

## BOOK REVIEW

of

Alister McGrath,

*Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*,  
Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

Richard Dawkins is Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, and is a well-known, and out-spoken, atheist and advocate of materialistic evolution. Dawkins won both the Royal Society of Literature Award and the Los Angeles Times Literary Prize in 1987 for his book *The Blind Watchmaker*. He also won the 1989 Silver Medal of the Zoological Society of London and the 1990 Royal Society Michael Faraday Award for the furtherance of the public understanding of science. In 1994 he won the Nakayama Prize for Human Science. He was awarded an Honorary D.Litt. degree by the University of St. Andrews in 1995. He received the Humanist of the Year Award in 1996. Since 1996 he has been Vice President of the British Humanist Association. Dawkins was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1997. Among his many books are *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*, Norton, 1986, *The Selfish Gene*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 1989, *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, Phoenix, 1995, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, Viking, 1996, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*, Penquin Books, 1998, and *A Devil's Chaplain*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003. To give some indication of how well Dawkins represents the views of noteworthy contemporaries (you may recognize the names) on evolution and its meaning, in addition to the awards mentioned above, I will list a few of those who endorsed Dawkins 1996 edition of *The Blind Watchmaker* (from pages i and ii and on the back cover): Edward O. Wilson, John Maynard Smith, Isaac Asimov, Michael Ruse, and Douglas J. Futumaya. These endorsees, and many others, serve to provide evidence that Richard Dawkins and his ideas, the subject of Alister McGrath's book, *Dawkins' God*, is not a straw man set up by McGrath. Rather, Dawkins, in case you are not already aware of it, is one of the most eloquent speakers and writers alive today that presents the case not only for biological evolution, but also for a materialistic philosophy of life. Alister McGrath, also at Oxford (I can't help but wonder if they ever have lunch together), believes that Dawkins has increasingly, in his publications, become a very out-spoken critic of everything Christian, and that his criticisms have less and less to do with science, but are themselves religiously motivated.

Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. He has a PhD in molecular biophysics, and is principal of Oxford University's Wycliffe Hall and director of the Oxford Centre for Evangelism and Apologetics. He writes extensively. Several of his recent books are *In the Beginning*, *The Reenchantment of Nature*, *The Journey*, and *The Twilight of Atheism*. The most important contribution of McGrath in *Dawkins' God*, in my opinion, is that Dawkins' atheism is a religious commitment and is not based upon scientific evidence. Furthermore, McGrath claims that atheism, in general, is a religious commitment, and that no compelling evidence has ever been put force by anyone to justify atheism. What evidence has been offered in support of atheism has not been scientific, but rather philosophical (Feuerbach), social and economic (Marx), and psychological (Freud). A committed atheist does have reasons for holding to his religious beliefs, but those reasons are not conclusions or even implications of scientific data. The common perception that a commitment to science and a commitment to atheism go hand-in-hand is just that, a perception: a perception put forth by articulate promoters of a materialistic worldview. That, plus Dawkins' strong anti-Christian bias, more-or-less summarizes *Dawkins' God*.

The book has five chapters: 1. The Selfish Gene: A Darwinian View of the World, 2. The Blind Watchmaker: Evolution and the Elimination of God?, 3. Proof and Faith: The Place of Evidence in Science and Religion, 4. Cultural Darwinism? The Curious "Science" of Memetics, 5. Science and Religion: Dialogue or Intellectual Appeasement? Note: a meme (word coined by Dawkins) is the cultural equivalent of a gene. There is no evidence of the existence of memes.

Chapter 3 on Proof and Faith is especially interesting and useful. McGrath challenges Dawkins' attempts to explain how it is that people would embrace religion. It is in this attempt that Dawkins introduces "memes." Here, McGrath does not mince words. "When I debate these issues in public, I regularly get asked why Christians blindly trust in God, in the absence of any supporting evidence. I ask if they would be kind enough to tell me where they find such a ludicrous idea, and to justify it from a serious Christian writer of note. I am usually greeted with an embarrassed silence. Yet on occasion, I get the answer: 'Well, that's what Richard Dawkins says.' The audience usually laughs. They get the point."

McGrath in chapter 5 on Science and Religion also takes issue with Dawkins' claim that a commitment to religion is mind numbing and interferes with intellectual progress. "A Christian approach to nature identifies three ways in which a sense of awe comes about in response to what we observe. 1. An immediate sense of wonder at the beauty of nature. . . . I can see no good reason for suggesting that believing in God in any way diminishes this sense of wonder. Dawkins' argument at this point is so underdetermined by evidence and so utterly implausible that I fear I must have misunderstood it. 2. A derived sense of wonder at the mathematical or theoretical representation of reality which arises from this. . . . 3. A further derived sense of wonder at what the natural world points to. One of the central themes of Christian theology is that the creation bears witness to its creator". It would seem that a strong Christian response to naturalistic Darwinian evolution is a little late in coming (or at least a little late in gaining traction), but I suppose that makes it all the more refreshing. Believe in God, or you will believe in something else. Believing in nothing does not seem to be an option that is open to us.