



# **A FRANK**

## **INTERVIEW WITH**

# **Richard Dawkins**

**Interview conducted by Joseph Ballard**

A prominent atheist and author of best-selling book “The God Delusion,” **Richard Dawkins** has become a leading voice against organized religion—calling it an “unfortunate byproduct” of human evolution. After the release of his 1976 best-seller “The Selfish Gene,” Dawkins established himself as one of the leading thinkers in the field of evolutionary biology, earning him the nickname “Darwin’s Rottweiler.”

**FRANK:** In “The God Delusion” you articulate a hypothesis that religion is a genetic misfire or an unfortunate byproduct, which you call a Darwinian mistake. Briefly explain this concept.

**RICHARD DAWKINS:** Whenever you ask a Darwinian question, especially about a complicated species like humans, you have to be careful. In one sense, Darwinians believe that things have survival value. They believe that what animals do and what animals are has been shaped by natural selection. But often what you actually see is a byproduct of something else. A person might choose to focus on a particular characteristic and question its survival value, not realizing it was the wrong question.

I use the analogy of moths flying into candle flames in “The God Delusion.” If you question the survival value of flying into a candle flame, it’s obviously not a very sensible question. So then you ask if this is a byproduct of something else, and it probably is. Moths fly at a fixed, acute angle toward a distant light source, like the moon, which is a very useful compass while flying. But nowadays the moon and the stars are not the only light sources at night. There are candles and other examples of artificial light. The moth’s nervous system has been set up by generations of natural selection to maintain a fixed angle to light rays without distinction, which explains its logarithmic spiral into the candle flame. What we see is an unfortunate byproduct, and we mischaracterize it as suicidal behavior.

Quite a lot of biologists now are beginning to see religion as a bit like that. So religion is a byproduct of not just one but probably several different psychological predispositions, which under the right conditions have survival value, but under the wrong conditions manifest themselves as religion.

**FRANK:** In your opinion as a biologist, what social theories, if any, can we extrapolate from biology?

**RD:** There has been an inglorious history of attempts to apply Darwinian thinking to human social affairs. From the 19th century to the rise of Adolf Hitler in the early 20th century, there have been people who have misapplied Darwinian ideas to human affairs and have, for example, suggested the triumph of the strong over

the weak is something that is natural and therefore to be encouraged. My view is almost the exact opposite.

**FRANK:** What purpose in an evolutionary sense does morality serve?

**RD:** Again, I think you probably want to look at morality as a byproduct. And in this case, I don’t want to suggest it’s an unfortunate byproduct. I think there are roots of what we recognize as morality in our Darwinian past. Natural selection favors altruism, but toward close kin. It also favors altruism and cooperation toward other individuals who are in a position to reciprocate.

Human society probably arose in our biological past when we lived in small clans or villages, where most of the people you met tended to be close kin, or those whom you met consistently throughout your life. This would have been a fertile breeding ground for altruism under the Darwinian model. Nowadays we don’t live in small villages. Most of us live in large cities, where we’re not surrounded by kin and reciprocators. But this desire to be nice, empathize and sympathize, which served us and our genes in the distant past, is still working away in our brains, even though it is no longer applicable.

**FRANK:** Is it possible to isolate a morality that is truly independent of religion, or can morality only be a response to a religiously or spiritually based morality?

**RD:** I think it’s exceedingly clear that people today, whether they’re religious or not, do not follow a religious morality. If you literally base your morality on either the Bible or the Quran, then you would be morally “beyond the pale” by any modern standard. We have moved on

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since biblical and Quranic times. Of course you can pick and choose verses of the Bible and the Quran that fit in with modern morality, but that really is picking and choosing. There is a moral Zeitgeist that moves astonishingly fast, and even in the course of a single lifetime you can notice distinct changes in the way we treat each other, our attitudes to race, to sex and to all sorts of things. This has nothing to do with religion.

There are people who think that without religion there would be nothing to stop us from raping, murdering and stealing. If anybody thinks that, then I don't want to know them because they're not very nice people. Those of us who are moral for reasons other than a fear of retribution from the great eye in the sky have a greater reason for pride in our morality.

**FRANK:** Building off that, you hold that despite geography, culture, ethnicity and religiosity, humanity shares common elements of morality. If that's correct, what can we draw from the existence of this "moral spine" across humanity?

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**RD:** I'm not sure how universal this is. A common morality does seem to cross different cultures. However, the existence of a shifting moral Zeitgeist means that historically our moral system is very different from century to century, and parts of the Islamic world today are still in the Middle Ages from that perspective. So, if you take the real horrors of the modern world, for example Donald Rumsfeld, he would be a bleeding heart liberal, even as recently as the Second World War. So, things do change rapidly.

**FRANK:** If religion were excised from the world, how does a purely rational society fill the gaps?

**RD:** You might say that we'd lose the explanation of where we come from and why we exist, but science has long since filled that gap with greater adequacy and effectiveness. Another gap would be consolation and comfort. It has been said that people need religion, because otherwise they would fear death or would be inconsolable in bereavement. Or that people need to believe that they'll meet their loved ones again in another life. It's very important to stress that just because you feel you need something, it doesn't necessarily make it true.

The religious mentality has stultified intellect by persuading people to be satisfied with non-explanations. In earlier times when there were no genuine explanations available, this might have been excusable. It no longer is. Religion has become accustomed to getting a free ride of respect. Everybody knows that you can criticize somebody's politics, their football team and their taste in music, but you mustn't criticize their religious beliefs. I think the time has come to stop that automatic respect. Religion must stand up and defend itself in exactly the same way a political opinion does.

**FRANK:** When you visualize cultural evolution, is there a reciprocal de-evolution in that process? If Western culture, for example, were to evolve to be free from religion, what might we lose that you would consider positive, if anything?

**RD:** Well, on the face of it, you might say we'd lose great art. There's no question that religion has inspired wonderful architecture, painting, music and even poetry. Would we lose that? I doubt it. One of the reasons why religion has inspired great art is that artists need to be paid. They depend on patronage, and in past centuries the church had the money. Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling because he was paid to do so. We shall never know what Michelangelo's ceiling might have been like if he'd been commissioned to paint the ceiling of a great museum of science, what Haydn's "Evolution Oratorio" or Beethoven's "Mesozoic Symphony" would have sounded like. So I don't think it is fair to say we'd lose great art. Rather, we would have a new kind of art, which would be just as great or greater, because the inspiration would be more inspiring.

**FRANK:** Your work in "The God Delusion" has demanded you venture beyond your chosen field of biology. What challenges have you faced in trying to move across those disciplinary boundaries?



**RD:** I don't think it has necessitated moving that far away, actually. I'm perhaps slightly unusual among scientists. I do think "The God Delusion" should be seen as a scientific hypothesis in the sense that a universe with a God would be different from one without, scientifically speaking. Some people imply that I've strayed into a field called theology. I don't think it's a field or subject at all. Professors of theology do interesting things when they study biblical literature or comparative religion from a psychological or anthropological perspective. But theology, in the sense of arguing about the exact nature of the trinity or transubstantiation, is not a respectable subject at all.

**FRANK:** You've clearly become an activist in this arena. Do you see yourself as a public servant?

**RD:** I do actually, yes. Much of what I've been saying has been about a concern for humanity, especially as an educator. I deeply care about the education of young people. I think the scientific worldview is utterly wonderful, and anybody who pays even scant attention to it should be able to see that. If we have a rival worldview actively trying to block scientific understanding, then I think it is a public service to fight that and draw attention to it.

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**FRANK:** What would the “Richard Dawkins School of Public Service” look like?

**RD:** It would probably be similar to this school (Clinton School), but it might have a bit less emphasis on the nuts and bolts of public service in politics and economics, and a bit more emphasis on educational aspects in encouraging people to open their eyes to the beauty of the world in which they live.

**FRANK:** You extol the virtues of the atheist community, and you speculate about its potential collective power. What needs to happen next for this community to take on a larger role in society?

**RD:** The number of nonbelievers of various sorts in the U.S. is actually substantial. You’d never know it, but nonbelievers outnumber religious Jews. Atheists haven’t yet gotten their act together and become organized in a way that Jews proverbially and praiseworthily have. If there was an atheist lobby that had a fraction of the power of the Jewish lobby, then who knows what it might achieve?

Unfortunately, as somebody once said, “Organizing atheists is like herding cats.” I think it’s necessary to do as the gay community did and “come out of the closet.” Atheists have all the good arguments on their side. Don’t be pusillanimous. Stand up, face the world, argue with people and reject the convention that you have to respect religion above all other things. Let’s stop being so damned respectful.

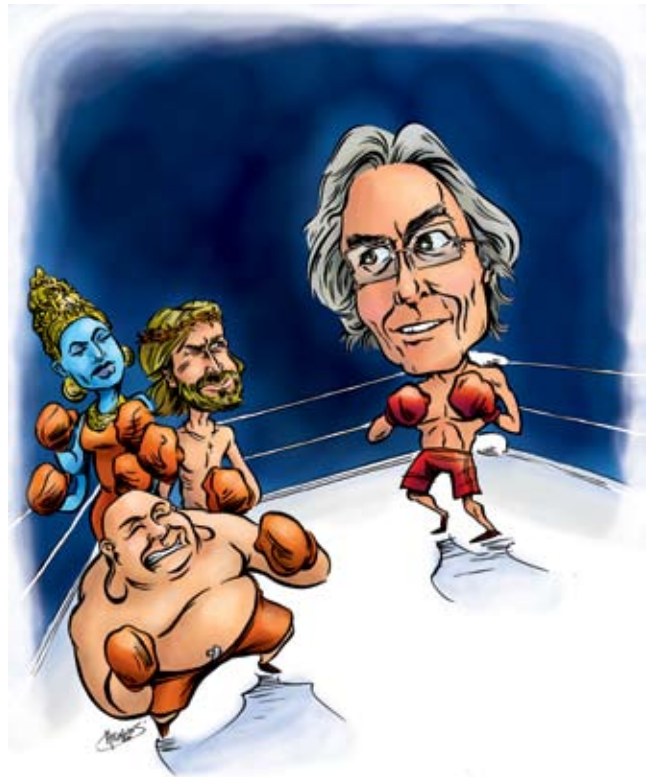
**FRANK:** Will this consciousness-raising that you so aggressively pursue ever come about in any broad sense as a result of what has been coined “militant atheism,” or is there a need for a middle path?

**RD:** That’s a question of political tactics, and I don’t know the answer. I’m not a very good politician, and it doesn’t really occur to me to think about what’s the best way to achieve something politically. If you look at the historical struggle for women’s suffrage, for example, it’s somewhat of a scandal that no modern democracy had females voting until the 20th century,

with the single exception of New Zealand. Women who militantly campaigned for the right to vote were written off as strident extremists, and people accused them of alienating the very people whose support they should have been courting. But today, the idea of women not being allowed to vote is preposterous. Would you be moderate? Would you be respectful? You wouldn’t.

**FRANK:** When you leave this world in triumph, as you have stated before, what legacy would you like to leave?

**RD:** I would like people to question everything, think for themselves, always ask for evidence, never retreat behind the wall of faith, use the scientific way of thinking to appreciate the world in which they live and try to leave the world a better place than they found it—not just using science but using all of human resources as well.



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