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Richard Dawkins — On a Mission to Convert

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The New York Review of Books is one of the nation's most important intellectual journals. Its essays and reviews tend to be long, thoughtful, and influential. Unlike many other book review journals, it attracts big-name writers and authors as reviewers. Many of these lean left — some far left — and the journal can be infuriating. Still, it is essential reading for understanding literary and intellectual culture in America.

The January 11, 2007 issue of NYRB features, among other lead reviews, an [extended essay](#) on Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*. Much has already been written about the book, about Richard Dawkins, and about his call for the end of all belief in God. Nevertheless, the appearance of [this review](#) in NYRB, which covers Dawkins' book along with two others, demands attention.

[H. Allen Orr](#), the reviewer, is Professor of Biology at the University of Rochester. A defender of evolutionary theory, Orr admires Dawkins, calling his earlier book, *The Selfish Gene*, “in my view, the best work of popular science ever written.”

Professor Orr understands what Dawkins is up to in this latest book. The Oxford professor is “on a mission to convert.” That is not often said of research scientists. As Orr explains, “He is an enemy of religion, wants to explain why, and hopes thereby to drive the beast to extinction.”

Why should we take notice of yet another attack upon belief in God? Orr answers that question convincingly:

Dawkins has succeeded in grabbing the public's attention in a way that other writers can only dream of. His book is on the New York Times best-seller list and he's just been featured on the cover of Time magazine.

More:

*Dawkins clearly believes his background in science allows him to draw strong conclusions about religion and, in *The God Delusion*, he presents those conclusions in language that's stronger still. Dawkins not only thinks religion is unalloyed nonsense but that it is an overwhelmingly pernicious, even “very evil,” force in the world. His target is not so much organized religion as all religion. And within organized religion, he attacks not only extremist sects but moderate ones. Indeed, he argues that rearing children in a religious tradition amounts to child abuse.*

That last point is especially important. In numerous venues, Dawkins has raised the argument that children should not be subjected to the religious beliefs, traditions, and prejudices of their parents. To do so is to subject children to a form of abuse, he argues. Watch this argument carefully — it is likely to become a focus of activists who take up Dawkins' charge.

Professor Orr finds this latest book by Dawkins to be “a blunt instrument” that goes far beyond where the science can take him. In Orr's words:

As you may have noticed, Dawkins when discussing religion is, in effect, a blunt instrument, one that has a hard time distinguishing Unitarians from abortion clinic bombers. What may be less obvious is that, on questions of God, Dawkins cannot abide much dissent, especially from fellow scientists (and especially from fellow evolutionary biologists). Indeed

Dawkins is fond of imputing ulterior motives to those “Neville Chamberlain School” scientists not willing to go as far as he in his war on religion: he suggests that they’re guilty of disingenuousness, playing politics, and lusting after the large prizes awarded by the Templeton Foundation to scientists sympathetic to religion. The only motive Dawkins doesn’t seem to take seriously is that some scientists genuinely disagree with him.

*Despite my admiration for much of Dawkins’s work, I’m afraid that I’m among those scientists who must part company with him here. Indeed, *The God Delusion* seems to me badly flawed. Though I once labeled Dawkins a professional atheist, I’m forced, after reading his new book, to conclude he’s actually more an amateur. I don’t pretend to know whether there’s more to the world than meets the eye and, for all I know, Dawkins’s general conclusion is right. But his book makes a far from convincing case.*

Orr writes with insight and caution. Here is more:

*The most disappointing feature of *The God Delusion* is Dawkins’s failure to engage religious thought in any serious way. This is, obviously, an odd thing to say about a book-length investigation into God. But the problem reflects Dawkins’s cavalier attitude about the quality of religious thinking. Dawkins tends to dismiss simple expressions of belief as base superstition. Having no patience with the faith of fundamentalists, he also tends to dismiss more sophisticated expressions of belief as sophistry (he cannot, for instance, tolerate the meticulous reasoning of theologians). But if simple religion is barbaric (and thus unworthy of serious thought) and sophisticated religion is logic-chopping (and thus equally unworthy of serious thought), the ineluctable conclusion is that all religion is unworthy of serious thought.*

*The result is *The God Delusion*, a book that never squarely faces its opponents. You will find no serious examination of Christian or Jewish theology in Dawkins’s book (does he know Augustine rejected biblical literalism in the early fifth century?), no attempt to follow philosophical debates about the nature of religious propositions (are they like ordinary claims about everyday matters?), no effort to appreciate the complex history of interaction between the Church and science (does he know the Church had an important part in the rise of non-Aristotelian science?), and no attempt to understand even the simplest of religious attitudes (does Dawkins really believe, as he says, that Christians should be thrilled to learn they’re terminally ill?).*

In the end, Orr scorches Richard Dawkins with what must be the worst dismissal *The New York Review of Books* is capable of publishing. *The God Delusion*, Orr argues, is “a book that’s distinctly, even defiantly, middlebrow.” Middlebrow? Now, that hurts. Professor Orr argues that the people who will take this book seriously are people who read Douglas Adams and Carl Sagan. That means it will not be taken seriously by people who read Ludwig Wittgenstein, William James, Susan Sontag, and Joan Didion.

Orr chides Dawkins for his failure to take theology seriously. He never really takes on a serious theological argument, Orr rightly observes. This is not really a book of intellectual seriousness, but a tract against belief in God written by an evangelist for atheism.

Give the cultural elites and *The New York Review of Books* credit for this one — they know a bad argument when they see one.

FOR FURTHER READING ON RICHARD DAWKINS: My articles, “[The Devil’s Chaplain: Richard Dawkins on Christianity](#)” (February 25, 2004), “[‘Darwin’s Rottweiler’ — Richard Dawkins Speaks His Mind](#)” (September 9, 2005), “[The Dawkins Delusion](#)” (September 26, 2006).

