

4 December 2006 10:49

- [Home](#)
  - > [News](#)
    - > [People](#)
      - > [Profiles](#)

# Richard Dawkins: You Ask The Questions Special

**The scientist, author and campaigning atheist answers your questions, such as 'What would you say at the gates of heaven?'**

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**In the beginning was ...? ALAN BROADHURST, Nottingham**

Simplicity.

**What is there to distinguish your intolerance from that of a religious fanatic? TONY REYNOLDS, By e-mail**

It would be intolerant if I advocated the banning of religion, but of course I never have. I merely give robust expression to views about the cosmos and morality with which you happen to disagree. You interpret that as 'intolerance' because of the weirdly privileged status of religion, which expects to get a free ride and not have to defend itself. If I wrote a book called *The Socialist Delusion* or *The Monetarist Delusion*, you would never use a word like intolerance. But *The God Delusion* sounds automatically intolerant. Why? What's the difference?

I have a (you might say fanatical) desire for people to use their own minds and make their own choices, based upon publicly available evidence. Religious fanatics want people to switch off their own minds, ignore the evidence, and blindly follow a holy book based upon private 'revelation'. There is a huge difference.

**You fail to make any distinction between organised religion (which can be dangerous) and an individual's 'belief in God' (which harms no one). Why do you seem incapable of separating the two? GARY HOWE, By e-mail**

Of course I am capable of separating the two. But whether beliefs are dangerous or harmless is not the only interesting basis for separating them. There is also the little matter of whether they are true. Scientists care about such things.

**Terrible things have been done in the name of Christ, but all he ever taught was peace and love. What's wrong with that? CHRISTOPH ALEXANDER, London SW19**

Nothing is wrong with peace and love. It is all the more regrettable that so many of Christ's followers seem to disagree. I once wrote an article called "Atheists for Jesus", (see [www.RichardDawkins.net](http://www.RichardDawkins.net)) and was delighted to be presented with a T-shirt bearing the slogan.

**Do you consider parents forcing children to accept their religion a form of child abuse? JAMES MACDONALD, Bronte, New South Wales**

Yes. What would you think of parents who forced their children to accept their politics, or their taste in architecture? Have you ever heard anyone speak of a "Leninist child" or a "Postmodernist child"? Of course not. Why, then, do we all go along with "Christian child" and "Muslim child"? Such labelling of children with their parents' religion is child abuse.

**Do you get a real kick out of arguing with believers?** PAM KELLY, By e-mail

No.

**Does your wife ever say "Bless you" after you sneeze, just to annoy you?** DOUG MACKENZIE DODDS, Reading

Bless you, I'd have to be dreadfully literal-minded to be annoyed by that. What do you take me for, one of those people who sends Christmas cards to The Archers?

**Like you, I am an atheist but could there be a place for the metaphor provided by religion - and particularly mythology - in human life?** STEPHEN PALMER, Shrewsbury Sixth Form College

Metaphors are fine if they aid understanding, but sometimes they get in the way. It can be better to cut straight to the real thing and bypass the metaphor altogether.

**Einstein, Newton, Bacon, Kepler, Pascal, Boyle and Faraday all believed in God. Does it bother you that such eminent scientists might not have been "deluded"?** BEN TAYLOR, by e-mail

It was hard to be an atheist before The Origin of Species. Einstein is the only member of your list who was born into the post-Darwinian world, and it is no accident that he was also the only one who didn't believe in God. He declared: "It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. "

**Do you not worry that ultimately most of humanity simply can't cope with the idea of there being no God?** JAMES SPIERS, New York City

I hope you are wrong, because it seems a rather patronising insult to humanity. Anyway, I think there is a higher nobility - and greater solace - in coping with what is true, even if it is frightening or painful.

**Your campaign to expose the irrationality of religious belief seems to have given you a higher profile than your work in evolutionary biology. Would you rather be known as Richard Dawkins the scientist or Richard Dawkins the militant atheist?** CLIVE ROBERTS, Rhyl

Bertrand Russell called himself the Passionate Sceptic. It's aiming high, but I'll shoot for that.

**How should an atheist compassionately respond to someone who says that without a belief in a spiritual afterlife he would not have been able to endure the death of a much-loved child?** GORDON PETER DUFF, Sheffield

Compassionate doctors sometimes lie to patients about the severity of their condition, and it is not always wrong to do so. I prefer not to follow the precedent, however. Instead, I would point out how lucky we are to have lived at all, however briefly. I developed the thought in the opening words of Unweaving the Rainbow, (see [www.RichardDawkins.net](http://www.RichardDawkins.net)) which I hope will be read at my own funeral.

**What do you think happened to the body of Jesus, and how does that tally with the accounts of the resurrection?** GRANVILLE SYKES, By e-mail

Presumably what happened to Jesus was what happens to all of us when we die. We decompose. Accounts of Jesus's resurrection and ascension are about as well-documented as Jack and the Beanstalk.

**Our pub quiz team is named The Church of Richard Dawkins. At a recent Oxford quiz night, we were told to change our name in case it was deemed offensive to any churchgoers present. Have you any suggestions for a "less offensive" name?** RICHARD O SMITH, Oxford

And they call me intolerant! I am shocked that this happened in Oxford, of all places. I hope you win the tournament so resoundingly that you can dictate terms and call yourselves whatever you like. "Offensive" my foot.

**Are people who advocate intelligent design stupid, and do you think natural selection will operate to remove them from future generations?** ADAM KHAN, The Hague, Netherlands

The majority are ignorant, which is not the same thing as stupid. Natural selection will not remove ignorance from future

generations. Education may, and that is the hope to which we must cling.

**Mary Midgley, the philosopher, has taken you to task for using words such as "selfish" to describe the unconscious entity of the gene. Has she a point and is there still personal bitterness between the two of you?** DECLAN ELLIS, Cambridge

Oh yes, what a good point. And how about physicists talking about quarks as having "charm"? Isn't that terrible? Or doctors talking about an "aggressive" cancer? Or economists talking about the European monetary "snake"? I dealt with Mary Midgley in an article called "In Defence of Selfish Genes" in the same journal that published her unprovoked attack. For the text, see [www.royalinstitutephilosophy.org](http://www.royalinstitutephilosophy.org)

**Why have you not engaged in public debate with Alister McGrath, Mary Midgley, Michael Ruse, Keith Ward, or indeed anyone else who would present you with a serious challenge?** JAMES RADFORD, By e-mail

The producers of my Channel 4 documentary [Root of All Evil?] invited the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster and the Chief Rabbi to be interviewed by me. All declined, doubtless for good reasons. I don't enjoy the debate format, but I once had a public debate with the then Archbishop of York, and The Observer quoted the verdict of one disconsolate clergyman as he left the hall: "That was easy to sum up - Lions 10, Christians nil."

**Should men submit to their selfish genes, dump their wives and go for younger, blonder models?** CAROLYN SANCHEZ, Manchester

No. We gave up submitting to our selfish genes long ago, when we took up clothes, contraceptives, sonnets, cubism, astronomy, snooker, bungee-jumping and other things that our selfish genes would at best consider a waste of time. Scientific facts about the world do not translate into moral "shoulds".

**I have huge respect for you as an evolutionary biologist and free thinker but my admiration was greatly enhanced when I discovered you were married to the fabulous Lalla Ward. Forgive me, but has she still got that fetching sailor suit she wore on Doctor Who?** STEVE DODDING, Peterborough

Alas, no, it has gone to the great wardrobe mistress in the sky. But Lalla doesn't need a costume to fetch me.

**You have been an incredible force in popularising Darwinism. What original research would you like to be remembered for?** IRENE TAL, Cambridge

The Extended Phenotype, although you could say it's philosophical rather than scientific research.

**How did a science geek like you get such an attractive wife?** GARY HAMMOND, London

I suggest you go to [salon.com](http://salon.com), type "The Sexiest Man Living" in the search box and eat your words. But seriously (of course you knew there had to be a "but seriously"), science has an image problem with young people, and phrases like "science geek" don't help. Isn't it a bit like "kraut" or "dago"?

**You backed an anti-war candidate in the last election. Would you be happier if Saddam Hussein were still in power?** ANTHONY SHEEN, Macclesfield

Oh, how silly of me. You see, I had this foolish memory that Saddam Hussein was given an ultimatum on the eve of war that if he surrendered his weapons of mass destruction war would be averted. Silly me, I thought that meant the purpose of the war was to remove his WMD. Oh, so now I understand. All along, the purpose of the war was to remove Saddam Hussein. Oh, I see (copyright: J Cleese). Now the Taliban are coming back to power, because Bush and Blair took their eye off Afghanistan and charged into Iraq instead. You know, horrible as Saddam Hussein was, I believe I'd rather have him than the Taliban. Last week in Afghanistan, a teacher was disembowelled and torn to pieces by four motorbikes pulling in opposite directions, for the religious crime of teaching girls algebra. I don't think even Saddam Hussein executed people for teaching girls algebra.

**Is global warming a threat to the human species?** ROBIN THOMPSON, Oxford

Yes. You could say that the human species is a threat to the human species. I recommend Al Gore's film on global warming. See it and weep. Not just for the human species. Weep for what we could have had in 2000, but for the vote-rigging in Jeb Bush's Florida.

**I salute your courage in questioning Christianity, but what do you do on Christmas Day when everyone is celebrating? I presume you do not send or receive cards or give/receive presents.** BRENDA EVANS, Dorset

Why do you presume that? Do you seriously imagine that all - or even a majority of - the people who send cards and presents are

followers of Jesus? Why, even the music we have to endure in shops is usually "White Christmas", "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer", and the nauseating "Jingle Bells". What's religious about that?

**If you died and arrived at the gates of Heaven, what would you say to God to justify your lifelong atheism?** VALERIE JACKSON, Richmond

I'd quote Bertrand Russell: "Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence." But why is God assumed to care so much about whether you believe in him? Maybe he wants you to be generous, kind, loving, and honest - and never mind what you believe.

**You ask the questions**

Send your questions for Alex Salmond, SNP leader and Archbishop John Sentamu to: [myquestion@independent.co.uk](mailto:myquestion@independent.co.uk)

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