

# THE GOD DELUSION: A RESPONSE FROM ALISTER MCGRATH

## INTRODUCTION

Since the release of Dawkins', *The God Delusion*, numerous theologians and philosophers have spoken out or written a response to Dawkins' ideas. This resource will consider Alister McGrath's response.

Alister McGrath (1953-) is a Northern Irish theologian who has written a full response to Dawkins' book in this own book, *The Dawkins Delusion?* (2007)

Previously an atheist, whilst studying science at Oxford University he became a Christian due to, as he puts it, discovering that *'Christianity was far more intellectually robust than I had ever imagined.'* (*Mere Theology*, 2010)

It was his realization that the Christian faith made far more sense of the world around him than its atheist alternatives, which convinced him that God existed.

In his book, McGrath recognises Dawkins' skill as a *'scientific populizer'*, but fundamentally disagrees with the majority of his arguments, accusing Dawkins of offering:

*'the atheist equivalent of slick hellfire preaching, substituting turbocharged rhetoric and highly selective manipulation of facts for careful, evidence-based thinking.'*

He also goes on to accuse Dawkins of including little scientific analysis, instead drawing upon, *'pseudoscientific speculation, linked with wider cultural criticisms of religion, mostly borrowed from older atheist writings.'*

## THE KEY COUNTER ARGUMENTS TO THE GOD DELUSION

### 1. Dawkins: Faith is juvenile

Dawkins argues that the world has grown up. We now live in a scientific and rational age, which offers the answers to all the big questions religion has previously attempted to answer. To hold onto religious beliefs when trying to make sense of the world is childish.

Jesus taught that Christians should be childlike, but He made it clear that following him was serious. Being a believer is, therefore, not childish in the slightest.

Dawkins also maintained that people who believe in God have a lower IQ and are clearly deluded. McGrath argues that this is blatantly false, as there are many prominent academics who profess to have a faith in God.

## 2. Dawkins: Religious people are irrational

McGrath criticises Dawkins' presentation of religious people, claiming that he deliberately portrays a misleading portrait of them:

*'The pathological as if it were normal, the fringe as if it were the centre, crackpots as if they were mainstream. It generally works well for his intended audience, who can be assumed to know little about religion, and probably care for it even less. But it's not acceptable. And it's certainly not scientific.'*

McGrath also points out that Dawkins, in his attempt to present religious people as crackpots, draws upon source material which has not been verified or is inaccurate. For example, Dawkins includes a quote by the third century Christian writer Tertullian; *'It is by all means to be believed because it is absurd.'* As McGrath points out, this is a misquote; Tertullian never, in fact, uttered these words.

## 3. Dawkins: Science provides solid explanations, backed by evidence. Religion does neither.

Dawkins stance is that science proves things by an appeal to evidence, where religion runs away from the evidence, and also fails to offer an adequate explanation for the world.

In a 2015 interview, McGrath quoted the literary theorist Terry Eagleton, who maintained that Christianity wasn't there to offer an explanation of anything:

*'Eagleton suggests, believing that religion is a 'botched attempt to explain the world' about as helpful as 'seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus.'*

- Alister McGrath, *'Faith, Proof and Evidence: What's right to think?'*, 2005)

It is clear that McGrath believes that Dawkins is missing the point when he references religion.

## 4. Dawkins: The cosmological and teleological arguments don't prove God exists

McGrath considers these arguments to be Aquinas' confirmation of what we, as Christians, already believe: God designed and created the universe. He believes that it is not enough to state that the world came about through Darwinian processes. What caused this to happen? To suggest that there wasn't a God involved is as big of a jump as suggesting there was. Science needs an explanation - after all, the theory of evolution is just that; a theory.

Natural sciences are empirical in their approach; they depend entirely on what can be observed. There is no direct, scientific, material evidence that proves God was involved in the creation of the world. By the same token there is no direct, scientific, material evidence that proves the Darwinian processes just magically started on its own.

Science, therefore, can be argued to shoot itself through the foot: this emphasis on what is *'actual and observable'* gives the sciences their distinct identity, but it also defines their limits.

## 5. Dawkins: Science and religion are incompatible

McGrath draws upon the writing of Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002), Professor of Biology at New York University, to support his argument that science and religion are compatible. Gould was an atheist, however he proposed that belief in the theory of evolution was perfectly compatible with atheism and conventional religious belief.

Science does not eliminate faith. Further, there are some questions which can't be answered by science. For example, *'Is there evidence for purpose in creation?'*

## 6. Dawkins: Religion stirs up fanaticism, leading to violence

McGrath grew up in Northern Ireland, witnessing first-hand the violence that occurred during 'The Troubles'; he concedes that this point has some validity. However, McGrath points out that Christianity is intrinsically a faith of peace, Jesus advocated against violence. It is humans, who have acted violently, disobeying the basic tenets of the Christian faith. You can't blame that on a whole faith. Dawkins' contention that atheists would never behave in such a way is clearly false, as some of the worst atrocities on earth have been committed by atheists, for example, Pol Pot, Stalin, Hitler.

Dawkins' selection of passages from the Bible also comes under scrutiny. McGrath argues that plucking them from scripture, without considering the cultural or historical context, weakens his arguments significantly.

### SUMMARY

Ultimately, states McGrath, just because we think something improbable, doesn't mean to say it is.

*'There are many things that seem improbable, but improbability does not entail, and never has, non-existence. We may be highly improbable, and yet we are here.'*

The issue is not about whether God is probable, but whether he is actual. You can learn more about this idea [here](#).

In 2006 Richard Dawkins presented a documentary – which he also produced – called 'The Root of All Evil?' (later retitled, 'The God Delusion'). Dawkins interviewed McGrath, filming a debate between them which lasts for over an hour. None of this footage was used in the programme, however it is available online. You can find it [here](#).

### TASKS

1. Conduct some independent research on Alister McGrath: read *'The Dawkins Delusion?'* if you can. Explain his key responses to Dawkins in your own words.
2. What does McGrath mean when he states that the issue is not about whether God is probable, but whether he is actual? Do you agree? Why/why not?
3. *'There are many things that seem improbable, but improbability does not entail, and never has, non-existence. We may be highly improbable, and yet we are here.'*

Do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer fully.