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Extension

Grade booster: atheism

Use these discussion questions and profiles to develop your knowledge of the people and concepts mentioned in this issue's 'Grade booster' (pp. 16–17).

Richard Dawkins

- Retired professor for public understanding of science at the University of Oxford.
- Highly successful populariser of science.
- Works include *The Selfish Gene* (1976), *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996), *The Ancestor's Tale* (2004), *The God Delusion* (2006), *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009), *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True* (2011).

Alister McGrath

- Professor of theology, ministry and education at King's College, London.
- PhD in molecular biophysics.
- Former atheist, now ordained in the Church of England.

Questions for discussion

1 Some evidence suggests that religion is good for individual wellbeing, physical and mental health. Do you think this is likely? If so, why? How might it impact on Dawkins' arguments?

2 Dawkins has been described as having an exceptionally low level of limbic activity — activity in the area of the brain suggested to be responsible for religious emotion. Does this throw any light on his arguments?

3 Follow this link: www.tinyurl.com/d4nms6v

What do you make of this experiment and Dawkins' reaction to it?

4 If you are an atheist, do you find Dawkins' arguments make you 'embarrassed to be an atheist' (Michael Ruse)?

5 If you are a religious believer, do you find Dawkins' arguments interesting? Annoying? Embarrassing? Amusing? Irrelevant?

6 If you are an atheist, are there any aspects of religion that you find attractive?

7 If you are a believer, are there aspects of your faith you find unattractive?

8 How do you think religious feeling in the individual might be best explained?

9 Is a different type of explanation needed to explain the origin of religion in society?

- 10** McGrath challenges Dawkins and suggests that 'the ultimate achievement of *The God Delusion* for modern atheism may be to suggest that his emperor has no clothes to wear. Might atheism be a delusion about God?' Do you think this is a fair conclusion?
- 11** Is this still a valid debate?
- 12** Is there anything new to learn from it?