

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Dawkins Delusion

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BRITAIN'S CRUSADING ATHEIST

While many Americans know Oxford professor and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins for *The Selfish Gene*, the 1976 science bestseller that portrayed all life as a struggle to propagate DNA, they may be less familiar with his other identity as a crusading atheist. Yet last fall Dawkins made news with a new book, *The God Delusion*, dismissing all religious faith as “insanity.” Arguing that “natural selection and other scientific theories are superior to a God hypothesis in explaining the living world,” Dawkins says he wrote the book as a “consciousness-raising exercise,” in the hope that “religious believers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.” Toward this end, *The God Delusion* concludes with an international list of “friendly addresses for individuals needing support in escaping from religion.”

Reviews have been mixed. *The New York Review of Books* accused Dawkins of “scattershot reasoning” and “rhetorical excess,” while Britain’s leading Marxist critic, Terry Eagleton, dismissed *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books* as “a vulgar caricature of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince.” Yet the book ranked number two in Amazon’s worldwide sales list, and is fueling an antireligious campaign in Britain, which Dawkins himself is leading, canvassing government ministers and promoting atheism in state schools. This effort has already notched successes in restricting religious rights, most notably in a new British law requiring Catholic adoption agencies to place children with gay and lesbian couples.

The National Secular Society (NSS), of which Dawkins is an honorary associate, has campaigned for a godless Britain since the nineteenth century, and devotes its Web site to decrying and ridiculing religious faith. The NSS, whose associates include twenty British parliamentarians, as well as such establishment cultural figures as the playwright Harold Pinter, vows to combat “religious power-seekers” and “put them in their place once and for all.” For his part, Dawkins has said he would remove all financial support from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim schools and make them teach atheism; prohibit hospital chaplains from solacing the ill; and undertake other measures to combat the “infantile regression” of religious belief. And what about parents who persist in telling their children about religion? “It’s probably too strong to say the state should have the

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right to take children away from their parents,” Dawkins told an interviewer. “But I think we have got to look very carefully at the rights of parents-and whether they should have the right to indoctrinate their children.”

According to Dawkins, morality is “biologically determined,” and all moral questions, from the prohibition of incest to the allocation of kidney machines, should be decided by “utilitarian moral philosophers” trained to assess the “balance of suffering and happiness” such questions address. “This is a very different way of doing morality than the absolutist way, which supposes some things are absolutely wrong,” Dawkins has argued.

Different, indeed. Brilliant as he may be in explicating biology for mass audiences, Dawkins goes badly astray when he ventures into moral speculation. Speaking at Oxford’s Literary Festival in 2006, alongside the philosopher A. C. Grayling and the Cambridge ethnologist Patrick Bateson, he insisted that human beings were growing “ever nicer” thanks to the decline of religion and the rise of science. Asked why the twentieth century had witnessed so many atrocities, he insisted Hitler and Stalin had been “quite mild” compared to the religious “monsters of the Middle Ages.” In a series on Britain’s Channel Four TV, he equated elderly pilgrims at Lourdes with suicide bombers on the London Underground. “Far from being beaten, militant faith is on the march all across the world with terrifying consequences,” Dawkins told TV viewers. “It’s something we must resist, because irrational faith is fuelling murderous intolerance throughout the world.”

Language like this would sound familiar to those who remember the campaign against religious faith in Eastern Europe, where claims about religion’s social divisiveness were used by totalitarian regimes to justify savage repression. Under such regimes, scientific atheism was a requirement for teachers and educators, legislators and ministers. Schools and colleges were seen as the frontline in a struggle against religious belief, a struggle that included removing Christian symbols and place names and disrupting Christian influences in marriage and family life. These were political systems in which just being a Christian was enough to attract the cold glare of suspicion and hostility. The utilitarian morality favored by Dawkins was given free rein.

Born into a British colonial family in Kenya, Dawkins is a self-described member of the political Left who lives comfortably in a 3 million-Euro house just off Oxford’s exclusive Norham Gardens. It is tempting to view him as a distinctly English eccentric, more outrageous than offensive, with middle-class secularist obsessions that hark back to the paternalism of figures such as the antireligious philosopher Bertrand Russell.

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Yet this would be a mistake. For one thing, his atheist campaign, with its chilling eugenic undertones, appeals to many people raised with little knowledge or understanding of religious belief—people for whom the fear of Islam touched off by September 11 has metamorphosed into a public phobia about all religion. Such people may be tempted by Dawkins's Darwinist notion of religious belief as a virus that infects inferior genes and needs "quarantining," as well as by the summons to defend society against a rising tide of "religious fanaticism."

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For another, Dawkins has influential friends and formidable resources. Hostility to religion has a long tradition in the United Kingdom, where "organized religion" often sits uncomfortably alongside Anglo-Saxon empiricism and individualism, and anticlerical sentiment reflects the impatience of an antireligious elite that resents alternatives to its own way of thinking. Welcoming Dawkins's new book, the veteran BBC broadcaster Joan Bakewell said the professor was right to be "not only angry but alarmed" at the spread of religious faith. The liberal peer, Lord Ralf Dahrendorf, who scrutinizes all legislation passing through the British Parliament, has also deplored threats to the "secular commitment" of Western societies. "The return of religion to politics—and to public life in general—is a serious challenge to the rule of democratically enacted law and the civil liberties that go with it," Dahrendorf wrote in the *Guardian*, and he appealed to "enlightened communities" to respond accordingly.

Britain itself may already be feeling the effects of such "enlightened" thinking. A recent Education Bill amendment would have required Catholic schools and other church-owned colleges to reserve at least a quarter of their places for nonreligious children (it was reluctantly withdrawn by Britain's education minister, Alan Johnson, after Catholic and Anglican leaders said they would create such places voluntarily). And an upcoming debate this month will center on the new Equality Bill, which threatens to deny religious organizations the right to follow conscience in dealings with homosexuals. Meanwhile, social services in several counties—including Dawkins's native Oxfordshire—are reported to have denied adoption rights to Christian couples, after claiming the children in question could be "brainwashed."

One church leader, Archbishop Mario Conti of Glasgow, has warned that the controversy over Catholic adoption agencies is just the "tip of the iceberg." If enacted, new regulations "could compel religious organizations to renounce their activities or be removed from public life," Conti warned. A new Charity Law is expected to withdraw tax-exempt status from religious bodies that fail to reflect "modern morals and existing orthodoxy," even as Christian Union societies at British universities have had to resort to legal action after being denied facilities and having their bank accounts frozen. Meanwhile, Edinburgh University has banned copies of the Bible from student dormitories after condemning the

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Christian Union for violating its “equality and diversity policy” by claiming that “any sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage is not God-ordained.” And religious leaders have resisted attempts by secularist local councils to “de-Christianize” Christmas and Easter and remove Christian place-names from towns and cities-literally wiping religion off the map.

As for Dawkins, a new Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason was unveiled in December to fight the “scandal” of religious teaching in schools, and to prevent children from being “labeled with their parents’ religion.” With a Labor Party Humanist Group launched in Parliament earlier this year to “oppose faith schools,” Dawkins can be confident his campaign is flourishing. Britain’s crusading atheist looks set to fight on for his ideal utilitarian society, a brave new world in which secularism reigns supreme, while lives, values, and freedoms are ruled by scientists.

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