

The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths

DAVID ROBERTSON, (UK: CHRISTIAN FOCUS,
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The collected letters of British pastor David Robertson in his pocket-sized riposte, *The Dawkins Letters*, were among the first on Richard Dawkins' website replying to Dawkins' anti-theist magnum opus, *The God Delusion* (2006). At an affordable \$7.99 at the time of this writing, *The Dawkins Letters* is a concise, useful introduction and critique of Dawkins' mega-seller.

According to Dawkins, *The God Delusion* sold over two million English copies by January 2010 (<http://richarddawkins.net/articles/5000#455619>), which was when it returned to the *New York Times* extended bestseller list after lingering there for fifty-one weeks from 2006 to 2007. Robertson's feisty retorts to Dawkins and other online contributors to Dawkins' official website, www.richarddawkins.net, are revised for *The Dawkins Letters*, Robertson's mini-manifesto of ten short letters, two bonus chapters, a quick introduction, and a concluding appeal.

Robertson's introductory letter confesses that he is neither a scientist like Dawkins, nor an Oxford scholar, nor (with a touch of British humor) is he presenting an academic treatise punctuated precisely with pristine English grammar. Rather, "As a deeply committed Christian, I am disturbed by the attacks Dawkins makes on God and the Bible, and astonished that his attacks are taken so seriously. I believe that he is appealing not to people's intelligence and knowledge, but rather to their ignorance" (11). *The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths* deftly delivers a dose of common sense and well-informed wisdom to dispel such ignorance.

In letter 1, Robertson prods at Dawkins' preaching about alleged risks in "coming out" as an atheist, which Robertson concedes could constitute "political suicide" (16) when running for public office in the United States, and genuine physical peril in some majority Muslim contexts. However, "I cannot think of a single career option in Britain where being an atheist would place you at a disadvantage (unless you are thinking of becoming a member of the clergy...) [but] there are many people for whom admitting they are 'religious' is a severe block to their career" (17).

Robertson asks with regard to Dawkins' significant support and media coverage, "Can you tell me when an Evangelical Christian was last given the opportunity by a national TV channel to produce a film demonstrating the evils of atheism" (19)? In contrast, Dawkins' highly publicized and glossy 2006 documentary, "The Root of All Evil?" focused primarily on ridiculing Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians.

Letters 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 9 compare the fruits and fertilizer supplied by Christianity and atheism both in their potential and actual records for cultivating awe, wonder, rationality, the scientific enterprise, tolerance, and ethical living. Letter 4 gets Biblical: Is God as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament really a cruel capricious tyrant? Letter 6 probes the scientific rhetoric lacing Dawkins' anti-theist

appeals, exposes Dawkins' logical fallacies, and provides contrary perspectives by noteworthy scientists such as Stephen Hawking, Nobel Prize winner Arno Penzias, and Harvard University's Owen Gingerich.

In Letter 10, Robertson tackles the implications of Dawkins' dangerous assertion that "religion," in and of itself, is a sinister form of child abuse and should be treated as such. This is exemplified by Dawkins' statements such as, "horrible as sexual abuse [by priests] no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing up the child Catholic in the first place" (Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 317; quoted in Robertson, 112).

Robertson is also concerned by Dawkins' apparent approval of psychologist Nicholas Humphrey's proposal, "Children I'll argue, have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people's bad ideas.... So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible... than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or to lock them in a dungeon" (quoted in Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 326; and in Robertson, 112). Robertson responds to such shrill denunciations:

You think I would have been better off being sexually abused... than being brought up having been taught about Jesus Christ. And you accuse me of being worse than a paedophile because I happily teach young children that God loves them, that they are important and have a purpose and place in this world...[is it] not right to be more than a little frightened by the consequences of such a perverse view? (117)

The first bonus chapter in Robertson's 2010 edition is a "Final letter to Dawkins" addressing developments since the letters were first posted, including a rebuke for an ostensibly fake, yet disturbingly detailed death threat posted against Robertson for a week at www.richarddawkins.net. The second chapter, "Salvation Came Through Dawkins," reproduces the testimony of an atheist who became a Christian after witnessing what she or he considered to be Robertson's gracious, reasonable, and persistent interactions with less than gracious – and sometimes less than reasonable – interlocutors on Dawkins' website.

Robertson's "Final Letter to the Reader" bequeaths a bevy of resources for follow-up on issues relating to science, art, literature, atheism, and history. Robertson closes with ten reasons to believe (in just one or two paragraphs each), provides his contact information, and invites readers, "If you want to know more, just ask. Pray to God, seek his face and his forgiveness and he will never turn you away. This book has been part of a conversation. One that is ongoing. It's not just about talk; it's about truth, life, meaning, beauty, justice and eternal love. And You. Join in" (143).

In spite of Robertson's self-effacing introduction, the words that flow from his keyboard (or pen) are prescient but not pretentious, literarily aware, and astute. Robertson gives Dawkins his due by not pretending the "New Atheism" has no legitimate points. But Robertson also refuses to suffer Dawkins' foolishness gladly (2 Corinthians 11:19, KJV). Consequently, *The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths*

is heartily recommended, fun and fast, an incisive pastoral appraisal deftly parrying perhaps the foremost atheist screed of our time.

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