

Richard Dawkins, Theology and the Enlightenment Project

Half a decade has now passed since the publication of Richard Dawkins' popular work *The God Delusion*.¹ This book was the centre, and to a certain extent the initiator, of an aggressive anti-religious movement known as the New Atheism.² This phenomenon, and Dawkins' book in particular, sparked an immediate critical reaction from a wide range of scholars, and appears to have left a legacy of lingering irritation among the self-consciously religion-literate community.³ My own engagement with the text of *The God Delusion* reflects this irritation, but the real engagement began with an exploration of the large and growing pool of scholarly responses. The most well known of these range from the Christian apologetic of Alister and Joanna Collicutt McGrath and John Cornwell, (creatively dubbed a divine dialogue with Dawkins), to the professedly non-religious commentary of Terry Eagleton.⁴ In reading these works and others I have observed two common and pervasive features. The first and clearest of these is the polemical stance, ranging from Eagleton's insightful dissections to the McGraths'

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, paperback edn (London: Transworld, 2007). My use of the paperback edition should be noted, because the page numbers differ considerably.

² See also, Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: how Religion Poisons Everything*, (New York: Hachette Book Group USA, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004); and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Knopf, 2007); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (New York: Viking, 2006). These authors have been collectively termed 'the Four Horsemen'. For a convenient brief critical commentary on them, see the introduction to Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic After 9/11*, (London/New York: Continuum, 2010), 1-15.

³ The two most commonly cited negative responses are Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching", *The London Review of Books* 28 (20)(19 October 2006), and H. Allen Orr, "A Mission to Convert", *The New York Review of Books* 54 (1)(11 January 2007). For a particularly effective and revealing critique, particularly regarding Dawkins' limited knowledge of religion, see Nicholas Lash, "Where Does *The God Delusion* Come from?", *New Blackfriars*, 88 (2007), 507-21.

⁴ Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, (London: SPCK, 2007); John Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel: a Seraphic Response to The God Delusion*, (London: Profile Books, 2007); and Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009). See also Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: the Twilight of Reason & the War on Religion*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2008) and John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: a Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2008)

sometimes scathing criticisms.⁵ Second, and more important, these works offer general commentary from experts in their respective fields, but do not represent serious, systematic scholarly research. While valuable and interesting, they disappoint in their limited value for placing Dawkins and his book in an appropriate historical-social context.

This disappointment is relieved in an unpublished thesis by a Master of Arts student, Gisèle Pritchard.⁶ Pritchard draws on a wide range of scholarship in order to analyse and critique *The God Delusion* and the ideological framework behind it. Her thesis is by far the most constructive and revealing treatment of Dawkins' that I have seen thus far. Pritchard moves well beyond the better known commentaries, providing a more concrete and systematic critique. The thesis, however, still retains the standard polemical stance, functioning largely as a problematisation of Dawkins' case, rather than an argument for its own sake. There remains, as far as I know, no original scholarly research on *The God Delusion* whose primary concern lies in contextualising Dawkins for the sake of a better, more intellectually satisfying understanding.

This apparent gap may be filled by expanding on Pritchard's thesis, which links Dawkins' work with an already well established topic of scholarly debate. Pritchard contextualises Dawkins within the Enlightenment project, a particular system of values and beliefs that identifies with the Enlightenment. However, she makes this connection without consulting the scholarship necessary to understand the concept of an

⁵ Timothy Jenkins, in "Closer to Dan Brown than to Gregor Mendel: on Dawkins' *The God Delusion*", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 62 (2009), 269-81, claims a less polemical agenda in its discussion of *The God Delusion*. On reading it, I did not find this claim entirely convincing. I will let you be the judge.

⁶ Gisèle Pritchard, "Debating Delusion: A Critical Interrogation of Richard Dawkins" *New Atheism*' (unpublished master's thesis, Concordia University, 2010).

Enlightenment project.⁷ Within this scholarship, two significant scholarly voices demand attention. Robert Wokler authoritatively summarises the scientific, anti-religious thrust of the project, which Dawkins exemplifies.⁸ In stark contrast to this, James Schmidt argues rather cynically that the *project* is more of a *projection*. This projection provides a kind of historical strawman for romantically minded critics of modernity.⁹ This difference in perspective between Wokler and Schmidt demonstrates the potentially complicated nature of the topic. If we wish to explain Dawkins in terms of the Enlightenment project, we must pursue clarity. Thus, by dialoguing with these scholars we can provide a more solid scholarly framework in order to deepen our understanding of *The God Delusion*.

However, in order to avoid the abstraction of the more general commentaries, this scholarly framework should be directly related to a detailed examination of the contents of *The God Delusion* itself. For the sake of brevity, we focus on one particular issue, which is Dawkins' perspective on theology. His apparent lack of schooling in this subject is one of the key issues surrounding the debate he has provoked. It ranks among the more serious concerns of his scholarly observers and critics.¹⁰ In brief, Dawkins dismisses theology as a subject altogether. He claims that theological insight has no real bearing on his argument. This aspect of Dawkins' thinking is thus as important to his polemic as is it to his detractors. Furthermore it ties in with the Enlightenment project in a complex but genuine manner, as it will become clear.

⁷ For a recent example of such scholarship, see Robert Alan Sparling, *Johann Georg Hamann and the Enlightenment Project*, (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

⁸ Robert Wokler, "The Enlightenment Project as Betrayed by Modernity", *History of European Ideas*, 24 (1999), 301-13.

⁹ James Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Project?", *Political Theory*, 28 (2000), 734-57.

¹⁰ See, for example, Haught's 12 page discussion on the New Atheists and theology in *God and the New Atheism*, 28-39.

We must first undertake a thorough exegesis on the subject of theology as it is treated within the pages of *The God Delusion*. On what understanding does Dawkins claim that theology is not even a real subject? We seek to analyse this understanding, identifying and summarising its particularities. The rest of the discussion will put this analysis into the context of the Enlightenment project. This will occur in three phases. First, the Enlightenment project itself is unpacked and its general ideology is related to Dawkins and to his perspective on theology. Second, a more particular and relevant consequence of this ideology is then brought to attention: the attitude of scientists toward other disciplines. And third, the ideology will be revealed in the contemporary political context, explicit in Dawkins book, which itself has a strong polemical bearing on how theology is presented.

The God Delusion

The God Delusion is one of several anti-religion books that appeared around the middle of the last decade.¹¹ Self-styled as the New Atheists, these authors share great popularity and have attracted serious criticism. They have been accused by some critics, most fundamentally, of a failure to understand religion.¹² Closely tied with this more general criticism has been the charge of ‘theological ignorance’, i.e. a lack of understanding academic theology. Indeed, although *The God Delusion* does not deal extensively with the discipline, it does reveal a certain understanding and perspective on it. We must now turn to this.

¹¹ See footnote 2.

¹² See footnote 3.

Dawkins on Theology¹³

Dawkins' perspective on theology can be separated into two distinct and complementary strains. First, he uses a consistent stereotype of theologians and the 'theological mind'. Second, we need to unpack the broader landscape of theology and its place in academia within his work, which provides some qualification and context for this stereotype.

The Stereotype

A stereotype of the 'theologian' is found throughout the book. Dawkins takes special care to distinguish theologians from fundamentalists. These theologians are 'sophisticated', 'modern' and preferably 'reputable'.¹⁴ He suggests that these are not taken in by blatantly simple-minded arguments, and indeed can be fairly reasonable scientists as well.¹⁵ Unlike fundamentalists, real theologians do not take scripture literally, but rather interpret it 'symbolically', 'allegorically' etc.¹⁶ That being said, being Christians, they necessarily still believe silly things in Dawkins' eyes.¹⁷ They are obscurantist, and split hairs without evidence.¹⁸ Theological reasoning seems to lack real boundaries and has difficulty distinguishing what is from what should be.¹⁹ Above all,

¹³ Unfortunately, the index of *The God Delusion* does not include an entry on 'theology'. For convenience, then, the following pages of the paperback edition together contain every known instance of the terms 'theology', 'theological' and 'theologian(s)' from the first preface to the last chapter: 14-5, 24, 54-5, 56-7, 78, 79-80, 82, 83, (84), 88-90, (91), 98, 100, (103), 108, 118, 121, 135, 151-3, (162), 176-80, 183-4, 186, 187, 207, (243), 269, 275, 280, 284-5, 287, 293, (294), 305, (310), (318), 322, (358), 360, 377, (380), 401, 403. Here, multiple pages contain extended discussion, while bracketed pages contain word usages considered redundant and excluded from analysis.

¹⁴ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 56, 83, 269, 275, 377.

¹⁵ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 83, 78, 151-3, 179-80.

¹⁶ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 269, 275, 280, 322, 377.

¹⁷ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 207-8.

¹⁸ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 54-5.

¹⁹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 293, 135.

theological reasoning, to Dawkins, is grotesque. This emerges strongly in his discussion of New Testament theology:

Oh, but of course, the story of Adam and Eve was only ever *symbolic*, wasn't it? *Symbolic?* So, in order to impress himself, Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a *symbolic* sin committed by a *non-existent* individual? As I said, barking mad, as well as viciously unpleasant.²⁰

Another good example appears where he deals with purgatory: “The doctrine of purgatory offers a preposterous revelation of the way the theological mind works.”²¹

After summarising the doctrine, he continues:

But what really fascinates me about the doctrine of purgatory is the *evidence* that theologians have advanced for it: evidence so spectacularly weak that it renders even more comical the airy confidence with which it is asserted.²²

After giving his account, Dawkins concludes that “this seriously is an example of what passes for reasoning in the theological mind.”²³

Another feature of the stereotype of the theologian is the suspicion that Dawkins expresses about their intellectual honesty. In one section he discusses the ‘Great Prayer Experiment’ wherein an effort was made by the Templeton Foundation to scientifically establish the power of prayer to facilitate medical recovery in patients. He tells how theologians denounced the study after it failed to produce positive results, and asks us, if it had succeeded: “can you imagine that a single religious apologist would have dismissed it on the grounds that scientific research has no bearing on religious matters?”

²⁰ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 287, his stress.

²¹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 401.

²² Dawkins, *Delusion*, 403, his stress.

²³ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 403.

Of course not.”²⁴ Another, more explicit, example occurs in the midst of his ‘Ultimate Boeing 747’ argument.²⁵ After citing the ‘strongest response’ he had received from theologians when confronted with his argument at a Cambridge conference, he reflects:

I did not gain the impression that the theologians who mounted this evasive defence were being wilfully dishonest. I think they were sincere. Nevertheless, I was irresistibly reminded of Peter Medawar’s comment on Father Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*... ‘its author can be excused of dishonesty only on the grounds that before deceiving others he has taken great pains to deceive himself’.²⁶

Dawkins singles out Richard Swinburne, a theologian from Oxford, as a model theologian,²⁷ who earns the height of Dawkins’ scorn for asserting that “Too much evidence [for God] might not be good for us.” According to Dawkins, this is a “typical piece of theological reasoning,” and he takes the opportunity to make a point of Swinburne’s prestige: “If it’s a theologian you want, they don’t come much more distinguished. Perhaps you don’t want a theologian.”²⁸ In other words, according to Dawkins, theologians have nothing useful to say on God’s existence.

A further point can be made about his perception of Biblical interpretation. Nicholas Lash, one of Dawkins’ critics, identifies a common misconception in Dawkins’ writing:

“Of course”, says Dawkins at one point, “irritated theologians will protest that we don’t take the book of Genesis literally *any more*...” Notice that “any more”. Dawkins takes it for granted that Christians have traditionally been fundamentalists, but that as the plausibility of

²⁴ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 90.

²⁵ To summarize, this argument states that anything capable of creating the Universe must be even more complex than the Universe itself, and therefore inconceivably improbable unless it was itself a product of a progressive natural process like Darwinian natural selection.

²⁶ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 183-4.

²⁷ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 82, 88-9, 176-9.

²⁸ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 89.

fundamentalist readings of the text has been eroded by the march of reason, “irritated theologians” protest that they no longer take biblical texts literally.²⁹

Lash points out that the correct chronological order of fundamentalist (i.e. literalist) and non-fundamentalist Christianity is the opposite. Fundamentalism is recent, non-literal reading is not.³⁰ He points out that “patristic and medieval theology worked with a rich, at times almost uncontrollable diversity of ‘senses of scripture’”³¹ Dawkins thus misunderstands, according to Lash, the entire history of exegesis, a critical aspect of theology, and this logically distorts his concept of modern theologians as well.³² Aside from mistakenly dating non-fundamentalist Christianity exclusively to the modern era, Dawkins also reduces it to a simplistic literalist vs. symbolic/metaphorical/allegorical dichotomy, whereas Lash explains that “Passages of Scripture gave up their sense only by being read in many different ways.”³³ Dawkins further assumes no rational justification in the theologians’ “favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as ‘symbolic’ rather than literal. By what criterion do you *decide* which passages are symbolic, which

²⁹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 269 (Lashes stress; my omission), quoted in Lash, “Where does the God Delusion come from?” 513.

³⁰ It is important here to recognise the distinction between ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘literalism’. The former is a more specific phenomenon and is characterised by reaction to modernity. The latter has no necessary connection with modernity, but simply reflects a theological perspective.

³¹ Lash, “Where does the God Delusion come from?” 513. Lash cites James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, (London: SCM, 1977) as a classic study on the modern nature of fundamentalism. On the nature of exegesis in patristic times see Frances Young, “The Interpretation of Scripture” in *The First Christian Theologians: an Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. by G. R. Evans (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell, 2004).

³² The commonly imagined fundamentalist norm of Christianity is congruent with the ideology of ‘progress’ through science (more on this below). It deserves mention that in *Delusion*, (55) Dawkins claims that theology “has not moved on in eighteen centuries,” thus dating theology to around the completion of the Bible. Also, the same “any more” makes another, more extreme appearance concerning the rejection of God as “an old man with a long white beard” (186). To be fair though, he asserts (without evidence) elsewhere that the old man’s “silliness is calculated to distract attention from the fact that what the speaker really believes is not a whole lot less silly” (57). This subtle contradiction opens up the possibility that Dawkins’ “any more” phrases have subconscious origins.

³³ Lash, “Where does the God Delusion come from?” 513.

literal?”³⁴ This is a rhetorical question, and does not account for the methodological nature of exegesis, including the role played by scholarship, such as linguistics.³⁵

The Broader Picture

The only extended treatment of theology as an academic subject takes place in a brief two page discussion that deserves detailed examination.³⁶ This occurs in the midst of Dawkins’ critique of Stephen Jay Gould’s concept of NOMA (Non-Overlapping Magisteria), a claim that science and religion are concerned with entirely different things i.e. they do not overlap and therefore they do not contradict each other.³⁷ Dawkins criticises two astronomers, naming only Martin Rees, for granting theology the ‘province’ of answering questions that science cannot answer. After objecting to this, he goes further:

I am tempted to... wonder in what possible sense theologians can be said to *have* a province... I recall the remark of a former warden (head) of my Oxford college. A young theologian had applied for a junior research fellowship, and his doctoral thesis on Christian theology provoked the warden to say, ‘I have grave doubts as to whether it’s a *subject* at all.’³⁸

Then, on the next page, he confirms his own position:

³⁴ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 280, his stress.

³⁵ Origin, for example, is said to have produced a work known as the *Hexapla* (“sixfold”) a body of work comprising the Old Testament in six languages, including the Hebrew and the Septuagint (Frances Young, “Interpretation”, 28.)

³⁶ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 79-80.

³⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999).

³⁸ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 79.

Unlike my astronomer friends, I don't think we should even throw [the theologians] a sop. I have yet to see any good reason to suppose that theology (as opposed to biblical history, literature, etc.) is a subject at all.³⁹

Two particular observations can be made here. First, Dawkins is not original in denying theology 'subject' status. He appears to characterise a more widespread commonsense view. Indeed, elsewhere, he also quotes Thomas Jefferson: "a professorship of theology should have no place in our institution."⁴⁰ Second, he distinguishes between 'theology' and 'biblical history, literature etc.' suggesting he has some awareness of how the term 'theology' can generate confusion over its content i.e. facts about religion or assertions about God. This is supported by statements elsewhere, where Dawkins' recognises the historicisation of the Bible by 'scholarly theologians' in the nineteenth century.⁴¹ He gives the same gesture in recounting Biblical scholar Bart Erhman's academic background.⁴²

Although he recognises this qualification, in response to the charge of theological ignorance, Dawkins posed the question: "would you need to read learned volumes on leprechology before disbelieving in leprechauns?"⁴³ Similarly, in the preface to the

³⁹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 80.

⁴⁰ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 100.

⁴¹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 118, 186.

⁴² Dawkins, *Delusion*, 120-1.

⁴³ Richard Dawkins, "Do you have to read up on Leprechology before disbelieving in them?", *The Independent*, (17 September 2007) <<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/letters/letters-faith-and-facts-464374.html>> [accessed 7 April 2011]. This line of argument was most recognisably expressed in the popular satire by P Z Myers, known as the 'Courtier's Reply': see P Z Myers, "The Courtier's Reply", *Pharyngula*, (24 December 2006) <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the_courtiers_reply.php> [accessed 7 April 2011]. The term refers to the response given, in the satire, to Dawkins' argument against the Emperor's New Cloths: "...His training in biology may give him the ability to recognise dangling genitalia when he sees it, but it has not taught him the proper appreciation of Imaginary Fabrics." Disappointingly, I have yet to come across a single scholarly source that deals with the 'courtier's reply' directly. Haught's discussion of theological ignorance in *God and the New Atheism*, (28-39) does not mention this seemingly canonised rebuttal, opting instead for the usual comparison of the New Atheists to their fundamentalist opponents. For a brief but decisive critical treatment of Dawkins' own 'Courtier's

paperback edition of the *The God Delusion*, which is dedicated to rebuking Dawkins' critics, he writes "most of us happily disavow fairies, astrology and the Flying Spaghetti Monster, without first immersing ourselves in books of Pastafarian theology etc."⁴⁴ These statements encapsulate his derision toward theology. Aside from this, they argue that Dawkins' lack of theological understanding can not be held against him as a serious criticism. This is a polemical tactic, and polemical tactics especially need to be viewed in light of their authors' political agenda. We shall return to this point later in the essay.

Summary of Observations

We can conveniently sum up five points about Dawkins' perspective on theology, as revealed in *The God Delusion*.

- Simplistic and historically inaccurate perception of exegesis.
- Deep suspicion of theologians.
- Denouncement of theological reasoning
- Denial of the status of 'theology' as an academic 'subject.'
- The use of this denial to justify theological ignorance and maintain his argument.

Reply' defence, see "On the Relevance of Leprechology: a Critique of Dawkins' 'Courtier's Reply'", *Broken Biologist*, (October 2011) <http://www.brokenbiologist.blogspot.com/2011/10/on-relevance-of-leprechology-critique.html> [Accessed 28 November 2011].

⁴⁴ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 15. In this section, Dawkins further elaborates his rationale. He claims that it is sufficient to consider those theologians who actually offer arguments for God's existence, rather than just beginning with God's existence and arguing from that premise (14). He claims that he has dealt with these theologians' arguments for God's existence, hopefully, with "good humour and sufficient comprehensiveness." This shows no awareness of his widely recognised insufficiency in dealing with Thomas Aquinas' 'five proofs' on 100-3. See, for example, Lash, "Where does the God Delusion come from?" 508-9; Thomas W. Martin, "Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*", *Dialog*, 48 (2009), 209-12 (210); and Marion Ledwig, "Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*", *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), 368-72 (370).

To contextualise these features of Dawkins' perspective, it is necessary to go beyond *The God Delusion* itself and turn to the relevant scholarship. Gisèle Pritchard has recently submitted a thesis which looks at *The God Delusion* from a critical understanding of his worldview. She argues that the very heart of Dawkins' perspective on religion lies in his ideology.⁴⁵ Pritchard's work thus provides a convenient starting point, revealing the contextual key to Dawkins' ideology, and in particular, his view of theology. We now turn to this subject, taking Pritchard's lead and further exploring the historical background of Dawkins' ideology.

The Ideology of Richard Dawkins

Pritchard provides an account of Dawkins' mindset including, for example, his particular view of Darwinian natural selection, and his peculiar style of atheism. For our purposes, the key aspect of his thinking is his dualistic perspective on the difference between science and religion.⁴⁶

For Dawkins, there is a very real distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Belief in the supernatural is superstition, a product of ignorance and fear, and religion is simply the most common form. Religion is also a monolithic entity, a discrete category of belief.⁴⁷ The object of most religion, God, is supernatural, and so is fundamentally no different to fairies in Dawkins' eyes. He sees it as an attempt at explaining our existence.

⁴⁵ Gisèle Pritchard, "Debating Delusion".

⁴⁶ For an insightful account of the relationship between religion and evolution for Richard Dawkins and Dan Dennett see Alister McGrath, "The Ideological Uses of Evolutionary Biology in Recent Atheist Apologetics", in *Biology and Ideology from Descartes to Dawkins*, ed. by Denis R. Alexander and Ronald L. Numbers (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 329-51; 421-28. Also see John Hedley Brooke, "Science and Secularization", in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. by Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 103-23, for a discussion of the relationship, real and perceived, between science and secularisation. Heidi A. Campbell and Heather Looy (eds.), *A Science and Religion Primer*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) is a great start for the more general topic of science and religion.

⁴⁷ Pritchard, "Debating Delusion", 19.

The science he believes in is also a single monolithic entity. It answers questions with reason, and so has rendered religion redundant. But religion will not submit to science, and so the two are engaged in a constant struggle.

In these beliefs, Dawkins readily identifies with the Enlightenment. But historians have strongly contested the extent to which one can say that there was such a thing called the Enlightenment in the first place, that is, as a unified body of beliefs and values that marked the eighteenth century. It is now well recognised that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were remarkably diverse, and often opposed, in their individual programs.⁴⁸ Pritchard claims that Dawkins is typically naïve of this scholarly caveat, i.e. that not all Enlightenment ideas are part of his ideology.⁴⁹ She then proceeds to identify those Enlightenment ideas that really are key aspects of Dawkins' thinking. To this end, she draws from Roy Porter,⁵⁰ and we shall do the same.

The Seventeenth Century saw remarkable advances in the fields of astronomy, physics and anatomy, as deduced from rational, 'scientific' inquiry. This inquiry was based on "[s]ystematic doubt, . . . experimentation, reliance upon first-hand experience rather than second-hand authority, and confidence in the regular order of Nature."⁵¹ Embodied in Francis Bacon, these principles were proclaimed, among others, by David Hume and Voltaire, and culminated in the belief that such enquiry "was the key to human progress."⁵² But there remained a significant obstacle to the progress of science and thus

⁴⁸ Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-10.

⁴⁹ Pritchard, "Debating Delusion", 30.

⁵⁰ Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment*, 2nd edn. (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵¹ Porter, *The Enlightenment*, 15.

⁵² Porter, *The Enlightenment*, 15-16; quote from 16.

to the common good of humanity, namely religion. Porter identifies the height of this attitude:

For some, notably Voltaire, Diderot and d'Holbach, the emancipation of mankind from religious tyranny had to be the first blow struck in a general politics of emancipation, because the individual possessed by a false faith could not be in possession of himself.⁵³

The crux of this attitude is the dawn of a new humanity, granting understanding of himself and of the natural realm in which the human being exists, informed by reason, observation and experiment rather than by authority, and free of irrational superstition, ever progressing toward perfection. To such an end, it would be imperative to do away with all forms of superstition, including religious belief. As Pritchard points out, this view of science is inherently 'utopian', implying that unfettered science leads logically to salvation.⁵⁴

Pritchard also takes a further step, and identifies the ideology described above as the 'Enlightenment project'.⁵⁵ While the term "Enlightenment" itself refers to the historical era of radical philosophy in the Eighteenth Century, the term 'Enlightenment project,' denotes a particular, often trans-historical, movement, which has been the centre of political debate over the virtues and failings of the Enlightenment over the past few decades.⁵⁶ According to Robert Wokler, the Enlightenment project was 'kindled' by religious intolerance. Tolerance of other faiths, however, did not remain at the centre of its agenda.

⁵³ Porter, *The Enlightenment*, 29.

⁵⁴ Pritchard, "Debating Delusion", 32.

⁵⁵ Pritchard, "Debating Delusion", 31.

⁵⁶ Sparling, *Johann Georg Hamann*, vii, 3; Wokler, "The Enlightenment Project", (302).

It began to figure within theories of human perfectibility, whose advocates identified the acceptance of theological dogmas, not as belief but as superstition. In the eighteenth century, religious conviction came to be denounced as blind faith, at once barbarous and irrational.⁵⁷

Wokler's conception of the Enlightenment project fits Pritchard's. In stark contrast to this, James Schmidt argues that the Enlightenment project is nothing but a projection by those who wish to use the Enlightenment as a scapegoat for the evils of modernity.⁵⁸

The above difference in perspective illustrates the complexity of debate concerning the meaning and identity of the Enlightenment project. In particular, it illustrates two subtly different issues. The first issue, which has already been mentioned, is the question of to what extent can a single thing called the Enlightenment be said to have existed? The second question is how does one define the Enlightenment project? The particular Enlightenment project that Schmidt concerns himself with is, he argues, an ahistorical construction of political philosophers, and so his rejection of the Enlightenment project is not itself a rejection 'per se' of that project which Wokler argues did indeed exist. Even Schmidt admits that an historically genuine Enlightenment (and so for our purposes a real Enlightenment project) could be identified in the "belief that man could be understood by the use of our natural faculties and without relying on ancient custom or revealed religion."⁵⁹ And so there seems to be no question of the theoretical legitimacy, if not necessarily the strict correctness, of classing Richard Dawkins as a modern day embodiment of the Enlightenment project. Indeed, an interesting comment by Sparling reinforces the link between the Enlightenment project and Dawkins.

⁵⁷ Wokler, "The Enlightenment Project", 305.

⁵⁸ Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Project?"

⁵⁹ Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Project?", 738, citation from James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 197.

For the pious, there is no greater question, for the irreligious no greater muddle than the place of God in the good life. This was the central political issue of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and remains the central cleavage around the Enlightenment project today (witness the current slate of devotional books and militant anti-devotional books on the bestseller lists).⁶⁰

Building on this tradition, Dawkins' view of religion draws from another, late-nineteenth century idea. Dawkins cites Sir James Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* (1890),⁶¹ which argues that religion is a primitive version of science, characteristic of primitive peoples. Science can serve a moral purpose in enlightening those less endowed with knowledge in order to accelerate the progress of the human race away from ignorance and superstition and toward the more advanced stages in human development. This view of religion stems from the Victorian belief in the superiority of the white male imperial elite over the barbarism of its darker colonial subjects. Although Dawkins is clearly detached from such racist sentiment, he and the New Atheists uncritically accept the view of religion associated with it.⁶² Religion is ignorance, and science is Truth. The wellbeing of the human race depends on the ultimate triumph of Truth over ignorance.

Having glanced at these two complementary traditions, let us examine a passage from *The God Delusion* concerning the doctrine of the Trinity:

The other thing I cannot help remarking upon is the overweening confidence with which the religious assert minute details for which they neither have, nor could have, any evidence.

Perhaps it is the very fact that there is no evidence to support theological opinions, either

⁶⁰ Sparling, *Johann Georg Hamann*, xiv.

⁶¹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 57, 219.

⁶² Pritchard, "Debating Delusion", 22-21. Here Pritchard is reflecting the same point by Beattie (45-6).

way, that fosters the characteristic draconian hostility towards those of slightly different opinion, especially, as it happens, in this very field of Trinitarianism.⁶³

In the first sentence, Dawkins equates the lack of evidence with the lack of *any* basis of reasoning at all. In the second, he goes further and assumes that rational justification is absent even from the perspective of the (presumably) theologians. Aside from illustrating his already noted poor grasp of exegesis, it shows the exclusiveness of what counts as a reasoned basis in his eyes. Systematic interpretation of scripture does not count in *science*, ergo, it does not count at all. We see a contrast between science as the way to truth, and religion as ripping itself up over unreasoned claims, all because Dawkins recognises no alternative methodology, of the sort used, for example, in the humanities.

Science and the Humanities

The relevance of the Enlightenment project does not end with Dawkins' dualism. It also bears upon his perspective on theology in a less direct way, through a more particular legacy. In shaping the identity of science, the Enlightenment project has spawned a certain self-consciousness among scientists. This self-consciousness has profound consequences for the way scientists regard other academic disciplines. By extension, these attitudes bear strongly on the extent of communication that occurs between scientists and their more distant colleagues in other areas. This aspect of the Enlightenment project helps us understand Dawkins, not so much by revealing his attitudes, but by putting our expectations of Dawkins' own understanding into perspective. Dawkins' treatment of theology must be viewed in light of the professional distance between biology and the humanities, and by extension, theology.

⁶³ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 55.

The distinction between the humanities and the sciences has its roots in the nineteenth century. In 1882, the prestigious Rede Lecture was given by the poet Matthew Arnold, with the title ‘Literature and Science’. This was a response to an earlier lecture by Thomas Huxley (a.k.a. Darwin’s Bulldog), and the subject of debate between them was the comparative value of classical education and science.⁶⁴ This dispute is regarded as the prequel to a much later Rede lecture, delivered in 1959 by C. P. Snow on the ‘two cultures’ of science and humanities,⁶⁵ which was followed by the infamously vitriolic reaction of literary critic F. R. Leavis in a later lecture.⁶⁶

We must be clear that there are considerable limitations to our application of Snow’s argument. Snow had little interest in scientists’ naivety of scholarly method and wisdom in the humanities; indeed his criticism was infamously more directed toward the humanities side. His specific argument was that ‘literary critics’ were ‘natural luddites’, while scientists had ‘the future in their bones’. Parallel with this, the former are politically conservative, while the latter could appreciate the plight of the needy. Having made this claim, his main concern was socio-economic, culminating in his belief, remarkable in retrospect, that science would have ended global poverty by the year

⁶⁴ See Stephan Collini “Introduction” in C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993) ix-xvii for discussion of this history.

⁶⁵ Snow, *Two Cultures*. The book includes his later ‘Second Look’ lecture (1963), where he reconsiders his claims in light of criticisms. The classic introduction by Stephen Collini in this and later editions is indispensable for a grounded understanding of Snow’s thesis. Also, Lionel Trilling, “Science, Literature and Culture: a Comment on the Leavis-Snow Controversy”, *Universities Quarterly*, 17 (1962), 9-32 is the most well known decent contemporary response. For more nuanced discussion, see Frank Furedi, Roger Kimball, Raymond Tallis and Robert Whelan, *From Two Cultures to No Culture: C.P. Snow’s ‘Two Cultures’ Lecture Fifty Years On*, (London: Civitas, 2009). Some interesting commentary is also offered in Stephen Jay Gould, *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister’s Pox*, (New York: Harmony Books, 2003), 89-95.

⁶⁶ F. R. Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962). As will be noted below, the later Rede lecture came from the perspective of science, while its predecessor did the opposite. But with the general continuity in mind, it is rather interesting that one of Dawkins’ key academic respondents, Terry Eagleton, is himself a literary critic, who describes Dawkins as “a spiritual child of H. G. Wells and C. P. Snow” *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 70.

2000.⁶⁷ While this optimism will remind us of Dawkins, that is not the reason that Snow is important. Rather, it is the mere fact that Dawkins exists in the context of the cultures of science and humanities. For this purpose, a survey of the criticisms levelled against Snow is unnecessary. However, one criticism has stated that “it’s not at all clear that the gulf [between science and humanities that Snow deplors] really matters.”⁶⁸ I hope that this article demonstrates that inasmuch as this gulf refers to that between humanities and science, Richard Dawkins’ polemic provides an argument for the gulf’s contemporary relevance. Finally, one particular difference between the present matter and Snow’s must be noted. If one envisages a spectrum running from the most ‘scientific’ to the least, Snow seems to be preoccupied with the extreme ends, comparing people who work in laboratories with ‘literary critics’ concerned with the likes of Dickens and Shakespeare. Our concern lies toward the middle: Dawkins is a popular science writer, and can be called a scholar of evolutionary theory, while the major angle of critique against him is historiographical (e.g. biblical scholarship; history and philosophy of science).

While the accuracy of Snow’s thesis during his own time is debatable, the question of its applicability in subsequent decades is complex.⁶⁹ The best way of proceeding from Snow and to contextualise Dawkins, is to cite Snow with regard to the situation of his own time. Dawkins’ environment fits Snow’s context perfectly in both time and place,

⁶⁷ Snow, *Two Cultures*, 42.

⁶⁸ Roger Kimball, “The Two Cultures Today” in Furedi et al. *From two Cultures to No Culture*, 31-43 (37).

⁶⁹ On the one hand, Collini (“Introduction”, xlv) comments on how the diversity of academic cultures and disciplines appears to have expanded. On the other, an interesting article by Raymond Tallis reads to some extent like a nuanced rehash of Snow’s lecture, although he is mainly concerned with relativism. See Tallis, “The Eunuch at the Orgy: Reflections on the Significance of F.R. Leavis” in Furedi et al. *From two Cultures to No Culture*, 44-60.

because he was situated in Britain,⁷⁰ and he went up to Oxford to read zoology in 1959,⁷¹ the very same year that Snow delivered his lecture. Thus, Dawkins began his undergraduate studies at a time when, According to Snow:

[T]he separation between the scientists and non-scientists is much less bridgeable among the young than it was even thirty years ago. Thirty years ago the cultures had long ceased to speak to each other: but at least they managed a kind of frozen smile across the gulf. Now the politeness has gone, and they just make faces... the young scientists now feel that they are part of a culture on the rise while the other is in retreat.⁷²

Should we accept this statement, even if it may be exaggerated, then the consequence, as Snow describes, is communicative failure and misconception.

This statement about the context of Dawkins' undergraduate years can be complemented by a more modern statement; one of contemporary relevance to the New Atheist polemic. Stephen Jay Gould has also commented significantly on the discordance between the humanities and the sciences. In his last monograph, he makes a claim even more extreme, and more to the point of this essay, than Snow:

[T]he vast majority of us [scientists] will never-and I mean never-even dream about reading technical academic literature from other fields, particularly literature that claims to present deep, critical, and insightful analysis of science as an institution, to reveal the psychology of

⁷⁰ See Snow, *Two Cultures*, 69. Here Snow adds further emphasis to the local nature of the 'two cultures' in response to his critics. Gould believes that one of the fatal flaws in Snow's thesis is that he "falsely extended a local British phenomenon into a claim for global pattern." Gould, *The Hedgehog*, 91.

⁷¹ In various places, Alister McGrath provides a brief biography of Dawkins. See Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*, (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell, 2005), 17-20; and McGrath, "Ideological Uses", 331-34.

⁷² Snow, *Two Cultures*, 17-18.

scientists as ordinary folks with ordinary drives, or to depict the history of science as a socially embedded institution.⁷³

This takes us back to the heart of the Enlightenment project and its scientific faith. Dawkins does not heed the works of history and philosophy of science.⁷⁴ In a brief autobiographical account of his discovery of the discipline, McGrath helps us understand why:

I had little time for this sort of stuff, tending to regard it as uninformed criticism of the certainties and simplicities of the natural sciences by those who felt threatened by them – what Dawkins would later call “truth-heckling.”⁷⁵

What is more, according to Pritchard:

Dawkins rejects all contemporary scholarship on religion, including the contributions of anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, and philosophy in favour of the nineteenth century religious theories of James Frazer, Max Weber, and William James.⁷⁶

The consequence is that Dawkins’ understanding of science, religion and the relationship between the two is the result of an inheritance now well over a century old, the worldview from which he judges the concept of ‘theology’. This understanding governs his ideology, but is also made possible by his naivety of what goes on elsewhere in the academic world. Both of these factors link Dawkins’ perspective on theology firmly with the Enlightenment project, and therefore within history.

The Politics of The God Delusion

⁷³ Gould, *The Hedgehog*, 101. See also McGrath, *Dawkins’ God*, 1-14 for a revealing personal account of a scientist’s broadening perspective.

⁷⁴ Pritchard, “Debating Delusion”, 50-58.

⁷⁵ McGrath, *Dawkins’ God*, 4.

⁷⁶ Pritchard, “Debating Delusion”, 20.

Having unpacked the Enlightenment project and how it informs Dawkins, we can now relate it to the political dimension of his work. This shall complete our understanding of his perspective on theology. The dualistic view of science and religion finds fulfilment in the works of the New Atheists. It has been suggested by many that the recent wave of atheist literature has been provoked by the rise of fundamentalism and, more particularly, triggered by the terrorist attacks of 9/11⁷⁷. It is utterly essential to appreciate the deeply political nature of *The God Delusion*. This comes out well in Dawkins' response to the 'straw man' criticism:

If only such subtle, nuanced religion predominated, the world would surely be a better place, and I would have written a different book. The melancholy truth is that this kind of understated, decent, revisionist religion is numerically negligible. To the vast majority of believers around the world, religion all too closely resembles what you hear from the likes of Robertson, Falwell or Haggard, Osama bin Laden or the Ayatollah Khomeini. These are not straw men, they are all too influential, and everybody in the modern world has to deal with them.⁷⁸

It should be noted that this argument specifically addresses the accusation that he pays too much attention to the dark side of religion. It does not, for example, answer for the misrepresentation of biblical interpretation as traditionally literalist. What it does do is reveal the *The God Delusion's* most fundamental point. It is about the political reality of religion today. It is not interested in a scrupulous academic portrait of religious history, or

⁷⁷ The introduction to Bradley and Tate, *New Atheist Novel*, 1-15, provides interesting discussion on this connection. However, for a far more general overview of religion, atheism and politics see Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*. Eagleton is a Marxist and offers a unique way of looking at Dawkins and the likeminded Christopher Hitchens. I recommend his far reaching discussion as a good complement to the brief treatment offered here.

⁷⁸ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 15.

‘real’ theology. This political reality comprises homophobia, anti-abortionism and other modern horrors as he speaks out against them in chapter 8.

So what is Dawkins’ political message? In his preface, he proposes four consciousness raisers, of which two are explicitly political. First, it is wrong to label children according to the religion of their parents e.g. ‘she is a Catholic child’. Dawkins states his inspiration from feminist success at rendering terms like ‘man-kind’ archaic.⁷⁹ Second, he promotes ‘atheist pride’ against the oppression of the religious majority, particularly in America. This is inspired by the ‘gay pride’ movement.⁸⁰ These are serious matters, but perhaps nothing hits closer to home than the story he tells, almost heartbrokenly, of Kirt Wise, who chose fundamentalist religion over a promising career as a geologist and paleontologist.⁸¹ It is here that Dawkins’ dualistic ideology finds its fullest expression in the religious-political context, and it might explain his disdain toward theology better than anything else, considering his lack of understanding concerning the relationship between theology, fundamentalism and mainstream religion.

Conclusion

The ideology of the Enlightenment project, its expression in contemporary atheist politics, and its effect on interdisciplinary communication, function almost like a sort of unholy Trinity that can now be used to explain Dawkins’ treatment of theology, namely the five points that were summarised following our exploration of the text itself. Given the Academic scenario that so excited C.P. Snow in the late 1950’s, it would seem unrealistic to expect Dawkins’ understanding of theology to be accurate. Dawkins’

⁷⁹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 25.

⁸⁰ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 26.

⁸¹ Dawkins, *Delusion*, 319-23.

misconception of Biblical exegesis stems from a simple lack of exposure. This lack of exposure also makes it easier for him to reject theology, especially in the face of criticisms that come from a theological angle. However, this lack of exposure does not sufficiently explain his willingness to publish such misconception in a popular book. It needs to be coupled with a strong political agenda partly fuelled by an ideological belief that religion is the enemy of Truth.

Dawkins writes scathingly of how the theological mind works in its reasoning, and denies theology the status of a serious academic subject. On the one hand, he believes with sincerity that academic theology makes as much sense as an academic discipline dedicated to the description of leprechauns. On the other, his ‘Courtier’s Reply’ provides a powerful rhetorical tactic, claiming to deny the validity of criticisms levelled against him. Considering some of the frightening realities of religion in America, one can understand Dawkins’ patently deep suspicion of these theologians that speak the case for the religion (Christianity) that, in his eyes, blinds people to the Truth, and with such malevolent consequences.

Up until now, writings on *The God Delusion* have been limited in their engagement with the actual text, exhibiting an abstract, polemical discourse. They have also been limited in their engagement with serious scholarly dialogue such as we see in Wokler and Schmidt. What this article has hoped to achieve, is to attempt a single coherent dialogue between precisely these three leagues: Dawkins (and therefore the New Atheism), his scholarly critics, and the far more robust scholarship surrounding the Enlightenment project. This new dialogue transcends any narrow interest in simply discrediting Dawkins, and transforms him into a topic of genuine historical interest, accessible to

anyone interested in the Enlightenment project, in its past and present development. What is more, it should serve as a guide for a better understanding of the present day atheist polemic, and a more constructive response from those scholars concerned with Dawkins' views and influence.