Richard Dawkins once took part in a debate with the distinguished theologian and philosopher Richard Swinburne. The Holocaust, Swinburne suggested, had a positive element because it gave Jews an opportunity to be noble and courageous. Swinburne's 'grotesque piece of reasoning', Dawkins writes in his new book, is 'damningly typical of the theological mind', and an attitude that reveals not just the redundancy of religion but also its immorality.

Dawkins is Britain's most famous atheist and in The God Delusion he gives eloquent vent to his uncompromising views. He begins by demolishing the two major arguments in favour of religion. For many people it is impossible to imagine how the complexity and intricate design of the natural world could have arisen by chance. Hence the need for a conscious designer – God.

It is true, Dawkins responds, that the probability of life having arisen by chance is as vanishingly small as the likelihood of a Jumbo Jet having being constructed by a hurricane sweeping through a scrap yard. But how much more improbable is the idea of an intelligent designer capable of taking all that scrap and turning it into a 747? After all, that intelligent designer, a far more complex entity than a Jumbo Jet, had himself somehow to be created. Evolution, Dawkins suggests, provides the only coherent alternative to both blind chance and 'intelligent design' because it creates complexity through innumerable small steps, each of which is 'slightly improbable, but not prohibitively so.'

The second major argument for God is that He is a necessary source of moral values. 'If God is dead, everything is permitted,' as Dostoevsky put it. In fact research shows that the moral sentiments of believers and atheists are not that distinct.

In any case, Dawkins points out, moral values are not fixed but have changed over time. Where once slavery was justified through Biblical invocation, today most Christians believe that the practice is contrary to God's will. It is not that God has changed his mind but rather that, as social beliefs have progressed, so Christians have begun interpreting God's word differently. But if we can make up our own minds as to what is right and wrong, Dawkins asks, why do we need God in the first place?

Dawkins's polemic against the need for religion is compelling, even if the arguments are not particularly new. Less persuasive is his attempt to explain what faith is and why people continue to believe. So great is his loathing for religion that it sometimes overwhelms his reasoned argument.

Take, for instance, Dawkins's claim that religion is a form of child abuse. He believes with the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey that children 'have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people's bad ideas' and that 'we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe in the literal truth of the Bible than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out'.

Parents indoctrinate their children with all manner of odious beliefs. That is the nature of parenting. And the nature of growing up is that young people decide for themselves, often rejecting the views of their parents. Dawkins's argument seems to reveal less about the nature of religion than about his own pessimistic view of the human capacity for change and independent thought.
Part of the problem is Dawkins's view that religion is not so much a set of beliefs as a mental illness. And moreover, a mental illness to which evolution has made the human mind particularly susceptible – an argument that has become fashionable in recent years.

It may be true that humans possess certain psychological dispositions that open them to religious ideas. But uncovering such traits is not the same as explaining the origins, let alone the contemporary attractions, of religion. What people seek in religion is not always obvious, and is often shaped by historical and social context.

In the pre-scientific world, belief in supernatural deities often provided a rational means of understanding the unpredictability of the world. In a world in which science has shown itself to be spectacularly successful in understanding nature, religion necessarily means something different. Today people often embrace religion for reasons that, paradoxically, have little to do with God. Radical Islam, for instance, has increasingly found a hold in Muslim communities over the past 20 years, more for political than for religious reasons.

Dawkins steamrollers over such complexities. The result, ironically, is that he ends up sounding as naive and unworldly as any happy clappy believer. 'Imagine with John Lennon a world with no religion,' he writes. 'Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as "Christ killers", no Northern Ireland "troubles", no "honour killings", no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money.'

Would that be so. Many of these clashes – over the Palestinian state, or in Northern Ireland, for instance – are originally secular struggles that have, with the degradation of politics, come to take on religious garb. Even suicide bombing is not necessarily a religious phenomenon – the tactic was pioneered by the secular Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

The most comprehensive study of al-Qa'eda supporters reveals that fewer than one in 10 have been to religious school. Whatever our views on God – and I am as obdurate an atheist as Dawkins – blaming it all on religion does little to illuminate the nature of contemporary sectarian conflict.

The moral of the story is that if you want an understanding of evolution or an argument for atheism, there are few better guides than Richard Dawkins. But treat with extreme caution the pronouncements of any one who takes his political cue from an ex-Beatle.