'If Religion is so dangerous, what shall we do about religionists? The Dawkins Debate'

I like a good intellectual scrap and looked forward to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. But I must admit that it disappointed me. I found it not, as I had expected, an intelligent and sophisticated invitation to atheism, but rather a bundle of prejudices and feeble arguments which often depend on anecdotal punch-lines for their conclusions. Yet it has been a best-seller and had wide media exposure. The book evidently had the same effect on John Cornwell, who gave a fascinating response to Dawkins' views to a packed chaplaincy at Warwick University last Monday evening.

Though the focus was on Dawkins, Cornwell himself is a fascinating figure and he began with a little autobiography to put his response to Dawkins into context. A cradle Catholic from the East End of London, he went to junior seminary and then, at eighteen, on to Oscott Seminary to prepare for the priesthood. But he left after completing the first part of his studies, going to study English Literature at Cambridge, moving from agnosticism to atheism and beginning a career in journalism which led him to the *Observer*'s foreign desk in the 1970s. This meant that he experienced a range of religious faith in some of the poorest parts of the world just at the time when fundamentalism began to develop as a significant trend in a number of different religions. Visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima, the hard-bitten foreign correspondent found that, although he did not share his hosts' fervent belief that the Virgin Mary was appearing to them, nonetheless something was happening that could not be explained by wholly rational processes. (His exploration at that time was written up in *Powers of Darkness, Powers of Light* which remains a fascinating examination of how ordinary people understand their own religious experiences.) Cornwell began an open, questioning and critical journey back to faith, partly documented in his memoir *Seminary Boy*. He now combines journalism with being Director of the Science and Human Dimension Project based at Jesus College, Cambridge. In 2007 he wrote *Darwin's Angel - an angelic riposte to The God Delusion* (Profile Books).

Cornwell's response to Dawkins came under three headings: faith, imagination, and Dawkins' own use of metaphor.

Faith as defined by Richard Dawkins is an all-or-nothing phenomenon, with no gradations or shadows within it. This enables Dawkins to claim that anyone who participates in religious rituals is susceptible to the delusion that he deplores. For him all faith is extreme, however much believers might pretend it is not: all Christians, for example, must be closet creationists and can have no truck with evolutionary theory. Cornwell simply questions the accuracy of the caricature that Dawkins is drawing here. In the late 1980s he went to interview the novelist Graham Greene in Antibes. Greene was known for his powerful novels of tortured faith. Cornwell, the journalist, wanted to know in what sense he was a Catholic and put him through a form of catechism for the interview. Again and again Greene said he didn't believe in the orthodox articles of faith. He was a doubter. But there was something that made him doubt his own doubt, a result of his own early years as newspaper reporter and his later work as a novelist. These two experiences had made him very sensitive to the difference between fiction and reportage. And in the story of the resurrection in John's gospel, he said, there is a little detail which he did not believe anyone would have made up: that Peter and John race each other to the tomb to see what has become of the body of Jesus. It seemed to be authentic reportage. That, said Greene, is what made him 'doubt my own doubt'. In other words, real, experienced faith is most often about the interplay between faith and doubt rather than about certainty, as Dawkins seems to believe.

Imagination is a phenomenon that Dawkins appears to have no place for. Truth must be literal and scientifically proved for it to have any validity, as far as he is concerned. But if this is so, what space is there for poetic truth, for the use of metaphor to describe those things that are beyond our capacity to grasp purely with the tools of science? Dawkins sharply criticises Christians, for example, who interpret parts of the bible in different ways, recognising some books, and even some passages within the same book, as metaphorical and not literal. But in doing this Dawkins surely underestimates the power of religious imagination. It is striking that Dawkins' own field of expertise is in biology; theoretical physicists tend to have a more optimistic view of the potential of imagination and metaphor in their search for the means to

describe the universe. In *Darwin's Angel* Cornwell draws attention to Stephen Hawking's recent shift away from the view that a theory of everything is possible and that therefore knowledge is finite. Revisiting Gödel's theorem has led to Hawking changing his mind and concluding that, after all, science does not have, and by definition cannot have, all the answers. This opens the door once more to other kinds of thinking, which rely on imagination: philosophy, literature and theology to name only three.

Cornwell's third point is perhaps the most serious, and is where he pushes Dawkins' thought to its logical conclusions. This is the heart of the matter and raises the question, 'If religion is so dangerous, what shall we do with religionists?' By religionists, he means practitioners of any faith. Dawkins routinely describes religious faith by the metaphor of a virus, connected with his Darwinist model of 'memes' transmitting ideas and values through cultures. Cornwell presses the alarm button at this point. For the logical extension of the idea of religion as a bacillus is that those who are infected should be quarantined and possibly removed altogether for the good of all. Dawkins does not, of course, advocate this and rightly objects that he has not said such a thing. But Cornwell, some of whose work has been on science in Nazi Germany, points out that the rhetoric is not far removed from the theories that led to the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews. If religion is the unmitigated evil, which Dawkins says it is, then what does he think should happen to those who participate in its rituals and beliefs? Dawkins has spent virtually his whole adult life in Oxford. Cornwell's experience has been far wider. Of the two the latter is perhaps best placed to know what effect the pronouncements of professors may have beyond the academy.

One important contemporary connection struck me as I listened on Monday evening. John Cornwell related a recent conversation with a newspaper editor, who said that since reading Dawkins he now knew that religion was not just a *bad* idea, but also a *dangerous* idea. The fruit of this view was pretty clearly displayed, I think, in the media reaction to Rowan Williams' speech on Sharia law. The Archbishop's point was that space has to be made within a system of secular law for those with religious beliefs that might conflict with it. The reaction assumed that this was not so much a bad idea as a dangerous one, hence the extreme reporting about it. In this sense Dawkins may have more influence than is at first apparent. Though Cornwell has done a pretty good job of pointing out the logical inconsistencies and misrepresentations of Dawkins' case, Dawkins has touched an exposed nerve in Western society, which centres on anxieties about religious fanaticism, and which have been growing since the 1970s and reached a peak with 9/11 and 7/7. The debate (if it can be called that) about faith schools taps into the same anxieties. On Dawkins' reasoning, headteachers of Church Primary Schools, for example, are virtually the same as the leaders of terrorist cells. Clearly this is not the case, but these are anxious times and Dawkins' writings speak to them. Hence it is all the more important to be aware of his work and its flaws. John Cornwell's critique is, in this respect, a great service to people of faith everywhere.

See http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/aug/30/religion.uk for an article by John Cornwell about Dawkins' work.