


# Richard Dawkins, Philip Kennedy and the Augustinian paradigm of Christianity

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Both Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* and Philip Kennedy's book *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions for Old Beliefs* were published in 2006. This article aims to compare the two books and to argue that Kennedy does not oppose Dawkins's views but, in fact, debates along similar lines. Kennedy is adamant that the Augustinian paradigm of Christianity no longer makes sense, because it is based on an outdated cosmology and anthropology. He firmly maintains that Christianity requires a new paradigm, which is informed by our current knowledge and worldview. Thomas Kuhn's ideas of paradigm and paradigm changes in the history of natural sciences are utilised in comparing the books, seeing that Dawkins accepts and works within the Darwinian paradigm of evolutionary biology, and Kennedy argues that Christians and Christian theologians adhere to the Augustinian paradigm of Fall-Redemption-Judgement. It is argued that Dawkins should have referred to the paradigm change in the study of the Bible, which occurred towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, and the plea of theologians, like Kennedy, for a paradigm change in theology. The article concludes that only a paradigm change in Christianity, which is in line with the modern worldview, will enable Christians to keep the tradition alive.

## Introduction

Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* and Philip Kennedy's book *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions for Old Beliefs* appeared in the same year.<sup>1</sup> Many Christians took note of Dawkins' book but apparently only few read Kennedy's.<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, both books should be recommended for Christians who would like to understand the current predicament of Christianity. However, it is only Kennedy's book that may convince Christians that Christianity needs a paradigm change if it wishes to survive the 21st century. Kennedy does not focus solely on why Christian beliefs cannot be harmonised with the modern worldview, or why science and religion are at loggerheads, but he also proposes changes that could contribute to the survival of the Christian tradition. Dawkins, on the other hand, is convinced that religion is detrimental to society. Although he distinguishes between fundamentalist and liberal traditions in Christianity, he considers that both traditions create problems if science is to flourish.

## Dawkins' and Kennedy's books

Dawkins' book comprises 10 chapters. In the first five, he focuses on arguments formulated to support the idea that a transcendent and personal God exists – an idea that he vehemently opposes (Dawkins 2006:9–207). In chapters six and seven, he discusses the relationship between religion and morality (Dawkins 2006:209–278). In chapters eight and nine, all the evils and wrongs that have been carried out in the name of the Christian God are scrutinised (Dawkins 2006:279–344). In the final chapter, he argues that we have only one life and that we should make the most of it. We ourselves create the world in which we live and give meaning to that life (Dawkins 2006:345–374).

Throughout his book, he discusses and criticises the theistic understanding of God, which O'Collins and Farrugia (1991:238) define as: '[t]he belief in a transcendent, personal God who creates, conserves and intervenes (e.g. through miracles) in our world'. It is important to take note of Dawkins's definition of theism, which differs from the above: 'There exists a superhuman,

1. Dawkins is a retired professor. He was professor for Public Understanding of Science (1995–2008) at the University of Oxford. Kennedy is currently senior research fellow at Mansfield College, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford.

2. Kathleen Jones (2007) is more conservative and adheres to the traditional Christian doctrines when critiquing Richard Dawkins's views concerning the debate between scientists and theologians. She evidently did not read Kennedy's book, as she makes no reference to it or to his conviction that the Augustinian paradigm of Christianity is outdated.

**Note:** The collection entitled 'Eben Scheffler Festschrift', sub-edited by Jurie H. le Roux (University of Pretoria) and Christo Lombaard (University of South Africa).

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supernatural *intelligence* who deliberately *designed* and *created* the universe and everything in it, including us' (Dawkins 2006:31).<sup>3</sup> This definition clearly demonstrates that the main aim of his book is to challenge and criticise the views held by Christian creationists.

Kennedy's book has a different aim. He introduces readers to the history of theological reflection in the Western world and covers the development of Christianity from the early centuries until the 21st century. However, this is much more than a mere history of theological reflection. Kennedy introduces readers to the scientific revolutions that impacted on Christian beliefs, and identifies the predicaments currently facing Christians. His book is divided into four sections. The first section introduces readers to the traditional beliefs, doctrines and creeds of Christianity (Kennedy 2006:3–38). The second section focuses on 'the revolutions of modernity' that have destabilised the Augustinian paradigm of Christianity (Kennedy 2006:39–109). The third section reflects on how these revolutions have affected the study of the Bible, the beliefs about Jesus and Christian theologians' endeavours to counter the effects of the revolutions (Kennedy 2006:111–178). The fourth section concerns modern-day issues such as poverty, feminism, the modern worldview and encounters of Christians with people of other faiths (Kennedy 2006:179–251). The book concludes with a discussion of the ecological crisis and its impact on Christian beliefs and theology (Kennedy 2006:252–260).

This article aims to compare the two books, and to argue that Kennedy does not oppose Dawkins's views but, in fact, argues along similar lines. Kennedy is adamant that the Augustinian paradigm of Christianity no longer makes sense, because it is based on an outdated *cosmology* and *anthropology* (Kennedy 2006:254).<sup>4</sup> He firmly maintains that Christianity requires a new paradigm, which is informed by current knowledge and worldviews. Kennedy (2006) writes as follows:

People can now know (...) that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible; that the story of Adam and Eve ought not to be read as literally descriptive; that the apostles who knew Jesus did not write the Gospels; that Jesus did not commission a papal court; that Jesus did not formulate the doctrine of the Trinity; that the world is not 6000 years old; and that men are not humanly better than women. To repeat: human beings today are party to the information that they inhabit a planet in a galaxy of 100 billion stars within an expanding universe of 100 billion galaxies. They are aware that animal species can change into other species and that human beings, genetically speaking, have cabbages for cousins. (p. 254)

In the process of comprehending his arguments, one could consider Thomas Kuhn's ideas of paradigm and paradigm

3. Italics were added to the original statement.

4. Kennedy describes the Augustinian paradigm as: the three-act Augustinian drama of the Fall of Adam and Eve; Reconciliation between God and humanity achieved through Christ's divinely willed death on a Cross; and God's apocalyptic Judgement of humanity at the culmination of human history (2006:252, cf. also ix, 255).

changes in the history of natural sciences. This would assist in the understanding of Dawkins's book as well, seeing that he accepts and works within the Darwinian paradigm of evolutionary biology.<sup>5</sup>

## Paradigms and paradigm changes

More than 50 years ago, Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996) argued that the natural sciences do not progress systematically, but rather develop in 'leaps and bounds' (Kuhn 1970). Or, better still, there are stable periods when 'normal science' is in progress, to be followed by periods of instability, when scientists discover anomalies that do not harmonise with an existing theory. Scientists are suddenly confronted with baffling information and new puzzles, which they cannot solve by relying on existing theory. However, some researcher will invariably offer a solution to the problems. A proposal for a different hypothesis is offered, which may assist the scientific community. If the new hypothesis goes some way towards helping researchers solve at least some of the problems, it may be accepted as a new theory.

In illustration, Kuhn (1970:68–69) refers to the change from a *geocentric* to a *heliocentric* understanding of the solar system. For many centuries, astronomers worked with a *geocentric* theory of the solar system, or as Kuhn calls it, 'the Ptolemaic paradigm' of astronomy (Kuhn 1970:69). Astronomers were convinced that the earth was the centre of the universe and that the sun, moon and stars orbited around the earth. They even quoted the Bible to convince people that this was a fact, referring for instance to Joshua praying that the sun and moon would refrain from orbiting the earth, so that the day could be extended, and the Israelites could win their battle (Jos 10:12).<sup>6</sup>

In the late 16th century, the Polish mathematician and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) challenged this theory in his posthumously published book *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Orbs* (1590). The Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), who was born two decades after Copernicus's death, supported his convictions and declared that the earth orbited the sun and that he could prove it. A new astronomical paradigm (the *heliocentric* paradigm) thus came into play in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (Scholder 1990:46–64). However, the Catholic Church opposed this conviction and condemned Galilei for heresy. The council responsible for his condemnation quoted Ecclesiastes 1:4b from the Vulgate '*... terra autem in aeternum stat*' ('... but the earth remains as it is forever') to prove that the earth does not orbit the sun but remains in an unchanging position (Spangenberg 1993:121–122).

Another example of a paradigm change is in the work of William Harvey (1578–1657), and his conviction that blood

5. His books *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) may serve as evidence that he works within the Darwinian paradigm of biology.

6. It is not long ago that most Christians believed this to be a historical account of real events.

circulates through the body.<sup>7</sup> He challenged the existing paradigm of the ancient Greek doctor Galen of Pergamum (129–210), who was convinced that the liver was the main source of blood and that it acted like a fountain. Galen believed that the liver continually created blood, which disappeared into the organs and other body parts. Doctors worked with this paradigm for more than a millennium! Harvey doubted this theory and calculated the amount of blood that the liver had to create for the heart to pump through the body in a minute and ‘... reluctantly concluded that Galen must be wrong and that the body could not possibly be making so much blood and destroying it in such a short time scale’ (Mosley & Lynch 2010:195). It took years for doctors to accept the new paradigm, which one may describe as ‘a new way of seeing the body, not as a balance of vital forces but as a complex mechanical machine’ (Mosley & Lynch 2010:196).<sup>8</sup>

## Dawkins and the paradigm of evolutionary biology

The theory of ‘evolution by natural selection’, which Charles Darwin (1809–1882) formulated in the late 19th century, may also be described as a paradigm change.<sup>9</sup> At that stage, most biologists were convinced that the different plant and animal species were fixed and that there existed a hierarchy in the natural world, which suggested that some species were more important than others. These ideas were rooted partially in the biblical creation stories (Gn 1–3). According to Darwin, species were not fixed, but could change over time on account of natural selection (Darwin 1952). In a stroke of genius, he merged *history* with *biology*. He could therefore argue a case for change with the passing of time; nothing in the world remains the same. He also took leave of the idea of a *hierarchy* in the natural world and the belief that humans were the pinnacle of creation.

From the beginning, there were heated debates about the consequences of this theory for the Christian faith. Such debates continue today. It could be said that Dawkins introduced a new perspective to this older insight of Darwin’s, namely, the argument that religions are detrimental to the existence of humanity: religions delude people and often create havoc in society. Dawkins maintains that human beings do not need religion but should rather follow Darwin’s lead who later in his life became an agnostic (Leaves 2011:25, 58–65).

Although one may find it possible to agree with some of Dawkins’s arguments, it is evident that he ought to have

7. Kuhn does not refer to this paradigm change in his book. However, this episode has all the characteristics of a paradigm change: (1) researchers experiencing problems that cannot be solved within the old paradigm; (2) the introduction of a new paradigm to solve the problems; (3) a period during which both paradigms exist, until the new one convinces researchers that it is the better of the two; (4) a new period of research commences when researchers accept the new paradigm and conduct their research accordingly.

8. A paradigm change can also be described as the ability to look at the same phenomena while seeing a different picture.

9. Kuhn (1970) does not refer to Charles Darwin and the paradigm change that he brought about in the study of biology.

paid more attention to recent developments in the fields of Biblical Studies and Theology.<sup>10</sup> Critical scholars in these fields are not oblivious of the challenges that the modern worldview and evolutionary biology present for theology and the Christian faith. Certain theologians argue the case for a paradigm change in theology and the church. Kennedy (2006) is an excellent representative of these theologians.<sup>11</sup> Not only is he well informed about the Copernican and Darwinian paradigm changes, but he is also aware of the paradigm change in the study of the Bible, which occurred towards the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Kennedy 2006:113–135).

## Paradigm changes and the study of the Bible

Thomas Kuhn’s ideas on paradigms and paradigm changes have been applied to almost all fields of study, including those of Biblical Studies and Theology (cf. Küng 1984, 1995; Saebø 1995). Biblical scholars (especially Protestant) became convinced that the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century could be labelled a paradigm change. Some scholars describe this change as follows: ‘The Reformers dethroned the pope and enthroned the Bible’ (Bainton 1963:1). However, this is not an appropriate description or representation of the Reformation. The Catholic Church and its theologians were also convinced of the authority of the Bible, and they used it extensively in their theological reasoning, preaching and publications. The issue on which the two groups differed was: Who may be regarded as *legitimate interpreters* of the Bible? The Protestant Reformers regarded *ordinary believers* as legitimate interpreters, while Catholic theologians held the view that *only the Church* (as represented by the pope and the church councils) had the authority to interpret it. This is one of the reasons why the Reformers commenced with Bible translations. They were convinced that believers should be empowered to read the Bible in their mother tongues, enabling them to understand what Christianity entailed and to challenge the authorities when they misinterpreted the Bible.

In a sense, one could say that the Reformers democratised the reading of the Bible, but this created another set of problems. Protestant churches proliferated because different readers created different meanings, and everyone was convinced that their reading was the most accurate. However, the dominant conviction about the Bible remained intact – the general belief was that the Bible was the *Word of God* and that it could be interpreted according to common sense. One may call this the dominant paradigm concerning the Bible, and today’s conservative Protestant Christians still cherish this paradigm and therefore call themselves ‘biblical Christians’.

The paradigm was, however, challenged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – or better, new knowledge destabilised

10. Although Jones (2007) quite correctly criticises Dawkins for not paying attention to research by critical biblical scholars, she naively accepts that the doctrines of Christianity are above reproach, because they are based on good interpretations of the Bible.

11. The following theologians may also be added: *inter alios*, Marcus Borg, Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, John Spong.

the existing paradigm. Protestant biblical scholars realised that the biblical books could not have been written or 'breathed' by God. They contained too many contradictions, discrepancies, anachronisms, and historical and scientific inaccuracies. These scholars thus realised that ordinary humans must have written the books. The biblical authors had a naïve understanding of the cosmos and of themselves as human beings. The Copernican and Darwinian paradigms inevitably undermined what people believed at that stage (Spong 2009:123–130). A new paradigm was eventually introduced for the study of the Bible in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mark Noll describes the paradigm as follows: 'The Bible, however sublime, is a human book to be investigated with the standard assumptions that one brings to the discussion of all products of human culture'. New methods of studying the Bible were also invented and applied. These methods were labelled 'historical-critical methods', and Kennedy's summary of them deserves quotation. Kennedy (2006) wrote:

A historically critical method of interpreting the Bible (a) regards biblical texts as human products; (b) analyses the texts in the languages in which they were originally penned; (c) examines them within their historical contexts; (d) accepts the new scientific worldview that emerged in the seventeenth century; (e) refuses to be constrained by ecclesiastical authorities; and (f) is informed by the findings of modern philology, phonology, lexicology, and syntax. (p. 118)

Strangely, Dawkins (2006) refrained from interacting with the results of these methods of studying the Bible. Had he considered the new methods, he would not have written the following sentence:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (p. 31)

The Old Testament moreover does not give us a unified picture of Yahweh. The different authors had different understandings of this character.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, scholars working within narrative criticism adamantly maintain that 'Yahweh is fully entitled to chop and change according to plot and characterization' (Carroll 1991:42). The Bible books are, after all, literature, and the authors were entitled to create the words and deeds of their characters – even those of their God character:

He [*the author*] structures time, sketches space, brings characters on and takes them off again, misleads the reader at times, and enforces his point of view through thick and thin. (Fokkerman 1999:55)

The new paradigm eventually affected what Christians had previously believed about the Bible and the message it proclaimed. It was no longer regarded as a book with a single message, which could be summarised as Fall-Redemption-Judgement. Moreover, '[i]f the Bible is examined as a historical

<sup>12</sup>Take, as an example, the way in which Yahweh is presented in the following Old Testament books: *Judges*, *Jonah* and *Ecclesiastes*.

document like any other, (...) it soon becomes clear that there is no Trinitarian doctrine in the Bible' (Kennedy 2006:121). Biblical scholars therefore for instance also discern the possibility of distinguishing between Jesus as a historical person (*Jesus the Jewish prophet*) and Jesus Christ (*the Saviour God of the grand narrative of Christianity*) (Kennedy 2006:136–161).

It is thus not only the Copernican and Darwinian paradigms that have impacted on the traditional Christian doctrines but also the new paradigms in Biblical Studies. Dawkins could have rendered readers a great service by referring to this paradigm change in Biblical Studies and how this undermines the traditional doctrines of Christianity. However, as stated earlier, his aim was to interact with Christians who were *creationists*. Had he acquainted himself with the paradigm change, he could have argued that biblical scholars do not readily accept the idea that creationists practise 'biblical Christianity' (Carroll 1991:67). Such a kind of Christianity never existed in the centuries prior to the Protestant Reformation. Only after the Protestant Reformation did Bibles become available for lay Christians to possess and read. The origin of this kind of Christianity ('biblical Christianity') is to be found in the Protestant Reformation. Reformed Christians began to believe that the Christianity they believed in and practised was practised by both Jesus himself and by the authors of the Bible. All of them held the Bible in high esteem. They did not realise that the church doctrines had been based on the interpretations and philosophies of later theologians. This will be argued and illustrated in the next section.

## Christianity and its Augustinian paradigm

Biblical scholars working within the new paradigm are convinced that the Bible does not narrate the story of Fall-Redemption-Judgement. That story is based on Christian theologians' interpretations of the biblical books. Biblical scholars nowadays argue that Christianity evolved out of Second Temple Judaism and became a distinct religion only in the third and fourth centuries CE (cf. Spangenberg 2009:119–143). Prior to that, Christians were a motley group who cherished different convictions and beliefs about Jesus. As Kennedy (2006:141) points out: 'During the first three hundred years after his death, there was no such entity as a monolithic unified Christianity'. Moreover, Jesus (*the Jewish prophet*) never proclaimed that he was sent by God the Father to atone for the sins of Adam and Eve and their descendants. He was not concerned about saving the world from death and damnation (Kennedy 2006:133–134). Jesus' message concerned the kingdom of God (Mk 1:14–15), about which Anthony le Donne (2011) has the following to say:

Jesus was preaching about theocracy to an oppressed people. In Roman-occupied Galilee, this was a dangerous sermon. In a land where Caesar was considered divine, the 'good news' of God's kingdom meant 'bad news' for Caesar. (p. 69)

Jesus' message was extremely practical (Kennedy 2006:159). However, thanks to Paul and other later theologians, the focus shifted from his message concerning God's kingdom to what happened to him towards the end of his life. This Jewish prophet and wisdom teacher was eventually transformed into the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who came to rescue humanity from death and damnation. In his book *Rescuing Jesus from the Christians* (2002), Clayton Sullivan, a biblical scholar and Southern Baptist minister, argues convincingly that the church's gospel about Jesus differs radically from the gospel preached by Jesus himself. Jesus' death on the cross was not a *religious* event ('an act bringing about reconciliation between God and mankind') but a *political* event ('[t]he execution of a potential rebel against the Roman Empire') (Sullivan 2002:157). What has become clear is that Jesus' message had a political slant. He was more concerned with establishing 'an alternative society to the Roman imperial order' (Horsley 2003:134) than with reconciling humans with God the Father and saving them from death and eternal suffering. Kennedy (2006) concurs with the above-mentioned scholars' arguments when he writes:

If one wants to understand anything about an ancient Galilean Jew, it is clearly advisable to study the history, topography, ecology, economics and politics of Galilee, together with its unique customs. Jesus' life unfolded under the dark shadow of imperial might, which explains the way Mark's Gospel wonderfully depicts Jesus' antidote to the poison of political imperialism: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news' (Mark 1:15). (p. 161)

Augustine (354–530) and Anselm (1033–1109) were mainly responsible for the grand narrative of Christianity. Augustine will always be associated with the idea of 'original sin' (or the Fall) and Anselm will be associated with the idea of Atonement ('the reconciliation of humanity with God through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ'). The grand narrative of Christianity can be summarised as follows: God created a perfect world, which Adam and Eve destroyed by being disobedient in the Garden of Eden. Their act of eating from the forbidden tree enraged God and he had to punish them and the whole of creation with death. Death was not part of the original perfect creation. However, God sent his only Son to die on a Roman cross to atone for humanity's sins and to conquer Satan and death. The evidence that God accepted this sacrifice is Jesus Christ's resurrection from the grave and his ascension to heaven, from where he will come to judge all humanity who do not believe in God and his mercy. He will not only act as judge but will also create a new heaven and a new earth.

Figure 1 (containing five pentagons) summarises these traditional Christians' convictions. The narrative starts with creation and ends with (the new) creation – if read clockwise. The five pentagons form a *web of meaning*, as each of the pentagons is linked to the other four. If you tamper with one, that reverberates through the other four.

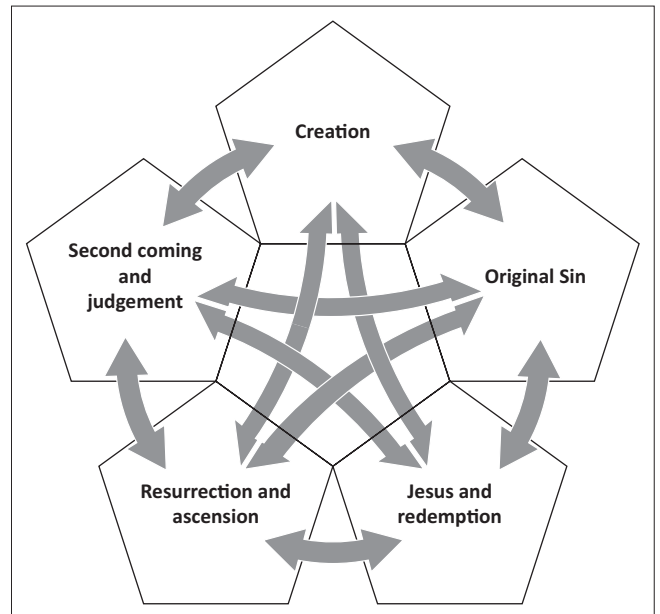


FIGURE 1: A diagram summarising the grand narrative of traditional Christianity.

Consider the doctrine of *original sin* as an example. The idea of original sin flows from the conviction that the creator God created a perfect world where death did not exist. Death entered the world only after the act of disobedience by Adam and Eve. If the doctrine of original sin (which is based on an erroneous interpretation of Gn 2–3) were abandoned, the birth and death of Jesus Christ would not make sense. There would have been no reason for the Second Person of the Trinity to be born from a virgin who was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Had Jesus been sired by a sinful earthly man, he would have inherited original sin and would not have been able to *act as saviour*. If there was no original sin, there would have been no reason for Jesus Christ to conquer death, be resurrected and ascend to heaven. If there had been no original sin, then the doctrine of a *second coming* and a *judgement day* would be meaningless. Why would Jesus Christ have to come back? Lastly, why should people believe in a *new creation* if death is accepted as natural and original sin had not brought death into creation?

Don Cupitt (2001) labels the narrative a 'myth' created by theologians, not rooted in history. He therefore writes:

Why? And how is it that, in Christianity in particular, the Church ended up with its heart outside history altogether and lost in the world of myth? The answer lies in the Grand Narrative of cosmic fall and redemption which Christianity developed and to which it remains firmly attached. (p. 95)

Dawkins should have paid attention to the publications by those biblical scholars and theologians who argue that the grand narrative (or the 'Augustinian paradigm', as Kennedy labels it) is based on the convictions and interpretations of early Christian theologians. Moreover, it is based on a defunct cosmology and anthropology (Kennedy 2006:254).

The *defunct cosmology* is also reflected in the three ecumenical creeds (the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Nicene Creed* and

the *Athanasian Creed*). These creeds reflect the three-tiered universe of the Bible. Jesus is regarded as the Son of God, who pre-existed in heaven as a member of the Trinity, was born on earth as a human being, died on the cross under the wrath of God the Father, descended into hell, rose from the dead and returned to heaven, from where he will one day return. According to the creeds, Jesus made a complete journey through the three-tiered universe! It is evident that the theologians who were responsible for the creeds lived in an environment and society that cherished this understanding of the cosmos. However, this can no longer be reconciled with the modern worldview. Kennedy (2006:27) quite correctly maintains that: 'Contemporary scientific cosmology renders a great deal of classical Christian doctrinal and liturgical language decidedly quaint'.

The *obsolete anthropology* is reflected in the doctrine of original sin and the belief in an immortal soul – which is not a biblical idea but comes from the ancient Greek philosophers. The doctrine of original sin and the belief in an immortal soul can be traced back to the Latin fathers of the church, and particularly to Augustine (354–430). According to Augustine, God created a perfect world, which collapsed because of the sin committed by the first human beings. This interpretation of Genesis 1–3 became a fixed doctrine in Western Christianity. It holds that every human being, by the very fact of birth, inherits a 'tainted' nature. Christians believe 'that, without Adam's sin, there would be no death' (Primavesi 2000:29). Augustine claimed that the virgin conception and birth of Jesus Christ guaranteed his sinless human nature. He was born without original sin, as Mary did not experience sexual desires, nor did she experience any pangs when she gave birth. He reasoned that Jesus was sent to earth by God the Father, to act as saviour and to end the reign of Satan and death. The proof of his victory is the resurrection on the third day after his death on the cross. Human beings who accept Jesus as their saviour will one day be resurrected, thereby escaping God's wrath. They will inherit a new heaven and a new earth, where they will spend eternity, while those who rejected Jesus as saviour will suffer God's wrath. They will eventually spend eternity in hell. Kennedy will surely concur with Günther Weber (1998) when the latter says:

The notion that God, the creator of the universe, became incarnate on earth, a cosmic speck of dust, in a human being, a chance product of evolution, could only have been formulated by people whose view of the world was imprisoned in a quite naïve geocentricity and anthropocentricity, and who through no fault of their own knew nothing of the real position of human beings in the cosmos. (p. 16)

It is my opinion that Dawkins could have rendered a great service to critical theology if he had noted those theologians who do not oppose him but argue along similar lines as he does. They are convinced (as he is) that there has been death since the origin of life on earth. They know (as he does) that it is part of the process of living. They know (as he does) that we live in an expanding universe and not in a three-tiered one. Moreover, they are convinced that '[h]umans have no

sure way of demonstrating that anything they ever say of God represents God in the least' (Kennedy 2006:255).

## The origin of religion

Questions that Kennedy does not address but Dawkins does are: Where do religions come from? Why are there religions in all societies? Dawkins finds an answer to these questions in evolutionary biology and sees 'religion as a *by-product* of something else' (Dawkins 2006:172). He cites the example of moths flying into a candle flame, originally navigating according to the light of the moon and stars. However, when humans started using artificial light such as candles, moths' navigational system (their natural compass) became confused. What at first contributed to their survival, now became detrimental to their existence. This is the same with religious ideas and behaviour. Children learn from their parents and older family members as to how to 'navigate' their lives. They benefit from the life experience of older people. 'Natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them' (Dawkins 2006:176). However, this can be detrimental when children do not learn to be critical of what they have been taught. They may fall into the trap of believing without questioning. Religious leaders usually dissuade believers from questioning beliefs inherited from parents. Those who do, soon find that they are ostracised. Most people cannot tolerate ostracising, because human beings are 'social animals'; from time immemorial, they have lived and survived in groups. People would rather remain subordinate than challenge the leaders of the group and be given their marching orders.

Dawkins also argues that religious ideas continually replicate themselves like genes. He therefore named them 'memes' (Dawkins 2006:191–192). These 'memes' are transferred from parents to their children. Some have such an emotional impact that believers find it difficult to live without that specific belief. Dawkins for instance refers to the 'immortality meme', which captivates some people so firmly that they find it impossible to think that death is the end of their existence (Dawkins 2006:196).

Although Kennedy does not discuss the origin of religion in his book, he raises numerous questions that may disturb ordinary Christians and most ministers. He convincingly argues that Christianity's Augustinian paradigm is outdated, and that Christians cannot continue to proclaim a message that is evidently linked to a world in which people do not live anymore and that is rooted in an uncritical reading of the Bible.

## Conclusion

After reading Dawkins's and Kennedy's books, I am convinced that Dawkins would have rendered a great service to critical theology if he had noted those biblical scholars and critical theologians who do not oppose him but argue along similar lines as he does. Christianity has a long and

chequered history but that applies to all religions and all human institutions. The history of our species is not always a history of heroic deeds. We are all responsible for the current state of the earth and we all need to work together and create a world in which our children and grandchildren will be able to survive. Therefore, Christians will have to develop a new story that is in harmony with the modern worldview. I am convinced that if the new Christian story is embedded in what is currently labelled as 'Big History', Christians will be able to keep the tradition alive.

Big History starts with the 'Big Bang' and then narrates how stars, galaxies, planets and moons were born. The story continues with how life emerged on earth, how humans evolved, how civilisations developed and eventually how industries came into being (cf. Fewster 2016). Religions emerged with the evolution of the human species *homo sapiens* and the birth of hunter-gatherer societies (Wade 2009:39). The early religions were concerned with the veneration of ancestors and only later did polytheistic and monotheistic religions come into being when bigger societies were established. These religions served as the 'glue' that kept the bigger societies intact (Wade 2009:124–125).

Christianity was born in the Mediterranean world and became the state religion of the Roman Empire. It served the Roman Empire well and eventually the whole of the Western world. Since the 4th century, Christianity has been on the side of those who have political power, and the powers that be used Christianity to their benefit. It is only during the 20th century that some Christians started to challenge the powers that be. It is also during this century that humans started to take note of the harm that they are causing to the earth and everything that is alive. A 'green' consciousness developed and some Christians who took leave of the traditional doctrines developed a new paradigm called the 'Greening of Christianity'. Both Primavesi (2000) and Geering (2005) argue that Christians should join forces with all and sundry who are concerned about the environment in which we live. However, to be able to work together with others, Christians will have to take a new look at the origin of their religion and where this fits in Big History.

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