

The Worldview of Richard Dawkins: from *The Selfish Gene* to *The God Delusion*

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Abstract

Richard Dawkins emerged on the public scene in 1976 with the publication of his first book, The Selfish Gene. Although the focus of this best seller was a particular view of evolution and natural selection, Dawkins managed to make several mild jabs at religious faith. Over the years, he has become increasingly vocal in his attacks on the theistic worldview in both his writings (e.g. The Blind Watchmaker) and his extensive lecturing. After the 9-11 terrorist attacks his anti-religious stance intensified. His active opposition to religion reached a peak in 2006 with publication of his most successful book to date, The God Delusion. Dawkins does not see any possibility of peaceful coexistence between science and faith.

Dawkins, as a leader in the movement, serves as a window for better understanding militant atheism. This paper explores Dawkins' basic presuppositions underlying his rejection of God, his dismissal of standard Christian rebuttals, his misunderstanding or misrepresentation of Christian theology, and the impression that Christianity and Christians have made on him. Dawkins presupposes that science is the only means of knowing. For God to be the first cause, His existence must be explained; and since God's existence cannot be explained, His existence is highly improbable. Dawkins dismisses standard arguments for God's existence as being illogical and void of content. Christianity, in Dawkins' view, is a perverse religion and the Christian God a cruel monster. Dawkins displays a lack of understanding of orthodox Christian theology and considers most religious adherents (especially American evangelicals) to be ignorant at best and evil at worse. The purpose of this examination of Dawkins' position is to better equip Christians as they confront the atheist worldview and to help them understand the presuppositions inherent in atheism and the type of arguments that are deemed acceptable.

Introduction

Richard Dawkins is among the world's most famous atheists. Because of his high visibility and vocal support of atheism, and his strong attacks on religion, he has been called: "the religious right's Public Enemy No. 1"¹; "Darwin's rottweiler"² (a play on Thomas Huxley description as Darwin's Bulldog); and "the nearest thing to a professional atheist we have had since Bertrand Russell."³

¹ Slack, Gordy. 2005. The Atheist. In *Salon*. Available online at: <http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2005/04/30/dawkins/index.html>.

² Downey, Robert. 1996. Article in *EastsideWeek* (Seattle weekly newspaper) December 11, 1996. Available online at: <http://www.simonyi.ox.ac.uk/dawkins/WorldOfDawkins-archive/Media/seattle.shtml>.

³ Eagleton, Terry. 2006. Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching. In *London Review of Books* 28(20): dated 19 October 2006. Available online at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eag101.html>.

He is among a small group of men who have been labeled, “The New Atheists.”⁴ They are not content to sit on the sidelines and ignore God; instead they have taken the offensive and are calling for the overthrow of religious faith.

Dawkins was born in 1941 in Nairobi, Kenya to well-to-do parents who fostered his interest in the natural sciences. By his own account, he had “a normal Anglican upbringing.” In his early teen years he believed the complexity and design seen in nature was best explained by the existence of a creator, and he held to “the argument from design.” However, by the age of sixteen, having read *The Origin of the Species* by Charles Darwin, he abandoned his faith and became convinced that evolution and Darwinian natural selection were a more satisfying explanation for the complexity of the natural world⁵.

Dawkins’ university education began at Balliol College, Oxford where he studied zoology under the tutelage of Nikolaas Tinberger, a Nobel Prize-winning ethologist. He completed his undergraduate studies in 1962. He continued his education and completed his MA and DPhil degrees in 1966, and a DSc in 1989. He was an assistant professor of zoology at the University of California at Berkeley from 1967 to 1969. In 1970 Dawkins began teaching at Oxford University and in 1995 became of first occupant of the newly created position of Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science, a position he continues to hold⁶.

Dawkins has authored nine books (see list at end of paper), most of which spent time on the New York Times best-sellers list, including the top spot. In addition, he has published dozens of papers in academic journals, written numerous articles for the popular press, hosted radio and television shows, and delivered hundreds of lectures. He is the recipient of several prestigious awards for his writing, work in biology, and civic contributions. Recently he is best known as a leading voice promoting atheism.

Since his earliest writings, Dawkins has been a strong proponent of evolution by means of natural selection. This, by itself, does not differentiate him from the vast majority of biologists and other natural scientists. Evolution by natural selection is one of the underlying principles of modern biology and is embraced by the vast majority of instructors of biology at the university level. His first book, *The Selfish Gene*, written in 1976, propelled Dawkins into the public spotlight and provided a platform for

⁴ See: Wolf, Gary. The Church of the non-Believer. In *Wired* online magazine, Issue 14.11, Nov 2006. See also: Aronson, Ronald. The New Atheists. In *The Nation*, 25 Jun 2007. The “New Atheists” include: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.

⁵ Miller, Jonathan. 2004. *The Atheist Tapes: Jonathan Miller in Conversation* (Part 4 interview with Richard Dawkins – aired 9 November 2004). BBC Four Television. (This series was adapted from an early series, *A brief history of disbelief*, and was re-aired in the U.S. on PBS in May 2007.

⁶ Dawkins, Richard. 2006. Curriculum Vitae. Available online at: <http://www.simonyi.ox.ac.uk/dawkins/CV.shtml>

championing the concepts of Darwinian evolution in a form digestible by the general public. Dawkins' writing style is witty and engaging and has enabled him to take difficult concepts and make them understandable to a broad audience of non-specialists. However, Dawkins has not been content to write only about the details and history of evolution. Even in his early books, it is clear his agenda includes more than educating the public about "the beauty of natural selection." Dawkins also is motivated by a desire to destroy faith in a Creator and replace it with a materialistic worldview, devoid of any hint of the supernatural.

Approach and Purpose

This paper explores Dawkins' worldview and his arguments against faith and for atheism and naturalism. It also considers his presuppositions and the kind of evidence he deems acceptable in discussing the development of life on our planet. In short, we want to understand Dawkins' worldview as an avowed, militant atheist. It is presumptuous and unfair to claim to know a person's thoughts or motives, unless, of course, he or she chooses to reveal them. Fortunately for the purposes of this paper, Dawkins' writings (both academic and popular), recorded lectures, and published interviews are prolific; so prolific in fact, that it is difficult to examine all the possible sources in a comprehensive manner. The material for this article is derived from Dawkins' published writings and public lectures and interviews with an emphasis on his books. Critiques and commentaries on Dawkins' views abound. One of the more recent is *The Dawkins Delusion*, a book authored by Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (both professors at Oxford University) published in February 2007.

My purpose in delving into the world of Dawkins was to better prepare myself to teach biology at the American University in Bulgaria. Knowing that I would be teaching evolution, which is the major unifying principle of modern biology, I wanted to thoroughly understand not only the science but the philosophy that stands behind it. Additionally, the confrontation between evolution and Christianity has been an area of personal interest for many years. Since Dawkins has become the leading voice promoting a militant, atheistic evolutionary viewpoint, I thought it important to be familiar with his work.

No place for God

In Dawkins world there is no god. There is no need of a god and no room for God. God is viewed as nothing more than an archaic superstition of unenlightened human beings. God and religion are hypothesized to be nothing more than parasitic "memes,"⁷ or as Dawkins is fond of saying, a virus of the mind. The impossibility of God is an underlying assumption in all of Dawkins' thinking and writing. Even when it does not contribute directly to the flow of an argument, Dawkins often finds it necessary to emphasize to his readers that God has no place in his world. For example, in *The Selfish*

⁷ Dawkins introduces the concept of memes in Chapter 11 (Memes: the new replicators) of *The Selfish Gene*. As defined by Dawkins, a meme is: "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation."

Gene Dawkins describes the amazing ability of DNA to store all the information necessary to build a complex organism. But he then adds, seemingly out of nowhere:

“Incidentally, there is of course no 'architect'. The DNA instructions have been assembled by natural selection.”

In most of Dawkins' early writings, such comments are indeed incidental to his main arguments. The focus of his early works is biology in general and evolution in particular. However, in his more recent works, attacking God and religion becomes his primary purpose and focus, reaching a climax in *The God Delusion*.

God is not needed (and certainly not wanted) by Dawkins, because in his worldview all the complexity of life on our planet can be neatly explained by evolution and natural selection. In fact, Dawkins views natural selection as the only workable theory capable of explaining the complexity and diversity of life. In *The Extended Phenotype* (p. 35) he writes:

“...all Darwinians substantially agree on what is, after all, the only workable theory we have to explain the organized complexity of life.”

Similarly, in *The God Delusion* (p. 120; 151)

“Natural selection is not only a parsimonious, plausible and elegant solution; it is the only workable alternative to chance that has ever been suggested.”

“It comes from natural selection: the process which, as far as we know, is the only process ultimately capable of generating complexity out of simplicity.”

In *The Blind Watchmaker* (p. xiv), he goes further claiming that the Darwinian worldview is capable of providing insight into even deeper mysteries.

“... I want to persuade the reader, not just that the Darwinian world-view happens to be true, but that it is the only known theory that *could*, in principle, solve the mystery of our existence.”

Dawkins often articulates a sense of wonder and awe as he contemplates the complexities and intricacies of nature. In many of his books, he artfully and beautifully describes the magnificent diversity of life and the marvelous adaptations of living organisms. In *The Blind Watchmaker* Dawkins praises William Paley, the eighteenth century English theologian and author of *Natural Theology - or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, for his “beautiful and reverent” descriptions of living systems. However, whereas Paley concludes that such perfection in nature clearly points to a Master Designer, a Divine Watchmaker; Dawkins asserts (p.14):

“All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics...”

Dawkins insists that since there is no supernatural overseer, there is no ultimate purpose to be found in nature. In this he is at least consistent. Again, quoting from *The Blind Watchmaker* (p. 14):

“Natural selection, the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind’s eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the blind watchmaker.”

Notice what Dawkins does here. Not only does he claim natural selection explains the diversity of life, he takes the added step of saying it explains the very existence of life. And he presents this, not merely as a likely possibility, but as something that is absolutely known to be true. In Dawkins mind, since there is no God, there can be no other explanation other than Darwinian natural selection.

Follow the Evidence and Forget Faith

But on what basis does Dawkins object to God’s existence and why is he so sure that there is no supernatural explanation for the existence of life; indeed to the existence of something instead of nothing? Repeatedly in his works, Dawkins affirms he is only interested in following evidence. His book, *The Devil’s Chaplin*, includes an essay in the form of a letter written by Dawkins to his then ten year old daughter. It is titled, “Good and Bad Reasons for Believing” (p. 242). The only good reason, according to Dawkins, is evidence. The “bad” reasons for believing include tradition, authority, and revelation. Dawkins has concluded faith is an unthinking submission to tradition, authority, and unverifiable revelation with absolutely no evidence to support it. Faith, in Dawkins’ vocabulary, is always blind faith and involves believing things without evidence, or worse, in spite of evidence. He writes with biting sarcasm in *The God Delusion* (p. 199):

“Faith (belief without evidence) is a virtue. The more your beliefs defy the evidence, the more virtuous you are. Virtuoso believers who can manage to believe something really weird, unsupported and insupportable, in the teeth of evidence and reason, are especially highly rewarded.”

Dawkins allows that in the study of historical questions, such as the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, it is acceptable to include evidence in the form of eye witness testimony. Christian scholars have made an excellent case that the Bible provides accurate accounts of eye witness testimony to the workings of God. However, Dawkins dismisses the Bible and refuses to acknowledge it as a reliable source for any kind of information. He totally discounts the Old Testament as a dependable source of history and considers the New Testament as having been corrupted and tampered with. He discounts the Gospels as having been written at such a late date that their value as historical documents is almost zero. When Christians do point to evidence in the form of Biblical texts, he brushes them aside without ever justifying why they should not be accepted as

historically reliable documents, usually giving some cliché answer. In *The God Delusion* (p. 97) he writes:

“Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament (and obviously not the Old Testament) as a reliable record of what actually happened in history, and I shall not consider the Bible further as evidence for any kind of deity.”

Dawkins’ presuppositions that there is no God and that no supernatural intervention in the affairs of humankind is possible have blinded his eyes to evidence in the Scriptures. His dismissal of Scriptures as a source of evidence has been reinforced by his lack of careful study and first-hand knowledge of the vast amount of Biblical scholarship that addresses the issues of the dating and authorship of various portions of the Bible. He has clearly selected to accept the findings of scholars who support his pre-held views and thus conveniently ignores, rather than confronts, the Bible as a source of evidence for anything.

Dawkins has no respect for theology and believes it has absolutely nothing to offer and is therefore not worthy of serious study or consideration. For example, when the Starbridge Lectureship in Theology and Natural Science was being established at Cambridge, Dawkins wrote a letter of protest to *The Independent* (20 March 1993). He wrote:

“What has "theology" ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? When has theology ever said anything that is demonstrably true and is not obvious? ... The achievements of theologians don't do anything, don't achieve anything, don't even mean anything. What makes you think that "theology" is a subject at all?”

Since Dawkins views theology as a worthless and trivial field of study, it is not surprising that he is neither knowledgeable nor adept at discussing it. He displays a very superficial understanding of Biblical scholarship and his lack of theological insight is a common weakness in his attacks on Christianity. He frequently misunderstands theology and misrepresents religious beliefs, offering instead only caricatures of what serious, thoughtful Christians actually believe. As Terry Eagleton wrote in the *London Review of Books*:⁸

“Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.”

Everything Must Have a Natural Explanation

⁸ Eagleton, Terry. 2006. Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching. In *London Review of Books* 28(20): dated 19 October 2006. Available online at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eagl01.html>.

In Dawkins' world, everything has an explanation, or more precisely, everything has a natural explanation, although it is possible the explanation is not yet known it certainly will not involve a supernatural being. In *Unweaving the Rainbow* (p. 5 – ebook version) Dawkins writes:

“I believe that an orderly universe, one indifferent to human preoccupations, in which everything has an explanation even if we still have a long way to go before we find it, is a more beautiful, more wonderful place than a universe tricked out with capricious, ad hoc magic.”

For Dawkins, supernatural occurrences such as the resurrection and virgin birth of Jesus are interpreted as signs of superstition and ignorance. Dawkins accuses Christians of copping out when they revert to supernatural explanations to questions such as the origin of life on earth. This is one of Dawkins standard attacks on Christians and other religious people; that they aren't serious about discovering truth and oppose science. Of course, this is blatantly untrue of many Christians who work in the field of science. In *The God Delusion* (p. 126), Dawkins writes:

“... one of the truly bad effects of religion is that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding.”

And again on p. 284 he writes:

“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.”

Dawkins does concede, however, that science has not discovered all that needs to be discovered and that it has not answered all the questions that have been asked. His short answer, when pressed to give an explanation for currently unexplainable phenomenon, is “science is working on it.” In a radio debate with David Quinn (09 Oct 2006, The Ryan Tubridy Show) Dawkins responded five times with a variant of “science is working on it” when challenged to explain the existence of matter.

“The origin of matter... the origin of the whole universe, is a very, very difficult question. It's one that scientists are working on. It's one that they hope eventually to solve. Just as before Darwin, biology was a mystery. Darwin solved that. Now cosmology is a mystery. The origin of the universe is a mystery; it's a mystery to everyone. Physicists are working on it. They have theories. But if science can't answer that question then as sure as hell theology can't either.”

How does “science is working on it” significantly differ from a Christian saying, “God did it using means which are currently beyond our understanding?”

Dawkins' God

It is abundantly clear that Richard Dawkins does not believe in any kind of supernatural god, and certainly not the God of the Bible. Dawkins does not simply refer to himself as an atheist, but rather as a militant atheist (some would say a fundamentalist atheist). In *The God Delusion* (pp.50-51) he proposes a scale to measure a person's propensity towards theism or atheism.

1. Strong theist. 100 per cent probability of God.
2. Very high probability but short of 100 per cent. De facto theist
3. Higher than 50 per cent but not very high. Technically agnostic but leaning towards theism.
4. Exactly 50 per cent. Completely impartial agnostic
5. Lower than 50 per cent but not very low. Technically agnostic but leaning towards atheism
6. Very low probability, but short of zero. De facto atheist.
7. Strong atheist. 'I know there is no God.'

Dawkins describes himself as a 6 who is moving towards 7. God obviously is not a part of Dawkins worldview, but who is this god in whom he does not believe?

As mentioned above, Dawkins demands that things be explained. For him, evolution by natural selection provides a satisfactory, indeed, the "only workable" explanation for why life exists on our planet and is the "only logical reason" for the tremendous diversity and complexity in nature. The major reason he rejects the "God hypothesis" is that, in his view, God's existence would then need to be explained (in non-supernatural terms).

Dawkins' core argument for the improbability (impossibility) of God is neatly laid out in chapter four of *The God Delusion*, "Why there almost certainly is no God." Simply put, Dawkins reasons that if God were the master designer He would need to be more complex than that which He designed. More complex means more improbable. And since God would have to be immensely complex, He is therefore highly improbable. This is Dawkins' major argument against God. Dawkins cannot move beyond his own paradigm: complex things are improbable; very complex things are very improbable; and God, by definition, must be immensely complex, and therefore He is highly improbable to the point of being virtually impossible. In Dawkins thinking, the only explanation for complexity (the illusion of design) is the accumulation of imperceptibly small changes over billions of years. Furthermore, Dawkins continually remarks that if we concede that God exists we would then need to explain where He came from. He makes this point repeatedly throughout his writings. Following are several examples from *The God Delusion*.

"Indeed, design is not a real alternative at all because it raises an even bigger problem than it solves: who designed the designer?" (p. 121)

"A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe cannot be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right." (p. 149)

“The first cause that we seek must have been the simple basis for a self-bootstrapping crane which eventually raised the world as we know it into its present complex existence. To suggest that the original prime mover was complicated enough to indulge in intelligent design, to say nothing of mind-reading millions of humans simultaneously, is tantamount to dealing yourself a perfect hand at bridge... To suggest that the first cause, the great unknown which is responsible for something existing rather than nothing, is a being capable of designing the universe and of talking to a million people simultaneously, is a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation. It is a dreadful exhibition of self-indulgent, thought-denying skyhookery.” (p. 155)

“... the designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the designer. The whole problem we started out with was the problem of explaining statistical improbability. It is obviously no solution to postulate something even more improbable.” (p. 158)

If this is Dawkins primary argument against God’s existence, as he contents it is, what has he proven? The God that Dawkins “disproves” is not the God of historical Christianity. Instead, Dawkins seems to imply that this God he doesn’t believe in is a physical (material) entity who occupies time and space in a similar fashion that human beings do. Since Dawkins assumes materialism as a given, it is the only kind of god that he can conceive of. Additionally, if God could be fully understood, if His existence could be explained, if He was the creation of another creator, He would no longer be the almighty, infinite, inscrutable God of the Bible. Dawkins, in a sense, has demonstrated what kind of God must exist. However improbable, God must be a being without beginning; a self-existent, eternal entity of infinite power who exists apart from the law of physics.⁹ If God can be “explained” then what kind of god would He be?

Of course, Dawkins cannot accept this, since in his world simplicity yields complexity. The universe, or at least life on our planet, he asserts, can only be explained as being the result of the accumulation of nearly imperceptible small changes occurring over vast (billions of years) amounts of time. In *Climbing Mount Improbable* he uses the metaphor of a mountain with two faces, one side a sheer cliff and the other a long gentle slope. Natural selection, he says, brings us to the peak by means of the long, gentle slope of gradual changes occurring and accumulating over billions of years, whereas God resorts to a supernatural leap up the cliff face. He is forced to reject God because of his a prior assumptions.

⁹ Philosophical analysis of Dawkins’ arguments for the improbability of God are developed more fully by: Alvin Plantinga in *The Dawkins Confusion Naturalism ad absurdum* (available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html>); Thomas Nagel in *The Fear of Religion* (The New Republic 23 Oct 2006); and by Dallas Willard in *Reflections on Dawkins' The Blind Watchmaker* (available at: <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=52>)

Dawkins has been blinded by his unquestioning allegiance to his own gods, science and naturalism. Science is seen as having the power to unravel most, if not all, the mysteries of the universe without the need of the supernatural. Naturalism stipulates that all that exists is natural (matter and energy). One thread that runs throughout Dawkins works is his worship of science; his view that ultimately science can successfully address (almost) every problem. One thing science cannot do, however, is determine what is right and wrong, what is moral or immoral.

Where does this lead?

Dawkins is operating under the assumption that there is no God (and therefore no pre-defined purpose to life). In this context, religion becomes an empty shell. What are some of the ramifications of this worldview? How does a Dawkins-type atheism impinge on other areas of life?

Value and purpose of human life

Perhaps, most significantly, humans no longer hold a privileged position in the order of nature in Dawkins' world. Whereas Biblical thinking recognizes humankind as having been uniquely created in the image of God, and therefore endowed with great intrinsic value; Dawkins sees humans as no more or less valuable, from an evolutionary point of view, than any other species. According to Dawkins, we (along with all other organisms) are merely "survival machines" designed by the blind hand of natural selection to propagate "selfish genes" into the next generation. (Dawkins' first book, *The Selfish Gene* promotes the view that natural selection acts primarily at the level of the gene rather than the individual.) Dawkins, demonstrating a consistency with his worldview, has spoken out against the speciesism, the belief that we as *Homo sapiens* are somehow better than other species¹⁰. Dawkins is careful to point out that humans are no more highly evolved than any other existing species, and to think differently is a form of arrogance. For Dawkins, human life has value, not because we have been created in the image of God, but because, against astronomical odds, our particular combination of DNA came to be. In *Unweaving the Rainbow* (p. 7) he writes:

“We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton.”

A few pages later he adds (p. 11):

“Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the universe and how we have come to wake up in it?”

¹⁰ For example see: Dawkins, Richard. 2003. Meet my cousin. *New Scientist*. Issue 1876, 05 June 1993.

According to Dawkins, we have “come to wake up” in this universe by blind chance and the application of physical and biological laws, apart from any overarching purpose. In other words, meaning in life, for Dawkins, involves waking up to the fact that we ultimately have no meaning. Addressing this issue, Dawkins relates an interesting exchange he had with James Watson (co-discoverer of the structure of DNA).

“Watson retorted: ‘Well I don't think we're (here) for anything. We're just products of evolution... But I'm anticipating having a good lunch.’” (*The God Delusion* p. 100)

This was meant as an amusing story to show that atheism is not of itself nihilistic; but if all we have to look forward to is a “good lunch” how can life hold much significance. We might as well say, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32 NIV).

Morality and religion

Dawkins would agree that science cannot of itself determine what is right and wrong, moral or immoral. He does, however, offer several Darwinian views of where morality might have come from. He holds that sources for morality exists other than the absolutist morality offered by religion. Rather than seeing Christianity and other religions as providing a positive influence on society, he sees them as dangerous. Again, showing his lack of theological understanding, he attacks the Bible as a source of morality, citing examples from Old Testament laws, which to the modern mind, seem untenable.

As previously noted, throughout Dawkins' profession career he has been a strong proponent and apologist for evolution by natural selection and consistent in his self-identification as an atheist. However, there was a turn to “the dark side” after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York. A quick perusal of the list of publications in Dawkins' CV reflects the evolution of the focus of his writings. For roughly the first 25 years (1968 – 1993) the majority of his papers and other publications focus on issues of animal behavior and evolutionary biology and are addressed to a professional audience. By 2001 however, nearly all his listed publications address atheism, religion, or other philosophical issues and are written for a more popular audience. (The period from 1993 to 2001 is intermediate, with a mixture of both scientific journal articles and publications for the popular press.)

Since 2001, Dawkins has become particularly scathing in his attacks on religion, even receiving criticism from other atheists who see him as being overly confrontational. For example, in *The God Delusion* (p. 31) he writes:

“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.”

Dawkins is clearly not neutral about religion; he is antagonistic and angry. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks he wrote a speech for the Freedom from Religion Foundation entitled, “Stop Respecting Religion” (Madison, WI, 22 Sep 2001). He writes:

“It is time to stop pussyfooting around. Time to get angry... It is time for people of intellect, as opposed to people of faith, to stand up and say, Enough!.. The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved —Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

Dawkins is no moderate seeking to establish common ground between science and religion. He goes to great lengths in *The God Delusion* developing the idea of religion as a “mind virus”. Religious education, in Dawkins view, is a serious form of child abuse. Again, quoting from *The God Delusion* (p. 315; 318)

“... isn't it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about?”

“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.”

In the same vein, Dawkins wrote and presented a two part documentary for the BBC titled, “Religion, the Root of all Evil?”(first aired in January 2006). It is clear Dawkins has taken off the gloves in his stance towards religion. He continuously chides and challenges intellectuals and scientists to stop giving aid and comfort to religion and to give up seeking common ground between faith and science.

Dawkins views religion as a virus that has infected the minds of millions of people, usually during their childhood. In *The Root of all Evil* Dawkins warns:

“For many people, part of growing up is killing off the virus of faith with a good strong dose of rational thinking. But if an individual doesn't succeed in shaking it off, his mind is stuck in a permanent state of infancy, and there is a real danger that he will infect the next generation.”

In Dawkins' world, there is no room for cooperation or even understanding between religion and science. The battle lines have been drawn with religion and faith standing opposed to reason and science.

Where do we go from here?

Where has this hostility come from? Why has Dawkins placed himself at the extreme edge of the atheist camp? And how should we as serious follower of Jesus Christ respond to these types of attacks. To a large degree we can only speculate about the source of Dawkins' anger and bitterness since we are not privy to the inner workings of his mind. Much of what Dawkins despises about religion, thoughtful Christians find distasteful as well. The Christianity that Dawkins ridicules is often an un-Biblical, or at least sub-Biblical caricature of historical Christianity. It is a Christianity mixed with political policies and agendas and rigidly tied to specific cultural forms. Not being a student of the Scriptures, Dawkins is unable to separate truth from error when it comes to various religious expressions. Certainly the manner in which Christianity has been presented to Dawkins cannot have helped his attitude. Christians are not immune to arrogance, intellectual laziness, closed mindedness, intolerance, and rudeness. Also, it appears that Dawkins does not (or is unable to) differentiate between various faith traditions. Since he holds all religion to be void of serious content, he easily lumps them together and labels them all worthless. The distinction in his mind between an Islamic extremist and a protestant liberal is not so great; they are both intellectually deficient and dangerous. Moderate believers, he says, are certainly better than extremists, but all religion can lead to extremism and must therefore be opposed.

There may also be a personal element to his hostility. On page 316 of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins confides that he was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of the clergy as a child. He has also been specifically targeted for attack by various Christian and other religious individuals and organizations.

The question remains, how should we as follower of Jesus Christ respond to this brand of atheism? What paths may the Gospel take in reaching someone like Richard Dawkins? One point of agreement between Dawkins and followers of Jesus is love of the truth. Repeatedly Dawkins positions himself as being on the side of truth. While we may disagree regarding what is true and what is false, if Dawkins is honestly seeking truth and if we also pursue truth, our paths are likely to converge. Interestingly, Dawkins has little patience with cultural relativism and postmodernism. Truth in Dawkins' mind is knowable; he agrees there are absolutes. As Christians, we have nothing to fear from the truth.

It is also clear that Dawkins and the majority of scientists who share his views are married to certain views concerning the age of the earth and the origins of life. It seems somewhat pointless to directly attack these areas of their worldview, unless we have the kind of evidence they find acceptable. Much harm has been done to the credibility of Christianity when believers (let's assume their motives are pure) try to discredit evolution when they are not familiar with the field and do not understand the evidence a secular evolutionist would find compelling. Telling a scientist the Bible declares the earth to be 6,000 years old does nothing to change his mind and only reinforces unflattering stereotypes. Likewise, bad science does little to further the cause of the Gospel, and indeed brings discredit to it. This does not mean Christians must remain silent regarding science or concede that evolution tells the whole story of man's origins. Instead, it implies that Christians need to either work hard to understand the scientific basis and

evidence they seek to discredit, or look for other avenues where the Gospel can penetrate the hearts of those who deny God.

Ultimately, a person's salvation does not hinge on his or her acceptance or rejection of evolutionary theory. Militant, evolutionary atheists such as Dawkins biggest need is Jesus (just like everyone else). And perhaps their only chance to see Jesus will be in the life of someone (a co-worker, family member, or neighbor) who comes alongside them and loves them. Do we give up addressing wrong thinking in areas of science? No, of course not, but we need to remember it is the Holy Spirit who convicts and convinces. Changing someone's wrong ideas about evolution, while perhaps helpful, is not the greatest need. They need the Holy Spirit to change their heart and bring them to repentance.

In some ways, people like Richard Dawkins may be closer to finding God than it appears. They are asking big questions, questions that only God can answer. They have a hunger for truth... they care about ideas. Many intellectual atheists are genuine humanitarians who have a sense of justice and right and wrong, which regardless of whether they acknowledge it, come from God. Dawkins, perhaps surprisingly, advocates reading the Bible in *The God Delusion*. He commits most of four pages to explaining why people should at least read and be familiar with the Bible. He ends this section by writing (p. 344):

“Let me not labour the point. I have probably said enough to convince at least my older readers that an atheistic world-view provides no justification for cutting the Bible, and other sacred books, out of our education.”

Finally, people like Dawkins are actively and constantly talking about God (even if only to insist He doesn't exist). They are passionate about the concept of God. I think I would rather engage someone like Dawkins than someone who doesn't care about the question of God's existence and is more interested in what's on television tonight than actually having to engage his or her mind. This is why the world of the university is so important and why it is such a potentially ripe field for the harvest. What if Richard Dawkins had been exposed to a Christian professor who took a personal interest in him when he was an undergraduate and showed him that there is indeed real evidence pointing to the existence of an all-powerful Creator?

Books by Richard Dawkins:

The Selfish Gene (1976, 1989, 2006)

The Extended Phenotype (1982, 1999)

The Blind Watchmaker (1986, 1991, 2006)

River Out of Eden (1995)

Climbing Mount Improbable (1996)

Unweaving the Rainbow (1998)

A Devil's Chaplain (2003)

The Ancestor's Tale (2004)

The God Delusion (2006)