

Rupert Shortt, *Outgrowing Dawkins: God for Grown-Ups*. SPCK, London, 2019. xiii + 104pp. 978-0-281-08410-4, £9.99, pbk.

This book is a direct response to Richard Dawkins' book, *Outgrowing God: a Beginner's Guide to Atheism* (Bantam, 2019) and continues Shortt's long-standing engagement with New Atheism in such works as *God is No Thing* (2016) and *Does Religion do more harm than Good* (2019). The substance of Shortt's defence of religion is not that it does not have its destructive and dark sides, or even that atheism and religious doubt may not be legitimate intellectual positions. Rather, like other contemporary apologists and defenders of religion, such as David Benchley Hart, Francis Spufford, Tina Beattie, Katherine Dell and Terry Eagleton, Shortt takes issue with charges that religious belief is illogical and intellectually specious, that religious commitment is deluded and infantile and religious institutions inherently barbaric and authoritarian.

In this respect *Outgrowing Dawkins* covers familiar debates, although Shortt focuses on three defences of religion on historical, theological and cultural grounds. The first addresses the misconception that science is inherently materialist and atheistic, pointing to the fact that historically those with a strong faith-commitment have often also been at the forefront of scientific enquiry. Shortt's second argument challenges the very model of theism at the heart of Dawkins' polemic, arguing that it is a parody of orthodox understandings of God.

Dawkins' God is capricious and tyrannical, but to conceive of God as like the rest of creation, whose existence can be proved or disproved empirically, is a major category error. Returning to themes originally developed in *God is No Thing*, Shortt rejects notions of God as a temporal, superhuman being, preferring the terminology of the divine as 'ground of existence' (p.5) who animates and suffuses all creation. Indeed, in terms of scientific causality, Shortt argues that Dawkins' understanding of evolutionary teleology, with its talk

of selfish genes and self-actualising memes, is far more reductionist than that of orthodox theism.

Third, echoing recent work by Tom Holland and Bentley Hart, Shortt emphasises the positive contribution of religion to civilisation. Historically, religion is neither purely good nor simply evil, but merely reflects human nature in all its variations. It is often the best way of giving form to humanity's desire to transcend material existence through 'narratives of quest and fulfilment' (p. 45) such as truth, beauty and moral purpose. It is the shape of these narratives and the communities that form around them that, in turn, nurture the social and cultural goods of virtue, compassion and charity.

This book manages to be both succinct and wide-ranging in its coverage of the essentials of what might be termed a genre of 'New Apologetics' to counter that of New Atheism. Shortt's treatment of many of his themes are necessarily brief, but one hopes that readers wishing to pursue them further will be encouraged to take up his suggestions for additional reading.

While this book is essentially a critical riposte to Dawkins, its real value may rest in its presentation of constructive routes for readers who wish to pursue alternative intellectual and theological avenues.

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