

News from the Field

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urged to “prohibit all forms of human cloning.”

Brain Damaged Firefighter Makes Recovery

Ten years after a firefighter was left brain-damaged and mostly mute during a 1995 roof collapse, he unexpectedly began to speak, making requests to see his wife.

Donald Herbert was fighting a house fire December 29, 1995, when the roof collapsed, burying him under debris. After going without air for several minutes, Herbert was comatose for 2 1/2 months and has undergone therapy ever since.

Dr. Rose Sherr of New York University Medical Center said when patients recover from brain injuries, they usually do so within two or three years.

“It’s almost unheard of after 10 years,” she said, “but sometimes things do happen and people suddenly improve and we don’t understand why.”

Feds Tested AIDS Drugs on Foster Kids

To gain access to hundreds of HIV-infected foster children, federally funded researchers promised to provide an independent advocate to safeguard the kids’ well-being as they tested potent AIDS drugs. Most of the time, that special protection never materialized.

Funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the research included 7 states—Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Colorado and Texas—and involved more than 48 different studies. It was most widespread in the 1990s as foster care agencies sought treatments for their HIV-infected children that weren’t yet available.

The practice ensured that foster children received care at government expense, with the hope of increasing their life expectancy. But it also exposed a vulnerable population to the risks of medical research and drugs that were known to have serious side effects in adults and for which the safety for children was unknown. ■



A Review of the *Dawkin’s God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*

(by Alister McGrath; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, 202 pages)

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In *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, Richard Holloway declared that he felt some sympathy for “the lumberingly awkward religious communities” because their “commanders . . . have to maneuver their ancient barnacle-encrusted galleons through these modern torrents” of bioethical debates (2005;10(suppl):137-9). The role of religious belief in bioethics is increasingly under attack. Leading that assault in Britain and Ireland is Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. The view of science that he so persuasively offers society, however, is that evolutionary biology and logical reasoning make religion not only unbelievable, but unethical—a parasitic “virus of the mind.” A review of his recent collection of essays, *A Devil’s Chaplain* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), noted that Dawkins “has swung from writing about science for a popular audience to waging an all-out attack on Christianity” (Michael Ruse, *American Scientist* 2003;91:554-6).

Alister McGrath has provided the first book-length refutation of Dawkins’ claims in *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. McGrath is a molecular biophysicist and theologian and is currently also at Oxford University as Professor of Historical Theology. His book does not seek to demonstrate how Dawkins’ claims differ from Christianity. Rather, McGrath points out how Dawkins’ arguments fall far short of the very logical and evidence-based reasoning that Dawkins himself espouses.

McGrath begins with a clear and concise overview of evolutionary biology and the neo-Darwinian synthesis. He then presents Dawkins’ view that the current state of scientific knowledge should lead a rational person to conclude that there is no God. McGrath points out that Dawkins fails to declare or defend several crucial assumptions. McGrath clearly demonstrates problems with these, and instead defends other conclusions, including:

- the scientific method cannot conclusively prove that God does or does not exist;
- the theory of evolution does not necessarily entail any particular atheistic, agnostic, or Christian understanding of the world;
- Dawkins’ refutation of William Paley’s watchmaker analogy does not equate to a refutation of God’s existence;
- Dawkins’ proposal that ‘memes’ explain the evolutionary development of human culture is more illogical and unscientific than a clearly articulated defense of Christianity.

McGrath demonstrates how Dawkins’ rejection of faith is a classic straw man argument. Dawkins’ definition that faith “means blind trust, in the absence of evidence” is not a Christian position, nor would many thoughtful people of any religion hold to it. In contrast, accepting Dawkins’ definition would require blind trust since he offers no evidence to support it! Rather, it is based upon, what McGrath calls, “an unstated and largely unexamined cluster of hidden non-scientific values and beliefs” (p. 92). McGrath then demonstrates how Dawkins frequently violates the very tenets of evidence-based reasoning that Dawkins himself claims to uphold and use to dismiss all religious belief.

Although McGrath does not address bioethics itself, his approach to evaluating Dawkins’ arguments provides a helpful and useful model. He shows by example how the principles of logical reasoning and critical thinking can be usefully applied to controversial topics—and claims like those of Holloway quoted above. Dawkins himself has written some material addressing bioethical issues. His arguments arise out of the same anti-religious, science-has-all-the-answers polemic that McGrath so clearly refutes. As such, examining McGrath’s arguments will help anyone interested in furthering dialogue between science and religion, in particular when the two fields collide as they sometimes do in areas of biotechnology and bioethics. ■