

Secular sermons

A review of
*A Devil's Chaplain:
Reflections on Hope,
Lies, Science, and Love*
By Richard Dawkins
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Richard Dawkins hardly needs introduction. As Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford, Dawkins is a leading proponent of Darwinism, and is perhaps the most visible living apologist for atheism. *A Devil's Chaplain* is a loosely-structured collection of articles, reviews, and other writings, most of which have been published previously over the past 25 years, and a few of which are new to this collection. The essays are separated into more-or-less related groups with introductory remarks by Dawkins.

Borrowing from the subtitle, there are two rough categories under which we can discuss the major themes of these essays: celebrations of his love for science, and warning calls decrying as 'lies' all departures from scientific 'orthodoxy'. 'Science' (including, in Dawkins' view, Darwinism as a central tenet) is Dawkins' overarching theme, his ultimate truth, which holds the entire book together.

Love and hope

Dawkins loves 'science', Darwinism in particular, and delights in singing its praises. Christians delight in science as well—as the handiwork of God. But Dawkins loves science as god, and consciously tries to build a world and life view around science, wearing many hats in the process.¹

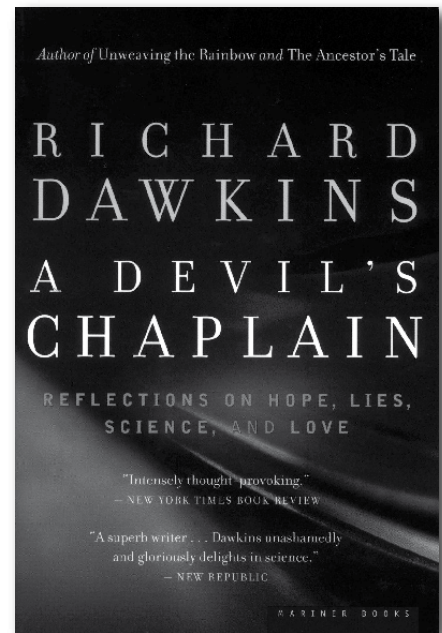
The scientist Dawkins dilates on the wonders of the atomic structure of crystals (pp. 43–45), and muses on the possibilities arising from genetic

sequencing of an increasing body of creatures (chapter 2.5). As an educator, he exalts a certain school headmaster who loved the sciences and succeeded in imparting that love to his students (chapter 1.8). Dawkins the historian admires the foresight of Darwin in an introduction to a new edition of *Descent of Man* (chapter 2.1). As a philosopher, Dawkins moralizes on the wickedness of 'speciesism', the view that we humans are more valuable than any other species (chapter 1.3). And reveling in 'universal Darwinism', as the Darwinian chaplain Dawkins presents his own theoretical argument for Darwinian evolution being universally valid to life anywhere in the universe ('Darwinism really matters in the universe', p. 79).

Dawkins includes elegies and tributes to close friends Douglas Adams and W.D. Hamilton; their shared love of science is their religion. Nostalgically, Dawkins writes of his love for Africa, with its quasi-religious significance as the evolutionary birthplace of humanity (section 6)—and his own birthplace (Nairobi, Kenya). He concludes with a letter to his ten-year-old daughter on science as the ultimate way to truth.

Lies

Sprinkled liberally among the odes to science are Dawkins' signature polemics against all departures from pure, orthodox Darwinian science. Our 'devil's chaplain', it appears, believes just as strongly as any (much maligned) fundamentalist preacher that the hard 'truth' must be preached (they obviously disagree on what that truth is). Dawkins rebukes a variety of people who he believes misunderstood science to a greater or lesser degree: a government minister (p. 27), 'alternative medicine' advocates (pp. 36, 164, 179–186), postmodernists (pp. 6, 47–53), and even Stephen Jay Gould (chapters 5.1–5.4).



Dawkins saves the real fire and brimstone preaching for his excoriations of religion and creationism. Whether it is decrying as deceitful a creationist film crew who stumped Dawkins on tape (during what he calls a 'suspiciously amateurish interview') (pp. 61, 91–92),² or describing religions in general as 'mind parasites' (p. 117), it is clear that (theistic) religion is what really draws Dawkins' ire (not of course his own atheistic religion). His rhetorical vehemence comes to a climax in 'Time to Stand Up' (chapter 3.5), which was originally printed in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy:

'Judaism, Islam and Christianity have much in common. Despite New Testament watering down and other reformist tendencies, all three pay allegiance to the same violent and vindictive God of Battles . . . Is there no catastrophe terrible enough to shake the faith of people, on both sides, in God's goodness and power? No glimmering realization that he might not be there at all . . . ? Those of us who have for years politely concealed our contempt for the dangerous collective delusion of religion need to stand up and speak out' (p. 157, 160, 161).

Dawkins is far outside his sphere of expertise when opining that the God of the Koran and the God of the Bible are the same deity. The view of salvation presented in the respective holy books could not be more different.³ Further, what about Christian ‘just war’ doctrine—does this not give Dawkins an inkling that he might be interpreting the ‘God of Battles’ out of context?⁴

Dawkins believes that religion is one of the ultimate problems in the world, and his attacks take many forms. Dawkins uses his pet theory of memes to describe religions as ‘viruses of the mind’ (chapter 3.2).⁵ He is willing to join with unorthodox Gould in advising other scientists to avoid debates with creationists, lest it lend intellectual respectability to the antievolutionists (chapter 5.5). The last chapter of the book (Dawkins’ letter to his daughter) sounds like an antitheistic Sunday-school lesson:

‘I want to move on from evidence, which is a good reason for believing something, and warn you against three bad reasons for believing anything. They are called “tradition”, “authority”, and “revelation”’ (p. 243).

Dawkins thus ends the book on a fittingly moralizing note, preaching at once the dangers of religion and the virtues of empirical science.

Sloppy chaplain

Considering the brevity of the essays, the number of topics discussed, and Dawkins’ tendency to paint with a broad brush, it is not surprising to find that overstatements and false impressions abound. Unfortunately, people tend to accept a well-known intellectual’s views without the careful scrutiny that they require, but the familiar scientific motto (and Dawkins’ own advice to his daughter) ‘nothing by mere authority’⁶ should be turned on Dawkins.

In one article included as chapter 2.3, Dawkins attempts to meet the ‘information challenge’ posed by creationists,⁷ and provides a plausible-sounding

solution. However, plausible *sounding* is all that it is. The evolutionists’ information problem remains; Dawkins has merely obscured it by confusing complexity with one form of information. Specifically, he has failed to distinguish semantic information from Shannon information, and thus makes the equivocation harder for the layman to spot (a common evolutionist fallacy when dealing with this issue).⁸ It is hard to believe that Dawkins was ignorant of this problem, as a detailed creationist critique of his original article had been available four years before publication of *A Devil’s Chaplain*.⁹ Accepting Dawkins’ authority is not safe when he declares the information problem solved.

In an entirely different line of argument, Dawkins uses the tired old canard that religion, if it doesn’t cause war, is at the least ‘incendiary’ and divisive, and is thus bad (pp. 156–161). That religion divides is undoubtedly true, but this is hardly unique among ideologies—has Dawkins never heard of Marx’s class warfare?¹⁰ The historical record gives no reason to believe that scientifically-minded rationalists with ideologies are any less dangerous than a ‘divisive’ religion; quite the opposite is true (the Nazi Holocaust Stalin purges and Pol Pot genocides were caused by evolutionary/atheistic régimes; their casualties dwarf those of all ‘religious wars’ throughout history put together¹¹). Besides, rejecting an idea because the person espousing it is less than perfect is a classic case of the genetic fallacy (e.g. if

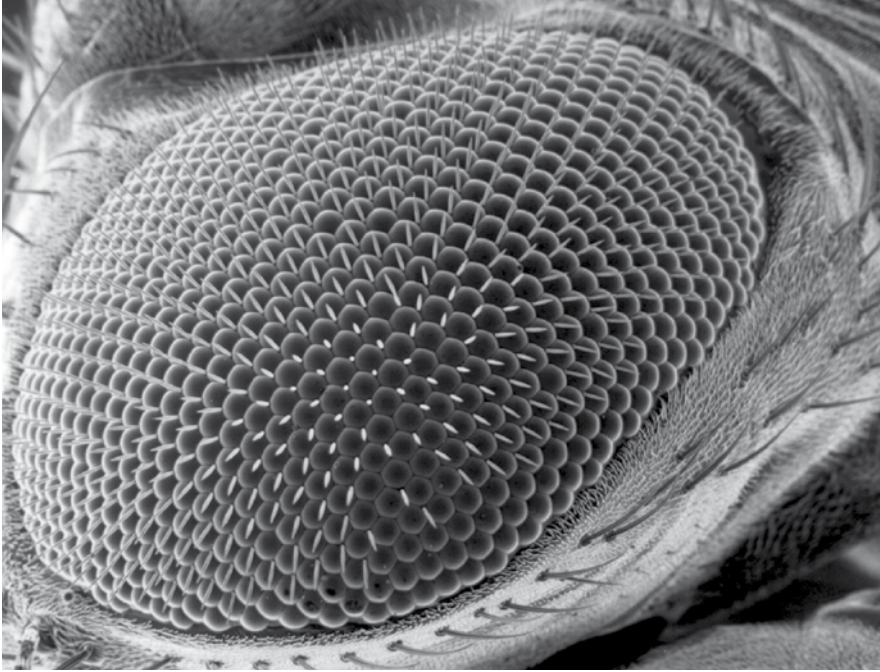
Einstein had been a serial killer, would that make $E = mc^2$ less true?).

Of course, even in his own field, Dawkins’ own authority is only as good as his arguments and evidence. In an essay responding to Gould’s punctuated equilibrium claims, Dawkins was presenting the case for gradualism by using the evolution of the eye as an example. He stated,

‘... modern analogues of every step up the ramp can be found ... But even without these examples, we could be confident that there must have been a gradual, progressive increase in the number of features which an engineer would recognize as contributing towards optical quality. Without stirring from our armchair, we can see that it must be so’ (p. 212).



Dawkins’ hyperbole reaches a peak when he attributes terrorism to religion in general. (Photo by Michael Johnson).



The compound eye of a fruit fly is an example of stunning engineering. The trilobite also possessed a compound eye, and the presence of this complex feature is a problem for evolutionists who date the trilobite back to the Cambrian. Dawkins never deals with this issue in his discussion of the evolution of eyes. (Credit: Dartmouth College).

But the fact that such analogues are extant today does not show that they were actually the steps which led to our eyes in evolutionary history; certainly gradual development sounds better than postulating instantaneous formation of eyes by macromutation, but Dawkins has not dealt with the problems for gradualism.¹² Further, he never deals with the fossil-record problems, the problems that led Gould to doubt gradualism in the first place. In the case of the eye, Dawkins mentions none of the difficult cases, such as the enormously complex eye of the trilobite.¹³ Was there really time for the gradual development of that eye by the Cambrian explosion, even given an evolutionary timescale? If so, does he have nothing to say about the absence of intermediates developing toward trilobite-eyes? We do not expect Dawkins to go into great detail in a short essay; still, though, to provide an armchair argument for why gradualism is preferable to punctuated equilibrium hardly saves gradualism from its real problems.

This is typical Dawkins, interacting

with criticism at only a superficial level. If he condescends to Gould, it is even less surprising (but no less sad) that he ignores the flood of scholarship coming from the creationist and Intelligent Design (ID) camps. This book's strength is Dawkins' ability to put standard Darwinian concepts in creative and often memorable words, not providing heavy-duty new technical solutions to evolutionary problems. For example, his 'landscape' metaphor for evolution, upon which he bases his argument for universal Darwinism (chapter 2.2), is simply an explanation¹⁴ of humdrum natural selection extrapolated (as usual) too far when it passes the 'kind' level.¹⁵ If Dawkins were really interested in refuting creationists, this would have been an excellent place to answer our arguments against a seamless continuum of evolutionary forms.

Classic Dawkins

A Devil's Chaplain is certainly not Dawkins' most powerful book, but anthologies rarely ever are. As an anthology, it does provide a lively

smorgasbord of Dawkins. The points made are not new, and its most significant sections were printed (and often refuted) well before the book came out. Its selling point is Dawkins' skill as a popular writer. Though filled with bad arguments, his essays are easy and exciting to read, discussing scientific and hot-button social issues with plentiful use of anecdote, analogy and rhetoric. It is something like a collection of random sermons and advice from atheism's most popular preacher.

Vulnerable chaplain?

Dawkins' sermons fall apart under close scrutiny, and further, he never even considers deeper philosophical problems underlying his method of argumentation. When Dawkins talks of religions fomenting wars, how does he know on a naturalistic basis that there is anything at all undesirable about war?¹⁶ How does he know that there is anything inherently good in 'truth'? In fact, as Alvin Plantinga has shown,¹⁷ there are reasons to doubt whether human thought is even capable of corresponding to reality within a naturalistic framework—the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum* of naturalism.¹⁸

As the late Greg Bahnsen noted, 'One does not decide *whether* to form some epistemological viewpoint and theoretical basis for certainty or not; he simply chooses whether he shall do it self-consciously and well.'¹⁹

Dawkins has an epistemology. He believes that he is capable of knowing true information by means of the scientific method, but he is entirely without a foundation in naturalism for such a belief. Christians who presuppose Scripture, on the other hand, have epistemological warrant for belief in efficacious reason and science, on the grounds that God is logical and made an orderly universe.²⁰ Small wonder, then, that Dawkins avoids the subject and prefers a surface-level polemical approach. The biblical apologetic not only can withstand his individual *ad hoc* 'empirical' arguments, but even undercuts his entire basis of argument

by showing that in order to have a reason to trust reason itself, we must presuppose the God of Scripture.²¹

References

1. For a generally excellent summary of Dawkins' treatment of science as a secular religion, written by a non-Christian, see Ruse, M., *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 202, 204–208, 2005; reviewed by Weinberger, L., *Journal of Creation* 20(1):31–33, 2006.
2. Dawkins denies that he was unable to answer, and claims that the taped interview gave a false impression. But Dawkins' account of the interview itself is confused. For a full description of what happened, see Skeptics choke on Frog, <www.creationontheweb.com/choke>.
3. Islam, by failing to comprehend the fall in Genesis, teaches that man can save himself by keeping the commands of Islam. Thus despite Dawkins' claim that it is an 'Abrahamic religion', he is ignorant of the whole point of the true Abrahamic religion—*justification by faith alone*, not by works (Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 which cite Genesis 15:6, cf. Ephesians 2:8–9); Islam preaches *justification by works*. See Grant, G., *The Blood of the Moon: Understanding the Historic Struggle Between Islam and Western Civilization*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, pp. 42–45, 2001. See also Wieland, C., The power of ideas, *Creation* 24(1):6, 2001; Wieland, C. and Catchpoole, D., Islam and worldview: the big picture (interview with Darrell Furgason), *Creation* 28(4):52–55, 2006.
4. See Geisler, N.L., *Christian Ethics*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, ch. 12, 1989.
5. For a creationist critique of the most recent exposition of memes, see Line, P., Unleashing the meme: is this the end of our existence? *Creation Matters* 7(2), 2002; also Sarfati, J., *Refuting Evolution* 2, ch. 12, Creation Ministries International, Australia, 2002.
6. This is a rough translation of the motto of the Royal Society. Although today the Society's motto unfortunately lends itself to anti-religious propaganda, the original intent of the Society's founders was shaped largely by Puritan sensibilities, in the belief that conducting investigations into nature which was 'both to the greater glory of God and the good of man.' Coser, L.A., *Men of Ideas*, Free Press, New York, p. 29, 1965. See also Nickel, J., *Mathematics: Is God Silent?* rev. ed., Ross House Books, Vallecito, CA, pp. 130–131, 2001.
7. On the information argument, see Gitt, W., Information, science and biology, *Journal of Creation* 10(2):181–187, 1996, and Gitt, W., *In the Beginning Was Information*, Christliche Literatur-Verbreitung e.V., Bielefeld, Germany, 1997. See also Wieland, C., Not by chance! *Creation* 20(1):50–51, 1997.
8. See the detailed critique of Dawkins' original article: Truman, R., The problem of evolution, <www.trueorigin.org/dawkinfo.asp>, 15 July 2005. Shannon himself wrote of the difference between Shannon information and semantic information: Shannon, C.E., A mathematical theory of communication, p. 1, reprint with corrections from *Bell System Technical Journal* 27:379–423, 623–656, Jul., Oct., 1948, at <cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf>. On the import of this issue for biological information, see Bradley, W.L., Information, entropy, and the origin of life, and Barham, J., The emergence of biological value; in: Dembski, W. and Ruse, M. (Eds.), *Debating Design: From Darwin to DNA*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 332–335 and 213–214 (respectively), 2004.
9. Truman, ref. 8, was written in 1999.
10. See Bergman, J., The Darwinian foundation of communism, *Journal of Creation* 15(1):89–95, 2001, and Noebel, D.A., *Understanding the Times: The Religious Worldviews of Our Day and the Search for Truth*, chapter 10, Harvest House, Eugene, OR, 1991, for summaries of how the ideological 'us' and 'them' of Marxism is used to justify war and class genocide.
11. For a few examples, see Bergman, ref. 10; Wiekart, R., *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004 (review by Sarfati, J., *Creation* 27(4):39, 2005); Bergman, J., Darwinism and the Nazi race Holocaust, *Journal of Creation* 13(2):101–111, 1999; Hardaway, B., and Sarfati, J., Countering Christophobia: a review of *Christianity on Trial* by Vincent Carroll and David Shiffit, *Journal of Creation* 18(3):28–30, 2004.
12. For a critique of one of Dawkins' more detailed expositions of eye evolution, see Sarfati, J., Book review: *Climbing Mount Improbable* by Richard Dawkins, *Journal of Creation* 12(1):29–34, 1998; for refutation of the idea a computer simulation of eye evolution exists, and admission by Dan-Erik Nilsson that his paper that Dawkins relied on made no such claim, see Berlinski, D., A scientific scandal, *Commentary* April 2003 (partially at <www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?command=view&id=1416>), subsequent letters Jul. 2003.
13. Sherwin, F., and Armitage, M., Trilobites—the eyes have it, *CRSQ* 40(3) 172–174, 2003; Stammers, C., Trilobite technology, *Creation* 21(1):23, 1998.
14. Based on Sewell Wright's influential diagram.
15. On created kinds, see Wieland, C., Variation, information and the created kind, *Journal of Creation* 5(1):42–47, 1991. Also see Sarfati, J., *Refuting Compromise*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 230–234, 2004; Scherer, S., Basic types of life, in Dembski, W., ed., *Mere Creation: Science, Faith, and Intelligent Design*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1998.
16. After all, perhaps war or societal chaos could fuel an evolutionary arms race, and thus advance the evolutionary value of progress! Conversely, Weikart (ref. 11) documented how the Darwinian German pacifists during WW1 objected to war—not because people were killed but because the *fittest* were often killed.
17. See Plantinga, A., *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford University Press, New York, ch. 12, 1993.
18. Michael Ruse, no friend of Plantinga, has in fact challenged Dawkins to at least interact with Plantinga's arguments. Ruse, M., Through a glass, darkly: a review of *A Devil's Chaplain* by Richard Dawkins, <www.americanscientist.org/template/BookReview-TypeDetail/assetid/28365;jsessionid=baa-ox6FIGN3P>, accessed 26 Jul. 2006. Ruse has tried and failed to convincingly answer a few of Plantinga's arguments in Ruse, M., *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 107–110, 2001. See also Weinberger, L., Preaching to his own choir: a review of *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* by Michael Ruse, *Journal of Creation* 19(2):42–45, 2005.
19. Bahnsen, G.L., Pragmatism, prejudice, and presuppositionalism, in North, G., ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, Ross House Books, Vallecito, CA, p. 243, 1976. Emphasis in original.
20. See Sarfati, J., Loving God with all your mind: Logic and creation, *Journal of Creation* 12(2):142–151, 1998.
21. See an introductory discussion in Bahnsen, G.L., *Van Til's Apologetic*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, NJ, pp. 4–7, 1998. Semi-popular expositions of this argument are presented by Jonathan Sarfati in his feedback responses 'Presuppositionalism vs evidentialism, and is the human genome simple?' 6 June 2005 <www.creationontheweb.org/presupp> and 'Correcting a severe misconception about the creation model,' 31 Dec. 2004 <www.creationontheweb.com/scien>.