7. If one defines religion by the nature of *believing* rather than the content of *beliefs* themselves, nontheistic movements like the New Atheism easily fall under the definition of “religion” (see Yinger, 11).
- 11 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 57.
- 12 Ibid., 5.
- 13 Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 198.
- 14 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 199.
- 15 Ibid., 286.
- 16 Dawkins, *The Magic of Reality*, 22.
- 17 Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, 114-79.
- 18 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 14.
- 19 Ibid., 31.
- 20 Ibid., 92.
- 21 Ibid., 59, 92-97.
- 22 Ibid., 250.
- 23 Richard Dawkins, “Atheists for Jesus,” *Free Inquiry* 25.1 (2005): 9-10.
- 24 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 253.
- 25 Ibid., 318.
- 26 Ibid., 264.
- 27 Ibid., 53.
- 28 Alister E. McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 56-57.
- 29 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 53.



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