

# Dawkins the dogmatist

by Andrew Brown

*Incurious and rambling, Richard Dawkins's diatribe against religion doesn't come close to explaining how faith has survived the assault of Darwinism*

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*Andrew Brown's books include [The Darwin Wars](#) (Simon & Schuster)*

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**The God Delusion** by Richard Dawkins  
(Bantam, £20)

It has been obvious for years that Richard Dawkins had a fat book on religion in him, but who would have thought him capable of writing one this bad? Incurious, dogmatic, rambling and self-contradictory, it has none of the style or verve of his earlier works.

In his broad thesis, Dawkins is right. Religions are potentially dangerous, and in their popular forms profoundly irrational. The agnostics must be right and the atheists very well may be. There is no purpose to the universe. Nothing inconsistent with the laws of physics has been reliably reported. To demand a designer to explain the complexity of the world begs the question, "Who designed the designer?" It has been clear since Darwin that we have no need to hypothesise a designer to explain the complexity of living things. The results of intercessory prayer are indistinguishable from those of chance.

Dawkins gets miffed when this is called "19th-century" atheism, since, as he says, the period of their first discovery does not affect the truth of these propositions. But to call it "19th-century" is to draw attention to the important truth added in the 20th century: that religious belief persists in the face of these facts and arguments.

This persistence is what any scientific attack on religion must explain—and this one doesn't. Dawkins mentions lots of modern atheist scientists who have tried to explain the puzzle: Robert Hinde, Scott Atran, Pascal Boyer, DS Wilson, Daniel Dennett, all of them worth reading. But he cannot accept the obvious conclusion to draw from their works, which is that thoroughgoing

atheism is unnatural and will never be popular.

Dawkins is inexhaustibly outraged by the fact that religious opinions lead people to terrible crimes. But what, if there is no God, is so peculiarly shocking about these opinions being specifically religious? The answer he supplies is simple: that when religious people do evil things, they are acting on the promptings of their faith but when atheists do so, it's nothing to do with their atheism. He devotes pages to a discussion of whether Hitler was a Catholic, concluding that "Stalin was an atheist and Hitler probably wasn't, but even if he was... the bottom line is very simple. Individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do evil things in the name of atheism."

Yet under Stalin almost the entire Orthodox priesthood was exterminated simply for being priests, as were the clergy of other religions and hundreds of thousands of Baptists. The claim that Stalin's atheism had nothing to do with his actions may be the most disingenuous in the book, but it has competition from a later question, "Why would anyone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief [atheism]?"—as if the armies of the French revolution had marched under icons of the Virgin, or as if a common justification offered for China's invasion of Tibet had not been the awful priest-ridden backwardness of the Dalai Lama's regime.

One might argue that a professor of the public understanding of science has no need to concern himself with trivialities outside his field like the French revolution, the Spanish civil war or Stalin's purges when he knows that history is on his side. "With notable exceptions, such as the Afghan Taliban and the American Christian equivalent, most people play lip service to the same broad liberal consensus of ethical principles." Really? "The majority of us don't cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech and protect it even if we disagree with what is being said." Do the Chinese believe in free speech? Does Dawkins think that pious Catholics or Muslims are allowed to? Does he believe in it himself? He quotes later in the book approvingly and at length a speech by his friend Nicholas Humphrey which argued that, "We should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible or that planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out." But of course, it's not interfering with free speech when atheists do it.

He repeats the theory that suicide bombs are caused by religious schools: "If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior value of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers. Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools." Evidence? As it happens, the definitive scientific study of suicide bombers, *Dying to Win*, has just been published by Robert Pape, a Chicago professor who has a database containing every known suicide attack since 1980. This shows, as clearly as evidence can, that religious zealotry is not on its own sufficient to produce suicide bombers; in fact, it's not even necessary: the practice was widely used by Marxist guerrillas in Sri Lanka.

Dawkins, as a young man, invented and deployed to great effect a logical fallacy he called "the

argument from Episcopal incredulity," skewering a hapless clergyman who had argued that since nothing hunted polar bears, they had no need to camouflage themselves in white. It had not occurred to the bishop that polar bears must eat, and that the seals they prey on find it harder to spot a white bear stalking across the ice cap. Of course, you had to think a bit about life on the ice cap to spot this argument. But thinking a bit was once what Dawkins was famous for. It's a shame to see him reduced to one long argument from professorial incredulity.