

Why Christians should take Richard Dawkins seriously

It's easy to get annoyed, but Christians really ought to listen to and take seriously what Richard Dawkins has to say. With his high profile books, articles, television programmes and general media coverage, he has become the number one scourge of religion and religious believers of all and every stripe. He is articulate, passionate, an excellent speaker and a formidable intelligence. He has made important contributions to his particular discipline of evolutionary biology, most famously with his first book *The Selfish Gene*, but no less impressively with the follow-up volume *The Extended Phenotype*, and a series of subsequent books. He is a major player in his discipline.

His book *The God Delusion* appeared in 2006. This isn't about evolutionary biology with a few side-swipes at religion thrown in, this is a concentrated assault on religion. He launches a series of exocet missiles at religion, at the concept of God, the 'supernatural', faith-heads (which is his term for religious believers), theology – the whole bang-shoot, in fact. Inevitably he has triggered much response. The theologian Alister McGrath, an Oxford colleague of his, who had already written one book critiquing Dawkins' views on religion, riposted rapidly with *The Dawkins Delusion*. Another Christian riposte has come from a more evangelical quarter in Andrew Wilson's *Deluded by Dawkins?* Both authors demonstrate that many of Dawkins' arguments are strewn with error and misunderstanding.

However, in response to the statement "theologians say that Dawkins is wrong" we can echo Mandy Rice-Davies: "Well, they would say that, wouldn't they?" It's part of their job description. Perhaps more significant, then, is the response Dawkins has drawn from non-Christian – or non-religious – quarters. Don't get me wrong: there are many who agree whole-heartedly with Dawkins. But consider the review of the book by Professor of English Terry Eagleton, a non-believer, which appeared in the *London Review of Books* (19 October 2006): it is a high octane demolition job.

Eagleton starts off "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. Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins, who is the nearest thing to a professional atheist we have had since Bertrand Russell, are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don't believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding. This is why they invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be." He continues for another 3,500 words to elaborate on this.

Now I think the critics of Richard Dawkins are in the main quite right. I say 'in the main' because Dawkins does make a number of valid points, particularly relating to the role of religion, and Christianity in particular, in the life of this country; but I agree that a large proportion of his book is indeed based on error. However, I don't think it right for us to say, "Ah, well, not only theologians but even atheists have demonstrated where Dawkins has gone wrong, therefore we don't have to take his views seriously."

We do have to take his views seriously, for more than one reason. Wilson suggests, and I agree with him, that Christians should be grateful to Dawkins, because "he has gathered together all of the best arguments against God's existence in one place, with the intention of debating them publicly." Quite so, but I think there's another reason to listen to Dawkins. It's this: theological writers and others can point out at length that what Dawkins does is to set up a straw man – or rather, a straw God – and then demolish it; they can show that Dawkins has not really got to grips at all with a true understanding of God and the religious dimension; but the straw God that Dawkins sets up and then demolishes is often uncomfortably close to the notion of God that we Christians all too frequently seem to talk about, pray to and worship.

What Dawkins demolishes in this book may well be a misrepresentation of God, but it is a misrepresentation, an idol, that we Christians all too have often set up and espoused as the real thing. We should listen to Dawkins because doing so can help us reflect on what we claim to believe, or think we believe, or imply that we believe. His views can act as an acid to eat away the false and phoney elements of our faith.

By way of example, Dawkins refers to 'The God Hypothesis' which "suggests that the reality we inhabit also contains a supernatural agent who designed the universe and – at least in many versions of the hypothesis – maintains it and even intervenes in it with miracles..." (p.81). God, in this understanding, refers to a fellow inhabitant of the universe. Earlier in the book, however, he takes a marginally more subtle line, and the hypothesis is that there is "a personal God dwelling within [the universe], or perhaps outside it (whatever that might mean)" possessing a whole range of unpleasant qualities he has earlier listed (p.59).

I doubt if many of us would fall into the simplistic belief that God is just another thing who inhabits the universe, such that if we went on a tour of the universe our guide would be saying "now ladies and gentlemen, over here is the solar system, over there is the Crab Nebula, watch out for the black hole at the centre; there's a super-nova; there's God, there's a comet..." and so forth. We don't think of God like that as simply an inhabitant of the universe. But what of the suggestion that God is outside the universe? I would guess most if not all past and present members of Sunday Schools and the like have sung, 'He's got the whole world in his hands', and other hymns or choruses with similar imagery which suggests an entity external to the universe. It may be a comforting image, and it may have a lot to recommend it – but there is the danger of it being too comforting and our taking it almost literally, which doesn't do justice to the biblical understanding of God as both immanent and transcendent – God dwelling within all things, but also greater than all things – and of God as a living presence.

Philosophers and theologians over the centuries, grappling with what is meant by 'God', have resorted to a different type of language, making statements such as "God is ultimate reality"; or "God is the ground of our being", or "God is the precondition that anything at all could exist", and so forth. In theological discourse, they can be very helpful concepts, but the trouble with them is that if you're not a

philosopher or theologian, you feel your eyes glazing over - God has become a philosophical concept rather than a living presence.

Let's face it, it is easier for most of us to hold a clear but inaccurate image of what we think God is, rather than to live with the discomfort of not being able to pin God down precisely. Many a mystic has said, in effect, that all descriptions of God are false because they are so inadequate, but that is not a comfortable place to be in. We prefer a domesticated God that our comprehension can contain, a golden calf that we have fashioned for ourselves, and that we can see. Richard Dawkins in effect, even though he may not realise it, is pointing at a load of golden calves that we have fashioned over the millennia, and saying, "what a load of rubbish". But of course, to rubbish a golden calf is not the same thing as to rubbish the living God. Dawkins, unwittingly, can help us distinguish between the two!

So, if our understanding of God can be encapsulated in a nice, neat definition; a nice, neat God hypothesis; a nice, neat image; a nice, neat set of instructions - if, in other words, our understanding of God does approximate to a Dawkins version, then we are in danger of creating another golden calf. The alternative, the non-golden-calf route, is to sit light to definitions, hypotheses and images, and allow God to be God.

Challenges to our image of God is not new. Back in 1963, the then Bishop of Woolwich John Robinson published *Honest to God*. After an extract was published in *The Observer* newspaper under the heading 'Our Image of God Must Go' the book became a surprise bestseller and triggered off a major rumpus. Robinson was urging us to jettison old images of God - uncontentious in theological circles, but a shock to the person in the pew. Commenting on it twenty years later, Ken Leech had this to say: "The 'god' whose image must go might well have been a caricature of the Christian God, but it was a caricature which corresponded with a widely held view, a view which effectively prevented any real engagement with God as a living reality. Robinson did not create this situation: he merely laid bare the reality of existing confusion and unbelief" (*True God*, Sheldon Press, 1985 p.6). I think Richard Dawkins - though he may well not sanction my saying this - is performing a similar challenging function to that of Robinson

Curious perhaps to compare Richard Dawkins to John Robinson, but whether such attacks on our images of God come from within the church or from outside it, it is no bad thing regularly to be reminded that all images of God fall far short of the reality encountered and witnessed to by Moses and the prophets, and by Jesus and the apostles. We should listen to Richard Dawkins. His understanding might be full of errors, but they are often our errors of understanding too.

(This article was originally given as an address at St Stephen's Anglican Church, Exeter)