

# has science buried God?

*Camilla Day reports on the exciting debate between Dawkins and Lennox*

I queued up outside Oxford's Natural History Museum clutching a coveted ticket to the sold-out event on 21 October. It was only the second time for Richard Dawkins and John Lennox to debate the existence of God, and the first on English soil.

Richard Dawkins is the well-known author of *The God Delusion*,<sup>1</sup> recently retired as Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, and sponsor of the atheist bus campaign.<sup>2</sup> His opponent, John Lennox, is Professor in Mathematics at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science at Green College, Oxford. He is a Christian who wrote *God's Undertaker: has science buried God?*<sup>3</sup> in response to *The God Delusion*.

## questions in my mind

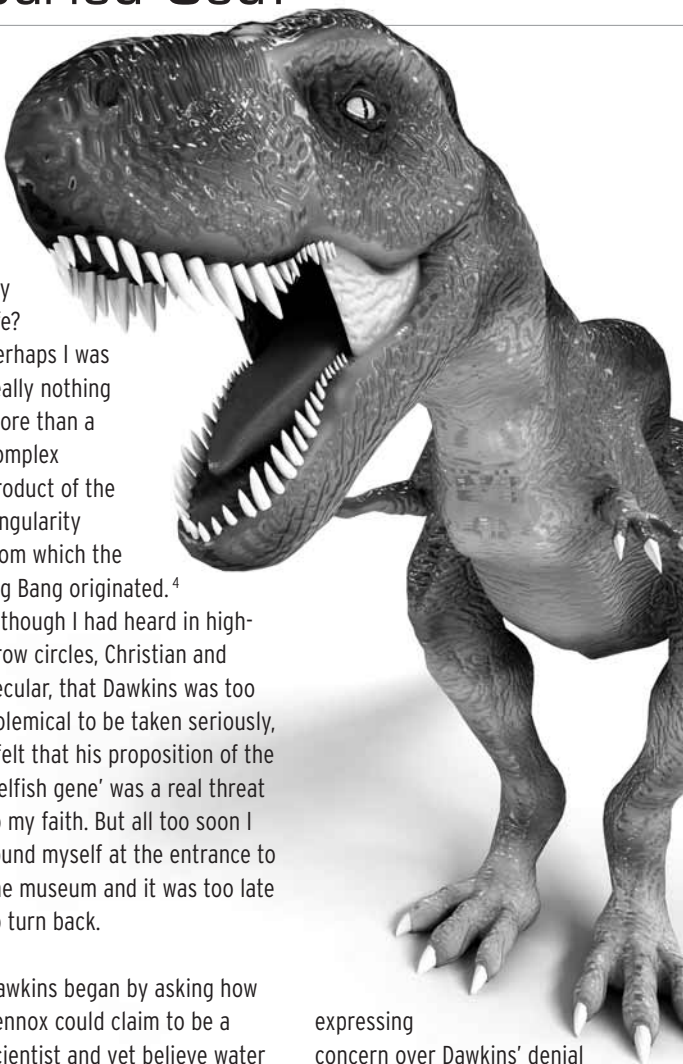
Was I going to be persuaded by 'the Dawkinator'? Had I been infected with a 'religious mind virus' for the past four years of

my life?

Perhaps I was really nothing more than a complex product of the singularity from which the Big Bang originated.<sup>4</sup> Although I had heard in high-brow circles, Christian and secular, that Dawkins was too polemical to be taken seriously, I felt that his proposition of the 'selfish gene' was a real threat to my faith. But all too soon I found myself at the entrance to the museum and it was too late to turn back.

Dawkins began by asking how Lennox could claim to be a scientist and yet believe water can be turned into wine.<sup>5</sup> After putting Jesus in the spotlight, he did not grant his opponent the same courtesy. Whenever Lennox spoke about Jesus, Dawkins accused him of fanciful digression from science and he was reluctant to engage. Lennox took that in his stride,

expressing concern over Dawkins' denial of Jesus' existence, not to mention his death and resurrection. Cornered, Dawkins was forced to concede that most historians did think he existed. But he attempted to dismiss the point by saying that the whole story of Jesus was petty.



## jaw-dropping moment

Dawkins was adamant that he did not believe in the petty Christian God who cares about sin and 'tortured himself' on the cross. Lennox's rebuttal was that sin and consequent alienation from God are in fact the most important questions in life. Nevertheless, Dawkins admitted that 'a serious case could be made for a deistic god'. This concession almost went by unnoticed, but journalist Melanie Phillips explains its gravity:<sup>6</sup>

*Here was the arch-apostle of atheism, whose whole case is based on the assertion that believing in a creator of the universe is no different from believing in fairies at the bottom of the garden, saying that a serious case can be made for the idea that the universe was brought into being by some kind of purposeful force...True, he was not saying he was now a deist; on the contrary, he still didn't believe in such a purposeful founding intelligence...Nevertheless, to acknowledge that 'a serious case could be made for a deistic god' is to undermine his previous categorical assertion that:*

*'...all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all "design" anywhere in the universe is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection...Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe.'<sup>7</sup>*

While Dawkins could contemplate a god, he said that this was incompatible with 'a god who cares about our sins', 'what we do with our genitals', and what we think about. This implies that his objection to the Christian God is not scientific but theological.

## evolution and design

Lennox argued that evidence of design in the universe implied that there must be a creative mind behind it. Dawkins countered by saying that it is mindless Darwinian evolution, the 'blind watchmaker', giving the impression that life was designed. Lennox said that he believed in evolution as a mechanism but that it was a separate assumption that there is no agent behind the mechanism. He cited the example of his watch; it 'is blind and automatic but that does not mean it wasn't designed, far from it'. Dawkins argued that if a stone fell to the ground, one

would acknowledge that it fell by gravity, not because God caused it to fall in the same way time and again. An agent is superfluous to the explanation of life. But Dawkins admitted that he had no explanation for the origin of life; he believes that a naturalistic explanation will one day be discovered by a 'Darwin of the cosmos'. However, Dawkins said some surprising things to Melanie Phillips after the debate:

*...rather than believing in God, he was more receptive to the theory that life on earth had indeed been created by a governing intelligence - but one which had resided on another planet. Leave aside the question of where that extra-terrestrial intelligence had itself come from, is it not remarkable that the arch-apostle of reason finds the concept of God more unlikely as an explanation of the universe than the existence and plenipotentiary power of extra-terrestrial little green men?<sup>8</sup>*

Darwin, himself an agnostic, wrote, 'it seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent theist and an evolutionist'.<sup>9</sup> Lennox said that the stunning Natural History Museum they were sitting in had been built by such Victorian

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theists for the glory of their God. Dawkins rejected this proposition, but he was wrong. The Regius Professor of Medicine at the time of construction, Sir Henry Acland, explained that the building was for obtaining the 'knowledge of the great material design of which the Supreme Master-Worker has made us a constituent part'. In fact, the funds for the building came from the surplus in the University Press' Bible account!

### hear them for yourself!

Unlike the rigid format of their first debate (see box), this event was a more fluid conversation between the two. In addition to the topics I highlighted above, they expounded on subjects from their books along the lines of rationality, morality, and justice.

Both speakers were remarkable communicators. Lennox certainly held his own, even while Dawkins was articulate and logical. But even so, Dawkins disengaged with the conversation at certain points and disappointingly resorted to emotive dismissals of God as 'petty', an 'imaginary friend' of those who need to grow up, and faith as 'fantasy'. Consequently, I not only felt substantially less

## Dawkins versus Lennox, round one – The God Delusion Debate

October 2007, University of Alabama (USA)

The two Oxford professors first debated each other a year ago. The free online video<sup>11</sup> is an easy way in to understanding the key arguments in Dawkins' book and the Christian riposte. It is also an excellent opportunity to spark off debate with non-Christian friends on the topic. I thought that Lennox finished the debate ahead on points but with no knockout blows.

The structure is a little strange, hampering the flow of the arguments. Dawkins expands on six theses, from *The God Delusion*, one after the other. These include: 'science supports atheism not religion' and 'religion is dangerous'. Lennox then responds to each argument. The format puts Lennox at an advantage as he can always critique Dawkins' arguments, whilst Dawkins does not have the opportunity to reply. Having said that, both speakers are engaging and often amusing as they stake their ground - it is well worth watching!

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threatened by his ideas; I was disappointed by his ignorance of the historicity of Jesus Christ. Science certainly has not buried God! But you do not need to take my word for it; make up your own mind. The audio recording of the debate is available for sale online.<sup>10</sup> It is well worth your time; you don't even need to stand in line!

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### REFERENCES

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