

context which has been lost to the heterodox. This reified God is no different in any sense from Zeus or Athena, and proofs which apply to this God could just as easily be applied to them. As such, these images are more than a slippery slope to idolatry — they are idolatry itself. To project upon God any fundamental characteristic at all is immediately to worship a creation of the human mind just as imaginary as the Olympians. Though Aquinas' Zeus has been stripped of his beard and lightning, he remains a thing, still a 'creator,' still an 'unmoved mover.' And, if anything, modern Western spirituality has tended even further towards the worship of images in recent years. For many, Zeus' lightning has made its return, as Michael W. Smith's lyrics in a famous Evangelical hymn demonstrate: «When He rolls up His sleeves/ He ain't just puttin' on the ritz/our God is an awesome God/ There is thunder in His footsteps/And lightning in His fist.» The remnants of the ancient sky god, a fabrication of the human imagination, remain alive in the Western tradition, and it is ultimately defence of these remnants which constitutes the bulk of God-proofs today.

As such, Orthodoxy has not yet been truly engaged by the modern Western debate. The god being defended and attacked in the West is not our God at all. In a surprising way, Dawkins and other atheists have not only failed to refute the God in which we do believe, but have not even addressed the issue in the first place. And in the same way, Western theists have not put forward any proof at all for our God — indeed, they have not even really considered the question.

Orthodoxy's place in the current God debate is stranger and perhaps more uncomfortable than we would like. We Orthodox Christians stand as believers in the All-Holy Trinity, as practitioners of an organized religion, and as followers of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. As such, Richard Dawkins serves as a harsh critic of our beliefs and way of living. Yet, the God which we worship is not the God under attack in Dawkins' work — indeed, ours is a God who seems forgotten to the West, both by the heterodox and by their atheist opponents. This position is a dangerous one indeed. If we are blinded by the outward similarities, and the millions of honest and loving hearts which constitute the Western

heterodox, we may quickly slip into their attempts to defend that which does not exist: a God of attributes and images no more genuine than the Olympian Zeus. Yet we are no atheists, and no allies of the anti-religious movement sweeping the Western world — we cannot throw stones at the heterodox along with Richard Dawkins.

But though we must be wary of the dangers in our situation, we must be equally excited at the opportunity we have been given. In a West whose philosophy has become a broken-record of refutations and defences of idols and lies, Orthodox Christianity has the opportunity to articulate the truth once again to those for whom it has been stolen by schism. Orthodoxy is no party to the Dawkins debate, but we hold the keys to the solution: a genuine faith in the Holy Trinity and the saving power of Jesus Christ who alone can sanctify our souls that we may become, in His Energies, the God Whom both the heterodox and the atheists have forgotten.

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1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, London: 2006.

2 Dawkins, 2006: 77-151.

3 Dawkins, 2006: 105-107.

4 Apophatic theology, derived from the word apophasis (Late Latin, repudiation, from Greek apophanai denial, negation, "to say no"), is negative theology; it describes who and what God is not.

5 Modern authors writing in English and French have also affirmed this teaching. See Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood: 2001; and Vladimir Lossky. *Essai sur la Theologie Mystique de L'Eglise d'Orient*, Paris: 1944.

6 Kataphatic (or Cataphatic) theology is positive theology, describing what and who God is.

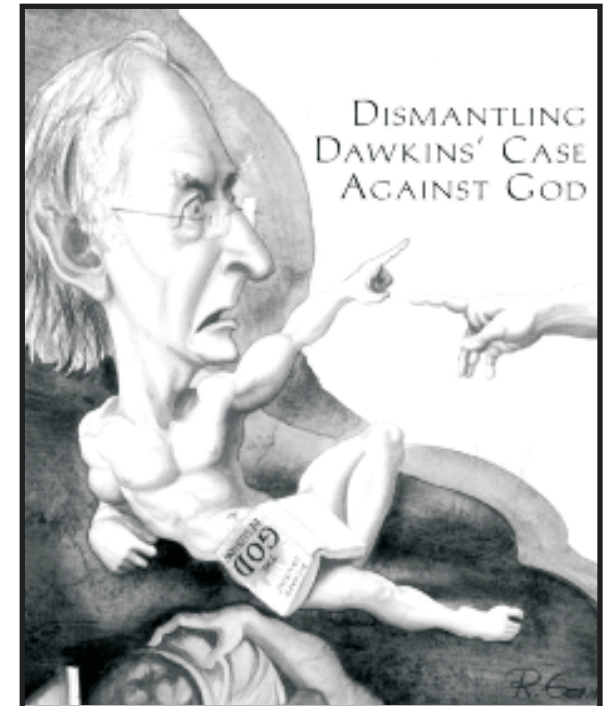
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WHO'S DELUSION?

Orthodoxy's place in the Contemporary God Debate



Over the past couple of years several texts have appeared in popular film and print which seek to attack the notion of God's existence and paint the role of religion in human society in negative terms. A new wave of modern, non-Marxist atheism has begun to find its feet, and as it shrugs off adolescence, has begun to develop a comprehensive ethical philosophy which seeks to tear down the old power of religion and replace it with a naturalistic humanism. Figures like Christopher Hitchens, Bill Maher, and Sam Harris have plead passionately for a new vision of humanity in which religion is dismantled and swept away to be replaced by stability, rationality, and peace.

Perhaps most articulate of the writers in this new school is Richard Dawkins, one of the United Kingdom's foremost evolutionary biologists. His 2006 landmark publication, *The God Delusion*, has rapidly become a staple of the debate over God's existence in the public sphere¹. Dawkins' ideas have been championed by his fellow atheists, and challenged by theists of all types. Regardless of one's perspective, no Westerner interested in religious questions has the luxury of ignoring Dawkins' work.

In a publication such as this one, the reader is likely expecting that this article will dismantle and refute Dawkins' case against God. This is an Orthodox Christian magazine after all, and Orthodox Christians are theists. But it is not my goal to disrupt any of Dawkins' conclusions, and there is a simple reason for this: Dawkins' arguments, and the broader debate in which he is involved, simply do not engage Orthodox theism in any meaningful sense. The reality of Orthodoxy's place in the modern West, we may be shocked to discover, is that we share a great deal more in common with Mr. Dawkins, and a great deal less with his opponents, than we might at first suppose. In reality, Orthodoxy is really not a natural party to the Western discussion of God at all.

But how can this be? To understand Orthodoxy's position in relation to the Western God debate, we need to understand specifically what that debate is about. To do so, we need look no further than Dawkins' book itself, for Dawkins has done an excellent job of compiling and analyzing the basic Western arguments for the existence of God. Dawkins rightly divides these arguments into two groups: a priori arguments, and a posteriori ones. A posteriori arguments are those which seek to prove God by examining the world, and Dawkins holds up the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas as the preeminent example of such arguments. Aquinas' most well remembered proof is his argument from creation: the world is so complex and remarkable that it seems that some brilliant mind must have designed it. A priori arguments for God's existence begin in a different place: the mind of the thinker employing them. Dawkins cites the work of Anselm of Canterbury to present such an argument, which is roughly as follows: if one can imagine something perfect, then something even more perfect must exist for one to model that image upon — this most perfect

thing is God. Dawkins dismantles these arguments, and various others which essentially flow from them before eventually positing that 'there almost certainly is no God.'² The arguments which Dawkins presents are well selected. These basic defences, rephrased and reworked, when coupled with what Dawkins describes as 'Bayesian' principles (saying that God's existence is highly likely as opposed to certain)³, constitute the sum of Western proofs of God. Dawkins has been diligent in leaving out nothing significant of his opponents' positions.

Each of these traditional proofs, and any of the myriad others which could readily be unearthed, seeks to demonstrate the certain existence of a particular type of being which is God. Arguments from the design of the universe necessitate an understanding of God as a designer. For God to be such a designer, God must have something of a mind, an intelligence, and a host of other characteristics. Those which posit a perfect prototype for humanity's image of perfection (and variations on this theme) demand the existence of such a prototype, one which reflects forward into the created order, and which demonstrates the quality of perfection, beauty, goodness or the like. Such a being amounts to a perfect creator, an 'unmoved mover,' or a universal mind. What is critical here is that in every case, God is an identifiable entity. God's possession of characteristics make traditional proofs function, and therefore would be central to the being of the God to which these proofs refer. In other words, if we prove God's existence from the perfection of God's creation, it is inherent to God's nature that God be a perfect creator, and such a proof cannot possibly refer to a God who does not create or is not perfect. Other arguments can be similarly analyzed.

Such an image of God is ultimately an image of an all-powerful existent creature. The idea of creatures such as this is by no means new to human thinking. The ancient Greek polytheists, for instance, saw gods at every turn. That which controlled the fertility of their fields they labelled 'Demeter.' That which was emblematic of the principle of reason they called 'Athena.' That which controlled the weather, the most powerful force they knew, they called 'Zeus.' Gods, for the Greeks, were defined by certain attributes, and their power was seen in the workings of the

principles which they represented — they had no existence beyond this. These categorizations of certain gods with certain characteristics directly mirror the type of figure which traditional God-proofs seek to defend. Indeed, one could easily employ such proofs in the defence of the figure of Zeus. Take a simple a posteriori argument for example: 'The weather is controlled by principles which we do not fully understand. However, those principles are evident in the action of the weather. Therefore, we call those principles «Zeus.» As such, Zeus exists.'

Christians like Thomas Aquinas and Anselm, or any number of modern writers, have insisted on the existence of a God with characteristics. For Aquinas this made God a creator and 'unmoved mover,' for Anselm a perfect being. But the Orthodox tradition, at its core, knows no such characteristics of God. Instead, Orthodoxy's understanding of God is radically apophatic⁴, and God's essence is understood to be completely unknowable — a position expounded by the Dionysian corpus, St. Maximus the confessor, St. Symeon the New Theologian, and most critically, St. Gregory Palamas⁵. Those kataphatic⁶ representations of God which Orthodoxy embraces are clearly understood to be necessary, but ultimately secondary. The true experience of God occurs in total silence, away from all thoughts, images, and characteristics of any kind. This is a God who defies even the language of 'perfection' — a God who defies the language of 'defiance' and the word 'God' itself.

This is not, therefore, the God being defended by modern Western theists. It is no accident that the arguments which Richard Dawkins dismantles begin to take firm shape in the West after the Great Schism. Thinkers like Aquinas and Anselm, unchecked by the wisdom of the true Church, easily fell into the error of rationalizing, and therefore of delimiting the concept of God. Such a conceptualized God is merely imaginary, the reification of those kataphatic models of God which Orthodoxy places in proper context — a