

Editorial

The Problem of Theological Illiteracy

Christians who write about the views of non-Christians usually take the trouble to research the non-Christian viewpoint thoroughly before committing their thoughts to paper. This approach has the great advantage that it encourages a genuine dialogue between opposing views and prevents the time-wasting tilting at windmills that can otherwise ensue. Unfortunately the compliment is frequently not returned in the writings of non-Christians, and this seems to be particularly the case in books about science and religion. Richard Dawkins, for example, wrote *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) as a critique of the natural theology of William Paley as if there had been no Christian thinking on the matter since the early nineteenth century, and conveniently ignored the fact that extensive theological reassessment of Paley's views was already in progress well before the appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. More recently the philosopher Daniel Dennett has perpetuated this tradition of theological illiteracy in his extended commentary on Dawkins, entitled *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995), in which John Locke's views on the 'primacy of mind' substitutes for Paley's natural theology as the windmill against which to tilt. Locke's identification of God with Mind, writes Dennett, represents a modified version of the Aristotelian concept of God as the Unmoved Mover. It is unlikely that any contemporary theologian would wish to cast the Christian concept of God in such terms. Nevertheless, Dennett subsumes all theistic views as if they were versions of this Lockean windmill, with the result that his comments on religion never really engage with Christian theism, although he appears to write under the impression that they do so.

What can be done about the problem of theological illiteracy? To be fair to non-Christian writers, a steady stream of apologetic books, particularly from creationist sources, continues to give them the impression that Christians are deists rather than theists. As long as this stream continues it is likely that Dawkins, Dennett, Atkins and others will continue their tilts at deistic windmills, thereby perhaps doing Christianity a service by drawing attention to the unbiblical nature of deistic thinking, but at the same time further confusing the general reader concerning the relationship between science and religion. The Christian duty therefore seems clear: to restate and explain the biblical doctrine of creation clearly at every opportunity, the article by Howard Van Till in this issue providing a good example of how the job should be done. All scientists who are Christians have a responsibility to engage in this explanatory enterprise, which needs to be pursued in schools, local churches and in the media, as well as within the scientific community. Non-Christian writers should improve their theological literacy if they wish their views to be taken seriously by Christians, but equally Christians should provide them with less excuse for theological illiteracy.