Book Reviews

The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine

Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007.

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Since arriving on the scene late in 2006, atheist Richard Dawkins's sophomoric decrial of religion, *The God Delusion*, has sparked wide discussion. Preceded by numerous review-length responses (notably Alvin Plantinga's "The Dawkins Confusion," Books and Culture, March-April 2007, pp. 21-24), Alister McGrath's *The Dawkins Delusion* is the welcome first book-length critique of Dawkins's latest work. Happily, one could hardly imagine a scholar better suited to the task. Holding doctorates in both molecular biophysics and theology, McGrath is himself a former atheist (having become a Christian as an adult). He spent a number of years teaching historical theology at Oxford, where Dawkins is a scientist, and now heads up the Centre for Theology, Religion and Culture at King's College, London.

As McGrath notes in his introduction, responding to *The God Delusion* is difficult given the sheer volume of its flagrant misrepresentations of religion, vitriolic polemics, dogmatism, and general lack of interest in genuinely engaging religious believers (tendencies, I would add, that are typical of the so-called "new atheists"). He nevertheless sets calmly about his task, ably exposing Dawkins's presuppositions and unfounded assertions one after the other. Indeed, given the philosophical nature of Dawkins's claims coupled with his status as a scientist, reading McGrath's book is often, as Logan Gage put it, "like watching one schoolboy do another's work" by "pointing out what Dawkins is obligated to show in order to make his case" (Christianity Today, November, 2007).

The Dawkins Delusion comprises four short chapters, each responding to a representative "argument" from *The God Delusion.* Chapter one takes up the question, "Deluded about God?" McGrath begins by correcting Dawkins's definition of faith. Being intrinsically irrational, faith, Dawkins claims, is "blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence." Of course, as McGrath shows, such a spectacularly question-begging definition is unfounded.

In his pretentiously titled fourth chapter, "Why there almost certainly is no God," Dawkins offers "the central argument" of *The God Delusion*, the crux of which has become Dawkins's catch phrase: "Who designed the Designer?" He asserts that God, as the explanation of our complex universe, must himself be highly complex, which greatly diminishes the probability that God exists. Given Dawkins's lofty regard for this argument, one wishes McGrath's treatment of it were more thorough. But he rightly questions the "leap from the recognition of complexity to the assertion of improbability" (p. 28) by noting that despite the highly improbable odds to the contrary, humans exist. Unfortunately, however, he passes on the opportunity to expound the many flaws of Dawkins's argument. For example, even if each of the six steps (calling them premises won't do) of Dawkins's argument were granted, the conclusion—that "God almost certainly doesn't exist"—is a non sequitur.

In the second chapter, McGrath considers the question, "Has science disproved God?" For Dawkins, that science disproves God is a foregone conclusion. So, when the late atheist Stephen Jay Gould concedes the compatibility of leading scientific beliefs with either atheism or theism, Dawkins dismisses him out of hand (p. 34). As McGrath notes, the upshot of Gould's statement is that there are limits to science, which Dawkins vehemently denies. Whereas Gould proposes the idea of the NOMA (nonoverlapping magisteria) of science and religion, Dawkins affirms a single magisterium: empirical reality (p. 40). In response, McGrath offers a third option: POMA (partially overlapping magisteria), which allows for the mutual benefit of science

and religion's interaction—a view taken, for example, by Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute and point-man for the Human Genome Project.

Chapter three asks, "What are the origins of religion?" Locating Dawkins in the tradition of Ludwig Feuerbach, McGrath critiques his naturalistic explanation of religion that theistic belief must be an "accidental [evolutionary] byproduct" of some sort (p. 55). Besides enjoying no scientific evidence, the foundation of Dawkins's theory is rife with problems. McGrath highlights Dawkins's suspect definition of "religion" (p. 59f), before engaging his claim that despite having no selective advantage in its own right, humans are nevertheless psychologically primed for religion because it confers selective advantage in other areas of life (p. 65). Given Dawkins's tendency to boil religion down to beliefs, such as "God exists," an interesting problem (which McGrath does not identify) arises. If, as naturalist neuroscientist Patricia Churchland explains, "boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing" ("Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience," Journal of Philosophy 84 [Oct. 1987]), then it's difficult to place much confidence in any human beliefs; evolutionary selections are made, so to speak, with an eye toward human behavior, not beliefs. McGrath does, however, rightly criticize Dawkins's notions of belief in God as a "virus of the mind" and the "God-meme" as ridiculous pseudo-science.

The final and longest chapter of the book takes up the question, "Is religion evil?" Not surprisingly, Dawkins thinks it is. After all, he reasons, a religion worshipping "a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a . . .capriciously malevolent bully" (p. 75) must be evil. Fortunately, as McGrath explains, Christians don't worship any such being. Moreover, evils like violence are by no means necessary to religion. Rather, they are the result of (fallen) human nature. McGrath rounds out the chapter by correcting Dawkins's many mistakes regarding Jesus' teachings, especially on the Old Testament.

Refusing to be distracted by the pejorative, vitriolic nature of Dawkins's polemics, McGrath has provided what is, for the most part, an outstanding response to Dawkins's *The God Delusion.* Despite its many qualities, however, *The Dawkins Delusion* leaves me with a few quibbles. First, though McGrath identifies and treats the central points of Dawkins's book, I found myself repeatedly wishing for broader, fuller responses (not deeper or more scholarly, mind you—the book is written for non-scholars, after all). For example, though mentioning science's dependence on "inductive reasoning" and highlighting Dawkins's repeated yet decidedly unscientific interpretations of data (pp. 35-36), one wonders why McGrath doesn't expound on the limits of science—especially given Dawkins's scientism. Claims of the sort "only knowledge acquired via science is true" are blatantly self-refuting; the goals, methodology, and presuppositions (e.g., validity of the laws of logic) obviously cannot be validated by science, either. There is also McGrath's cryptic remark that Evangelicals "believe passionately in God but eschew religious behavior" (p. 63). What could be meant by this? Surely McGrath is aware of the Evangelical wings of both the Anglican and Catholic churches? Besides, I certainly consider such practices as the taking of the Eucharist and baptism to be rituals or "religious behavior." Finally, McGrath mistakenly accuses the intelligent design movement of employing a "god-of-the-gaps" argument (p. 30). Intelligent design proponents do not merely argue from "naturalistic ignorance," appealing to God only upon discovering explanatory gaps. Rather, they argue via inference-to-the-best-explanation that an intelligent designer is necessary (contra the blind watchmaker thesis). McGrath specifies that he rejects ID on theological grounds, as well, but unfortunately he doesn't elaborate.

These concerns notwithstanding, that it is Dawkins who is deluded about God is clearly established by this book.

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God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions? Insights from the Bible and the Early Church

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As Christian apologists interacting regularly with people of various creeds, faiths, and religious traditions, we have likely all spent time pondering the question posed in the subtitle of Gerald McDermott's latest work, *God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions?* However, it is one thing to ponder this question and quite another to attempt to answer it (and yet another to publish one's attempt). In *God's Rivals*, McDermott courageously but humbly attempts the latter. In the introduction he offers his primary thesis: "If there is one theme, or red thread, that runs through the following chapters, it is this: the biblical authors and early church theologians saw the religions not simply as human constructions but as spiritual projects as well" (11). Based on this insight, McDermott attempts to find the happy medium between the "fundamentalist extreme" that views all non-Christian religions as entirely demonic and "religious relativism," which views all religions as equally salvific ways to God.

After a couple chapters laying out the primary issues he wishes to address, McDermott takes a chapter each to discuss the Old Testament and New Testament views on other religions, followed by a chapter each discussing the views of Church Fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Finally, in the last chapter, McDermott ties together all the data from these various sources to address the questions: What are the religions? And why are they there?

Based on his survey of the OT passages dealing with other religions, McDermott discusses four views hinted at in the text: (1) "neighborly pluralism," the idea that each nation has its own god, and as long as everyone keeps to themselves, everything is fine; (2)

"competitive pluralism," similar to the above idea, only now the nation-gods are in competition; (3) "vehement missionary exclusivism," the idea that there is truly only one God, Yahweh, and that all peoples of all nations should serve him; and finally, (4) the "cosmic war view," in which the cosmos is populated by a multitude of beings, warring against each other for the world's destiny. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, McDermott rejects (3) and opts for a combination of (1), (2), and (4). He argues that according to a theory-neutral reading of the OT data, one finds that the other gods really do exist. As he describes it, the cosmic war view "rejects the 'Yahweh alone' view that denies the existence of any other gods. It might refuse to call them 'gods,' but when it does that it is only quibbling with words" (63).

McDermott next discusses how these gods are described in the NT as "principalities and powers," offering biblical and historical evidence for pairing these OT and NT notions. In the remaining chapters, then, he describes in fascinating detail the Church Fathers' views on these spiritual beings and how these views might help us understand the phenomenon of religious diversity today. According to McDermott's account, God initially created these beings with the purpose of watching over the nations and directing the people of the earth to worship God and obey the law. Instead, these beings distorted their role by directing worship to themselves and making people slaves to the law. Nevertheless, in God's providence, he uses these distorted representatives to instill in people an understanding of their inability to follow the law and their need for a redeemer. Thus, despite the distortions in other religions, they contain elements of truth that can potentially lead people in the direction of Christ.

With *God's Rivals* McDermott has done the evangelical world a great service by engaging the question of religious diversity in a fresh way. Nevertheless, this book is not without room for critique. First, we might want to question whether it is really "quibbling with words" to refuse to use the term "gods" as McDermott suggests. For if we take his suggestion at face value, what he is proposing is some form of *polytheism*, the existence of a multitude of gods. While McDermott acknowledges outright that these gods are created beings by the One Creator God, Yahweh, he nonetheless maintains that they are, in fact, *gods*. But as Keith Yandell often reminds his students, there are no

levels of divinity; you either are or you aren't. We might thus be willing to concede with McDermott that there are other powerful beings in the cosmos, but I think we should continue to quibble over the fact that they are not *gods*. It seems that McDermott has made the mistake of reading the OT's *description* of people's beliefs in other gods as the OT's *endorsement* of the view that there actually are other gods. (See George Mavrodes's anthologized article, "Polytheism," for a rather humorous satire of this kind of reading of the OT.)

Secondly, McDermott is forthright with the concession that "my treatment of these texts and issues reflects my Reformed theology. In other words, I believe in a big God who works in ways that burst all of our conceptual boxes—with contrasting approaches which sometimes seem paradoxical or even contradictory to us but which for him are no problem" (18). While his Reformed theology should not be a problem for most readers, the way he details his "big God" is at points problematic. For example, McDermott writes, "Satan is a creation of God enforcing God's law through a 'ministry' of accusation. . . . As Paul's Jewish contemporary Philo put it, God rules through intermediate powers, *who are servants to do things not appropriate to God himself*" (79, italics mine). It appears, then, that one of "our conceptual boxes" that God is not limited to is the idea of *moral perfection*. God has revealed himself to us as a perfectly holy and righteous God, but according to McDermott's suggestion here, God works in ways "contradictory" to this by delegating the dirty work to his servants—apparently including Satan. On this proposal Yahweh sounds more like the *Godfather* than the Christian God. I think this understanding should cause any reader, Reformed or otherwise, to be a bit uneasy with McDermott's proposal.

Finally, I have another minor issue with this book that as a Christian philosopher I cannot help but mention, though it is not directly pertinent to his thesis. In his discussion of Justin Martyr's view that ancient Greek philosophy offered "seeds of the Word," McDermott gives a rather misleading description of the current state of philosophy. He states, "Remember, the ancient world's conception of philosophy was very different from our own. We typically think, with some good reason, that philosophy is for those who have given up on religion. So if you want to find God, you would not go first

to the philosophers. But in the second century, most religious seekers pursued Greek philosophy with the intent of finding God" (88). One might think that this paragraph was written in the 1950s. Certainly the legacy of Marx, Nietzsche, Russell, and Ayer is still felt strongly in philosophy today, but given the renaissance of Christian philosophy in the last half-century, McDermott's comments unfortunately only serve to propagate the lingering stereotype of contemporary philosophy as an anti-Christian discipline. This stereotype is damaging for the church (not to mention Christian philosophers) and should be eradicated as soon as possible.

But all quibbling aside, I believe *God's Rivals* is a helpful resource for anyone wrestling with the issue of religious diversity. I would especially recommend this book to those who find themselves in either the fundamentalist or the relativist camp or for those who would simply like to see how the Church Fathers addressed similar concerns. *God's Rivals* might leave the reader with more questions than she began with, but with this issue that is probably a good thing. As far too many Christians think their understanding of other religions and the people who adhere to them is *the* absolute Christian view, this book does a good job at calling that confidence into question. For that accomplishment alone, McDermott should be applauded. And while McDermott's proposal is not without problems, we can appreciate his attempt to answer these difficult questions from a biblical and historical standpoint. We thus might view McDermott's work in the legacy of Francis Schaeffer and his ilk, namely, those Christian thinkers who are bold enough to ask the difficult questions that many would rather ignore, who have the ingenuity to offer novel solutions, but whose solutions might occasionally miss the mark.

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