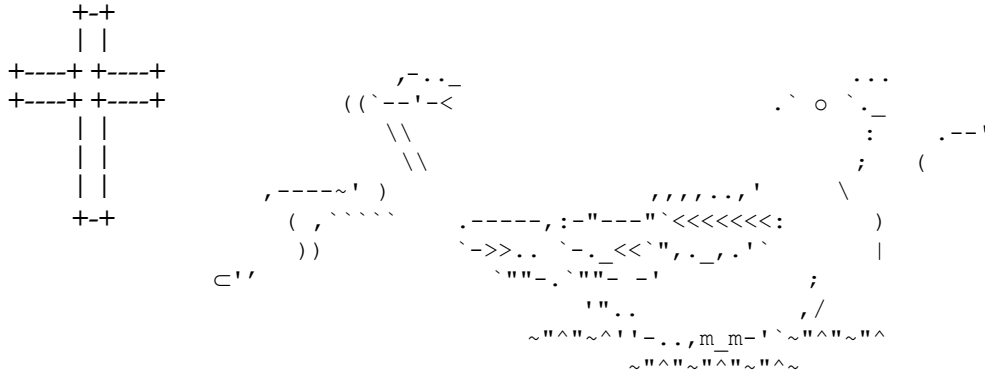


# Wise as serpents and harmless as doves

(Matthew 10:16)



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## Do not trust the prophesies of the octopus Mike L Anderson

What do Paris Hilton and Paul the Octopus have in common? It is alleged that Paul correctly predicted the winners of eight World Cup 2010 matches including the final between Spain and the Netherlands. Answer: they are both celebuitantes. Celebutantes are famous for being famous rather than their skills. Strictly speaking one needs to be human, young, female, wealthy and preferably blonde to qualify, but I think this is arbitrarily restrictive. It is not that Paul is unskilled. In camouflage, jet propulsion and ink production, he beats any human hands down. However, none of these skills made him famous. On the other hand, if you google "Paul the Octopus" and football you will receive more than 7 million hits. Paul is not actually a football prophet. People merely imputed predictive power to one very lucky animal oracle among many aspirants).

For comparison, google the acclaimed evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr + evolution and you get one twentieth of that. There you have it; a two year old mollusc is twenty times more famous for prophesying about football than a one

hundred year old evolutionary biologist is for studying evolution. Through no fault of his own, Paul is a celebutante in football matters.<sup>1</sup>

If you think Mayr should feel put out, consider this. The theologian "Jurgen Moltmann" + God receives only around 200 000 hits. And Moltmann is not just any old theologian. During the 2006 Soccer World Cup an online Theological World Cup was held for the greatest 20th century theologian. Moltmann won the final out of the top 32 contenders.

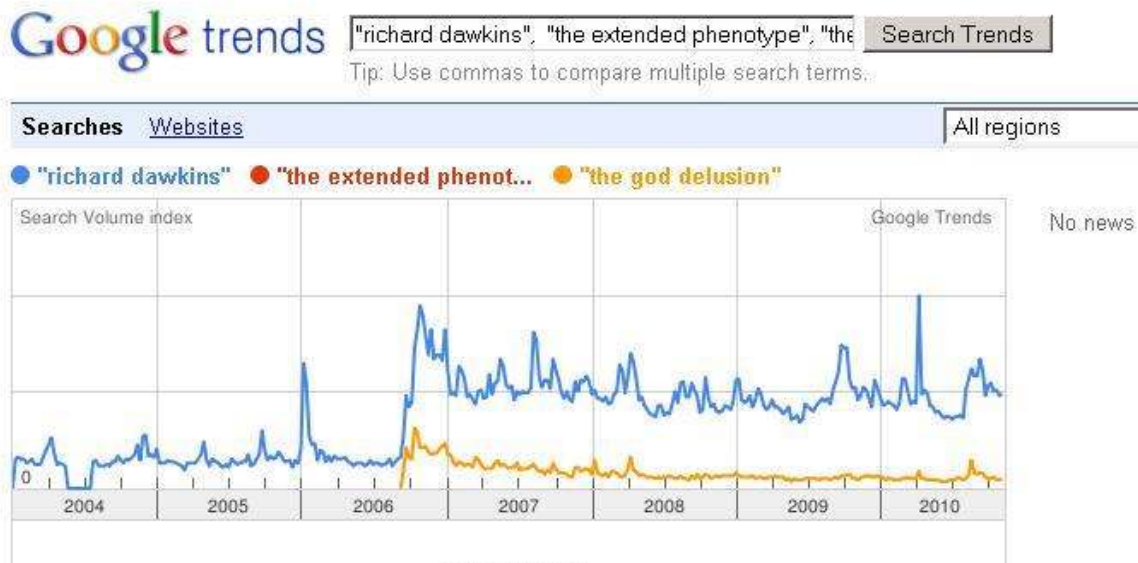
For comparison, evolutionary biologist "Richard Dawkins" + God receives over 1 million hits and Dawkins is just any old non-theologian. Or perhaps worse. "Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology."<sup>2</sup> This is the assessment of a literary critic for the *London Review of Books*. There you have it; the non-theologian is five times more famous for his views on God than the theologian. Dawkins is a celebutante in theological matters. Being a most intelligent evolutionary biologist does not count.

Deferring to octopuses on football or evolutionary biologists on theology is to commit *Argumentum ad Verecundiam* or appeal to false authority. Many just do not get the fallacy. On several occasions in religion and science seminars after favourably quoting Dawkins on evolution, people have expressed surprise that I do not continue on and quote him on God. They seem to think I am being inconsistent. I would only be inconsistent if Dawkins were God. They think that the fallacy applies to other people's heroes; their hero is immune

I want to be very clear here. Truth does not depend on what authorities claim, but on the evidence. However, accessing, evaluating and popularising evidence requires expertise and that is why as a practical matter non-gods have to rely on authorities when outside their field. This is why if one wants to know God it is far better to read theologian J.I. Packer's *Knowing God* than biologist Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. If one needs a response to the latter book there is theologian Alister McGrath's *The Dawkins Delusion?* And if one wants to know about evolution it is far better to read Richard Dawkins than philosopher-mathematician William Dempski of "Intelligent Design" fame however much the former's "theology" sticks in ones throat.

### Are celebutantes made by God?

So, it is not that Dawkins is unskilled. He is certainly extremely skilled in evolutionary biology.<sup>3</sup> But it is not his knowledge of evolution that made him famous so much as his ramblings on God. Don't believe me? Do a Google Trends search on "Richard Dawkins"+ "*The Extended Phenotype*" + "*The God Delusion*." Google Trends compares how often search terms are entered. *The Extended Phenotype* is Dawkins' personal view of the evolution of life. God is mentioned only twice in this book and the title fails to feature on Google Trends. Most people are not interested in *The Extended Phenotype*. 'God' appears more often in *The God Delusion* - 715 times to be exact. At the time *this* book came out there is a noticeable leap in how often 'Richard Dawkins' is searched (see accompanying graph).



Celebutantes are made by God in more ways than one. If the "Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes"<sup>4</sup>, surely he sovereign over the kings and queens of the Internet?

### Are celebutantes made through evolution?

The evolutionary process may also be behind the rise of celebutantes. Anthropologists Henrich and Gil-White point out that humans, unlike other species, get most of their information about the world from other humans rather than directly from the environment. The latter is time-consuming and energetically expensive. The former is a handy shortcut. They argue that that natural selection has favoured social learners that copy certain individuals.<sup>5</sup> But which individuals? One criterion that people seem to use is prestige. Prestigious individuals are identified by such cues as wealth, health and age.<sup>6</sup>

This approach worked well in the relatively simple world of our ancestors. The system breaks down in the current age because the world is just too complex for single individuals to get a handle on it. Success in one department of life is no guarantee that one is capable in another. The trouble is, as studies have shown, high prestige persons can have a measure of credibility beyond their expertise.<sup>7</sup>

### **Is Jesus a celebute?**

It seems sometimes that there is a concerted effort to make Jesus Christ into a celebute. In his day one tried to make him into a civil judge.<sup>8</sup> Others tried to make him into a political figure.<sup>9</sup> He resisted the imposition. Nowadays George W. Bush calls him his favourite "political philosopher." Elton John says he was a "super-intelligent gay man". Others say he was a hippy; still others a capitalist, socialist, liberal or guru.

They are trying to make him famous for something other than he was and for reasons they think deserve fame. They are trying to make him into a celebute. What did Jesus want to be known for? Not for his birth, nor his transfiguration, nor his prophecies nor even his resurrection. In the remarkable condescension of God, the "skill" Jesus wants to be known for is his death. Hence he instituted communion. Jesus did not have the trappings that usually come with celebutes. He was not wealthy and certainly not blonde.

How does the World Wide Web reflect the priorities of Jesus? The following table shows the number of hits for Jesus Christ and each of some of the events in his life.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Google hits</b>
Birth	4 million
Transfiguration	<1 million
Death	9 million
Resurrection	2 million

It suggests that Christians are on the right track in their professions on the Web.

However, if you google "Jesus Christ" and Christmas you get a whopping 26 million hits. Of course, it suits the world's commercial interests if Jesus largely remains a baby. The world has made him into something of a celebute by taking the substance out of Jesus. Many celebrate Christmas happy in all the

hype but without even a vague idea of the true basis for focusing on him. In light of this perhaps it would be good to remember that the Child cannot be separated from the crucifixion and repeat a poem I wrote some time ago.

### **It's Christmas time**

There is a box beneath the tree.  
It has no ribbon, the tree no leaves.  
The box is empty, but for hay.  
The tree is bare, but for blood.  
The Babe has grown and died and risen.  
It's Christmas time.

There is a Maori proverb that goes, "do not die like the octopus." They were scornful of the animal that gives up without a fight. But in this respect Jesus is just like the real mollusc. As Isaiah prophesied,

"He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth."<sup>10</sup>

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, football is far more popular (871 million hits ) than natural selection (3 million hits).

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching: A Review of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*," *London Review of Books*, October 19, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is better to say extremely skilled in popularising Darwinism. Ernst Mayr has said, "Yet the funny thing is if in England, you ask a man in the street who the greatest living Darwinian is, he will say Richard Dawkins. And indeed, Dawkins has done a marvelous job of popularizing Darwinism. But Dawkins' basic theory of the gene being the object of evolution is totally non-Darwinian. I would not call him the greatest Darwinian." Mayr, E. (2001) What evolution is. [http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/mayr/mayr\\_print.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/mayr/mayr_print.html) Dawkins may be a minnow next to Mayr, but the average anti-evolutionist is a minnow next to Dawkins.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 4:32

<sup>5</sup> Henrich, J, and Gil-White, F.J. (2001) The evolution of prestige – Freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission. *Evolution and Human Behavior* 22:165-196.

<sup>6</sup> Health is normally associated with youth and wealth with age. Some have it all by inheriting a fortune. Hence the Paris Hilton phenomenon.

<sup>7</sup> Ryckman, R.M. Sherman, M.F. and W.C. Rodda (1972) Locus of Control and Expertise Relevance As Determinants of Changes in Opinion About Student Activism. *Journal of Social Psychology* 88: 107-14.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 12:14.

<sup>9</sup> John 6:15.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 53:7.