

LETTERS

'THE GOD DELUSION'

To the Editors:

H. Allen Orr, in "A Mission to Convert" [NYR, January 11], his review of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and other recent books on science and religion, says that Dawkins is an amateur, not professional, atheist, and has failed to come to grips with "religious thought" with its "meticulous reasoning" in any serious way. He notes that the book is "defiantly middlebrow," and I wonder just which high-brow thinkers about religion Orr believes Dawkins should have grappled with. I myself have looked over large piles of recent religious thought in the last few years in the course of researching my own book on these topics, and I have found almost all of it to be so dreadful that ignoring it entirely seemed both the most charitable and most constructive policy. (I devote a scant six pages of *Breaking the Spell* to the arguments for and against the existence of God, while Dawkins devotes roughly a hundred, laying out the standard arguments with admirable clarity and fairness, and skewering them efficiently.) There are indeed recherché versions of these traditional arguments that perhaps have not yet been exhaustively eviscerated by scholars, but Dawkins ignores them (as do I) and says why: his book is a consciousness-raiser aimed at the general religious public, not an attempt to contribute to the academic microdiscipline of philosophical theology. The arguments Dawkins exposes and rebuts are the arguments that waft from thousands of pulpits every week and reach millions of television viewers every day, and neither the televangelists nor the authors of best-selling spiritual books pay the slightest heed to the subtleties of the theologians either.

Who does Orr favor? Polkinghorne, Peacocke, Plantinga, or some more recondite thinkers? Orr brandishes the names of two philosophers, William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and cites C.S. Lewis's *Mere*

Christianity, a fairly nauseating example of middle-brow homiletic in roughly the same league on the undergraduate hit parade as Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* (1998) and transparently evasive when it comes to "meticulous reasoning." If it were a book in biology—Orr's discipline—I daresay he'd pounce on it like a pit bull, but like many others he adopts a double standard when the topic is religion. As Orr says, both James and Wittgenstein "struggled with the question of belief," in their admirable and entirely different ways, but both also steer clear of the issues that Orr chides Dawkins for oversimplifying. I wonder which themes in these fine thinkers Orr would champion in the current discussion, beyond the speculation he cites from James, that "the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe." I'd be curious to know what Orr thinks that means. How should it be clarified and investigated, in his opinion, or does he just want to leave it hanging unchallenged?

Orr ends by wondering why Dawkins—no expert on religion—wrote his book, and he might also wonder why I wrote mine. Didn't we have more intellectually satisfying problems to work on, problems better fitting our training, interests, and talents? I'll answer for myself, but I think Dawkins would give much the same answer. Yes, of course I'd much rather have been spending my time working on consciousness and the brain, or on the evolution of cooperation, for instance, or free will, but I felt a moral and political obligation to drop everything for a few years and put my shoulder to the wheel doing a dirty job that I thought somebody had to do. I am aching to get back to my favorite topics, but I still have to do a fair amount of follow-up, apparently, since there are plenty of people like Orr who still want to protect religion from the sort of unflinching scrutiny Dawkins and I (and Sam Harris and Louis Wolpert and others) are calling for. Is this opinion of Orr's just force of habit, or going along with tradition, or has he carefully studied the phenomena and seen that we really mustn't rock the boat, for fear of causing

calamity? If the latter, he owes the world a careful and vivid argument to that effect, for it would put Dawkins and the rest of us in our proper place as dangerous intellectual vandals. Such a project would not fit his talents or training, but I should think it would be his duty as a concerned scientist.

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H. Allen Orr replies:

Daniel Dennett's main complaint about my review is that I held Dawkins's book to too high a standard. *The God Delusion* was, he says, a popular work and, as such, one can't expect it to grapple seriously with religious thought. There are two things wrong with this objection. The first is that the mere fact that a book is intended for a broad audience doesn't mean its author can ignore the best thinking on a subject. Indeed it's precisely the task of the popularizer to take this best thinking and present it in a form that can be understood by intelligent laymen. This task is certainly feasible. Ironically, the clearest evidence comes from Dawkins himself. In his popular works on evolution, and especially in *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins wrestled with the best evolutionary thinkers—Darwin, Hamilton, and Trivers—and presented their ideas in a way that could be appreciated by a broad audience. This is what made *The Selfish Gene* brilliant; the absence of any analogous treatment of religion in Dawkins's new book is what makes it considerably less than brilliant.

The second thing wrong with Dennett's objection is that it's simply not true that *The God Delusion* was merely a popular survey and "not an attempt to contribute to ... philosophical theology." Dennett has apparently forgotten that the heart of Dawkins's book was his philosophical argument for the near impossibility of God. Dawkins presented his so-called Ultimate Boeing 747 argument in a chapter entitled "Why There Almost Certainly Is No God," branded his argument "unanswerable,"

and boasted that it had stumped all theologians who had met it. I can see why Dennett would like to forget about Dawkins's attempt at philosophy—the Ultimate 747 argument was shredded by reviewers—but it's absurd to pretend now that *The God Delusion* had no philosophical ambitions. It also won't do to claim, as Dennett does, that Dawkins's book was concerned only with arguments "that waft from thousands of pulpits every week and reach millions of television viewers every day." Dawkins explicitly stated that he was targeting *all* forms of the God Hypothesis, including deism, and insisted that all were victims of his arguments.

As for C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, I cited it to show that Lewis had already dispensed with one of Dawkins's claims. Dennett now tells us that Lewis was no recondite thinker but a fairly unsophisticated pop theologian. I agree. Indeed that was exactly my point. I called Lewis's book "the most widely read work of popular theology ever" and noted that there was no evidence that Dawkins was familiar even with such popular material, much less with serious theology.

Finally, Dennett fundamentally misunderstands my review. He seems to think that I'm disturbed by Dawkins's atheism and pointedly asks which religious thinkers I prefer instead. But as I made clear, I have no problem with where Dawkins arrived but with how he got there. It's one thing to think carefully about religion and conclude it's dubious. It's another to string together anecdotes and exercises in bad philosophy and conclude that one has resolved subtle problems. I wasn't disappointed in *The God Delusion* because I was shocked by Dawkins's atheism. I was disappointed because it wasn't very good.

CORRECTION

In Paul Ginsborg's "In the Shadow of Berlusconi" [NYR, January 11], the rally at which Silvio Berlusconi fainted was in Montecatini Terme in Tuscany on November 26, 2006.