

A Devil's Chaplain and Other Selected Essays by Richard Dawkins, edited by Latha Menon. Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2003.

As the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, Richard Dawkins has played a significant role in our national life in the explanation and popularising of science and scientific subjects. As a proud Darwinian, Dawkins has also been for many years the scourge of religion in general and the pseudo-doctrine of creationism in particular.

Reading Dawkins' work when one comes from a faith perspective is always a challenge, because he is remorseless in the way he approaches religious issues, as well as caustic in his comments on specific religions. Sometimes his atheism shows an almost fundamentalist intolerance which can mirror the religious fundamentalism that he so justifiably criticises.

It might therefore be with some caution that certain readers would approach A Devil's Chaplain, the latest publication of Dawkins' work, this time a series of essays. In some of these Dawkins does indeed demonstrate the robustness for which he is (in) famous, but there is also another side to the man that can be glimpsed and which is very attractive.

The collection is divided into seven sections, each with a detailed introduction by Dawkins himself, explaining the origin and context of the essays and other pieces of writing.

Dawkins is at his most moving when he writes of his reaction to the untimely death of the late Douglas Adams, author of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, and in the address that he gave at Adams' Memorial service, as well as in the letter to his (then) ten year old daughter when he seeks to set her on the straight and narrow about the world she lives in, and about religion. As a fan of Stephen Jay Gould, with whom Dawkins had his scientific disagreements but for whom he retained a definite respect, the section devoted to Gould's work is also a bonus, as is the text they had hoped to co-sign ridiculing the exponents of creationism.

Anyone with an open mind about science, and religion, should read this collection.

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