

A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

THE  
GOD DELUSION  
DEBATE



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# THE GOD DELUSION DEBATE

**A DISCUSSION GUIDE**  
compiled by Bill Wortman



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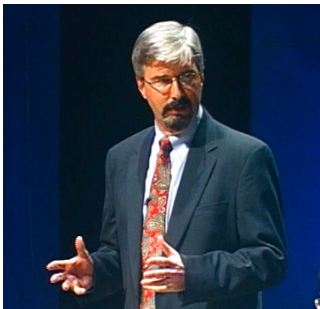
# THE PARTICIPANTS

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**Richard Dawkins, FRS** at the time of this debate held the position of Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford. He did his doctorate at Oxford under Nobel Prize winning zoologist, Niko Tinbergen. He is the author of nine books, some of which are *The Selfish Gene* (1976, 2nd edition 1989), *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), *The God Delusion* (2006), and most recently *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009). Dawkins is an atheist.

**John Lennox** is a Reader in Mathematics at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science at Green College, University of Oxford. He holds doctorates from Oxford (D. Phil.), Cambridge (Ph.D.), and the University of Wales (D.Sc.) and an MA in Bioethics from the University of Surrey. In addition to authoring over seventy peer reviewed papers in pure mathematics, and co-authoring two research monographs for Oxford University Press, Dr. Lennox is the author of *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (2007). Lennox is a Christian.



**Larry A. Taunton** is founder and Executive Director of Fixed Point Foundation and Latimer House. Like Fixed Point itself, Larry specializes in addressing issues of faith and culture. A published author, he is the recipient of numerous awards and research grants. He is Executive Producer of the films “Science and the God Question” (2007), “The God Delusion Debate” (2007), “God on Trial” (2008), “Has Science Buried God?” (2008), “Can Atheism Save Europe?” (2009), and “Is God Great?” (2009). Larry formerly taught European and Russian history. He holds academic degrees from Samford University and the University of Alabama.

**William H. Pryor Jr.** is a judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. Pryor served as Attorney General of Alabama from 1997 to 2004. He is a graduate, *magna cum laude*, of the Tulane University School of Law where he was editor in chief of the *Tulane Law Review*. Judge Pryor currently teaches federal jurisdiction at the University of Alabama School of Law.



# INTRODUCTION

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In 2006, world renowned atheist and scientist Professor Richard Dawkins published his world-wide best-seller *The God Delusion*, an all-out assault on theistic religion in general and Christianity in particular. In it, Dawkins asserts that God, defined as “a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us” (p. 31), is delusional.

One year later, Dawkins and Lennox, two of the greatest minds in the science-religion debate, met to put those assertions to the test. In Dawkins' first visit to the so-called “Bible Belt”, he and Lennox debate Dawkins' views as expressed in *The God Delusion* and their validity over and against the Christian faith. The event garnered national and international attention from *The Times* of London, NPR, BBC, *Christian Post*, and *Fox News Network*. *Spectator Magazine* called the debate “remarkable”, and still others have called it historic.

The God Delusion Debate was filmed on October 3, 2007 before a sold-out crowd at the University of Alabama-Birmingham's Alys Stephens Center and broadcast to a global audience of over one million.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE DEBATE

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The debate begins with autobiographical statements by Dawkins and Lennox. After these opening statements the debate is divided into six segments. Each segment is devoted to one of the six major theses of Dawkins' *The God Delusion*.

The six segments are as follows:

1. Faith is blind, science is evidence-based
2. Science supports atheism, not Christianity
3. Design is dead, otherwise one must explain who designed the designer
4. Christianity is dangerous
5. No one needs God to be moral
6. Christian claims about the person of Jesus are not true; his alleged miracles violate the laws of nature

Judge Pryor introduces each segment by reading a quotation or two from the book to sum up Dawkins' argument for each major thesis. Then Dawkins defends the thesis and Lennox follows with a rebuttal. After all six segments have concluded, Dawkins and Lennox give closing statements.

# HOW TO USE THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

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This study guide will introduce each segment and explain as simply as possible the meaning of that segment's thesis and the nature of the debate that ensues. It is probably best to read each segment's introduction first and then watch the debate segment that corresponds to it. Following the introduction is a series of questions for further discussion. These are intended for group discussion. At the conclusion of all six segments and the closing statements, there is a recommended reading section on the topics discussed.

## THREE PRACTICAL HINTS

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- A common way to watch such a highly charged debate like this is to look for a rhetorical knockout punch or silver bullet. But a debate about serious ideas and their consequences should not be viewed as merely another form of film entertainment. Instead, the goal is to better understand the nature of the debate by listening to two highly accomplished scholars present their respective arguments.
- It is natural for people to identify more closely with one side of the debate. Therefore, it is all too easy to listen carelessly to what the opponent of one's own views is arguing. So as a practical strategy, it is recommended that you try as a priority to understand the arguments of the person you *don't* tend to agree with.
- Unfortunately, much of public debate these days is nothing more than an emotional shouting match of talking points. This debate represents a contrast to this. Two educated and well-informed men have a robust and civil disagreement, where they respectfully allow their opponent to finish his thoughts without rude interruptions. In your own discussions on this debate, you should consider the debate itself as a model of how people can respectfully, yet forcefully, dialogue.

## TWO PRACTICAL CONSTRAINTS

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- This debate was broadcast live on the radio and so the time had to be strictly adhered to. There are points where you will wish these two remarkable men had had more time. Indeed, their debate is so riveting that two more debates followed this one in order to flesh out more fully the topics they discuss here. You may purchase these two follow-up debates at [www.fixed-point.org](http://www.fixed-point.org) ("Dawkins-Lennox Radio Interview at Trinity College" CD, *Has Science Buried God?* DVD).
- The discussions about the theses are not confined to their apportioned segments in the debate. Both Dawkins and Lennox respond to previous theses as the debate advances into new segments and theses. For this reason, it may be preferable to pause in the middle of the segments in order to allow for more discussion on previous theses as they come up.

# AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENTS (7:20 - 19:35)

## QUESTIONS

1. This debate is mostly about whether the *objective findings of science* lead one to dismiss or postulate the idea of God. So why is it important to know about the biographies of these two men and what they subjectively thought about God when they were growing up as children?
2. Neither Dawkins nor Lennox arrived at their current view of God's existence as a result of years of scientific study in their adult life. Does this mean that their respective positions are weaker? Why or why not?
3. In what ways has *your* biography affected your understanding of whether God exists?
4. On what significant points do these two scientists agree?
5. In what ways do Dawkins and Lennox differ from the way atheists and Christians tend to be portrayed in the public media?

# THE FIRST THESIS (19:35 - 30:48)

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## FAITH IS BLIND, SCIENCE IS EVIDENCE BASED

### INTRODUCTION

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This thesis relates to *how* we know whether God exists. It is not so concerned with whether God exists, but *how a person would be sure* that he does or does not exist? Science represents a way or method of knowing many things about our universe. Faith is traditionally understood as a way of knowing God. If faith is blind (as is often said), then how would a person be assured that what they know about God is true? Science, by contrast, is popularly thought of as based exclusively upon “sight”. For example, if there is reasonable evidence that something exists, a scientist concludes that it exists. There is no evidence that tooth fairies actually exist, so a scientist does not postulate their existence. But are these two popular ways of thinking about science and faith valid? Dawkins thinks so. Lennox does not.

### QUESTIONS

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1. It is clear that Dawkins and Lennox do not agree on the basic meaning of the words “faith” and “science”. How do they differ in their understanding of these words?
  - a. Dawkins?
    - i. Faith =
    - ii. Science =
  - b. Lennox?
    - i. Faith =
    - ii. Science =
2. Dawkins presupposes that science is a way of knowing everything. Lennox counters this opinion by asserting that there are some things that science cannot help us to know. What are some things that science cannot tell us?
3. Lennox asserts that faith is evidence-based (cf. Rom 1:20). What are some examples from your everyday experience of how faith and trust are based upon evidence?
4. Dawkins claims that religion uses “the God hypothesis” to explain what science does not currently understand. This is called a “God of the gaps” argument. How does Lennox differentiate his argument from a “God of the gaps” argument?
5. Do you agree with Dawkins’ or Lennox’s understanding of faith and science? Why?

# THE SECOND THESIS (30:48 - 44:00)

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## SCIENCE SUPPORTS ATHEISM, NOT CHRISTIANITY

### INTRODUCTION

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Whereas the first thesis dealt with *how we know* whether God exists or not, this second one deals directly with the scientific evidence for or against God's existence. Dawkins asserts that the evidence of science in no way whatsoever supports "the God hypothesis". Science has explained many important things and so there is no reason to believe it won't resolve the remaining problems with our understanding of nature. Lennox counters that the opposite is the case. The evidence of science does indeed support belief in God, for the high improbability of a life-friendly universe and of the origin of life itself demand the existence of a purposeful Designer.

### QUESTIONS

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1. NOMA (Non-Overlapping Magisteria) is a view advanced by the late Harvard biologist, Stephen Jay Gould. It holds that science and religion deal with separate, "non-overlapping" realities. Both Dawkins and Lennox reject Gould's concept of NOMA. Why? (Hint: it relates to some of the biblical miracles).
2. Dawkins equates *superstition* with the *supernatural*. Lennox insists there is a distinction. What is the difference between superstition and the supernatural?
3. Lennox not only claims that science supports theism, he also accuses atheism of undermining science. According to Lennox, how does atheism undermine science?
4. Lennox cites as positive evidence from science the fine-tuning of the universe. This is the observation that a half a dozen universal physical constants have to be so "finely-tuned" to a narrow range that the slightest deviation at the Big Bang would have made life impossible in the universe. What makes this positive evidence so important?
5. Lennox gives an example of how John Maddox, the editor of *Nature* magazine (1966-73, 1980-1995), one of the most prestigious scientific journals in the world, considered the Big Bang theory "dangerous" because it would give credence to the creation story of Genesis. Why do you think Lennox brings up this incident?



# THE THIRD THESIS (44:00 - 56:50)

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## DESIGN IS DEAD, OTHERWISE ONE MUST EXPLAIN WHO DESIGNED THE DESIGNER

### INTRODUCTION

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Two of the most important events in the universe have yet to be explained by science: the origin of the universe and the origin of life. Dawkins admits that cosmologists (who study the origin and development of the universe) do not have an explanation for the origin of the universe and that biologists (who study living organisms) have no explanation for the origin of life. He also concedes that it is “tempting” to introduce a divine Designer as the cause of these two events. But to do this, in his opinion, is to provide no explanation at all because 1) we then need to know who created God and 2) that God, since he is more complex than the event we are explaining, violates the principle of science that solutions must be “more simple” than the problems they resolve.

### QUESTIONS

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1. Dawkins presents what he considers the leading temporary or place holding explanations for the fine-tuning of the universe: the Anthropic principle and the Multiverse. The Anthropic principle states that we realize we are in a fine-tuned universe, because if the universe were not fine-tuned, we would not be around to realize it. Does this qualify as a *scientific* explanation? Why or why not?
2. The Multiverse holds that there is a “foaming bubble of universes” (an infinity of them) and that we just happen to be in one of the few that can support life. So our universe is not fine-tuned, it is simply the one that won the lottery of life so to speak. How would a scientist like Dawkins know if there was such a thing as a Multiverse, a collection of universes *outside of* our universe?
3. It is clear that “the Multiverse hypothesis” is a postulation to deal with the obvious improbability of a fine-tuned universe. Is this answer more satisfying than postulating a supernatural intelligence? Why or why not?
4. How does Lennox answer the question “Who created God”?
5. Dawkins states that scientific explanations must always be simpler than the events they explain. Lennox counters that this is not true. Gravity is harder to comprehend than the falling apple it explains. He illustrates this by an analogy from archaeology: an archaeologist may infer intelligence as the source of simple markings on a cave wall just as a scientist could infer a super-intelligence as the source of the DNA language in the human cell. Is there any sense in which Lennox’s explanation and illustration fail to adequately rebut Dawkins’ argument? If so, how?

# **THE FOURTH THESIS** (56:50 - 1:17:15)

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## **CHRISTIANITY IS DANGEROUS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

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Dawkins argues in his book that religion is dangerous because it teaches that faith is a virtue. Recall that for Dawkins, faith is blind, irrational, and unjustified. So he sees it as an unquestioning acceptance of whatever a holy book says. If a holy book commands followers to do fanatical and terrible things, then there is a logical path between faith and terrible acts. Hence all religious faith is dangerous. Lennox counters that Dawkins has unfairly mischaracterized Christianity by classifying it as, in the worst case, an inherently violent religion or, in the best case, fertile ground for such fanatical violence.

### **QUESTIONS**

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1. Lennox agrees with Dawkins that all blind fanatical faith is dangerous. Is blind fanatical faith limited to religion? In what other arenas of life can blind fanatical faith be found?
2. Lennox points out that Christ explicitly prohibited his followers from imposing truth by means of violence. But if Christians have not always followed this prohibition, is Dawkins' argument still valid? Why or why not?
3. Dawkins insists that there is no logical path between atheism and atrocities; that terrible acts do not follow logically from atheism as they do from blind unquestioning faith. Is this true? Why or why not?
4. Lennox says that truth cannot be imposed or defeated by violence. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

# THE FIFTH THESIS (1:17:15 - 1:28:00)

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## NO ONE NEEDS GOD TO BE MORAL

### INTRODUCTION

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Dawkins writes in his book, “no one needs God in order to be good”. He gives two reasons for rejecting God as a motivation for good: 1) either “sucking up” to God or fear of punishment are “ignoble” reasons to be good and 2) the Bible has not changed and therefore is unreliable as a guide for behavior in our modern world where morality has advanced beyond the standards of the ancient world which produced the Bible. What decides what is right and wrong? *Zeitgeist*. *Zeitgeist* is a “cultural shifting consensus...in the air” which defines for each society and generation the standards of right and wrong. Lennox challenges Dawkins by quoting David Hume (an 18th century Scottish philosopher) who said that we cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*. Atheists have no rational basis to discuss morality at all. There is simply what *is*. Within the framework of materialism there is no objective basis for what *ought* to be.

### QUESTIONS

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1. Do you agree with Dawkins that it is “ignoble” to do what is good and avoid what is evil because you believe the Creator God is pleased/displeased with such behavior? Why or why not?
2. Do people normally require some form of accountability to do good or are they more prone to do good when there is no “celestial security camera”? Give examples.
3. Lennox does not think that Dawkins has a rational basis for discussing morality. On the basis of what criteria would Dawkins say that “Stalin did terrible things” (as he said earlier in the debate)?
4. Dawkins argues that since the Bible has not changed, it provides unreliable criteria for judging what is right or wrong for our generation and society. Is this true for most of the moral issues of our contemporary world? What are some moral issues for which the Bible, as is, provides either no guidance or unreliable criteria?
5. What criteria are used in deciding present moral issues in business, medicine, or law? What is the basis of these criteria?

# THE SIXTH THESIS (1:28:00 - 1:36:39)

## CHRISTIAN CLAIMS ABOUT THE PERSON OF JESUS ARE NOT TRUE; HIS ALLEGED MIRACLES VIOLATE THE LAWS OF NATURE

### INTRODUCTION

Dawkins did not offer any comments on this thesis but chose instead to discuss thesis five during his allotted minutes. Lennox did address the thesis. He focuses primarily on the historical reliability of the New Testament writings and on the meaning of the golden rule: love your neighbor as yourself. In his book Dawkins asserts that neither Leviticus (which is where the golden rule originates) nor Jesus understood the term “neighbor” to refer to non-Jews. Dawkins sees this as significant because it would show that the central criterion of Christ’s ethical teachings was out of the main stream of our modern thinking about equal rights for all. Jesus believed in equal rights for all *Jews*, he claims.

### QUESTIONS

1. What are the indications from Leviticus 19 and Luke 10 that “neighbor” was intended to include non-Jews?
2. What reasons come to your mind for why Dawkins might have chosen addresses these themes in his book?
3. Do you think Dawkins is effective at dissuading believers and/or non-believers from accepting the integrity of the Bible? Why or why not?

# CLOSING STATEMENTS (1:36:39 - 1:43:34)

## QUESTIONS:

1. Lennox argues that the *appearance* of design in the world and the longing for ultimate justice either correspond to facts (the world was truly designed and there will truly be an ultimate justice) or are a “mockery”. Does this strengthen the case for God’s existence? Why or why not?
2. Dawkins concedes that an argument from science for a Designer God, a deist God, as Lennox has made it is “all grand and wonderful”. But he vehemently objects to Lennox’s assertion that the resurrection of Jesus is “the central evidence upon which I base my faith, not only that atheism is a delusion, but that justice is real.” What causes him to respond so viscerally to this statement?
3. Aside from the arguments themselves, what personal characteristics of these men do you think affect whether you perceive one or the other to be more persuasive?

# RECOMMENDED READING

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The following recommendations for further reading are deliberately few. They are intended for those who want to acquaint themselves with the details of the recent debates about God's existence. A debate of this kind ventures into science, history, philosophy, and biblical scholarship. For that reason, it is helpful to get the perspectives of authorities in different areas and so the recommendations are organized according to this criterion. Books marked with an asterisk (\*) are written by Christian authors.

## BOOKS BY SCIENTISTS:

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Berlinski, David (2009). *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*. New York: Basic Books.

\*Lennox, John (2009). *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* London: Lion UK.

Dawkins, Richard (2006). *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

## BOOKS BY HISTORIANS:

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Hitchens, Christopher (2007). *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve.

\*Hart, David Bentley (2009). *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. New Haven: Yale UP.

## BOOKS BY PHILOSOPHERS:

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Singer, Peter (1993). *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Dennett, Daniel (2006). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Peguin.

\*Craig, William Lane (1984, 2008). *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Wheaton: Crossway Books.

\*Plantinga, Alvin (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford UP.

## BOOKS BY BIBLICAL SCHOLARS:

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Ehrman, Bart (2009). *Jesus Interrupted*. New York: Harper Collins.

\*Roberts, Mark (2007). *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton: Crossway Books.

\*Blomberg, Craig (1987). *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press.



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