

## 10.

### THE FUTURE OF ATHEISM

*Imagine there's no countries*

*It isn't hard to do*

*Nothing to kill or die for*

*And no religion too*

*Imagine all the people*

*Living life in peace*

—John Lennon

### The Origin of Religion

As Daniel Dennett makes clear in *Breaking the Spell*, we still do not have a scientific consensus on the origin of religion. A common theory is that religion is somehow built into our brains, that we have a “god gene” or simply a predisposition to look for agents behind all phenomena.<sup>1</sup> If so, then it most likely would have been put there by evolution.

Usually, when we talk about the evolution of a part of the body, we assume that it had some survival value—if not for the individual, then for a gene. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes our body has a part, or a particular structure, that just occurred by accident and wasn't sufficiently

harmful to be weeded out by natural selection. The god gene might be one of these. Or, more likely, it does not exist.<sup>2</sup>

The early, tribal precursors to religion were divination and magic. We can imagine a shaman in some ancient forest tribe stumbling across some black powder that exploded with a loud bang and bright flash of light when thrown into a fire. He would be sorely tempted to claim special powers for himself by producing such an explosion in front of the tribe during a ritual.

Shamans were expected to reveal information about the agents who ran the world and to help manipulate them. There was no sharp distinction between natural and supernatural. The morals suitable to small groups – fairness, empathy, tit-for-tat, honesty, reciprocity, and suspicion of outsiders – have plausibly been built into us by social evolution. Several of them have been found in the higher social animals like chimpanzees and wolves. But with the development of agriculture humans began to live in much larger groups. Interactions of trade and commerce were between strangers and tribal morality was too narrow to regulate these interactions. Leaders sought to impose broader rules of behavior and supernatural agents were invoked to underwrite these rules. Of course leaders also saw securing their own power as an essential good of the society. It is no accident that the origination of religions in the Middle East coinciding with the development of agriculture was hierarchical with priests and kings acting as conduits for divine authority. Ultimately the kings of Christendom asserted Divine Right with the help of the

Church. And in China, the emperor had long been viewed as the conduit to Heaven.

In chapter 5 we saw how, despite the official atheism of the communist state, Stalin normalized relations with the Russian Orthodox Church during World War II. You can bet that did not come without *quid pro quos*. For example, the Church helped the government suppress rival denominations that were not so cooperative.<sup>3</sup> In centuries past the Russian Orthodox Church had close connections with the Czarist secret police, so it is no surprise that Stalin and now the current Russian strongman, former KGB officer Vladimir Putin, embraced the ROC. So you don't even have to have a nation and government of believers to use religion to keep people in line.

Although religion and morality have always gone hand-in-hand, this does not imply that religion is necessary for morality. Most moral precepts can be interpreted as part of the social contract we make with each other in order to live together in peace and harmony. When we don't, as is often the case, the cause can be attributed to a breakdown of that contract. Religion is often a big player in that breakdown.

## **A God Gene?**

It seems to me highly unlikely that there is a god gene or any other mechanism built into the brain to specifically produce religious belief. If there were, then there wouldn't be over a billion nonbelievers in the world. Furthermore, whatever special survival value may have been provided by religion has not yet

had time to shape significantly the evolution of the human body. People forget that the timescale of biological evolution is vast by human standards. We have essentially the same bodies our ancestors had 100,000 years ago and our brains have not changed much in at least half that time.<sup>4</sup> However, it may be that the brain had certain systems already built in for other reasons that predisposed it to religious thinking once society developed, as suggested by Pascal Boyer in *Religion Explained*.

Now, that does not mean the social systems could not have evolved over shorter times. The mechanism for social evolution is still debated, but it seems reasonable that it happens. In that case religion may have evolved socially, rather than biologically, because of survival or other value to the society that practiced one form or another – or, accidentally. In an article in *Free Inquiry*, historian Alexander Saxton quotes me as saying:

[Empirical] evidence does not support the widespread assertion that religion is especially beneficial to society as a whole. Of course, it has always proved extremely beneficial to those in power – helping them to retain that power – from prehistoric times to the [2004] presidential election. But it is not clear how society is any better off than it would have been had the idea of gods and spirits never evolved.<sup>5</sup>

Saxton argues that it is difficult to imagine that religion, at least historically, would not have become so universal to our species had it not contributed

adaptively to human survival. I don't disagree, except to dispute that it is all that universal. My statement was that things might have been better without religion. The reason religion won out over non-religion had more to do with the survival of power elites than the benefit of the masses. In fact, Saxton attributes the connection between war and religion as the mechanism by which religion abetted the process. Religion stimulates war and war stimulates technological progress that, in the long run, enhances the global dominance of the human species.

However, Saxton points out that with the Second World War and the nuclear bomb, along with ecological burnout, things changed. Religion ceased to be adaptive to human survival and became dysfunctional. Instead of putting the blame where it belongs, on all of us, religions seek to place the blame elsewhere – on agents of an Evil Empire. Saxton concludes:

The truth – the hard core, “get real” kind of truth – is that somewhere down under, by some sort of subluminal awareness, every human being really *knows* that believing in belief (as the song famously tells us about falling in love with love), is “nothing but make believe.” The atheist’s mission is to nourish the seed beneath the snow; to seek not escape but survival.<sup>6</sup>

## The Gods Are Not Winning

In their 2004 book *Sacred and Secular*, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart take a sociological look at the world trends in religion and secularism.<sup>7</sup> As they point out,

The seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud – all believed that that religions would gradually fade away in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society.<sup>8</sup>

However, religion is still very much with us over a century later and many observers have drawn the opposite conclusion, that it is secularism that is fading away:

After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper '*requiescat in pace*.'<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the data, however, secularism is far from dead. In fact, it is the fastest growing "belief system" in the world. The number of nonreligionists in the world grew from 3.2 million in 1900 to 918 million in 2000. Agnostics and atheists are now expanding at a rate of 8.5 million converts each year. They have moved from 0.2 percent to 15 percent of the population in that time.<sup>10</sup>

Even in the U.S. the religion trend is slowly and surely downward. From 1978 to 2008 church membership dropped from 70 to 65 percent. Bible literalists decreased from 40 percent to 30 percent. Bible skeptics grew from 10 to 20 percent. Mormonism is the exception, but with its 12 million adherents it is still well below nonbelievers.

As few as one in four Americans are actually in church on a typical Sunday, with only a few percent in the megachurches. The Southern Baptist church, the largest born again sect, is baptizing at about the same rate as fifty years ago, when the population was half what it is today.

Since 1900 Christians have remained at a steady level of one-third of the world's population, with no growth evident. Neither are Hindus experiencing growth, at a seventh of the total. Paganism, including modern versions such as Scientology and New Ageism, has contracted by half.

In a hundred years Islam has risen from one eighth to one fifth of the world and is predicted to be one quarter by 2050. This is the result of the large birthrate among Muslims rather than converts. The result is a rapidly growing proportion of Muslims worldwide, little or no growth in Christians and Hindus and at the same time a rapidly growing proportion of nonbelievers. The losers are other believers.

Nonbelievers now form majorities in Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. The Church of England may drop Sabbath services because of poor attendance.

The expected revival of religion in Russia that was predicted with the end of Communism has not materialized. Despite the support given by the government to the Russian Orthodox Church, which was mentioned above and in chapter 5, only 25 percent of Russians believe in God. Faith is even declining in previously very Catholic Poland.

China is another place where reports have claimed a surge in religion that is not backed up by the facts. One poll estimated 300 million Chinese are religious, mostly Buddhists and Taoists with 40 million Christians. This implies about a billion nonbelieving Chinese, doubling the world figure I have been using in this book. However, most Chinese have various traditional supernatural beliefs, especially in regard to medicine, and so no doubt there are not many died-in-the-wool atheists.

## **Understanding the Data**

Norris and Inglehart have pinpointed where the sharp decrease in religiosity is taking place. In the period 1917 to 1984, religiosity remained largely unchanged in agrarian societies, where the economies are based on agriculture, and in industrial societies, where the economies are based on manufacturing. However, it has fallen sharply in “postindustrial” societies, where the economies are based on services. These are societies where at least two-thirds of the gross domestic product arises from services.

These authors also confirm the observations of others that a strong correlation exists between religiosity and income, both individually and by

nation. When you plot the religiosity of a nation against its per capita gross domestic product you see a strong correlation in which religiosity falls off as a nation is increasingly wealthy (see Fig. 10.1). The exception is the wealthiest nation of all, the United States. In America religiosity is on a par with the far poorer nations of Mexico and Chile. This is called the *American anomaly*.

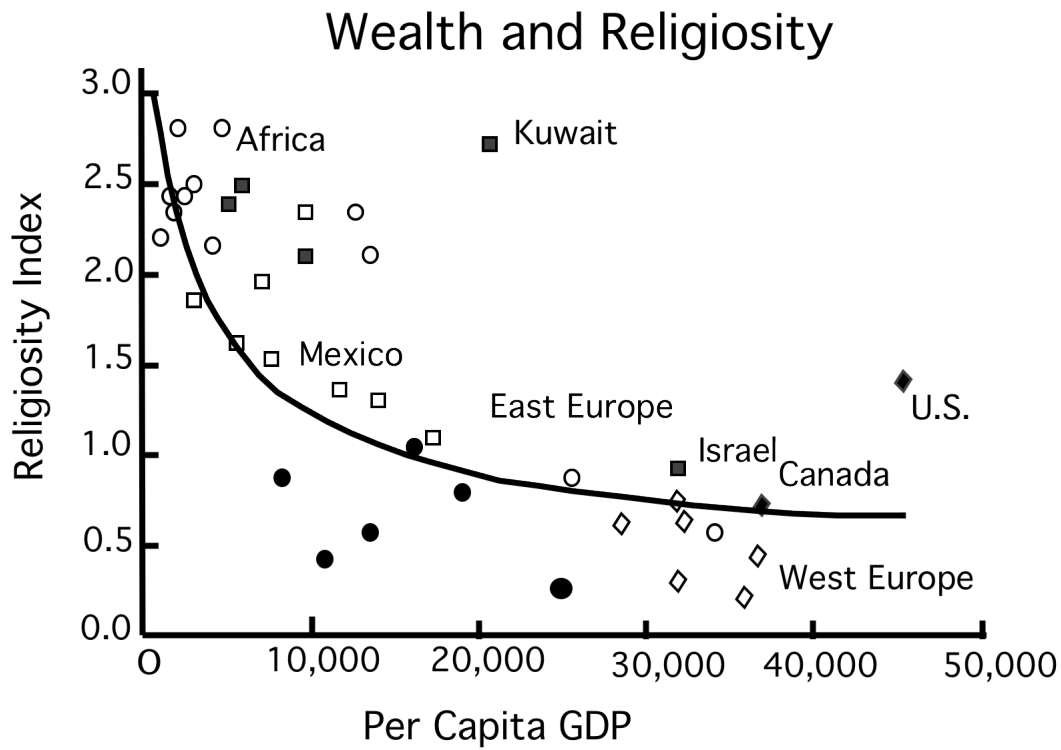


Fig. 10.1. Relationship between a nation's religiosity and its wealth. Reprinted by permission of the Pew Global Attitudes Project.

Disagreement exists among sociologists on the source of the American anomaly. Independent researcher Gregory Paul has proposed an answer in a *Free Inquiry* article titled "The Big Religion Questions Finally Solved."<sup>11</sup> Plotting the *income inequality* in a nation versus religiosity he sees religiosity falling off as the

income inequality decreases. The U.S. is still slightly anomalous, but far less so than when you consider income alone, falling just slightly above the average trend.

Paul has constructed what he calls a “Successful Societies Scale” (SSS) that compares collective scores on levels of homicide, incarceration, youth and adult mortality, suicide, teen pregnancy, abortion, fertility, marriage and marriage failure, alcohol consumption, corruption, life satisfaction, per-capita income, income disparity, poverty, work hours, and employment levels. He does not give us the formula he uses to calculate SSS, nor does he give any references. However defined, Paul claims a correlation between his SSS and increasing secularism. The more secular a society, the more it enjoys better societal conditions. On this scale, America is the most dysfunctional nation of the first world, with an SSS well below the rest. Paul concludes:

The United States is a religious anomaly *because* its socioeconomical system is correspondingly anomalous and pathological in contrast to first world norms.<sup>12</sup>

Paul suggests that Americans use religion as a form of self-medication to alleviate the chronic stress and anxiety engendered by their society's many failings.<sup>13</sup>

However, as reasonable as this sounds to the liberal ear, this conclusion is not supported by his own data. The correlation between Paul's SSS and secularity (defined as the opposite of religiosity) is no more significant than the one between income inequality and religiosity. Paul does not provide any statistical tests and his essay, bereft as it is of most of the needed ingredients, can hardly be classified as a scientific study. So, it seems to me, all the other factors he puts into his SSS index other than income inequality contribute nothing to the conclusion. This is further muddled by the fact that the factors are not independent but all interrelated. That means you can pick any one, say health care, and conclude that excessive religiosity in America is caused by the lack of universal health care.

Paul's explanation of the American anomaly in terms of societal dysfunction is not confirmed by the data of Norris and Inglehart. When they compare religiosity with income inequality not only does the U.S. remain anomalously high, but so do Ireland, Canada, Italy, and Finland.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, France and The Netherlands are anomalously low. Income inequality may account partially for religiosity, but it clearly is not the only factor. If it was, all the countries would be closer to the line.

In fact, Norris and Inglehart admit that their data do not reveal an explanation:

In postindustrial nations no empirical support that we have examined could explain why some rich nations are far more religious than others.<sup>15</sup>

Or, they might add, some, like France and The Netherlands, less religious.

However, a page later they offer an opinion similar to Paul's and similarly unsupported by their data:

The United States is exceptionally high in religiosity in large part, we believe, because it is also one of the most unequal postindustrial societies under comparison. Relatively high levels of economic insecurity are experienced by many sectors of U.S. society, despite American affluence, due to the cultural emphasis on the values of personal responsibility, individual achievement and mistrust of big government, limiting the role of public services and the welfare state for basic matters such as healthcare covering all the working population. Many American families even in the professional classes, face risks of unemployment, the dangers of sudden ill health without private medical insurance, vulnerability to becoming a victim of crime and the problem of paying for long term care for the elderly. Americans face greater anxieties than citizens in other countries about whether they will be covered by

medical insurance, whether they will be fired arbitrarily, or they will be forced to choose between losing their job and devoting themselves to their newborn child.<sup>16</sup>

As we have known from the time of the philosopher David Hume, correlation does not imply causation. While it may appeal to those who already ideologically view America as dysfunctional to attribute this as the primary source of America's excessive religiosity, the data do not confirm this. While African Americans and blue collar workers tend to be religious, the white evangelicals you find in megachurch pews and working to get Republicans elected are often very well off. Much of the money that supports the many organizations in the U.S. that promote extreme conservative views comes from wealthy Christians.

Economic and social inequality probably plays some role in excessive religiosity, for some sectors of American life, but other factors undoubtedly also come in, particularly history. Anyone familiar with the history of these nations should not be surprised to find the U.S., Ireland, and Italy on the high side of religiosity while France sits on the low side.

## **Godless Society**

Religious extremists in America have tried to argue that atheism and secularism would destroy the foundations of society. Televangelist Pat Robertson has asserted that when a society is without religion "the result will be tyranny."<sup>17</sup> In her bestseller *Godless* (same title as book by atheist Dan Barker) , conservative

writer Ann Coulter says societies that fail to grasp God's significance are headed toward slavery, genocide, and bestiality.<sup>18</sup> She also asserts that when evolution is widely accepted in a given society, all morality is abandoned.<sup>19</sup> Influential television commentator Bill O'Reilly has said that a society that fails to live "under God" will be a society of "anarchy and crime"<sup>20</sup> where "lawbreakers are allowed to run wild."<sup>21</sup>

British cleric and theologian Keith Ward has argued that societies lacking strong religious beliefs are immoral, un-free, and irrational.<sup>22</sup> Philosopher John D. Caputo declared that people who are without religion and who do not love God are nothing more than selfish louts, thereby implying that a society with a preponderance of godless people would be a fairly loveless, miserable place.<sup>23</sup>

One again we see how believers ignore the evidence and make up facts to suit their own prejudices. That's the way faith operates and that's why it should be challenged. Any number of societies now exist where the majority has freely abandoned religion and God. Far from being dens of iniquity, these societies are the happiest, safest, and most successful in the world.

Sociologist Phil Zuckerman spent fourteen months during 2005-2006 in Denmark and Sweden interviewing a wide range of people about their religious beliefs. He presented his results in a 2008 book *Society without God*.<sup>24</sup>

The first thing Zuckerman noticed upon arriving in Aarhus, Denmark was: no cops. He saw no police cars, no officers patrolling on foot or motorcycle. A grand total of 31 days passed before seeing his first police presence. In 2004 the

total number of murders in Aarhus, a bustling metropolis of a quarter million people, was one.

Most Danes and Swedes do not even believe in the notion of “sin,” yet their violent crime rates are the lowest in the world. Almost nobody goes to church or reads the Bible. Are they unhappy? In a survey of happiness in 91 nations, Denmark ranked number one.<sup>25</sup>

Zuckerman notes that while Denmark and Sweden are societies without God, they are not societies without religion. The majority still pay one percent of their annual incomes to support their national churches, get married in church, and baptize their children in church. Most still think of themselves as “Christians.” This is done not from faith or spiritual conviction, but out of a sense of cultural tradition. It is unthinkable to most couples not to have a “real wedding” with a “white dress in an old church.”<sup>26</sup>

I have observed a similar phenomenon among many of the Jews I have met over the years. Although few admitted it outright, I got the impression that many did not believe in God but nevertheless practiced the rituals of Judaism out of respect for and desire to participate in their ancient heritage. Perhaps this is what we can look forward to as belief declines in America, if it is not already happening – a continued use of the church as a place to celebrate rites of passage, participate in a community, and perhaps even use as a pleasant, quiet place to meditate.

I need not list all the statistics on Denmark and Sweden to show that belief is very low. Basically about 20 percent believe in a personal God, consider God to be important in their lives, and believe in life after death compared to about 80 percent in America.

What about the health of these godless societies? By every measure of societal health—life expectancy, literacy rates, school enrollment rates, standard of living, infant mortality, child welfare, economic equality, economic competitiveness, gender equality, healthcare, lack of corruption, environmental protection, charity to poor nations, crime suicide, unemployment—Denmark and Sweden rank near the top.

I don't want to leave the impression that these nations have no problems. Certainly they do, but they are freer to consider rational solutions not having a majority of citizens who rely on ancient fables for primary guidance.

However, the movement toward increasing secularity in Europe may not continue indefinitely. Eric Kaufmann, a reader in politics and sociology at the University of London has used birth rate data to project that the current trend on decreasing religiosity in Britain, France, and Scandinavia will continue to decrease until around 2050 and then turn around, returning to current levels by 2100.<sup>27</sup> It seems that the future of atheism will depend on two factors: education and economics. If problems with global warming, overpopulation, and energy are not dealt with and even the current rich countries become poor and uneducated, atheism will be one of the first things to go. But, if we can solve these problems,

and people everywhere gain a better life, then they will have no further need to hope than some invisible force will someday appear in the sky and put an end to our suffering.

## **Living without Religion**

Several books have come out in recent years in which atheists not directly associated with the new atheist movement have provided their suggestions on how to live without the supposed comfort of religion. Eric Maisel is a PhD whose publisher describes him as a “psychotherapist, philosopher, cultural observer,” and “America’s foremost creativity coach.” He has just released *The Atheist Way: Living Well Without Gods*.<sup>28</sup> As he describes it:

Living the atheist’s way is more than living without gods, religion, and supernatural enthusiasms – much more. It is a way of life that integrates the secular, humanist, scientific, freethinking, skeptical, rationalist, and existential traditions into a complete worldview and that rallies that worldview under the banner of atheism, choosing that precise word as its rallying cry. It chooses *atheism* to make clear that our best chance for survival is for members of our species to grow into a mature view of self-interest, one in which human beings can discuss their conflicting interests without one side betraying the other by playing the god card.

*The Atheist’s Way* centers on the question of *meaning*. Instead of assuming that supernatural forces outside ourselves determine our

meaning in life, we make our own meaning. Meaning, value, and purpose are human ideas. As Dan Barker puts it, "Instead of a purpose-driven life we have a life-driven purpose." Still, there is something about the book that strikes me as little more than psychobabble self-help with a heavy emphasis on self.

Reference to megachurch pastor Rick Warren's inspirational book of the decade, *The Purpose-Driven Life*,<sup>29</sup> is also made by atheist theologian (yes, there are a few) Robert M. Price in his 2006 book *The Reason Driven Life*.<sup>30</sup> In addition to debunking Warren's theology as having no basis in scripture, Price shows that Warren fails to provide a solution to genuine spiritual hunger. Instead Warren's strict fundamentalist teaching stunts an individual's growth personally, morally, and intellectually. If there is any place where the method of reason promoted by atheism shows its superiority over unquestioned, unsupported faith in helping people live a rewarding life it is here.

An early draft of a book with the working title *A Young Person's Guide to Atheism* was sent to me last year by the author, Chris Edwards. If it ever appears in print, I would recommend it highly. Atheism is growing most rapidly in just the place it needs to grow, with young people. Atheist groups are multiplying rapidly on campuses and I have been pleased and gratified by the enthusiasm I have found in the colleges and universities I have visited over the past two years,

Finally, let me mention *Living Without God* by the distinguished atheist philosopher Ronald Aronson.<sup>31</sup>

Aronson is critical of the new atheists in not providing secularists with an alternative to believe in if they are not to believe in God. They only provide denial of God and nothing to compare with what he calls the “coherence” of religious belief:

Our religious friends affirm their belief in the coherence of the universe and the world, their deep sense of belonging to it and to a human community, their refusal to be stymied by the limits of knowledge, their confidence in dealing with life’s mysteries and uncertainties, their willingness to take complete responsibility for the small things while leaving forces beyond themselves on charge of the large ones, their security in knowing right from wrong, and perhaps above all, their sense of hope about the future.<sup>32</sup>

Aronson then adds,

Even if we would reject these beliefs as unfounded and irrational, we have to be struck by their force. And envy their coherence . . . Besides disbelief, what do we have to offer? What should we tell our children and grandchildren as we see them swept up in a pervasively religious environment.<sup>33</sup>

The new atheists do indeed reject religious beliefs as irrational and are certainly not going to dream up other irrational beliefs to take their place.

We strongly disagree with Aronson that they are “coherent.” It is not coherent to kill for your religious beliefs. The existential questions, "death, loss, suffering, and inhumanity are not answered by the great religions— unless you think "it's a mystery" is an answer.

We also disagree with Aronson’s implication that holding to a set of irrational beliefs can be healthy. And we have plenty to offer besides disbelief. We have freedom of thought, the ability to live our lives the way we want to live them without anybody forcing superstitious rules upon us.

As for what to tell our children and grandchildren, we tell them nothing! We teach them to think for themselves and then trust them to arrive at rational conclusions that suit themselves and serve them in their lives, which belong to them and not to us. My wife and I hardly ever talked about religion at the dinner table and even sent our children to church-connected private schools, at great financial sacrifice, where they would get the best possible education. One of the schools was Punahou, where Barack Obama graduated a few years ahead of my daughter. Our kids attended chapel and never heard us tell them what to believe. Long before I started writing books on the subject they had decided for themselves that there is no God.

Now, Aronson is an atheist and claims he will go beyond the new atheism and tell the rest of us how to live without God. He starts by pointing out that

hundreds of years after the enlightenment it is still very hard to be human, with death, loss, suffering, and inhumanity seemingly inescapable parts of life. Furthermore, “despite” our technological achievements we still are ruining the environment, insecure about healthcare, vulnerable economically, and have an unequal and unfair distribution of wealth. Theists use religion to ease these difficulties of living, and living without God requires finding non-theistic relief from these same difficulties.

Although this is a fine statement of our problem, Aronson does not come close to providing sufficient answers. He presents some bland essays on “gratitude and dependence,” “aging and dying,” and “responsibility and hope” but much more is needed. Aronson usefully provides some of the thoughts of classical thinkers about godlessness, how Albert Camus decided life must always be absurd while John-Paul Sartre “looked beyond absurdity to human-imposed order, meaning, and purpose.”<sup>34</sup> Clearly Maisel (see above) was not first with this idea.

New atheism is, well, new. By the time it becomes old we will surely have more answers. But I submit that it has broken some new ground and already provides some viable ideas about how to live in a godless universe. At this point, let me mention the works of a few recent atheist authors that I have not discussed previously in this book but who have added considerably to the intellectual case for nonbelief: *Atheist Universe: Why God Didn't Have A Thing To Do With It* by self-help author David Mills;<sup>35</sup> *50 Reasons People Give for Believing in*

*a God* by Guy P. Harrison;<sup>36</sup> *Atheism Explained: From Folly to Philosophy* by sociologist David Ramsay Steele;<sup>37</sup> *Encountering Naturalism: A Worldview and Its Uses* by the director of the Center for Naturalism, Thomas W. Clark;<sup>38</sup> and *The Ghost in the Universe: God in Light of Modern Science*<sup>39</sup> by physicist Taner Edis. I highly recommend these to the reader for further study, although I do not claim these authors endorse all the views I have presented or consider themselves “new atheists.”

## **The New Atheism Summarized**

In this book I have reviewed and expanded on the ideas that have become associated with New Atheism as presented in the bestselling books that appeared between 2004 and 2007 by Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and myself. We have departed from the views of traditional atheists in several respects, and some of these added their voices to those of theists to object.

The new atheists’ philosophy is summarized well in the titles and subtitles of their books. Harris urges the “end of faith” since it is worthless and dangerous to believe without evidence. Dawkins sees belief in God as a “delusion.” Dennett urges us to “break the spell” of the taboos about studying and questioning religion. Hitchens writes about “how religion poisons everything.” And I claim that not only is there no evidence for God, “science shows that God does not exist.”

Some atheists criticize these positions as too uncompromising. They say that we need to work together with “moderate” religious groups if we are to keep creationism out of the schools. New atheists do not want to see creationism in the schools either, but do not regard it as such an overarching problem that we can ignore the even greater damage that is done to society by the irrational thinking associated with religion. As long as moderate believers continue to promote an unsupported faith that claims divine revelation as a source of knowledge, they encourage the extreme elements of that faith to feel free to commit any horrific act thinking they are carrying out the will of God.

Theistic critics accuse new atheism of “scientism,” which is the principle that science is the *only* means that can be used to learn about the world and humanity. They cannot quote a single new atheist who has said that. We fully recognize the value of and participate in other realms of thought and activity such as art, music, literature, poetry, and moral philosophy. At the same time, where observed phenomena are at issue, we insist that scientific method has a proper role. This includes questions of the supernatural and the existence of any god who actively engages in the affairs of the universe.

Theists also try to argue that science operates on faith no less than does religion by assuming science and reason apply to reality. This betrays an ignorance of science that is pervasive among theists and theologians. Faith is belief in the absence of evidence. Science is belief in the presence of evidence. When the evidence disagrees with a scientific proposition, the proposition is

discarded. When the evidence disagrees with a religious proposition, the evidence is discarded.

Theists similarly misunderstand the use of reason. They say you can't prove the universe is reasonable without making a circular argument, assuming what it is you are trying to prove. If so, their argument is circular too, because they are using reason. But this is not how it works. It is not the universe that is reasonable or not. It is people who are reasonable or not. Reason and logic are just ways of thinking and speaking that are designed to assure that a concept is consistent with itself and with the data. How can you expect to learn anything from inconsistent, irrational thinking and speaking?

In this regard, I wish to emphasize that our dispute with believers is purely an intellectual one. There is no reason why it cannot be carried on civilly. We are often criticized for engaging in "polemics" against religion, but my dictionary defines polemic as "a passionate argument." What's wrong with being passionate about one's arguments? Believers are equally passionate about theirs. We see nothing wrong with asking the faithful to provide evidence and rational arguments for their faith, rather than us keeping quiet as do so many in our atheist and agnostic friends for fear of offending "deeply held beliefs." And why should we be faulted for bringing up the historical facts about the atrocities committed in the name of God? We have every right as scholars to point out the inconsistencies and downright error in scriptures, and to describe the historical and archaeological finds that prove beyond a reasonable doubt that events like

Exodus never happened and that the Jesus described in the New Testament is largely if not wholly a mythological figure. We are not trying to shut down religious institutions, but we have a right as citizen to object to the illegal and unconstitutional distribution of taxpayer money to these institutions and other special privileges they are awarded by cowardly politicians. And, we feel it is our duty to protest when government officials rely on superstition instead of science to make decisions that affect the lives of everyone on this planet.

I have expanded on the scientific position of new atheism, which holds that a completely materialistic model of the universe satisfactorily explains all our observations from cosmology to the human mind leaving no gap for God or the supernatural to be inserted.

Theists think they have a gap for God provided by the big bang that requires a supernatural creation. I have shown that this claim is based on the mistaken notion that the universe must have had a beginning of infinite density and infinitesimal size called a "singularity." They wrongly interpret this singularity as the beginning of space and time.

Stephen Hawking was one of the authors of the original "proof" three decades ago that such a singularity follows from Einstein's theory of general relativity. Two decades ago, in his bestseller *The Brief History of Time*, Hawking explained that the original calculation did not take into account quantum mechanics and that, when this is done, the singularity does not occur.

Even in their most recent books and lectures, theists continue to ignore Hawking and propagate this error. They don't seem to care since they know their audiences are generally too unsophisticated to pick it up. The universe probably had no beginning. In one plausible scenario that can be completely worked out mathematically, our universe appeared from an earlier one that always existed by a well-understood process called quantum tunneling.

The same misunderstanding of or disregard for the scientific facts holds for another theist claim, that the universe is so fine-tuned for life that it could only have been created by an intelligent being. Even my new atheist colleagues have trouble with this one because they are not physicists. In this book, and earlier ones, I have tried to explain why the fine-tuning argument fails. The parameters of nature are not fine-tuned at all. Either they have the values they do because of being arbitrary to begin with, being fixed by the laws of physics, or else they still allow for *some* kind of life when other parameters are varied. A common mistake by the unqualified people making these claims of fine-tuning is to fix all the parameters but one and then vary just that one. Any properly trained scientist knows that all parameters must be varied when studying what happens when the parameters of a system change.

The Intelligent Design movement in biology is dying a natural death, although we will probably hear a few death throes before final interment. Intelligent Design in cosmology deserves to die. I am tired of shooting so many arrows into it. The new area in science where theists are beginning to stake out a

position is the mind. They think they can find a gap for God in the fact that neuroscience still does not have a consensus on a purely material model for the operations of the brain that are associated with thinking and consciousness. However, we have seen that all the evidence points to the mind as a purely material phenomenon and the only valid objections to this conclusion are theological or philosophical. Claims of evidence for special powers of the mind, such as ESP, do not stand up under the application of the same strict criteria used in assessing any extraordinary claim in science.

I have given examples of the atrocities in the Bible and those committed by religion over the ages. I spent some time on the Mormons since they represent a sect that formed sufficiently recently that we have reliable historical data on which to draw some conclusions about why religion and violence go together like a horse and carriage. I like simple answers, and the answer is simple. People are capable of slitting a baby's throat if they are convinced they are following God's orders.

I also have countered some of the criticism of the new atheists, particularly aimed at Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens who blame September 11 and other terrorist acts squarely on religion and not the sole result of political oppression. As we saw in chapter 5, the last instructions Mohammed Atta gave to his team makes this perfectly clear. Islam flew those planes into those buildings.

Many of the theist books critical of New Atheism attempt to argue that “atheists” like Hitler and Stalin killed more people than all the kings of Christendom, the Crusades, and Inquisition put together. This assertion is invalid on several fronts. First, there is no atheist scripture that tells people to kill people in the name of atheism, the way the Bible and Qur’an condone the killing of nonbelievers. Second, Hitler was not an atheist. Third, if there were no religion there would not be a separate, hated group of people like the Jews who over the centuries have been persecuted for “killing Christ.” So we can assign the holocaust to religion. Fourth, recently released documents from the Soviet era prove that Stalin did not kill in the name of atheism and in fact normalized relations with the Russian Orthodox Church during World War II. Churches everywhere have often worked closely with governments no matter how cruel to suppress opposition. The Catholic Church aided the Nazis; the Russian Orthodox Church helped keep the Czars in power; both the Soviet and today’s Russian rulers continue to find it useful in this regard.

One does not measure evil by the numbers killed. Is killing ten innocent people worse than killing one? Every king, pope, crusader, or inquisitor who unjustly killed a single person committed an evil act. And history records far more people who killed in the name of religion than who did so in the name of unbelief.

I spent some time summarizing the conclusions of biblical scholar Bart Ehrman, who after serving as a protestant minister lost his faith when he found

that the Bible, and Christian teaching in general, fail to account for the suffering in the world. None of the biblical answers work. The prophets taught that suffering was God's punishment for disobedience. But even the obedient suffer, as the story of Job shows. The claim that suffering is caused by humans, made possible by free will fails to explain suffering from natural disasters. Another idea is that suffering is redemptive, bringing good where there was previously evil. But what possible good can come of the many children in the world who starve to death each day? Finally, the Bible proposes that suffering and death will end when Jesus returns for the Last Judgment. Jesus promised it would happen in a generation. It hasn't yet.

I briefly reviewed the answers to suffering provided by other religions than Christianity. In Islam, it's simply God's will, not to be questioned. Hindus see suffering alleviated in a future life. Buddha taught an eightfold path to the end of suffering, which comes with the elimination of the ego when one's sequence of lives terminates in nothingness. Taoism also preaches an end to the love of self and its replacement with a love of the world.

Sam Harris suggested in *The End of Faith* that we pay attention to some of the insights of Buddha and other spiritualists and mystics of the East to aid us in understanding our own minds. Religious historian Karen Armstrong has written about the period from about 900 BCE to 200 BCE, peaking around 500 BCE, when a great transformation occurred in human thinking. An equivalent revolution in human thinking was not repeated again until 1600-1700 CE with the rise of

science and reason in the West. This earlier period is called the Axial Age and is characterized by thinkers in India and China turning inward and seeking to find truths within themselves by emptying their minds and freeing themselves of the dominance of ego. She also describes transformations in thinking taking place in Greece and Israel, but these led in a different direction.

Remarkably, the primary sages Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Confucius all lived around 500 BCE. Furthermore, Thales of Miletus, the first scientist in recorded history, supposedly predicted the eclipse of the sun that occurred May 29, 586 BCE, triggering the Greek axial age. Although this event is disputed, Greek science began with Thales. The Jews were hauled off to exile in Babylonia in 585 BCE, leading to the axial age in Judaism.

While a handful of mystics in the Abrahamic religions also taught the virtues of selflessness, the great bulk of adherents to these faiths were drawn in by highly self-centered thinking. This is perhaps less so in Judaism, but both Christianity and Islam are the two most popular religions today for one reason more than any other: the promise of eternal life.

Atheism can never compete with this promise. We will not win a single convert by promising nothingness in the place of paradise. (Hell is only promised for others). However, if you are already an atheist and view paradise as the impossible dream that it is, then you need a way to face nothingness. The great sages have pointed the way, and if we eliminate the superstitions and supernatural detritus that the religions they founded have accumulated over the

last 2,500 years, we have what I have termed The Way of Nature. We are natural, material beings with natural, material brains that have, by whatever means, evolved to give us an exalted sense of self.

Theists assert that religion is necessary for a moral society, that morality comes from God, and that in an atheist society everyone would run wild. This is certainly not born out by the facts, which indicate that problems with crime, child and spousal abuse, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and other social ills are lower in the less religious nations. The evidence is overwhelming that the happiest, best-adjusted, healthiest societies in the world are those in which the majority has freely abandoned belief.

While scholars are still debating mechanisms, it seems highly likely that morality evolved naturally in society and was only adopted later, imperfectly, by religion. Furthermore, many biblical teachings, such as support for slavery and subjugation of women are immoral by modern standards. These examples also show how morality is not absolute but evolves with time.

And what specific values to live by are suggested for your consideration by New Atheism? They are no different than those associated with Humanism and general philosophical rationality. They can be found in a wealth of literature, especially the many works of Bertrand Russell. More recent summaries include *The Philosophy of Humanism* by Corliss Lamont,<sup>40</sup> *Eupraxophy* by Paul Kurtz,<sup>41</sup> *How to Live* by Peter Singer,<sup>42</sup> and *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* by Erik J. Wielenberg.<sup>43</sup> The last author offers this thought:

The victory of accepting naturalism consists in exerting control over one's own mind. In a universe in which human beings are largely at the mercy of morally indifferent forces beyond their control, one prominent kind of achievement is *taking control*. In the particular case of accepting naturalism, the victory is over fear. The religious believer is driven by fear; in this way, the believer's mind is subject to forces beyond personal control just as much as the body. But the naturalist takes control of the mind and refuses to be ruled by fear; this victory over the universe is a worthwhile achievement in and of itself.<sup>44</sup>

The message of new atheism has been terribly misunderstood as being exclusively negative. For every negative we have an even greater positive. Faith is absurd and dangerous and we look forward to the day, no matter how distant, when the human race finally abandons it. Reason is a noble substitute, proven by its success. Religion is an intellectual and moral sickness that cannot endure forever if we believe at all in human progress. Science sees no limit in the human capacity to comprehend the universe and ourselves. God does not exist. Life without God means we are the governors of our own destinies.

If you are a theist or other believer, throw off your yoke and join us. If you are an agnostic, look at the evidence and see that we do in fact know that God does not exist and join us. If you are an atheist who thinks we should work with moderate believers, look at the consequences of irrational thought and join us.

*You say I'm a dreamer  
 But I'm not the only one  
 I hope some day you'll join us  
 And the world will live as one*

—John Lennon

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Dean H. Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired Into Our Genes* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), Eugene G. D'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> *In Gods We Trust*, p. 186ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Fighting Words*, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Wade, *Before the Dawn: Recovering the Lost History of Our Ancestors* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Saxton, "The Great God Debate and the Future of Faith," *Free Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (2009): 37-43. Original quotation in *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, pp. 245-46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

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<sup>7</sup> Pippa Norris, and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics*

*Worldwide*, vol. Cambridge studies in social theory, religion, and politics  
(Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Stark, and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of*

*Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Paul, and Phil Zuckerman, "Why the Gods Are Not Winning," *Edge:*

*The Third Culture*,

[http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/paul07/paul07\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/paul07/paul07_index.html) (accessed  
February 8, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Gregory S. Paul, "The Big Religion Questions Finally Solved," *Free Inquiry* 29,  
no. 1 (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Sacred and Secular*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 107-08.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted from the film *With God on Our Side: George W. Bush and the Rise of the*

*Religious Right*, by Calvin Skaggs, David Van Taylor, and Ali Pomeroy,  
Lumiere Productions, 2004.

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- <sup>18</sup> Ann H. Coulter, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006), p. 3. No to be confused with Dan Barker's *Godless*.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 280.
- <sup>20</sup> Bill O'Reilly, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), p. 19.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.
- <sup>22</sup> Keith Ward, *In Defence of the Soul* (Oxford: Oneworld, Inc, 1998).
- <sup>23</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
- <sup>24</sup> Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).
- <sup>25</sup> "Something's Happy in the State of Denmark," *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 19, 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> *Society without God*, p. 9.
- <sup>27</sup> Eric Kaufmann, "Sacralization By Stealth: Demography, Religion, and Politics in Europe," *Jewish Policy Research*, <http://www.jprr.org.uk/downloads/Kaufmann%20Paper.pdf> (accessed February 25, 2009).
- <sup>28</sup> Eric Maisel, *The Atheist's Way: Living Well Without Gods* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2009).
- <sup>29</sup> Richard Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here for* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002).
- <sup>30</sup> Robert M. Price, *The Reason-Driven Life: What Am I Here on Earth for* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006).

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- <sup>31</sup> Ronald Aronson, *Living Without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists, and the Undecided* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008).
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 17.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 45.
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- <sup>36</sup> Guy P. Harrison, *50 Reasons People Give for Believing in a God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008).
- <sup>37</sup> David Ramsay Steele, *Atheism Explained: From Folly to Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008).
- <sup>38</sup> Thomas W. Clark, *Encountering Naturalism: A Worldview and Its Uses* (Somerville, MA: Center for Naturalism, 2007).
- <sup>39</sup> Taner Edis, *The Ghost in the Universe: God in Light of Modern Science* (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2002).
- <sup>40</sup> Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 8th ed. (Amherst, NY: Humanist Press, 1996), first published in 1965.
- <sup>41</sup> Paul Kurtz, *Eupraxophy: Living Without Religion* (Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1989).
- <sup>42</sup> Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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<sup>43</sup> Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 118.