

1.

ATHEISM ON THE OFFENSIVE

Religion is a disease.

Heraclitus (c. 535 – 475 BCE)

The Gods People Worship

Many nonbelievers will tell you that they are not “atheists” but “agnostics.”

Although they see no evidence for God, they reason that we can never know whether or not God exists. After all, they say, “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” How can we possibly know that a god does not exist who is hidden from us so that we have no proof or evidence either way?

For example, an impersonal god may have created the universe and then left it alone to follow its own path, governed by the natural laws that it built into the universe, perhaps along with a large element of chance. This doctrine is called *deism*. As I discussed in my previous book, *Quantum Gods*, such a god who, in Einstein’s famous words, “plays dice with the universe,” might be impossible to detect.¹

Einstein often used the word “god” in his philosophical statements, but made it clear that he did not believe in a personal god. When pressed he said he believed in the “god of Spinoza,” who is basically a metaphor for the order and structure of the universe. This doctrine is called *pantheism*. A related doctrine is

panentheism in which god includes the physical universe and whatever else there is. Pantheism simply gives the name “god” to the sum of reality and is empty of any religious content that can be used to guide people’s lives or ritual that can be used to provide inspiration. The god of the Jewish kabbalistic tradition is panentheistic and religiously significant. However, neither of these views plays an import role in modern religious thinking.

Over the ages the most common form of god worship has been *polytheism*, the worship of many gods, usually representing various objects in nature from the sun and moon to animals and humans. Today, Hinduism is the only truly polytheistic religion practiced by a large number of people, although technically it is called *henotheistic* in that there is only one absolute reality, Brahman, and the various gods of the Hindu pantheon are merely representations (avatars) of this one reality.² Muslims consider the Christian Trinity polytheistic and Catholics pray to a whole constellation of saints that in another time would be called gods. In his documentary film *Religulous*,³ Bill Maher hilariously interviews a “senior Vatican priest” standing outside St. Peters who tells him that Jesus Christ is only sixth on the list of heavenly personages that Italian Christians pray to.

But, such differences aside, the god that more people currently worship than any other is some variation on the personal god of the Jewish Torah, Christian Old Testament, and Muslim Qu’ran. He is called YHWH in the Torah and Old Testament, and Allah in the Qu’ran.

I will, for simplicity, often refer to this god as the “Abrahamic God,” or just “God,” which should be understood to refer to the god of the three religions that trace their origins to the patriarch Abraham, a probably mythological figure who supposedly lived four thousand years ago.⁴ If Abraham existed at all, he would have been polytheistic as were all the peoples in Canaan at the time. Judaism did not become monotheistic until after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon circa 530 BCE.

The Atheist Worldview

The term *theism* usually refers to the belief in a personal god or gods such as found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Technically, then, an atheist is someone who does not believe in the gods of these religions. If atheists were defined as anyone who is not a theist, they would include deists, Buddhists, and others generally identified as “spiritualists.” Deists believe in a god who created the universe but then leaves it alone to carry on according to the laws he has laid out, rarely if ever stepping in to change the course of events and not paying much if any attention to individual lives. Buddhists (though not all) do not believe in gods but have some sense of a supernatural. Spiritualists believe in an unknown higher power, a so-called universal spirit, or simply have a vague notion that “something must be out there.” Let us stick to the common usage of atheist to mean someone who believes that no gods exist, including the deist god, the universal spirit, or any other vague possibility that agnostics prefer to leave open. This includes Buddhists. That is, there are theists, deists, Buddhists,

spiritualists, agnostics, and atheists. More simply, there are believers and nonbelievers, or supernaturalists and naturalists.

Atheists view science as the best means humanity has yet come up with for understanding the world. Not all scientists are atheists. However, few of those scientists who are believers assume any role for the supernatural in explaining the phenomena that reach our senses. Rather they compartmentalize their thinking into scientific and religious. They enter one compartment when they go to church on Sunday, one that has been swept clean of the critical thinking and devil's advocacy that came with their training. Monday morning they return to work and enter the other compartment where God never enters the equations.

As you often hear, "science is provisional." So both believing and nonbelieving scientists must keep open the possibility that their concepts may change should the data warrant it. Science just makes models anyway and does not require nor does it use any metaphysics. As far as science can tell, the universe is matter and nothing more. If at some future date, scientists find they need something other than matter in their models and they can still describe that substance mathematically, this new stuff would not be supernatural. In that case a distinction between believer and atheist would still remain. For now, let's keep things simple: the atheist believes that we need not include anything beyond matter (to be defined precisely later) to describe the universe and its contents. Everybody else thinks we need something else.

The atheist view is not what some believers derogatorily call “scientism,” the view that science is the only source of knowledge. Atheists appreciate the beauty of art, music, and poetry as much as believers, along with the joys of love, friendship, parenthood, and other human relationships. We love life even more than the believer, because that is all we have. We only insist that when anyone makes a claim about the world of our senses, that science and reason be allowed to test that claim.

That may sound non-controversial, but one of the major complaints that the new atheists have about society today, especially in the United States, is that religion is given a special dispensation from the requirement of rationality that is applied in all other forms of human discourse. We are pilloried for hurting people’s deepest feelings when we cast doubt that somebody born of a virgin rose from the dead or when we question that some book contains all the truths that anyone need ever know. We not only regard such beliefs as wrong, we see them as immoral and dangerous to the future of society.

Philosopher Michael Martin, who has written authoritatively on atheism, distinguishes between two types, *negative atheism* that simply identifies non-belief, including agnosticism, and *positive atheism* where the nonbeliever “rejects the theistic God and with it the belief in an afterlife, in a cosmic destiny, in an immortal soul, in the revealed nature of the Bible and Qur’an, and in a religious foundation for morality.”⁵

A breakdown of world belief is given in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Major religions of the world (partial list) ranked by number of adherents.⁶

Religion	Number	Percentage
Christianity	2.1 billion	33
Islam	1.5 billion	21
Secular/Nonreligious/ Agnostic/Atheist	1.1 billion	16
Hinduism	900 million	14
Chinese traditional	394 million	6
Buddhism	376 million	6
Judaism	14 million	0.22

These estimates were obtained from the website of a Christian organization, Adherents.com, that based them on *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *World Christian Encyclopedia* reports.⁷ The numbers are admitted to tend toward the high end since they count people with a minimal level of self-identification.

We see that there are over a billion nonbelievers in the world, more than Hindus, making it the third largest “belief” system. This may be a vast underestimate that has not counted China accurately. I have seen estimates that as many as a billion nonbelieving Chinese alone. But while they may not believe in gods, most Chinese maintain traditional supernatural beliefs.

The table does not break down the nonbelievers. Martin quotes an estimate from the 2002 *New York Times Almanac* that 4 percent of the world's population are professed atheists. With an estimated world population at this writing of 6.7 billion, this gives 268 million current atheists.

Despite the apparent fact that the people of the United States are exceptionally religious, at least in terms of professed supernatural beliefs of one type or another, the national figures are not much different from those worldwide when surveys probe more deeply than simply asking the subject to state a religious preference. While only 1.6 percent or about 4.8 million Americans admit they are atheists, this is undoubtedly an underestimate because the term "atheist" has a more negative connotation in America than in other developed countries.

Atheists fall below homosexuals in the esteem of a majority of Americans. For example, in the November, 2008 U.S. elections, North Carolina Senator Elizabeth Dole, wife of 1996 Republican Presidential Candidate Robert Dole, put out a TV ad that her Democratic opponent, Kay Hagan, accepted money from an atheist rights group.⁸ A Dole commercial showed pictures Hagen with a woman's voiceover saying, "God does not exist." Hagan angrily filed a lawsuit for defamation. In America, apparently, calling a person an atheist is as bad as calling her a child molester. Hagan handily defeated Dole, while the lawsuit is still pending as of this writing.

Is America a Deist Nation?

Although a majority of Americans call themselves “Christians” a study of their actual beliefs made by Baylor University in 2005 indicates that many people who think of themselves as Christians actually disagree with basic Christian teachings. The survey found that 44 percent of all Americans do not believe in a god who plays an important role in the universe or their personal lives.⁹ That makes them *deists*, not theists, although most probably would not accept the designation. But the fact is that only 54 percent of Americans are true Christians who believe in a God who significantly acts in the universe and in human lives. Certainly you are not a Christian if you do not believe in a God who acts in the current world.

So more than a billion people on Earth do not believe in the Abrahamic God or any other specific god, outnumbering Hindus and Jews, and almost matching the number of Muslims. If some fraction of the estimated Chinese nonbelievers is counted, then there are more nonbelievers than Muslims and only Christians exceed nonbelievers.

Atheism in Society

Despite the large numbers of nonbelievers, atheism has not represented as major a force in world or national affairs as many much smaller groups such as Jews or homosexuals. While communism is officially atheist, a fact Christians gleefully point to as an example of what happens when atheism holds sway, communist

philosophy is based on economics, not metaphysics. The political and economic philosophies of communism do not follow from the hypothesis of non-belief. Indeed, with its dogmatic policies and authoritarianism, communism more closely resembles a godless religion than secular atheism. The only political views of atheists that are closely linked to their atheism are that church and state should be separate and that decisions should be based on reason rather than revelation.

A number of organizations in the United State and elsewhere promote atheist, freethinking, and secular humanist viewpoints. The organization with the largest membership of freethinkers is the Freedom From Religion Foundation based in Madison Wisconsin. Its co-presidents are Dan Barker and his wife Annie Laurie Gaylor. For nineteen years Barker was an evangelical preacher and highly successful composer and performer of Christian music. Gradually, without any atheist proselytizing, he came to doubt and finally disbelieve in Christianity and all religion for that matter. Barker tells his story in a 2008 book *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists*.¹⁰

Most prominent atheists contribute regularly to *Free Inquiry* magazine, published by the Center for Inquiry located in Amherst, New York. CFI is a think-tank for atheism and secular humanism.¹¹ It also coordinates the local efforts of several other centers along with a large number of community and student groups worldwide.

Currently, the net memberships of FFRF, CFI and other organizations¹² are comparatively small and hardly the threat that Christian leaders would like Christians to think they are. In the past, non-believer organizations have not been able to recruit a major fraction of those who hold similar views on God and religion and stir them up into political action.

I think it is fair to say that, at least until recently, the typical non-believer simply did not give religion much thought and lived her life as if it is the only one she had – which happens to be the case. Non-believer publications and other media outlets have had little influence when compared to the vast industry of religious books, magazines, TV and radio stations, and Internet sites. One reason why America seems to be more religious than other developed countries could be the vast Christian propaganda machine unmatched anywhere else. In the past the subjects of atheism and secularism have received scant attention in the general media. Until recently, books on atheism have not sold well, although some atheist authors, notably Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, have written bestsellers on the closely related subject of evolution.

New Atheism Steps In

This all changed dramatically in 2004 with the first in a series of bestsellers by authors who preached a more militant, in-your-face kind of atheism that had not been seen before. This phenomenon has been termed *New Atheism* and it may augur well for the future of nonbelief. New Atheism seems to be a growing phenomenon in the U.S. and has attracted much media attention.¹³ The atheist

and freethinker groups mentioned above are experiencing increasing membership, especially on college campuses.

As you might expect, this phenomenon has driven Christian apologists to distraction. A whole raft of books has been published in response to the atheist bestsellers, largely from Christian publishing houses, of which, as I said, there are many. Most of these anti-atheist screeds are marked by shoddy scholarship (almost all of those I have sampled lack an index), misrepresentations of atheist views, and inaccurate quotations. I will give specific examples in the course of this book. None of the anti-atheist books have sold anywhere near as well as the atheist books they challenge. In what follows I will quote from some of these and other commentaries as I summarize the arguments made in the new atheist literature. This first brush should give a good taste of the conflict and demonstrate why any reconciliation is unlikely in the near future. In the following chapters we will discuss the issues in greater detail and expand upon what I see as the message of New Atheism.

Here's how the well-known conservative author and political commentator Dinesh D'Souza describes the new atheists in his 2007 book *What's So Great About Christianity?*

The atheists no longer want to be tolerated. They want to monopolize the public square and to expel Christians from it. They want political questions like abortion to be divorced from religious and moral claims. They want to control school curricula so they can

promote a secular ideology and undermine Christianity. They want to discredit the factual claims of religion, and they want to convince the rest of society that Christianity is not only mistaken but evil. They blame religion for the crimes of history and for the ongoing conflicts in the world today. In short, they want to make religion – and especially the Christian religion – disappear from the face of the earth.¹⁴

In this introduction D’Souza does not provide evidence for his assertions by quoting from the new atheist literature. We certainly do not want to “expel Christians” from the public square or “control school curricula,” but would not be unhappy with some of the other outcomes. As we will see later, when he does quote new atheist writers (including myself), D’Souza does so misleadingly and, in at least one important case, falsely.

D’Souza has been traveling the country debating atheists. I recently witnessed Christopher Hitchens wipe up the floor with him at the University of Colorado.

In *The New Atheist Crusaders and Their Unholy Grail: The Misguided Quest to Destroy Your Faith* Christian writer Becky Garrison, Senior Contributing Editor of the religious satire magazine *The Wittenburg Door* says,

These new atheists aren’t resurrecting the old atheist argument that belief in God is wrong. Rather, they’re advocating that belief in God is dangerous and destructive. Furthermore, while old-school

atheists came to the conclusion that God doesn't exist after some angst-ridden anxiety and serious soul-searching, this current crop of anti-God guys giggle like schoolgirls over their naughty refusal to kowtow to society and buy into this God biz.¹⁵

In *God and the New Atheism* the reputable theologian John Haught agrees with Garrison. As old-school atheists he mentions Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre as facing up to what the absence of God should really mean—the “disorienting wilderness of nihilism.”¹⁶ This must be the “angst-ridden anxiety and serious soul-searching” that Garrison is talking about.

Haught tells us,

Before settling into a truly atheistic worldview, you would have the experience the Nietzschean Madman's sensation of straying through “infinite nothingness.”

In short, you have to be willing to risk madness to be a true atheist. The new atheists, not being madmen, do not qualify.

I don't see how lifting the burdens of dreadful superstitions such as the fear of hell and replacing them with a coolly reasoned understanding of the universe should result in “angst-ridden anxiety.” I have no trouble thinking about “infinite nothingness” and, in fact, I can represent it mathematically.¹⁷ The madmen are those theists who hear the voice of God telling them to blow themselves up along with as many innocents they can take along with them.

The End of Faith?

The new atheist movement burst into existence in 2004 with the publication of *The End of Faith* by a young neuroscience graduate student with a degree in philosophy, Sam Harris.¹⁸ Harris cuts straight to the heart of religious belief and identifies blind faith as the source of much of the unreason in the world and a prime contributor to the terrorism and fanaticism we have experienced in recent years, in particular September 11, 2001. He disputes the common claims that faith is an essential component of human life and that other sources than faith are responsible for the horrifying acts of fanatical believers:

Two myths now keep faith beyond the fray of rational criticism, and they seem to foster religious extremism and religious moderation equally: (1) most of us believe that there are good things that people get from religious faith (e.g. strong communities, ethical behavior, spiritual experience) that cannot be had elsewhere; (2) many of us also believe that the terrible things that are sometimes done in the name of religion are the products not of *faith* per se but of our baser nature – forces like greed, hatred, and fear – for which religious beliefs are themselves the best (or even the only) remedy.¹⁹

Harris comes down hard on those such as linguistics professor Noam Chomsky who regard America as a terrorist nation that brought September 11 down on itself.²⁰

Fareed Zakaria, the editor of *Newsweek International* and columnist for the Washington Post has attributed the turmoil in the Middle East to the failure of political institutions:

If there is one great cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it is the total failure of political institutions in the Arab world.²¹

Harris responds,

Perhaps. But “the rise of Islamic fundamentalism” is only a problem because *the fundamentals of Islam* are a problem.²²

While addressing Islamic terrorism in some detail, Harris hardly leaves Christianity off the hook. Unlike most of the secular community, Harris does not give moderate and liberal religion, Muslim and Christian, a free ride. He asserts that by refusing to speak out against religious extremists and by holding to irrational beliefs of their own and insisting on the revealed nature of their scriptures, moderate Muslims and Christians provide aid and comfort to those who wish to force medieval ideas on the rest of society.

Quoting Deuteronomy 13:17-11 where God commands you to kill anyone, including your father or mother, if they suggest serving other gods, Harris notes that moderation in religion has nothing underwriting it but the “unacknowledged neglect of the letter of divine law.”²³ He continues:

The only reason anyone is “moderate” in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought (democratic politics, scientific

advancement on every front, concern for human rights, and end to cultural and geographic isolations, etc.).²⁴

In November 2006, Harris and Dawkins attended a meeting called *Beyond Belief* at the Salk Institute in San Diego. The videos of the entire conference were still on the Web as of this writing over two years later and very much worth watching, along with subsequent meetings.²⁵ Top scholars in science also attended and most of those who spoke were atheists.

I was somewhat taken aback by the benign view of religion presented by the atheistic scientists other than Harris and Dawkins. Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg, an avowed atheist, has made many quotable statements against religion, such as:

The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.²⁶

And,

Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.²⁷

Yet, at the meeting he said he was more “sanguine” about religion than Harris. When he meets people socially where he lives in Texas, he finds that, when the subject of religion comes up, most believers do not hold to many of the extreme official views of the churches they attend. For example, few Christians think that

a non-Christian who lives a good life cannot go to heaven. However, ask their preachers or theologians and they will tell you otherwise. Of course Weinberg's circle of acquaintances around the University of Texas at Austin is not likely to be representative of Americans elsewhere.

Other atheist speakers came down hard on Harris and Dawkins, arguing that their approach will not earn any converts to atheism and asking what right do atheists have to deny believers the comforts of faith. Harris and Dawkins tried valiantly to point out the dangers of continuing this reliance on dogma rather than reason and science as the world heads for a period of increasing turmoil. They make the case very eloquently in their speeches and books, which their detractors do not seem to have read very carefully. These detractors seemed totally oblivious, for example, to the fact that since Ronald Reagan our presidents have taken advice from preachers who view events in the Middle East as a precursor to the Second Coming of Jesus when the world will come to an end. As we will see in the next chapter, millions of American Christians anticipate this occurrence.

Harris suggests an alternative to the irrationality of the Abrahamic religions that is not simply scientific materialism. He regards Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as hindering the development in the West, and in Islamic countries, of the real "spiritual" progress made in Buddhism and other Eastern religions over thousands of years. I think most new atheists would agree with me that we should avoid using the term "spiritual" to refer to phenomena such as love,

compassion, and selflessness. We see no reason why these cannot result from purely material forces and “spiritual” to most people implies something supernatural.

However, I have made my own independent study of ancient Eastern philosophy, which I will review in a later chapter. I find that when stripped of any implication of supernaturalism I agree with Harris that Eastern philosophers uncovered some unique insights into humanity and the human mind that were lacking in the West. I propose that the teachings of the ancient sages of the East constitute a “Way of Nature” that provides atheists and materialists with a viable path to peace and happiness. The sages’ teachings are marked by selflessness and calm acceptance of the nothingness after death. Although a handful of mystics in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam preached a similar inward looking and selflessness, it was closely tied to the supernatural, whereas the Eastern methods did not require any supernatural element. The mass-scale religions, West and East, ignored this ancient wisdom, replacing it with the extreme self-centeredness associated with the absurd promise of eternal life.

Continuing with the critics, Becky Garrison, asserts,

I can attest that one can be a practicing Christian and still have some serious issues with the institutional church. Heck, I’ve been ranting against church crud since 1994, a good ten years before Harris hacked out *The End of Faith*.²⁸

If there’s anything I hate, it’s an unholy than thou attitude.

In 2006 Harris came out with a small book called *Letter to a Christian Nation* that also made the bestseller lists.²⁹ Here he responded to the thousands of letters he received after his first book telling him how wrong he was in his criticisms of both extremist and moderate religiosity. The most militant messages were from Christians, so Harris decided to reply specifically to them. As he explains on the first page,

Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism. While we may want to ascribe this to human nature, it is clear that such hatred draws considerable support from the Bible. How do I know this? The most disturbed and my correspondents always cite chapter and verse.³⁰

Harris has been severely criticized for his position on certain political issues such as torture and preemptive nuclear war. I will not discuss these in this book because they have nothing to do with atheism. Harris maintains a web page "Response to Criticism" where he clarifies and further explains his positions.³¹

The God Delusion

Two other bestsellers also appeared in 2006 by authors far better known than Sam Harris: Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins and Tufts University philosophy professor Daniel Dennett.

Dawkins gained almost instant fame as a young researcher when in 1976 he authored *The Selfish Gene*, which promoted the idea that evolution operates on genes rather than individual organisms.³² That is, it is not the organism that seeks to survive but the genetic information that is collected in what is termed a gene.³³

Evolutionary models are very difficult to verify or falsify and so often remain contentious within the field for years. Creationists often take misplaced comfort from this. No dispute among experts in the field can be found on the basic correctness of the Darwin-Wallace scheme of evolution by natural selection. Arguing over detailed mechanisms is the everyday *modus vivendi* of science.

However, Dawkins's selfish genes (based on earlier work) offered a tentative explanation for altruism since in the selfish-gene scheme the evolutionary drive is the survival of genetic information. Thus the sacrifice of an individual, a common observation in nature, can increase the odds of the survival of a gene.

Dawkins, who has a gift for writing eloquent, quotable phrases, followed this with a series of other very readable works explaining for a popular audience how Darwinian natural selection provides the mechanism by which complex organisms evolve from simpler forms. In *The Extended Phenotype* he basically carried forward the idea of selfish genes.³⁴ In *The Blind Watchmaker*³⁵ he responds specifically to the argument from design that had been compellingly presented by Archdeacon William Paley in *Natural Theology*, published fifty years before Darwin.³⁶

In *River Out of Eden* Dawkins makes evolution even more accessible to the popular audience.³⁷ *Climbing Mount Improbable* adds to this, showing how natural selection is able to produce systems that have apparently low *a priori* probability, answering creationist claims that biological organisms are so highly improbable that they cannot have arisen from pure natural processes.³⁸

Dawkins switches gears a bit in *Unweaving the Rainbow*, where he shows that science has a beauty that matches art and poetry and should be looked at equally as a source of pleasure and inspiration.³⁹ *A Devils' Chaplain* is a series of essays on various subjects from pseudoscience the religion and creationism.⁴⁰ In *The Ancestor's Tale*, Dawkins and his assistant Yan Wong trace the evolutionary history of humanity backwards in time and meet up with various other species who share the same ancestors.⁴¹

Finally we come to one of the publishing sensations of recent years, Dawkins's *The God Delusion*.⁴² As of November, 2007 it had sold 1.5 million copies and had been translated into 31 languages. It remained on the *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction bestseller list for 51 weeks, until September 30, 2007. The paperback edition also became an instant and long-lasting bestseller.

Dawkins argues that the "God hypothesis" is a valid scientific hypothesis that should be analyzed skeptically like any other. He goes over the arguments for God's existence and concludes they are "spectacularly weak." Referring to the argument from design, perhaps the most common reason given for belief in God, Dawkins says, "Far from pointing to a designer, the illusion of design in the

living world is explained with far greater economy and with devastating elegance by Darwinian natural selection.”⁴³

Dawkins presents the case that religion is not the source of morality and is, in general, not such a good thing for the world. He claims that childhood indoctrination is the reason for much religious belief, rather than the free choice of a mature, rational evaluation of the alternatives.

As in previous books, Dawkins tries to show that

a proper understanding of the magnificence of the real world, while never becoming a religion, can fill the inspirational role that religion has historically – and inadequately – usurped.⁴⁴

Finally, Dawkins urges that atheists not be shy or apologetic about their atheism but to stand tall to face the far horizon and speak out proudly showing their independence of mind. In the past century in America we have seen women, then African Americans and other minorities, and then homosexuals stand up for themselves as humans with the same rights as others. Gradually these groups have become increasingly respected and accepted as equal members of society. It is time for atheists to gain the same status.

By far most of the books written to counter the rise of New Atheism have focused on *The God Delusion*.” Let’s see what a somewhat random selection of them have to say.

In *The Dawkins Delusion*, Alister and Janna Collicut McGrath assert,

Dawkins simply offers the atheist equivalent of slick hellfire preaching, substituting turbocharged rhetoric and highly speculative manipulation of fact for careful, evidence-based thinking.⁴⁵

Continuing,

How ... could such a gifted popularizer of the natural sciences, who once had such a passionate concern for the objective analysis of evidence, turn into such an aggressive antireligious propagandist with an apparent disregard for evidence that was not favorable to his case? Why were the natural sciences being so abused in an attempt to advance atheist fundamentalism?"⁴⁶

When I read this I made mental note to record, as I read through the rest of the McGrath book, the many evidence-based examples of this abuse I expected the authors to give. But they simply say,

The book [*The God Delusion*] is often little more than an aggregation of convenient factoids suitably overstated to suggest that they constitute an argument. To rebut this highly selective appeal to evidence would be unspeakably tedious.⁴⁷

So the McGraths could not bring themselves to overcome their tedium and give examples after all. As with many of the other books critical of new atheism, the McGraths are guilty of the same scholarly laziness they attribute to the new atheists.

In *The Devil's Delusion*, David Berlinski does quote Dawkins and even takes the trouble (that must have taken some exertion) to give the page number:

[Dawkins says] The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, blood thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.⁴⁸

Berlinski responds, "These are, to my way of thinking, striking points in God's *favor*, but opinions, I suppose, will vary."⁴⁹ It should be noted that Berlinski identifies himself as a "secular Jew."

John Haught, the theologian mentioned earlier, makes an astonishing statement that I will have more to say about in this book:

[Dawkins] uncompromising literalism is nowhere more obvious than his astonishing insistence throughout *The God Delusion* that the notion of God should be treated as a scientific hypothesis.⁵⁰

This pinpoints one of the key differences between atheists and theists as well as agnostics and many old atheists. The non-atheist groups seem to think that God is immune from being studied by the objective, rational methods of science. The new atheists firmly insist that the personal, Abrahamic God is a scientific hypothesis that can be tested by the standard methods of science. And, as we will see, he has failed the test.

Theists were not the only ones unhappy with *The God Delusion*. One of Dawkins's own colleagues in evolutionary biology, David Slone Wilson, also an atheist, complains that Dawkins is wrong about religion:

In *Darwin's Cathedral*⁵¹ I attempted to contribute to the relatively new field of evolutionary religious studies. When Dawkins' *The God Delusion* was published I naturally assumed that he was basing his critique of religion on the scientific study of religion from an evolutionary perspective. I regret to report otherwise. He has not done any original work on the subject and he has not fairly represented the work of his colleagues.

Wilson does not review *The God Delusion* at all but spends his time arguing about evolutionary theories of religion, in particular the controversial question of group selection, which is not what Dawkins's book is about. Dawkins has no trouble shooting Wilson down:

Why would Wilson "naturally assume" any such thing? Reasonable, perhaps, to assume that I would pay some attention to the evolution of religion, but why base a critique on an evolutionary perspective, any more than on Assyrian woodwind instruments or the burrowing behaviour of aardvarks? *The God Delusion* does, as it happens, have a chapter on the evolutionary origins of religion. But to say that this chapter is peripheral to my main critique would be an understatement. When I was asked to

prepare an abridgment for the British audio recording, I had to decide which bits of the book were essential, and which bits could, however regretfully, be left out. My first cut, and the only chapter I deleted completely, was the chapter on evolutionary origins. Sad as I was to lose it (I was consoled by the fact that we also recorded an unabridged version for the American market) it seemed to me the least essential chapter to the central theme of the book.

Breaking the Taboo

Not all new atheists take as hard a line, and so are not as subject to as much God-lover venom as Harris, Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. We will get to Hitchens in a moment. But first let me mention the work of the eminent philosopher Daniel Dennett that has been considered part of New Atheism.

Dennett is the author of a dozen books. He is best known for two lengthy, scholarly tomes that present a strong case for the purely material world that I have identified as the atheist world-view. In *Consciousness Explained* (1991) Dennett attempted to show that the phenomenon we call consciousness can be understood as resulting from purely physical processes in the brain.⁵² While a number of other scholars have made the same claim, Dennett's book is noted for arguing that the philosophical concept of *qualia*, which refers to the properties of sensory experiences — qualities or sensations such as pleasure or color — is incoherent and thus meaningless. This conclusion is, to say the least, highly controversial.

In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) Dennett asserted that Darwinian natural selection not only is sufficient to explain the evolution of life but also is an organizing principle that can be applied in other domains such as mind, culture, morality, and society.⁵³ Also not exactly non-controversial.

Dennett's contribution to the new atheist literature is called *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Unlike the other books we are summarizing, *Breaking the Spell* is not an argument for atheism and, although an outspoken atheist, Dennett insists he is not speaking to the choir. Rather he wants to convince believers and nonbelievers alike that, whether or not God exists, religion is such an important part of society that it should be studied scientifically, like any other natural phenomenon.

Many readers have misinterpreted Dennett's title as "breaking the spell of religion." However, he insists this is not what he meant. As he explains, "The spell that I say *must* be broken is the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many."⁵⁴

Furthermore, Dennett does not claim to have the answers to the questions that such a study would raise and all he does is make some tentative proposals in that direction.

Even his definition of religion is tentative:

I propose to define religions as *social systems whose participants avow beliefs in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.*⁵⁵

As many critics have pointed out, religion is already a subject of scientific study, so Dennett is really not proposing that much new. He summarizes the various proposals already found in a rapidly growing literature on the possible evolutionary origins of religion, including his own tentative scheme in which the unit of social evolution is not the gene but the “meme.” *Meme* is a term introduced by Dawkins for any idea or thought that can replicate from one brain to another analogous to the biological gene. Dennett, does not claim any of these theories, including his own, is established.

This biggest theist objection to Dennett, however, is again the one we saw before by John Haught – the simple act of applying science to religion. In his review in the *New York Times*, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, Leon Wieseltier, accuses Dennett of *scientism*:

Scientism, the view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical, is a superstition, one of the dominant superstitions of our day; and it is not an insult to science to say so. For a sorry instance of present-day scientism, it would be hard to improve on Daniel C. Dennett's book. "Breaking the Spell" is a work of considerable historical interest, because it is a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions.⁵⁶

The *Times* should not be asking a literary editor to review a book on science any more than they should ask a scientist like myself to review a book on Shakespeare. Wieseltier does not provide a quotation from Dennett, or any other

new atheist for that matter, which asserts that science has all the answers. His is the typical misunderstanding of science found among academics who never took a course in science during all their years of education. Science provides many answers that are amply verified in the modern world and to refer to these as “contemporary superstitions” is an insult to scientists everywhere. Does Wieseltier go to a barber rather than a dentist when he has a toothache? Does he write his reviews on clay tablets instead of a word processor? Religion is a social phenomenon that is observable and thereby amenable to study by scientific means just as tribal customs in the Amazon or the culture of the Internet.

However, I do agree with Wieseltier when he says “You cannot disprove a belief unless you disprove its content.”⁵⁷ Dennett insists he is not interested in proving or disproving the existence of God and that the issue is not relevant to the scientific study of religion. His critics don’t believe his claimed disinterest, and other new atheists agree that the existence or non-existence of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God is not only provable both logically and empirically but that his existence has been disproved beyond all reasonable doubt.

Still, it is hard to see how Dennett’s book should have offended so many theists. I think his unpopularity among believers is more the result of his body of work including the books mentioned and various articles in newspapers and magazines. He and Richard Dawkins have been supportive of the movement among a group of atheists to use the term “brights” to refer to themselves in the same way that homosexuals refer to themselves as “gays.” Dennett’s op-ed piece

in the *New York Times* pushing the bright idea drew a lot of attention.⁵⁸ The implication that offends most believers is that they are thereby “dims.” Dennett denies this, noting that non-gays are not called “glums” but “straights” and believers could call themselves “supers” since they believe in the supernatural.⁵⁹ However, the term “bright” has not been adopted by the majority of new or old atheists. Christopher Hitchens has called it “conceited” and “cringe making.”⁶⁰

God: A Failed Hypothesis?

The next new atheist book to appear chronologically was my own effort, *God: The Failed Hypothesis – How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*, which made the *New York Times* bestseller list in March, 2007.⁶¹ There I argue that the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God can be proved not to exist beyond a reasonable doubt.

While I present some of the logical arguments that have appeared in recent literature, my main message is based on the fact that, although there are differences, the god of each of the three great monotheisms plays such an important role in the working of the universe and in the lives of humans that the effects of that deep involvement should be observable by the human senses and the instruments we have built to increase the power of these senses.

I disagreed sharply with those, including many nonbelieving scientists, who insist that science has nothing to say about God. Certainly science is not in a position to answer metaphysical questions about the nature of God, such as whether he exists outside of time. But it can examine the physical phenomena that should follow from the hypothesis of a God who is supposed to perform

certain acts, from creating the universe and designing life, to answering prayers and revealing universal truths to humanity. These phenomena are testable just as those from any scientific theory. The failure of these tests implies the falsification of the hypothesis. The God hypothesis has failed those tests.

Now, what have the apologists said about my book? It should come as no surprise to hear that I did not convince Dinesh D'Souza. He refers to my cosmological discussion: "Physicist Victor Stenger says the universe may be 'uncaused' and may have "emerged from nothing."⁶² D'Souza scoffs,⁶³ "Even David Hume, one of the most skeptical of all philosophers, regarded this position as ridiculous . . . Hume wrote in 1754, 'I have never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might rise without cause.'"⁶⁴

Hume can be excused from not knowing quantum mechanics in 1754; but D'Souza cannot be excused in 2007, over a century since its discovery. According to conventional interpretations of quantum mechanics, nothing "causes" the atomic transitions that produce light or nuclear decay that produce nuclear radiation. These happen spontaneously and only their probabilities can be calculated. In the course of this book we will see many more examples of the sheer ignorance or deliberate misrepresentation of science among Christian apologists such as D'Souza. We will also get into the more serious, knowledgeable objections when we discuss the various contentious issues in detail.

Is God Great?

The final book in the first round of new atheist literature that I will introduce here is *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens, which made first place on the *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction list in early June, 2007.

Hitchens is in many ways the most interesting of the new atheists, even more controversial than Richard Dawkins. Only theists hate Dawkins. Hitchens's detractors are more widely dispersed, although he has been nothing but kind to and supportive of me personally.

Hitchens was born in England and read philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford. He immigrated to the United States in 1981 where he has been a prolific essayist and book reviewer after an earlier career as a foreign correspondent. He currently works for *Vanity Fair* magazine and his articles appear regularly in many other major journals.

Hitchens's political opinions are, to say the least, curious, as he has moved from a far-left Trotskyite to a supporter of many neoconservative positions. He has severely criticized Bill Clinton, Henry Kissinger, and Ronald Reagan. He has hit hard at religious leaders such as Mother Teresa, Tenzon Gyatso the 14th Dalai Lama, and Jerry Falwell. His friendship with Salmon Rushdie has led him to speak out forcefully against "Islamic fascism" and support the war in Iraq as part of the battle against this particular evil. As was the case with Sam Harris, and all

other new atheists, I will not discuss Hitchens's politics or any other opinions that have nothing to do directly with atheism.

"God is not Great" is an allusion to the Islamic exclamation "*Allahu Akbar*" or "God is Great." Hitchens lists four "irreducible objections" to religious faith:

- It wholly misrepresents the origins of humans and the cosmos.
- It manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism.
- It is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression.
- It is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.⁶⁵

In an epigraph Hitchens quotes John Stuart Mill on Mill's father's view of religion. It is worth repeating in full because it well represents the views of the new atheists and how they dramatically differ from the more conciliatory attitudes of the current mainstream of nonbelievers:

His aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality: first, by setting up factitious excellencies – belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human kind – and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtue: but above all, by radically vitiating the standards of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.⁶⁶

God is not Great is available as an audio book read by the author, whose speaking voice is hardly distinguishable from that of the late, great actor Richard Burton.⁶⁷ Listening to chapter 4 you will hear an eloquent statement of the moral evils of religion, the unnecessary death and suffering of millions of people brought about by lunatic religious beliefs that are enforced by cowardly politicians throughout the world.

Theologian Haught admits:

The catalog of evils committed under the umbrella of theistic faiths is a long one, and the writings of Hitchens, Dawkins, and Harris could well serve as an examination of conscience by those of us who think of God as infinite goodness, self-serving love, the ground of our freedom, the author of life, and our ultimate destiny.⁶⁸

Haught's response is not to seek a reason for the catalog of evils, but to ponder, "Not everybody thinks of God in such [infinitely good] terms, and it could be enlightening to find out why."⁶⁹ It would be more enlightening to find out why believers can still think of God in such loving terms given the catalog of evils that is presented in the three books, facts that in all cases cannot be disputed.

But to a theologian who works from the unquestioned starting assumption that an all good, all powerful, all knowing God exists, the atheist has to be the one in error. He concludes that the atheist cannot find a solid justification for his

ethical values in the absence of God. He refers to Harris as conjecturing that we can fall back on reason alone. Haught asks “why should we trust our reasoning abilities either?”⁷⁰

Earlier we saw that Haught objected to treating God as a scientific hypothesis. His distrust in reason matches his distrust in science. And this is exactly the place where the battle line between theism and atheism is to be drawn. The theist thinks that he has some superior channel to reality, provided by God’s revelations. The atheist argues that empirical science and reason are the most reliable tools we have to determine truths about the world. The reason we trust reason and science, and have no trust whatsoever in religious arguments, is that science and reason work in understanding the world and making it a better place for humanity while religious argument leads universally to dismal failure and untold human suffering.

Notes

¹ Victor J. Stenger. *Quantum Gods: Creation, Chaos, and the Search for Cosmic*

Consciousness (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008).

² Richard Branham, private communication.

³ Bill Maher, *Religulous*. Documentary film directed by Larry Charles. Lionsgate (2008).

⁴ The biblical story of Abraham is inconsistent with archeological findings. See Israel Finkelstein, and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed:*

Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts

(New York: Free Press, 2001), pp. 33-36.

⁵ Michael Martin. "Atheism" in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* ed. by Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), p. 88.

⁶ Adherents.com. http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html (accessed February 10, 2009).

⁷ David B. Barrett, et al., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ FoxNews, November 1, 2008, <http://elections.foxnews.com/2008/11/01/dole-trails-democratic-rival-hagan-north-carolina-senate-race/> accessed November 5, 2008.

⁹ The Baylor Religion Survey, The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (September 2006). Selected findings at <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2008).

¹⁰ Dan Barker, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2008).

¹¹ I will not give web addresses for organizations or well-known individuals, since these frequently change and they can be easily found with an Internet search.

¹² See *The God Delusion*, pp. 375-79.

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- ¹³ Stephanie Simon, "Atheists Reach Out—Just Don't Call it Proselytizing," *The Wall Street Journal* (November 18, 2008).
- ¹⁴ Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity?* (Washington, DC: Regnery Pub, 2007), p xv.
- ¹⁵ Becky Garrison. *The New Atheist Crusaders and Their Unholy Grail: The Misguided Quest to Destroy Your Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), p. 18.
- ¹⁶ John F. Haught. *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 20-22.
- ¹⁷ Victor J. Stenger, *The Comprehensible Cosmos: Where Do the Laws of Physics Come From?* (Prometheus Books, 2006), pp. 304-12.
- ¹⁸ *The End of Faith*.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 15.
- ²⁰ Noam Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Open Media/Seven Stories Press, 2001).
Excerpts can be found at http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Chomsky/9-11_Chomsky.html (accessed November 12, 2008).
- ²¹ Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy At Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003), p. 138.
- ²² *The End of Faith*, p. 148.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*

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- ²⁵ Beyond Belief: Science, Reason, Religion, and Survival, *The Science Network*, <http://thesciencenetwork.org/programs/beyond-belief-science-religion-reason-and-survival> (accessed October 22, 2008).
- ²⁶ Steven Weinberg, quoted by James Glanz, "Physicist Ponders God, Truth and 'a Final Theory'," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2000.
- ²⁷ Steven Weinberg, *Freethought Today*, April 2000.
- ²⁸ *The New Atheist Crusaders and Their Unholy Grail*, p. 5.
- ²⁹ Sam Harris. *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p. vii.
- ³¹ Sam Harris, "Response to Criticism," http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/response-to-controversy2/ (accessed February 10, 2009).
- ³² *The Selfish Gene*.
- ³³ There is no physical unit in a biological cell that is identified as a gene. Rather it is a unit of specific information that is part of the DNA or RNA in a cell.
- ³⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype : The Gene as the Unit of Selection* (Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; San Francisco: Freeman, 1982).
- ³⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker : Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York: Norton, 1996).
- ³⁶ William Paley, *Natural Theology; Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, 12th ed. (London: Printed for J. Faulder, 1809).

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- ³⁷ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden : A Darwinian View of Life*, vol. Science masters series (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995).
- ³⁸ Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, 1st American ed. (New York: Norton, 1996).
- ³⁹ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and the Appetite for Wonder* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).
- ⁴⁰ Richard Dawkins, and Latha Menon, *A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Essays* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003).
- ⁴¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).
- ⁴² Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). The audiobook beautifully read by the author and his wife, actress Lalla Ward, is available in the U.K. by Random House, U.K. and in North America by Tantor Media, Inc. (2006).
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- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 3.
- ⁴⁵ Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath. *The Dawkins Delusion : Atheist Fundamentalism And The Denial Of The Divine*, (InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 11.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 12.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 13.
- ⁴⁸ *The God Delusion*, p.

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- ⁴⁹ David Berlinski. *The Devil's Delusion : Atheism And Its Scientific Pretensions* (Crown Forum, 2008), p. 44.
- ⁵⁰ *God and the New Atheism*, p. 31.
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- ⁵² Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Little Brown, 1991).
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- ⁵⁴ *Breaking the Spell*, p. 17.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid* p. 9.
- ⁵⁶ Leon Wieseltier, "The God Genome," *New York Times*, February 19, 2006.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁸ Daniel Dennett, "The Bright Stuff," *New York Times*, July 12, 2003.
- ⁵⁹ *Breaking the Spell*, p. 21.
- ⁶⁰ *God is Not Great*, p. 5.
- ⁶¹ *God: The Failed Hypothesis*.
- ⁶² Victor J. Stenger, "Has Science Found God?" *Free Inquiry* 19, No. 1 (Winter 1998/1999): 56-58.
- ⁶³ *What's So Great About Christianity?* p. 125.
- ⁶⁴ J.Y.T. Greid, ed. *The Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 187.
- ⁶⁵ *God is Not Great*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ John Stuart Mill, On his father in *Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1873), quoted in *God is Not Great*, p. 15.

⁶⁷ Hatchett Audio; Unabridged edition (May 1, 2007).

⁶⁸ *God and the New Atheism*, paperback edition, p. 72.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 73-74.