

The Truth Behind the New Atheism

Taken from the book *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*
by David Marshall

I arrived by bus from Heathrow Airport to begin a research program at the Oxford Centre for Missions Studies. I began walking up High Street jet-lagged, dragging a suitcase and carrying a backpack, but curious for my first look at the famous little town. After about 100 paces, I noticed a plaque on the stone wall to my left, and set down my luggage to read:



Robert Boyle



Hooke's Microscope

In a house on this site between 1655 and 1688 lived ROBERT BOYLE. Here he discovered BOYLE'S LAW and made experiments with an AIR PUMP designed by his assistant ROBERT HOOKE, Inventor, Scientist and Architect who made a MICROSCOPE and thereby identified the first living cell.

Boyle and Hooke were founding members of the Royal Society, which put Francis Bacon's famous call to apply science for the good of humanity into action. Hooke, an inventor and experimental scientist of many talents, published breathtakingly beautiful still-life drawings of microscopic herb spores, woven silk, mold, and even fleas that are still admired today. Boyle, one of the leading scientists of his day and a devout Christian, established a lecture series in his will for "proving the Christian religion against notorious Infidels, to wit, Atheists, Theists (Deists), Pagans,

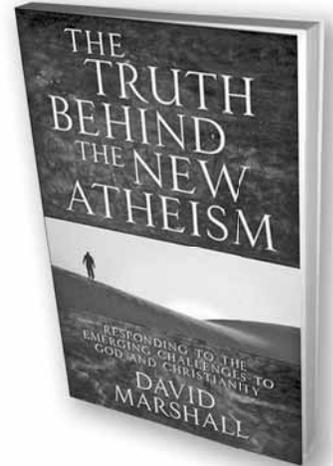


Jews and Mahometans; not descending lower to any controversies that are among Christians themselves."¹

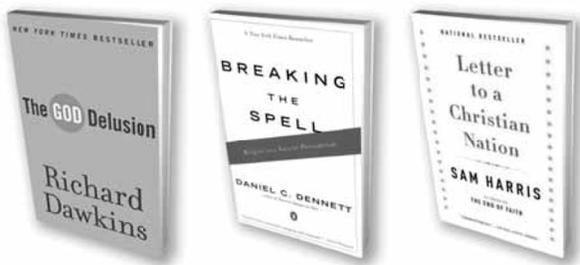
Religious controversy, one might say, has come to a new "Boyle" today. The most notorious infidel of our time works in New College across the street and down an alley. Richard Dawkins, Oxford Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, is—like Boyle and Hooke—passionate about science. And like Hooke, he is meticulous and artistic in the pictures he draws (verbal rather than engraved) of the living world. But besides his artistry with words (he won the 1987 Royal Society of Literature Award), Dawkins is known for a concept of evolution that focuses on the "selfish gene," for a controversial branch of knowledge called *memetics*, and most of all for his impassioned public attacks on religion, Christianity in particular.

With his friend the American philosopher Daniel Dennett and a young protégé named Sam Harris, who, like Dennett, studies human consciousness, Dawkins has attempted to parlay the prestige science has accumulated since the time of Boyle and Hooke into overthrowing *The God Delusion*, as the title of his bestselling 2006 volume put it. Dennett's book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomena*, also released in 2006, attempts to show that evolution can explain religion away without change. Harris also hopes to make an *End of Faith*, as his first book advocated. Harris' bestseller *Letter to a Christian Nation* added to the chorus.

These books are aptly titled. They argue not only that religion is wrong and there is no God, but that faith is a curse upon the human race. Harris' books



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were written in the context of 9/11 and are passionate about the dangers of religion. He describes the Bible as inarticulate, morally repugnant, and false. Dawkins enlists a company of adjectives to battle the Old Testament Yahweh:

Arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynist, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.²

Dennett finds a bit more good in religion, but in a way, his criticism is even more radical. He offers a theory as to how the human race fell into this trap. By backwards muttering, he hopes to “break the spell” of faith.



Voltaire



Thomas Paine



Bertrand Russell

These attacks don't come in a vacuum. In recent years various schools of skepticism have argued that religion can be explained naturally, the Gospels are unhistorical, Gnostic “Gospels” are just as good or better than the ones in the Bible, the Vatican was led by “Hitler’s Pope” during World War II, and the “religious right” brings the threat of “Christian fascism” to the United States. One is reminded of the passengers in the airline disaster spoof *Airplane* who line up with boxing gloves, a whip, a baseball bat, and a gun to take their anxiety out on one of their fellow passengers.

Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett form the core of what I call the New Atheism. They agree much, and quote one another often and warmly. They borrow what they like from many schools of skepticism and from rationalist arguments going back to Voltaire, Tom Paine, and Bertrand Russell (to whom Dawkins is often compared).

Between them, they advance seven arguments:

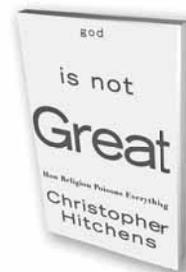
1. Faith is irrational. Faith means “believing not only without evidence, but in the teeth of the evidence,” as Dawkins famously put it.³
2. Evolution undercuts any reason there may have once been to believe in God (which is why few eminent scientists are religious).
3. Biological and social evolution can explain the origin of religion.
4. The Bible is, at best, a jumbled aggregate of theological cullings that do little to enrich humanity and much to harm us.
5. The Jesus of history was (at best) mortal.
6. Christians in the United States (the “American Taliban,” Dawkins calls them) constitute a profound threat to democracy.
7. All in all, the world would be better off without the gospel of Jesus Christ, or any religion.

The trio harmonizes in tone almost as much as in substance. None mourns the death of God: they are eager to heap dirt on his coffin, and volunteer to dig his grave deeper. Dawkins is called an “evangelist” or “Darwinian fundamentalist” even by some secular colleagues, like his *bête noire* Steven Jay Gould (who, with the likes of biologist E.O. Wilson and Michael Shermer, offers skepticism in a mellower tone). Dennett compares himself to a “revivalist preacher,”⁴ while Harris’s passionate jibes at theistic religion (“an average Christian, in an average church, listening to an average Sunday sermon has achieved a level of arrogance simply unimaginable in scientific discourse”) seem designed to rankle as much as subvert.⁵

The talented polemicist Christopher Hitchens chimed in a year later with his subtly titled *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, violating all the rules of grammar, never mind courteous discourse, to express contempt for his Creator.

How should a Christian respond?

An answer to such “notorious infidels” needs, I think, to find a middle path between two errors. On the one hand, a mocking or sarcastic response would feed the Us vs. Them mimesis, giving readers something to cheer or jeer, depending on who you’re rooting for, but not persuade anyone. Such a tone is also unworthy of the gospel. On the other hand, the New Atheists are often contemptuous of moderates (and for Gould’s well-intentioned suggestion that religion and science be assigned separate spheres of influence—“Non-Overlapping Magisteria,” or “NOMA”). The New Atheists have set the cathedral on fire. I plan to put it out, not roast marshmallows while it burns. The skeptics, I will argue, are flatly and often spectacularly wrong.



But I also think these and other critics do believe, and those who want to know whether or not to believe, a favor. The Christian tradition has always taught that faith needs to be tested by reason. Dawkins consolidates the most common modern objections to Christianity. Harris asks a few key questions with “burning anxiety” (to borrow a phrase from one of those issues, the debate over the role of Christianity in the Holocaust). Dennett popularizes new anti-God theories, giving us a chance to look more closely at this strange phenomena called *man* and consider why he tends to believe in God, even at gawdforsaken times and places.

Some of Jesus’ greatest sayings came in response to criticism. In the second century, a skeptic wrote an attack on Christianity known today from the philosopher Origen’s response, *Against Celsus*. If the blood of martyrs is the seedbed of the church, intellectual criticism can be the showers that make those seeds grow.

Of course I won’t cover all the issues that these or other new atheists (Christopher Hitchens, Carl Sagan, Steven Weinberg) bring up. I won’t venture too deeply into philosophical “proofs” for or against God. Dawkins disputes Thomas Aquinas’ arguments and offers what he sees as a telling blow against theism: “Who designed the designer?”⁶ Any Creator must be more complex than what he creates, so doesn’t belief in God just complicate matters? Better philosophers than Dawkins or I, including Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne, have answered these questions. Dawkins also assumes the cosmological argument for God (“the universe had a beginning, therefore a Beginner”) has fallen into disuse. In fact, William Lane Craig jousts with leading unbelieving philosophers on this very issue in debates that can easily be found online, and the big bang theory has moved quite a few physicists and astronomers to discuss it openly. I leave readers to judge for themselves how moribund that argument is.

Evolutionary biologist Alan Orr doubts the question of God should center on abstract reasoning too much, however:

Since when is a scientific hypothesis confirmed by philosophical gymnastics, not data? The fact that we as scientists find a hypothesis question-begging—as when Dawkins asks “who designed the designer?”—cannot, in itself, settle its truth value. It could, after all, be a brute fact of the universe that it derives from some transcendent mind, however question-begging this may seem.⁷

What we’ve learned about the origin and nature of the universe has given these old debates new life in recent years. But I, too, prefer brute facts. I’ll concentrate my response on earthbound evidence for the rationality and value of the Christian faith.

The challenge of the New Atheists can be summarized in three sets of questions, and High Street in Oxford, standing across from St. Mary’s Cathedral (where C.S. Lewis preached his famous “Weight of Glory” sermon), outside the home where Boyle and Hooke worked, a block from the garden where penicillin was discovered, and the college where Schrodinger’s cat first met her fate, is a good place to ask them. First, we ask about God and science. Is faith irrational? Does evolution make belief untenable? If not, why do so few modern heirs of Boyle and Hooke believe? Did God create man, or did man create God?

Second, Dawkins’ friend and colleague Sir John Krebs is the principal of “Jesus College.” The richest college here—where John Wesley, Lewis Carroll, and John Locke taught, and 16 future prime ministers studied—is Christ College. Who is Jesus Christ? How does he help solve the riddle of God and the meaning of life? The answer, of course, lies in the Bible, which the New Atheists see as a dubious document. Are they reading it right?

Third, look around this town, founded in the early eighth century as a monastery by the semi-legendary shy princess St. Frideswide (whose unwanted suitor, following a tradition already half a millennia old, was struck blind in a forest, then healed by the virgin saint). Does faith blind or heal? Is an incipient “American Taliban” on the verge of dragging the United States back into the Dark Ages? Does morality evolve? What did the Enlightenment have to do with Adolf Hitler and Joseph



Origen



John Wesley



Lewis Carroll



John Locke



Stalin? Is religion mainly a horror story of witch-hunting, inquisitions, and caste oppression? (Such as the burning of three famous Anglican bishops for heresy a five-minute walk from this spot?) Or has the gospel molded the very stones upon which the New Atheists walk, the key foundational principles of Western, and now world, civilization?

The value of any viewpoint lies in what it allows us to see. The makers of the modern world—Rousseau, Voltaire, Freud, Marx, Darwin, Kinsey, Mead—often tangled their facts. But they inspired people to see life from new perspectives. They opened doors to what followers perceived as a wider world.

Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris are talented storytellers too. The power of their arguments lie primarily, I think, in the map of reality they draw as apprentices to the aforementioned and other Enlightenment cartographers.

After describing the flaws in their map of reality, therefore, I will briefly sketch a map of my own. If Dennett aims to break the spell of faith, you might accuse me (in this final chapter) of casting a new one. But enchantments are set to liberate as well as to bind, to help people see as well as to blind them. f

Endnotes

1. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 75.
2. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 31.
3. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 198.
4. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 20.
5. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 74.
6. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 158.
7. Alan Orr, *The New York Book of Reviews*, January 11, 2007.

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