

Flew Speaks Out: Professor Antony Flew reviews *The God Delusion*

Antony Flew

- Antony Flew was a lecturer at the Universities of Oxford and Aberdeen, before posts as Professor of Philosophy at the Universities of Keele and of Reading. He has now retired. He is renowned for his 1950 essay "Theology and Falsification" and his atheistic work, before announcing in 2004 his belief in a Creator God. [View all resources by Antony Flew](#)
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On 1st November 2007, Professor Antony Flew's new book *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed his Mind* was published by HarperOne. Professor Flew has been called 'the world's most influential philosophical atheist', as well as 'one of the most renowned atheists of the 20th Century' (see Peter S. Williams' bethinking.org article "[A change of mind for Antony Flew](#)"). In his book, Professor Flew recounts how he has come to believe in a Creator God as a result of the scientific evidence and philosophical argument.

Not surprisingly, his book caused quite a stir – as can be seen from the miscellaneous customer reviews on [Amazon.co.uk](#). Some of those comments (and those elsewhere) implied that Flew was used by his co-author, Roy Varghese, and did not in fact know what was in the book. This is a serious charge to which Professor Flew responded and which he reiterated in a recent letter (dated 4th June 2008) to a friend of UCCF who has shown it to us. Professor Flew writes:

I have rebutted these criticisms in the following statement: "My name is on the book and it represents exactly my opinions. I would not have a book issued in my name that I do not 100 per cent agree with. I needed someone to do the actual writing because I'm 84 and that was Roy Varghese's role. The idea that someone manipulated me because I'm old is exactly wrong. I may be old but it is hard to manipulate me. That is my book and it represents my thinking."

Professor Flew has recently written his forthright views on Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. His article, reproduced below, shows Professor Flew's key reasons for his belief in a Divine Intelligence. He also makes it clear in *There is a God* (page 213) that it is possible for an omnipotent being to choose to reveal himself to human beings, or to act in the world in other ways. Professor Flew's article is offered here as testimony to the developing thinking of someone who is prepared to consider the evidence and follow its implications wherever it leads.

Professor Antony Flew writes:

The God Delusion by the atheist writer Richard Dawkins, is remarkable in the first place for having achieved some sort of record by selling over a million copies. But what is much more

remarkable than that economic achievement is that the contents – or rather lack of contents – of this book show Dawkins himself to have become what he and his fellow secularists typically believe to be an impossibility: namely, a secularist bigot. (Helpfully, my copy of The Oxford Dictionary defines a bigot as ‘an obstinate or intolerant adherent of a point of view’).

The fault of Dawkins as an academic (which he still was during the period in which he composed this book although he has since announced his intention to retire) was his scandalous and apparently deliberate refusal to present the doctrine which he appears to think he has refuted in its strongest form. Thus we find in his index five references to Einstein. They are to the mask of Einstein and Einstein on morality; on a personal God; on the purpose of life (the human situation and on how man is here for the sake of other men and above all for those on whose well-being our own happiness depends); and finally on Einstein’s religious views. But (I find it hard to write with restraint about this obscurantist refusal on the part of Dawkins) he makes no mention of Einstein’s most relevant report: namely, that the integrated complexity of the world of physics has led him to believe that there must be a Divine Intelligence behind it. (I myself think it obvious that if this argument is applicable to the world of physics then it must be hugely more powerful if it is applied to the immeasurably more complicated world of biology.)

Of course many physicists with the highest of reputations do not agree with Einstein in this matter. But an academic attacking some ideological position which s/he believes to be mistaken must of course attack that position in its strongest form. This Dawkins does not do in the case of Einstein and his failure is the crucial index of his insincerity of academic purpose and therefore warrants me in charging him with having become, what he has probably believed to be an impossibility, a secularist bigot.

On page 82 of The God Delusion is a remarkable note. It reads ‘We might be seeing something similar today in the over-publicised tergiversation of the philosopher Antony Flew, who announced in his old age that he had been converted to belief in some sort of deity (triggering a frenzy of eager repetition all around the Internet).’

What is important about this passage is not what Dawkins is saying about Flew but what he is showing here about Dawkins. For if he had had any interest in the truth of the matter of which he was making so much he would surely have brought himself to write me a letter of enquiry. (When I received a torrent of enquiries after an account of my conversion to Deism had been published in the quarterly of the Royal Institute of Philosophy I managed – I believe – eventually to reply to every letter.)

This whole business makes all too clear that Dawkins is not interested in the truth as such but is primarily concerned to discredit an ideological opponent by any available means. That would itself constitute sufficient reason for suspecting that the whole enterprise of The God Delusion was not, as it at least pretended to be, an attempt to discover and spread knowledge of the existence or non-existence of God but rather an attempt – an extremely successful one – to spread the author’s own convictions in this area.

A less important point which needs to be made in this piece is that although the index of The God Delusion notes six references to Deism it provides no definition of the word ‘deism’. This enables Dawkins in his references to Deism to suggest that Deists are a miscellany of believers in this and that. The truth, which Dawkins ought to have learned before this book went to the printers, is that Deists believe in the existence of a God but not the God of any revelation. In fact the first notable public appearance of the notion of Deism was in the American Revolution. The young man who drafted the Declaration of Independence and who later became President Jefferson was a Deist, as were several of the other founding fathers of that abidingly important institution, the United States.

In that monster footnote to what I am inclined to describe as a monster book – *The God Delusion* – Dawkins reproaches me for what he calls my ignominious decision to accept, in 2006, the Phillip E. Johnson Award for Liberty and Truth. The awarding Institution is Biola, The Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Dawkins does not say outright that his objection to my decision is that Biola is a specifically Christian institution. He obviously assumes (but refrains from actually saying) that this is incompatible with producing first class academic work in every department – not a thesis which would be acceptable in either my own university or Oxford or in Harvard.

In my time at Oxford, in the years immediately succeeding the second world war, Gilbert Ryle (then Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy in the University of Oxford) published a hugely influential book *The Concept of Mind*. This book revealed by implication, but only by implication, that minds are not entities of a sort which could coherently be said to survive the death of those whose minds they were.

Ryle felt responsible for the smooth pursuit of philosophical teaching and the publication of the findings of philosophical research in the university and knew that, at that time, there would have been uproar if he had published his own conclusion that the very idea of a second life after death was self-contradictory and incoherent. He was content for me to do this at a later time and in another place. I told him that if I were ever invited to give one of the Gifford Lecture series my subject would be *The Logic of Mortality*. When I was, I did and these Lectures were first published by Blackwell (Oxford) in 1987. They are still in print from Prometheus Books (Amherst, NY).

Finally, as to the suggestion that I have been used by Biola University. If the way I was welcomed by the students and the members of faculty whom I met on my short stay in Biola amounted to being used then I can only express my regret that at the age of 85 I cannot reasonably hope for another visit to this institution.

Note on Lord Gifford (Adam)

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography describes Lord Gifford as 'judge and benefactor'. He endowed lectureships at four Scottish universities 'for promoting, advancing and diffusing natural theology, in the widest sense of that term, in other words the knowledge of God' and 'of the foundation of ethics.' The first lectures were delivered in 1888.

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