

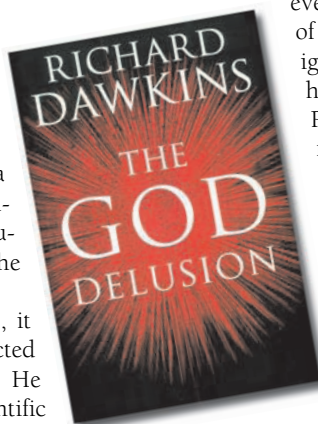
## Atheists unite!

**The God delusion.** Richard Dawkins. London: Bantam Press, 2006 (406 pp, \$34.95). ISBN 0593055489.

**THINK OF THE OLD JOKE:** I am not so much an atheist as someone who doesn't believe in God. Few folk are persuaded by even good logic when it comes to religion. So what can an evolutionary biologist tell us about God? Can a book explain *why* so many humans have a religion, what the behavioural and perhaps evolutionary explanations might be? What about the philosophical and non-biological aspects?

This book has a lot to say. Firstly, of course, it deals with the creation of life superbly, as expected by this master of evolutionary explanation. He addresses the existence of God as a straight scientific question (and finds His existence hugely less satisfying intellectually than current scientific biological explanations, however incomplete and doubt-ridden).

Astonishing is the description of how fundamental religion in the United States has developed into such a monstrous juggernaut. Declaring oneself to be an atheist is political suicide in the US (and consequently no politicians do). Fundamentalist Christians' belief of every word of the Bible leads them into direct conflict with the sciences of geology and biology (especially evolution by natural selection), and "intelligent design" is seriously promoted as an



alternative to mainstream science in the US, and increasingly even in the United Kingdom. Are we at risk, even in Australia, of returning to the pre-Enlightenment mire of superstition and ignorance? Inter-religious hatred is also a dark stain on history for Dawkins. But does this confuse cause with effect? Perhaps religion is just the excuse for "in-grouping" arising from human natural aggression.

Dawkins speculates on *why* religion has evolved. Perhaps it is a by-product of natural selection: young humans with their extended years of vulnerability selected to obey to keep out of the trouble they cannot learn about by direct experience; hallucinations as a product of thinking. These ideas are fun, and are important because of the approach — showing that we can think of biological explanations as well as the usual sociological and historical ones.

Theologians and philosophers will dismiss Dawkins as a hard-nosed evolutionist straying off his area of expertise to trample naïvely into theirs. But this book provokes new thinking, beautifully set out in biting logic with an overlay of whimsical anecdote — so it is not just fun, but funny.

Relevance? Perhaps evolutionary biology, with all its relevance to human behaviour, should become one of the mandatory basic sciences for medicine.

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