

## BOOK REVIEW

of

David Berlinski,

*The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*,  
Crown Forum, 2008.

September 2008

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

In the documentary movie *Expelled* by Ben Stein, one of those interviewed was David Berlinski, author of the book under review, for his assessment of evolution, intelligent design, and the dogmatic opposition to any criticism of Darwinism by the scientific establishment. As far as I know, this book is Berlinski's first book-length criticism of Darwinism and especially of what has come to be known as *scientism* (the atheistic religion that pretends that it is based on science). The interesting title of Berlinski's book comes from an amalgamation of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*, McGrath's response *The Dawkins Delusion?*, and another book by Dawkins titled *The Devil's Chaplain*. Berlinski describes himself as a "secular Jew," and says that his "religious education did not take. I can barely remember a word of Hebrew. I cannot pray." Although he does not, to my knowledge, say he is an agnostic, it seems that that must be what he is. He has a Ph.D. from Princeton University and has taught mathematics and philosophy at universities in the United States and in France. He has written math and science books such as *A Tour of the Calculus*, *The Advent of the Algorithm*, and *Newton's Gift*. In approaching what may well be the most controversial and defining topic of our time, I suppose that one of two approaches can be taken. One would be a serious presentation of the scientific facts and attempting to reason with those who are opposed to your point of view. The other approach may well be to ridicule your opponents, call them stupid, and make sport of the issue. Berlinski has chosen the latter approach. However, after calling them stupid, he gives detailed rationale as to why the charge is appropriate. In a sense I suppose he combines the two approaches. His dry humor is throughout the book that could not be pulled off by anyone of lesser brilliance, but shines more brightly in some sections. Here and there his humor evokes out-loud laughter from the reader, although no doubt that depends somewhat on the reader's worldview. Berlinski takes them all on by name and pulls no punches. He seems to take great delight in pointing out their errors of logic, their incorrect scientific facts, their gross extrapolations, their superficial understanding of science, the absurdities of what they actually profess to believe, and their lack of humility before the mysteries of life. For an agnostic, if that is what he is, he seems to have admiration for theologians and others who struggle to make sense of life, and surprisingly, and delightfully to me, he quotes Scripture to make some of his points. A strange prophet he, but then God can obtain praise from the rocks if it please Him to do so.

The book has ten chapters. The chapter titles are as follows: Chapter 1. *No Gods Before Me*, 2. *Nights of Doubt*, 3. *Horses Do Not Fly*, 4. *The Cause*, 5. *The Reason*, 6. *A Put-up Job*, 7. *A Curious Proof That God Does Not Exist*, 8. *Our Inner Ape, a Darling, and the Human Mind*, 9. *Miracles in Our Time*, and 10. *The Cardinal and His Cathedral*.

The first major area that Berlinski addresses is the criticism that is often made of religious people. When Sam Harris and others point out the human suffering that has occurred at the hands of religious leaders, Berlinski agrees fully. However, to leave it there as though something significant has been said raises more questions than it answers. He describes Harris' book *Letter to a Christian Nation* as "devoid of any intellectual substance whatsoever." Berlinski elaborates: "A great deal of human suffering has been caused by religious fanaticism. If the Inquisition no longer has the power to compel our indignation, the Moslem world often seems quite prepared to carry the burden of exuberant depravity in its place. Nonetheless, there is this awkward fact: The twentieth century was not an age of faith, and it was awful. Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot will never be counted among the religious leaders of mankind." He then lists for us 63 wars that took place during the 20th century with the number of those killed in each. The numbers are staggering: 15 million in WWI, 55 million in WWII, 20 million under Stalin, 40 million under Mao, etc. This sort of information, of course, does not justify religious intolerance of any kind, but it certainly does help to put things into perspective, and completely counters any suggestion that the world would be safe and secure if we could just get rid of religion, as at least implied by, if not actually stated, by the likes of Harris, Dawkins, etc. Not only in terms of wars, but other writers such as Steven Pinker make claims about how much better the world is now as a result of modernity. Berlinski exclaims "The good news is unrelenting . . . In considering Pinker's assessment of the times in which we live, the only conclusion one can profitably draw is that such as excess of stupidity is not often to be found in nature." "What Hitler did *not* believe and what Stalin did *not* believe and what Mao did *not* believe and what the SS did *not* believe and what the Gestapo did *not* believe and what the NKVD did *not* believe and what the commissars, functionaries, swaggering executioners, Nazi doctors, Communist Party theoreticians, intellectuals, Brown Shirts, Black Shirts, gauleiters, and a thousand party hacks did *not* believe was that God was watching what they were doing."

Another area that Berlinski addresses is the way philosophical "proofs" for the existence of God are dismissed by atheists. He has a great deal of admiration for Aquinas, and summarizes his cosmological argument (not "proof") for the existence of God. Before dismissing someone who wrote so long ago, consider Berlinski's words: "His life coincided with a period of great brilliance in European art, architecture, law, poetry, philosophy, and theology. Commentators who today talk of the *dark ages*, when faith instead of reason was said ruthlessly to rule, have for their animadversions only the excuse of perfect ignorance." The cosmological argument is simply that the universe has a cause. Many, apparently, think it has no cause or purpose. That flies in the

face of common sense, even the common sense of a child, but nonetheless it is held. But then Berlinski goes on to argue how the philosophical cosmological argument has been greatly bolstered from the “very place one might least expect it to appear: contemporary physical cosmology.” Berlinski reviews the findings of the “Big Bang” theory and other modern discoveries that Aquinas knew nothing of but strongly supports the cosmological argument for the existence of God. “If nothing else, the facts of Big Bang cosmology indicate that one objection to the argument that Thomas Aquinas offered is empirically unfounded: Causes in nature do come to an end. If science has shown that God does not exist, it has not been by appealing to Big Bang cosmology. The hypothesis of God’s existence and the facts of contemporary cosmology are *consistent*.” He then delightfully quotes from modern scientists, including Nobel Prize winners, who have not overlooked the religious significance of these modern scientific discoveries. For example, “‘So long as the universe had a beginning,’ Stephen Hawking has written, ‘we could suppose it had a creator.’” For another example, “‘The best data we have concerning the big bang,’ the Nobel laureate Arno Penzias remarked, ‘are exactly what I would have predicted, had I nothing to go on but the five books of Moses, the Psalms, the Bible as a whole.’” If some atheists want to dismiss such things, it is only because they have no real response to give. Berlinski presents the best arguments from philosophy and from science for the existence of God that I have read.

Berlinski’s criticism of Darwinian evolution of humans is brutal: “It is rather more difficult to take what no one doubts and fashion it into an effective defense of the thesis that human beings are *nothing but* the living record of an extended evolutionary process. That requires a disciplined commitment to a point of view that owes nothing to the sciences, however loosely construed, and astonishingly little to the evidence.” Of course, there are many who may require some convincing, so just saying that evolution has little evidence in its support won’t do the job. But arguments there are a plenty. “Darwinian biologists are very often persuaded that there is a conspiracy afoot to make them look foolish. In this they are correct.” “Suspensions about Darwin’s theory arise for two reasons. The first: the theory makes little sense. The second: it is supported by little evidence.” Okay, no argument presented here. You’ll have to read this book, as well as perhaps some others, if you want the details.

Putting words in God’s mouth and sounding like a passage from Job, Berlinski writes “You have *no* idea whatsoever how the ordered physical, moral, mental, aesthetic, and social world in which you live could have ever arisen from the seething anarchy of the elementary particles.” This is a delightful book to read, especially so since it comes from a somewhat unexpected source.