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The God Delusion

By **Richard Dawkins**

Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY, USA. 2006, 406pp. ISBN 978-0-618-68000-9 [Hdbk, \$27.00]

Reviewed by **Todd K. Shackelford**

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Richard Dawkins, the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, catapulted to fame three decades ago with the publication of his scholarly and accessible review of modern evolutionary science, *The Selfish Gene*. *The God Delusion* is Dawkins's ninth book, and it is a stunningly good book: a masterpiece of clear-thinking and a passionate and unwavering call to arms to the rational among us.

Dawkins attacks with ferocity and wit the irrationality and superstitious thinking that powers the major world religions, as well as magical thinking in all forms. He debunks along the way the major myths and misunderstandings about life without a god. Life is more beautiful, not less so, with an appreciation of just how fleeting our own life is, how grotesquely lucky we are to have been born at all. According to Dawkins, attributing to a god or gods the existence and complexity of life forms is aesthetically and intellectually insulting.

Dawkins notes clearly in the preface that a goal of this book is to advocate atheism and rational, non-superstitious, non-magical, non-religious thinking. Dawkins presents a reasonable argument that there are many

people—and especially many scientists and political leaders—who are non-believers, but do not dare expose themselves as such for fear of punishment or reprisal. I want to believe he is correct and that his book will reach even a small portion of this, his intended audience.

Dawkins notes plainly and unapologetically that there is no more rational reason to believe in a god or gods than there is to believe in fantasies such as Santa Clause or the Tooth Fairy, fantasies that most sane people in the Western world relinquish as silly and implausible by the time they enter elementary school. But it really is puzzling, as Dawkins notes: otherwise-intelligent adults who now appreciate the profound silliness and implausibility of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, unicorns, and the rest, nevertheless cling to an equally bizarre and logically indefensible belief that a personal god performs miracles, hears their prayers, and waits for them in Heaven (or else condemns them to Hell). Dawkins speculates that perhaps an irrational belief in a god or gods is a byproduct of psychological mechanisms evolved to function in childhood and which motivate children to believe as true everything their parents and other authority figures tell them. Unquestioning belief in the veracity of parental instructions, directions, and admonitions almost certainly had tremendous survival value for ancestral children. But of course the rub is that parents sometimes fill their children's heads with nonsense, and the child's mind is not "designed" to distinguish the treasure from the trash. This is an intriguing speculation that warrants serious empirical attention.

Dawkins provides a strong case that the existence of god in fact is a testable hypothesis, amenable to rational, scientific scrutiny. According to Dawkins, religion and science, are not, as Stephen Jay Gould argued, non-overlapping magisteria. The truth value

of religious beliefs and all forms of superstitious and magical thinking can be put to scientific test. Dawkins notes that although the existence of a god or gods can never be disproved, neither can we disprove the existence of Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. But we can assign probabilities of the likelihood of the existence of god, Santa Claus, and the Tooth Fairy. In each case, notes Dawkins, these probabilities are vanishingly small.

Dawkins writes at length about the dangers of religion, especially of the major monotheistic religions, whose adherents claim moral superiority and absolute righteousness over adherents of the other religions. Just as surely as believers of one monotheistic religion "know" they are right, so too do believers of the other monotheistic religions "know" they are right. But of course these belief systems are fundamentally incompatible. This, according to Dawkins, is a recipe for disaster. Osama bin Laden "knows" that he and his cause are Good and that George W. Bush and his cause are Evil just as surely and certainly as Bush "knows" that bin Laden is Evil whereas Bush is Good. It is in this sense that Dawkins notes clearly that the world would be a far more peaceful place without religion. Dawkins argues that the key to maintaining these vicious religious conflicts is for parents and others in authority to continue to teach that faith is a virtue. According to Dawkins, so long as parents around the world continue to teach their children to cherish without question belief systems that are incompatible with the belief systems being taught by parents adhering to other belief systems, religious conflict of the bin Laden-Bush type will be a scourge of humanity.

Faith is not a virtue, according to Dawkins. It is a dangerous intellectual and aesthetic embarrassment that belittles the beauty and complexity of life that Darwin elegantly

explained nearly 150 years ago. *The God Delusion* is a literary and intellectual treasure that advocates unapologetically for a rational worldview free of superstition and magical thinking.

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New Books

Any qualified individual interested in writing a review of one of the following books, or any other recent and relevant book, should contact the Editor or an Associate Editor. Publishers, authors, and others may call attention to recently published or forthcoming books by sending information to the Editor.

Brown, B. Evolution: A Historical Perspective. Greenwood Press, 2007, 232pp. ISBN: 0313334617

Burston, D. Erik Erikson and the American Psyche: Ego, Ethics and Evolution. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007, 244pp. ISBN: 07657-04951

Canfield, J. V. Becoming Human: The Development of Language, Self and Self-Consciousness between Hominid and Human. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 256pp. ISBN: 0230552935

Cartwright, J. Evolution and Human Behaviour: Darwinian Perspectives on Human Nature. Palgrave Macmillan (2nd Ed.), 2007, 384pp. ISBN: 0333986326

Cela-Conde, C. J., & Ayala, F. J. Human Evolution: Trails from the Past. Oxford University Press, 2007, 432pp. ISBN: 0198567790

Eisenman, R. Creativity, Mental Illness and Crime. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2007, 139pp. ISBN: 978-07575-42237

Esterhuysen, A. Sterkfontein: Early Hominid Evolution in the Cradle of Humankind. Witwatersrand University Press, 2007, 64pp. ISBN: 1868144216

Filler, A. G. The Upright Ape. New Page Books, 2007, 288 pp. ISBN: 1564149331

Hart, M. H. Understanding Human History. Washington Summit Publishers, 2007, 483pp. ISBN: 1593680260 (Applies an evolutionary perspective to human history over the last 50,000 years)

Holmes, T. Primates and Human Ancestors: The Pliocene Climates. Facts On File, 2008, 208pp. ISBN: 081605965-9

Patthy, L. Protein Evolution (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007, 384pp. ISBN: 1405151668

Russon, A. E., & Begun E. R. (Eds) The Evolution of Thought: Evolutionary Origins of Great Ape Intelligence. Cambridge University Press, 2007, 394pp. ISBN: 0521039924

Sansom, R., & Brandon, R. N. Integrating Evolution and Development: From Theory to Practice, 336pp. The MIT Press, 2007 ISBN: 0262693534