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The Devil's Chaplain: Richard Dawkins on Christianity

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Dawkins is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. He is an unashamed evangelist for Darwinism, and is the media's favorite evolutionist. His books have sold by the thousands and his ideas have taken on a life of their own—pushed along by the currents of postmodern culture.

In his previous books, such as *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins presented a view of evolutionary naturalism that focused on genes as the basic engines of evolutionary progress. The so-called "selfish gene" suggests that highly organized and complex living beings are merely vehicles used by the evolutionary process to reproduce genes and perpetuate their legacy. According to Dawkins, evolution progresses as genetic information is transferred to future generations and as information is passed from mind to mind in the form of "memes," or units of intellectual material.

In his new book, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love*, Dawkins has collected some of his favorite essays, reviews, and addresses in one volume. The book's title is taken from a letter Charles Darwin wrote to his friend Joseph Hooker in 1856. In a playful passage, Darwin remarked: "What a book the Devil's Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature." Like Darwin, Dawkins argues that evolution is a blind process, demonstrating no concern for suffering "as an inherent consequence of natural selection." Like his friend the late Carl Sagan, Dawkins argues that the current generation of human beings is the first to gain the power to influence evolution itself. In his first book, Dawkins had argued that humans "alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators." In this new volume, Dawkins asserts that "evolution gave us a brain whose size increased to the point where it became capable of understanding its own provenance, of deploring the moral implications and of fighting against them."

As a militant atheist, Dawkins is living out the inevitable consequences of the Darwinian worldview. The evolutionary perspective is left with the universe as nothing more than a silent box empty of all meaning, intention, and design. Everything within the box must be explained in terms of purely naturalistic materials and processes. The cosmos and everything within it is nothing more than a marvelous—if often malevolent—accident of nature.

Dawkins' hostility toward religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has been evident from the earliest years of his writing career. He has written popular articles for secular humanist and atheist periodicals, and is bold to identify atheism as the only credible intellectual option in the modern era. He sees Christianity—and all forms of theistic belief—as intellectual viruses. But we underestimate Dawkins if we assume that his concerns are merely academic and intellectual. To the contrary, Dawkins aspires to be a social engineer and to bring the evolutionary worldview into the public square in order to revolutionize politics, culture, economics, and every dimension of life. Give him credit—his ambitions are not humble.

The title of his newest book is more than a literary accident. Dawkins really sees himself as an evangelist for

Darwinism and as something like a High Priest of naturalism. He sees all forms of religious belief as the enemy, and wants to expunge public life of all religious arguments, concepts, and traditions. Ultimately, we sense that Dawkins would like to clear the public square of all religious believers as well.

“Why has our society so meekly acquiesced in the convenient fiction that religious views have some sort of right to be respected automatically and without question?,” Dawkins asks. “If I want you to respect my views on politics, science, or art, I have to earn that respect by argument, reason, eloquence or relevant knowledge. I have to withstand counter-arguments. But if I have a view that is part of my religion, critics must respectfully tiptoe away or brave the indignation of society at large. Why are religious opinions off limits in this way? Why do we have to respect them simply because they are religious?”

Religion, Dawkins accuses, “is the most inflammatory enemy-labeling device in history.” His atheism is rooted in philosophical rationalism: “If religious beliefs had any evidence going for them, we might have to accept them in spite of their concomitant unpleasantness. But there is no such evidence.” Religious believers are inhabitants of “suckerdom,” and religious beliefs are the product of “malignant infection.”

Two specific lines of argument promoted by Dawkins in this new work are worthy of attention. First, Dawkins’ militant atheism destroys the pretensions of those who try to create a half-way house between Christian belief and the theory of evolution. Dawkins will have nothing to do with efforts to “reconcile” religion and science. He accuses some of his fellow scientists of sloppy thinking or intellectual dishonesty. Responding to Ursula Goodenough’s book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Dawkins asserts that it presents a form of false advertising. Though Goodenough proposes a reconciliation between science and religion, Dawkins is enough of an atheist to spot a fellow unbeliever when he sees one. “Dr. Goodenough does not believe in any sort of supreme being, does not believe in any sort of life after death; on any normal understanding of the English language, she is no more religious than I am.”

This line of argument is actually very helpful as it destroys the various attempts to accommodate the Christian worldview to the worldview of naturalistic scientism. According to Dawkins’ radical secular worldview, real science and real religion can have nothing to do with each other. Any argument to the contrary, he counters, is either a form of disguised belief in God or corrupted science. “If God is a synonym for the deepest principles of physics, what word is left for a hypothetical being who answers prayers; intervenes to save cancer patients or help evolution over difficult jumps; forgives sins or dies for them? If we are allowed to re-label scientific awe as a religious impulse, the case goes through on the nod. You have redefined science as religion, so it’s hardly surprising if they turn out to ‘converge.’” New Age scientists pushing their proposed reconciliations of evolution and Christian belief are described by Dawkins as engaged in “a cloying love-feast of bogus convergence.”

Rejecting the late Stephen Jay Gould’s proposal that science and religion inhabit different “nonconflicting magisteria,” Dawkins counters that Christian believers insist on crossing over into the scientific world when they claim validity for such events as miracles and divine providence.

“Theologians, if they want to remain honest,” Dawkins instructs, “should make a choice. You can claim your own magisterium, separate from science’s but still deserving of respect. But in that case you have to renounce miracles. Or you can keep your ...miracles and enjoy their huge recruiting potential among the uneducated. But then you must kiss goodbye to separate magisteria and your high-minded aspiration to converge on science.”

Since Dawkins sees religious belief as an intellectual virus, he argues that parents should have no right to instruct and recruit children into their own religious faith. “A human child,” Dawkins explains, “is shaped by evolution to soak up the culture of her people.” According to Dawkins, “When you are pre-programmed to absorb useful information at a high rate, it is hard to shut out pernicious or damaging information at the same time. With so many mindbytes to be downloaded, so many mental codons to be duplicated, it is no wonder that child brains are gullible, open to almost any suggestion, vulnerable to subversion, easy prey to Moonies, Scientologists and Nuns. Like immune-deficient patients, children are wide open to mental infections that adults might brush off without effort.”

This second line of argument should draw immediate attention to the fact that Dawkins and his fellow atheists have no intention of respecting anything like the concept of religious liberty that has framed the American experiment. “Society, for no reason that I can discern, accepts that parents must have an automatic right to bring their children up with particular religious opinions and can withdraw them from say, biology classes that teach evolution.” In Dawkins’ vision of a perfect

world, undoubtedly he would be the authority to decide what our children would and would not learn, and all would be atheists.

One of the most venerable and valuable axioms of warfare is this: "Know your enemy." Naturalistic evolution and the materialist worldview represent the most threatening enemies Christianity now faces in the Western world. In *A Devil's Chaplain*, Richard Dawkins helps us to understand the worldview and thinking behind the theory of evolution. As he applies to be the devil's chaplain, it appears that Richard Dawkins is superbly qualified for the job.

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