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PREFACE

Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people

Living for today

—John Lennon

In 2004, Sam Harris published *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. This marked the first of a series of five bestselling books that took a harder line against religion than had been the custom among secularists. This movement has been termed “New Atheism.”

Motivated primarily by the events of September 11, 2001, which he laid directly at the feet of the religion of Islam, Harris did not leave Christianity or Judaism off the hook. Neither did he pardon religious moderates:

One of the central themes of this book . . . is that religious moderates are the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being

should be free to believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principle forces driving us toward the abyss.¹

Harris followed in 2006 with *Letter to a Christian Nation* that responded to the many messages he had received from Christians objecting strongly to his criticism of their faith, and of faith in general.

The same year, the famed biologist and author Richard Dawkins published *The God Delusion* that stood on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 51 weeks. Dawkins says he intended his book to be a series of “consciousness-raising” messages aimed at people who have been brought up in some religion or other who want to be free of it for one reason or another. Dawkins first message: “You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled.”²

Also in 2006, philosopher Daniel C. Dennett produced *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* that made a plea for religion to be examined scientifically in order to better understand where religion came from, why people believe in God so fervently, and why religion is such a potent force in society.³ Although the author insisted he was not taking a stand against religion, he could not prevent his previous reputation as an ardent proponent of atheism from having him labeled as a new atheist.

In 2007 my own contribution, *God: The Failed Hypothesis—How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist* made the *New York Times* bestseller list in March of that year.⁴ With endorsements by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, my book fit right in with the genre of new atheist literature. In *God: The Failed Hypothesis* I make a

unique argument. Scientists and others had written scores of books showing that there is no evidence for the existence of God. They were always countered by the truism, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." But I pointed out that absence of evidence *that should be there* is valid evidence of absence. I demonstrated that the absence of evidence that should be there is now sufficient to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that the God worshipped by Jews, Christians, and Muslims does not exist.

In June of that year, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by journalist and literary critic Christopher Hitchens debuted in first place on the *New York Times* bestseller list.⁵

Hitchens provided further evidence and arguments for the malign influence of religion in the world. He thus became recognized as a charter member of the New Atheism. Hitchens graciously wrote a foreword for the paperback edition of *God: The Failed Hypothesis* that came out in 2008. As presented by these authors, the New Atheism breaks new ground that is not covered in other writings on atheism, both earlier and current. Most of these other writings are excellent and not in significant disagreement with the new approach on all but a few issues. Their emphases tend to be either philosophical, as for example with George H. Smith's classic: *Atheism: The Case Against God*,⁶ or personal, as for example with Dan Barker's excellent *Godless*.⁷

The new atheists write mainly from a scientific perspective. Dawkins and I are science PhDs who have spent years doing scientific research, Dawkins in

biology and I in physics and astronomy. Harris has a degree in philosophy and is working on a PhD in neuroscience. Dennett is a philosopher of science who has written almost exclusively on scientific topics. While Hitchens is not a scientist, his approach to religion is clearly empirical. He has observed the lethal effects of religion first hand during his travels as a foreign correspondent. All of us have been criticized for not paying enough attention to modern theology. We are more interested in observing the world and taking our lessons from those observations than debating finer points of scriptures that are probably no more than fables to begin with.

In this book I review and expand upon the principles of New Atheism. Not all nonbelievers – atheists, agnostics, humanists, or freethinkers – have been happy with the approach taken by the new atheists, especially our unwillingness to take a benign view of moderate religion. They would like to maintain good relations with the religious community, especially with regard to the public acceptance of science. They worry that government funding for science might be put at risk and the teaching of evolution in the schools compromised.

While new atheists sympathize with these concerns, we do not consider them as serious as the even greater dangers imposed by the irrational thinking associated with religion. Most people recognize the value and necessity of scientific research, especially medical, and are not likely to change that to spite a few loudmouthed atheists. And a child is not going to be scarred for life hearing the dreaded word “creationism” in the classroom. We are not saying this issue

isn't important. No one alive is a greater proponent of evolution than Richard Dawkins and he recognizes what he calls the "superficial appeal" of all evolutionists working together to fight creationism. But he takes the position of geneticist Jerry Coyne that "the *real* war is between rationalism and superstition."⁸

A place where we differ from mainstream scientists is in the common, but we think mistaken, notion that science and religion are, in the words of the late, famed paleontologist Steven Jay Gould, two "non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA)."⁹ We agree with most philosophers that this is incorrect and amounts to a redefinition of religion as "moral philosophy." Religions make statements about all kinds of phenomena that are legitimate parts of science, such as the origin of the universe and evolution of life. Even the principles of morality are subject to scientific investigation since they involve observable human behavior. Furthermore, we do not see morality as god-given but rather the result of humanity's own social development.

We strongly disagree with the National Academy of Science, and many scientists, that science has nothing to say about God or the supernatural. The gods most people worship purportedly play an active role in the universe and in human lives. This activity should result in observable phenomena, and it is observable phenomena that form the very basis of scientific investigation.

Numerous books vehemently protesting the New Atheism have been written by theists, almost all Christians. Their arrows have been mainly directed

at Dawkins and Harris. As I will show in detail, their criticisms are misguided and their arguments easily countered. I examined a large sample of these books and did not find a single new argument for the existence of God or for the value of religion that had not already been addressed in atheist literature. So, I will be going over some familiar ground. However, I do significantly update some of the arguments against God, give a detailed account of naturalism, and follow up on proposal by Harris in *The End of Faith* that we pay some attention to the ancient wisdom of the East.

Many theist authors present several arguments from physics and cosmology that have lain mostly unanswered in popular books. Where these arguments do come up in the writings of other physicists, they are usually dismissed there as nonsense with little explanation. I have made a more serious attempt than any physicist I know in taking these issues seriously and trying to come up with adequate natural explanations. I continue this effort here, with some new reasons to reject the claims that the big bang supports a supernatural creation and that the physical parameters of the universe are “fine-tuned” for our kind of life.

In this regard, I must repeat what I say in all my books about interpreting evidence. A good scientist does not approach the analysis of evidence with a mind shut like a trap door against unwelcome conclusions. If and when science finds any evidence for the existence of God, gods, or the supernatural that stands up under the same stringent tests that are applied in science to any claimed new

phenomenon, with no plausible natural explanation, then honest atheists will have to become at least tentative believers. This is not impossible, as I will show.

Perhaps the most unique teaching of New Atheism is that faith, which is belief without supportive evidence, should not be given the respect, even deference, it obtains in modern society. Faith is always foolish and leads to many of the evils of society. The theist argument that science and reason are also based in faith is specious. Faith is belief in the absence of supportive evidence. Science is belief in the presence of supportive evidence. And reason is just the procedure by which humans assure that their conclusions are consistent with the theory that produced them and with the data that test those conclusions.

I have followed the other new atheists in cataloging a sample of the atrocities associated with religion, both in the Bible and in history. The common theist response that atheists in the twentieth century killed more humans than theists over the ages is not supported by the facts. Furthermore, nonbelievers do not kill in the name of atheism the way believers kill in the name of God. We will study the example of Mormonism to see how easy it is for people to commit the most horrible acts when they are convinced they are doing so under orders from God.

I will also show how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam cannot account satisfactorily for the suffering in the world and certainly have done little to alleviate it. We will discover that 2,500 years ago the Buddha and other sages of the East provided a way to endure suffering that is still applicable today. By

meditation, ritual, or other means we rid ourselves of the self-centeredness that so dominates our lives.

While Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have produced similar teachings, they are not practiced by most adherents. In fact, Christianity and Islam are the most popular religions in the world because of their appeal to our most selfish instincts with the promise of eternal life. The followers of the Hindu and Buddhist religions also often ignore the best wisdom in their philosophical traditions, pursuing egocentric desires through supernatural hopes.

I have followed Harris's suggestion that we consider the teachings of the sages of the East and concluded that these teachings can be stripped of any supernatural baggage that is implied by referring to them as "spiritual" or "mystical" and still have the same force. An atheist can meditate without any mumbo-jumbo and arrive at the state of mind of a Zen Buddhist who reaches the understanding that the ego is artificial. As we will see, brain imaging is beginning to provide preliminary evidence for how this takes place purely naturally.

Atheism cannot compete with any of the supernatural religions that disingenuously promise eternal life.¹⁰ All the evidence points to a purely material universe, including the bodies and brains of humans, without the need to introduce soul, spirit, or anything immaterial. But, repeating the quote from Richard Dawkins given above, "You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced,

moral, and intellectually fulfilled.” Once we are free of the fetters of religious belief we can look forward to a life under our own control.

Basically, then, this book debunks many of the myths about religion and atheism that are held not only by believers but by many nonbelievers as well. One final myth is that religion is growing in the world and secularism is dying. As we will see, the facts tell a different story. There are from one to two billion nonbelievers on this planet, depending on how you count Chinese. This makes nonbelief either the second or third “belief system,” exceeded only by Christianity and possibly Islam. And, it is the fastest growing.

This growth is mainly confined to “postindustrial” nations where at least two-thirds of the gross domestic product comes from services. Belief in agricultural and industrial (manufacturing) societies has largely remained flat over a century. In general, the more wealthy a nation the less likely it is to be religious. Ireland, Italy, Canada, Finland, and especially the United States are anomalously more religious than expected from their wealth. On the other hand, Denmark, The Netherlands, and France are anomalously low. These anomalies cannot be attributed to a single cause but are probably the result of a mix of factors such as history and economic inequality.

The new atheists are committed to helping accelerate the trend away from religion that is already occurring in certain parts of the world. We ask other atheists to join us in taking a harder line against the follies and atrocities of religion produced by its irrational thinking. Not only will a more secular world

improve our security, by making wars more unlikely, it will allow science and reason to once more help guide government policies, especially in the U.S. after eight years or more of being ignored in favor of “faith-based initiatives.” We see this as the only road to survival.

Notes

¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004); Audiobook available from Blackstone Audio, Inc. (2006), pp 14-15.

² Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 1.

³ Daniel Dennett. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006).

⁴ Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis. How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Prometheus Books, 2008).

⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

⁶ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1989).

⁷ Dan Barker, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2008).

⁸ *The God Delusion*, p. 67.

⁹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, The Library of Contemporary Thought (New York: Ballantine Pub. Group, 1999).

¹⁰ In the definition of atheism used in this book, I do not include Buddhists or any other non-theists who still hold to supernatural beliefs. This may be a bit contradictory, however it corresponds more closely to common usage and so should lead to less misunderstanding.