

# NEW ATHEISM

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## A Critical Approach to the New Atheism

A STUDY ON THE NATURE OF BELIEF, THE EXISTENCE OF GOD &  
THE BIBLE

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## INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed a vigorous resurgence of interest in atheism. This present expression of atheism is being promoted throughout the Western world with ever-increasing militancy and dynamism. This new movement has become very vocal and the object of their attack is God “all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented” (Dawkins 2007:57). With an un-tempered evangelistic zeal more reminiscent of those against whom they rally, the New Atheists have gone on the offensive. The intent of their efforts are overtly stated: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down” (Dawkins 2007:28). The book in question is *The God Delusion*, a book that established Richard Dawkins as the world’s most high profile atheist polemicist. This same year saw the cover of Time magazine featuring an issue titled “God vs. Science”<sup>1</sup>. In 2007 we also saw the release of Christopher Hitchens bestselling book *God is Not Great*. The movement has generated a plethora of memorable and pejorative sound bites, i.e. “Religion poisons everything” and the “God-virus” that have either consciously or subconsciously found their way into the thinking of popular culture and are now firmly entrenched in the psyche of public conceptions regarding religion.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20061113,00.html>



The task of this paper will be to engage critically with the arguments offered by the New Atheists which claim that God does not exist. I will also endeavor to understand the underlying philosophical framework on which they operate when forming their conclusions. These conclusions need to be evaluated to determine their accuracy before the arguments based on them can be considered.

### **WHAT EXACTLY IS THE NEW ATHEISM?**

The term was coined by journalist Gary Wolf whilst writing an article for *Wired* magazine in 2006. He used it to describe three particular authors; Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. He described them as “a band of intellectual brothers mounting a crusade against belief in God”<sup>2</sup>. These authors bring us an enthusiastic presentation of atheism and an impassioned denunciation of organized religion. Also included in this group is the journalist Christopher Hitchens who together form the “band of brothers” that are collectively identified as the intellectual spearhead of the movement and have been dubbed the “four horsemen” of the New Atheism. At this point it is necessary to discuss what exactly is “new” about the New Atheism. Atheists come in different forms, and have their own sectarian camps, each preferring a slightly different title. Some display little animosity towards

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>



religion and are happy to engage in constructive dialogue, whilst others are overtly hostile. While there are surely nuanced distinctions that separate these groups, some may not technically be atheists, but in the broad sense they are de facto atheists as their beliefs do amount to a practical rejection of God's position in the world and they live as if He does not exist. The distinguishing element of the New Atheists is their intellectual militancy and moral self-confidence (D'Souza 2007:22). The dogmatic and clichéd verbosity so prevalent in their literature far exceeds that of their atheistic predecessors. Hitchens states the position with terseness; "I'm not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist" (2001:55). He finds the effect of religious belief to be "positively harmful". Epstein, a humanist from Harvard clarifies in an article for the Washington Post that anti-theism means actively seeking out the worst aspects of faith in god and portraying them as representative of all religion. Anti-theism seeks to shame and embarrass people away from religion, browbeating them about the stupidity of belief in a bellicose god.<sup>3</sup>

The self-confidence of the New Atheists is most palpable in examining the suggestion from Dawkins that a new term should be considered to replace the term "atheist" which he believes carries with it negative connotations.

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[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/greg\\_m\\_epstein/2007/10/less\\_antitheism\\_more\\_humanism.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/greg_m_epstein/2007/10/less_antitheism_more_humanism.html)



This new noun according to Dawkins should be “brights”. Creating the metaphor that theists are dim and atheists are bright. Dawkins clarifies that a bright is a person whose world view is free of supernatural and mystical elements.<sup>4</sup> Seemingly fed up with being a marginal and reticent minority they see this arrogance as justified in order to accomplish their goal of eliminating the “lunatic influence of religion” (Harris 2005:234).<sup>5</sup> Dawkins believes that many atheists are hiding in the closet reluctant to “come out” and he wishes to bring reality to a new expression of “atheist pride” (2007:26). Dawkins statements elsewhere highlight that “pride” is the operative word here. He dogmatically asserts that “atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed a healthy mind” (2007:26) and that the atheist view is “never tainted with self-delusion, wishful thinking or whinging self-pity” (2007:405). At one point he even cautions his attentive readers “not to be too dogmatically confident” (2007:150), a mystifying comment as *The God Delusion* is replete with utterly dogmatic assertions and the unremitting insistence that his own position on religion is correct and his detractors are “no better than fools” (2007:155). As for self-delusion, Dawkins waxes eloquently about the way “creationists”, a derogatory term for Christians who claim to be scientists, like to “trample their dirty hobnails” (2007:92) all over the separateness of science’s turf. He is apparently oblivious to the blatant hypocrisy of this statement appearing as it does in a

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jun/21/society.richarddawkins>

<sup>5</sup> Afterword to the American Edition only



book written by a biologist that purports to engage with philosophy and Theology. Atheists are divided in their own ranks about the aggressive and dogmatic approach taken by the New Atheists. Their embarrassment echoes that of philosopher Michael Ruse when he penned the now famous endorsement for the McGraths' book, *The Dawkins Delusion*: "The God Delusion makes me embarrassed to be an atheist and the McGraths show why" (Lennox 2011:23). Yale professor David Hart describes the New Atheism as consisting of nothing more than vacuous arguments afloat on oceans of historical ignorance, made turbulent by storms of strident self-righteousness (2009:4). He charges that Sam Harris in his book; *The End of Faith*, when commenting on Christian belief, "displays an abysmal ignorance of almost every topic he addresses" (2009:8) this causes Hart to nostalgically lament the loss of historical insight and intellectual honesty present in the older strain of atheism typified by Nietzsche and that its absence from so much contemporary antireligious polemic is what renders it so depressingly vapid.

## **NATURALISM AND THE NEW ATHEISM**

To borrow a biblical phrase, the "fields were ripe for harvest" as far as the New Atheism was concerned. Whenever a society experiences a significant paradigm shift there will always be a trail of identifiable sociological factors that help necessitate the shift. The New Atheism is no exception to this. The New Atheism has its roots firmly planted in the enlightenment thought of the



eighteenth century. The Enlightenment marked the most decisive turning point in the unfolding drama of western thought. It is generally recognized that one can hardly conceive of a more radical religio-cultural revolution in the modern age (Uda 1995:227). Immanuel Kant's famous "shift to the subject", the great division between the phenomenal and noumenal, and the subsequent reorientation of epistemological certainty to the thinking subject irrevocably severed metaphysics from an objectivist account of truth (Thornbury 1999:12). One consequence of Kant's revolt against reason is his fact/value dichotomy. For him the "objective" world of fact is the phenomenal world of experience, while the "subjective" world of will cannot be known by pure reason. Instead this subjective world is known by practical reason or a morally postulated act of the will (Nix 1984:449). Thus Kant's dichotomy leaves us with a two tier system where the bottom level consists of verifiable facts and the top level is reserved for socially constructed values. Ultimately this meant that traditional concepts that had firm theistic undergirding such as ethics, morality and even religion and faith were placed in the upper story and could no longer be objectively known. Christianity slowly began to drift away from objectivity to subjectivity, causing theology to become a discipline that was to be separate from all other "secular" disciplines (Mizell 2005:60). Kant's metaphysical agnosticism produced a huge epistemological shift within the soul of western culture. A result of this shift was to create a unique opportunity for the denial of the divine, specifically the denial of a personal supernatural being as posited by Christian theism. What was left in the wake



of the Enlightenment was no longer a fairly monolithic affirmation of theism, but a plethora of movements that included sceptics and freethinkers, as well as deists and pantheists (Mohler 2008:19).

The fact/value distinction was cemented firmly into the foundation of western culture in the late nineteenth century with the writings of Charles Darwin. The impact of Darwin's theory of evolution cannot be overstated. He offered a plausible and completely naturalistic mechanism to account for the origin of life. Thus the lower tier of fact could now be understood as a completely naturalistic, self-contained and comprehensive worldview. This could be considered the dawn of philosophical/scientific naturalism. It is confidence in this revolutionary Darwinian worldview that lies behind the statement of Dawkins in his book *The Blind Watchmaker* that "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist" (2006:6). Some may immediately object to the perceived equivocation by using the term philosophy when discussing "scientific" concepts, however this is intentional. For much of what is packaged and sold under the label of science is not really science at all but philosophical materialism. That is to say it is not objective truth but merely someone's personal "values" (Pearcey 2005:157). Naturalist Stephen J. Gould highlighted this principle with his concept of non-overlapping magisterium; he affirmed that science simply cannot adjudicate the issue of God's possible superintendence of nature (Gould 1992:118-21). If



Darwinians choose to dogmatise on matters of religion, they stray beyond the straight and narrow way of the scientific method, and end up in the philosophical badlands (McGrath 2005:55). New Atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett illustrated this by his comment that Darwin's great accomplishment was to reduce the universe to a product of "purposeless, meaningless matter in motion"<sup>6</sup>. This is clearly a metaphysical pronouncement as the statement cannot itself be scientifically tested. It is merely Dennett's philosophical opinion which has left the bounds of science. Daniel Dennett does however accurately describe the ramifications of Darwinian theory in his book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, commenting that Darwin's theories resemble a kind of "universal acid" that will "eat through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionised worldview" (1996:63). He further states that Darwin's ideas had been born as an answer to questions in biology, but they threatened to "leak out" (1996:63). He was correct, they have indeed leaked out, but the question remains: why do they assume that their own foundation will be immune to this universal acid? As we shall see it is not immune and it forces the naturalist to live with many self-contradictory affirmations!

However much we try to keep the divide between facts and values separate we must comprehend that there is a symbiotic relationship between them. It

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<sup>6</sup> PBS "Evolution Episode 1: Darwin's Dangerous Idea



is precisely because the lower story of fact has been defined in terms of scientific naturalism that there is “no ground” for upper story values or beliefs. A fully naturalistic belief leads to a deterministic model of humanity that reduces ideas like freedom and dignity to useful fictions (Pearcey 2005:110). As Francis Schaeffer so perceptively pointed out, using similar language to Dennett, the lower story “eats up” the upper story, dissolving away all the traditional concepts of morality and meaning (Schaeffer 1985:212). The ultimate conclusion is that things like human freedom, the soul, human purpose and the existence of God are merely socially constructed illusions. For example Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist, who also penned a glowing accolade for Dennett’s book, declares that the mind is nothing more than “the physiological activity of the brain”, which is a machine, the result of natural selection and other evolutionary processes. The mind then is nothing more than “an entity in the physical world, part of a causal chain of events” (Pinker 1999). Yet elsewhere he states that the existence of morality necessitates that man is more than just a machine; “ethical theory requires idealisations like free, sentient, rational, equivalent agents whose behaviour is uncaused,” and yet “the world as seen by science , does not really have uncaused events” (Pinker 1998: 55).What is actually being said here is very illuminating. It amounts to a dilemma for Pinker that ethics depends on the reality of something his own worldview of naturalistic science has declared to be unreal. He attempts, weakly I might add, to maintain both sides of the contradiction by parceling the two into



their respective lower and upper stories. Pinker freely admits this is his approach; “the cloistering of scientific and moral reasoning in separate arenas also lies behind my recurring metaphor of the mind as machine” (Pinker 1998:56). He identifies his lower story commitment with the following; “the mechanistic stance allows us to understand what makes us tick and how we fit into the physical universe” but then reverts to his upper story position by saying; “when those discussions wind down for the day we go back to talking about each other as free and dignified human beings”. His remarkably unsatisfactory conclusion is that; “a human being is simultaneously a machine and a sentient free agent, depending on the purpose of the discussion” (Pinker 1998:56). Of course the most objectionable premise in this statement is apparently humans are at the same time machines but also free agents! This is quite simply an out-and-out contradiction. He is forced to affirm the reality of a set of ideas such as freedom and human dignity that contradict his intellectual commitment to scientific naturalism, even though these things have no basis within his own philosophy (Pearcey 2005:108). They have to take a leap into the upper story to solve the existential tension that exists between these two contradictory modes of thought even though he knows there can be no rational basis for them. This contradiction is affirmed by many who share a commitment to scientific naturalism. Minsky candidly admits that he is “virtually forced to maintain that belief (freedom of the will), even though we know it’s false” (Minsky 1988:307). This is the majority position in the



cognitive neuroscience community. Philosophical eliminative materialists like John Searle and Daniel Wenger<sup>7</sup> describe this “mind consciousness” as an illusion, going so far as to conclude that the brain acts on its own, and then deceives us into thinking we acted intentionally. It is hard to accept these statements as the bastions of rationality that they claim to be. They seem oblivious to the obvious conclusion; how can we then trust our thoughts? C.S Lewis highlighted the flaw in this thinking long ago:

*“But if their thoughts are merely accidental by-products, why should we believe them to be true? I see no reason for believing that one accident should be able to give me a correct account of all the other accidents”. (Lewis 1984:97)*

Richard Dawkins is equally culpable in displaying this sort of contradictory philosophy for he flagrantly states that “as a scientist I am a passionate Darwinian” but at the same time “I am a passionate anti-Darwinian when it comes to politics and how we should conduct our human affairs” (Dawkins 2004:13). The very fact that he and others have to live with this contradictory dichotomy between their beliefs and their reality should demonstrate that scientific naturalism which they have located in the lower

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Wenger’s book is titled: *The Illusion of Consciousness*.



story of fact is not an adequate worldview. Berkley professor Philip Johnson concludes that one thinker after another has tried to find some way to contain this universal acid in order to protect something from its corrosive force. But the defining characteristic of universal acid is that it eats away everything, including the container that was meant to hold it (Johnson 2010:54).

## **SECULARISM AND THE NEW ATHEISM**

The rise of the New Atheism has been described as the endgame of secularism (Mohler 2008:28). Secularism built upon the metaphysical and epistemological paradigm shift which resulted in the fact/value distinction and turned the two tiers into a public/private distinction. Secularisation is one of the most powerful conditioning influences in cultural formation today and is the underlying impetus that presently propels western culture (Zacharias 1996:23). Sociologist Peter Berger describes secularisation as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (Berger 1990:107). Ultimately the secularisation theory assumes that as modernity worked its way through society there would be less need for God as an explanatory factor in the framework of civilisation. Freud described it this way; “the more people have access to the treasures of our knowledge, the more widespread the severance from religious belief” (Freud 2004:48). Simply stated,



secularism asserts that public life should be conducted without reference to religion or any notion of transcendence. This is the privatisation of religion, the handmaiden of secularism. It argues that when we come into public discourse arguing about public policy, we must never use religious reason, only secular reason (Keller 2010:65). Secular reason is supposedly neutral with no hidden agendas or motives but in reality it results in the complete elimination and public humiliation of the theistic framework. Privatisation has also changed the nature of religion, the private realm which it has been assigned is safely cordoned off from the "real world" where important activities take place (Pearcey 2005:68). The private (religious) realm is nothing more than an "innocuous play area" (Berger 1977:18). The effect on Christianity was immense as Philip Johnson notes: "even conservative Christians have so privatised their faith that they do not regard it as a source of knowledge but as merely theological reflection on topics given by secular academia" (Johnson 1996). Thus the secularisation of Europe and America created a cultural opening for the emergence of what we are calling the New Atheism (Mohler 2008:35). All that was needed was a catalyst to supply the initial inertia. This was provided by the events of 9/11. Social commentator Ed West readily concedes that the New Atheist movement began when a man flew a plane into the World Trade Centre.<sup>8</sup> All the New Atheists reference 9/11 in their works and Dawkins even states that: "my last vestige of "hands

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<sup>8</sup> <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/edwest/100052245/911-was-the-start-of-the-new-atheist-movement-lefties-too-scared-to-admit-that-they-fear-islam/>



off religion” respect disappeared in the smoke and choking dust of September 11, 2001” (Dawkins 2004:185). In the days that followed this terrible event the cultural conversation shifted towards the value of religion in public and on the global scene. The atmosphere after 9/11 created a context in which the aggressive and pejorative claims of the New Atheists could now be intellectually entertained by the nations.

## **SCIENCE AND THE NEW ATHEISM**

The New atheists are fully committed to the caricature that science and religion are locked into an eternal battle for supremacy. This “warfare” scenario is presented as if the forces of retrenchment and obscurantism (Religion) were always hurling their ideological ordinances against the forces of reason, experimentation and enlightenment (science) (Groothuis 2011:98). Sam Harris states that the conflict between science and religion is unavoidable and the success of science comes at the expense of religious dogma (Harris 2007:63). He charges that science is a completely factual enterprise, whereas “theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance” (Harris 2006:173). Dawkins likewise declares that he is “hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise” (Dawkins 2007:321). Faith to him is “blind trust in the absence of evidence” (Dawkins 1989:198). It is “evil precisely because it requires no



justification and brooks no argument” (Dawkins 2007:347). In the same vein much of the New Atheist literature is littered with tedious analogies to Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy implying that when we mature in our thinking we leave behind such childish delusions. Well, much could be said about this scenario advanced by the New Atheists but I will narrow my response to the main premises. Firstly the “warfare story” is exaggerated and unsubstantiated. The historical record is not one of unmitigated hostility between the church and scientific enterprise. As McGrath notes, this view is now “seen as a hopelessly outmoded historical stereotype which scholarship has totally discredited” (McGrath 2007:24). This is not to imply there has never been religious antagonism to science, there surely has, but just to make clear there is no inherent conflict between science and Christianity. As Lennox points out; “an anti-scientific stance is completely apathetic to the biblical worldview (Lennox 2011:30). Contrary to the warfare scenario presented the scientific enterprise reached its glories in the Christian West during the scientific revolution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Philosopher of Science Alfred N. Whitehead concludes that the “development of modern scientific theory, is an unconscious derivative from medieval theology” (Whitehead 1967:13). Historian Lynn White notes that “the monk was an intellectual ancestor of the scientist” (White 1945:96), and sociologist Rodney Stark claims that the results of the scientific revolution were not the results of an “eruption of secular thinking” but were the “culmination of many centuries of systematic progress by medieval scholars by that uniquely



Christian twelfth century invention, the university (Stark 2005:12). The question is why modern science emerged in Europe. Christianity provided the philosophical foundation as well as the spiritual and practical motivation for doing science. Whitehead notes that science required Christianity's "insistence on the rationality of God" (Whitehead 1967:12). If God is a rational being, then may not humans, who are made in his image, also employ rational processes to study and investigate the world (Schmidt 2004:219). This linking of rationality with the empirical inductive method culminated in the seminal contribution of Francis Bacon, "the practical creator of scientific induction" (Schmidt 2004:219) who stressed observation and experimentation. This method caused a paradigm shift within science by breaking with the pantheistic elements embedded in the Aristotelian philosophy used to explain the world (Schmidt 2004:221). The effect was so profound that Lynn White commented that, "every major scientist, in effect, explained his motivations in religious terms" (White 1968:89).

Secondly the New Atheists have hijacked the definition of science by insisting on a purely naturalist understanding of the term. The New Atheists are philosophically committed to naturalism as their *modus operandi*.

Evolutionary biochemist Richard Dickerson refers to science as a "game" and the first rule is to "see how far we can explain the behaviour of the physical universe in terms of purely physical and material causes, without invoking



the supernatural" (Dickerson 1992:277). Immunologist Scott Todd also says that even if all the evidence leads to an intelligent source, "such a hypothesis is excluded from science because it is not naturalistic" (Todd 1999:423). Even Dawkins has admitted that "if there were no actual evidence in favour of Darwinian Theory, we should still be justified in preferring it over all rival theories" (Dawkins 2006:287). This philosophical commitment gives rise to methodological naturalism as the means of scientific enquiry. This idealized image of science as an impartial unbiased method of empirical observation that attends strictly to the evidence, bristling with objective sounding words like 'observation' and 'evidence' is in reality nothing more than applied naturalism (Pearcey 2005:168). In a candid moment Stephen J Gould admits as much; "The stereotype of a rational and objective 'scientific method' with scientists as logical robots is self-serving mythology" (Gould 1994:14). Inquiry should be free to follow the evidence wherever it leads, whether to a natural or intelligent cause.

Finally the New Atheist definition of faith as "blind trust" is a self-serving delusion. This arbitrary and idiosyncratic definition simply does not stand up to serious investigation (McGrath 2005:91). In fact I find it rather incongruous coming from a group who insist on beliefs based upon "publicly checkable evidence" (Dawkins 1989) that they then offer no evidence to support anyone holding to this made up definition of faith. Which works of



theology were consulted? This is not the historical Christian understanding of faith which always valued the role of evidence and reason. True, faith is not something established solely on an antecedent basis by indisputable evidence. But faith, once engaged in, enables us to reason and recognise supporting evidences. Thus faith is a form of knowledge; it works in concert with, not against, reason (Erickson 2006:953). Christianity has placed a high value on the role of the mind especially in reasoning and argument. Jesus commanded us to love God with “all our minds” (Matt.22:37), the bible is full of exhortations to “reason together” (Isa. 1:18), to “examine everything carefully” (1 Thess.5:21) and to “destroy arguments” (1 Cor.10:5). Jesus presented himself by “many convincing proofs” (Acts 1:3) and Paul regularly “reasoned” with unbelievers “explaining and giving evidence” (Acts 17:3) for his beliefs. This image hardly comports with the new atheist’s scenario of “blind faith”.

## **NEW ATHEISTS AND THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE**

Richard Dawkins’ contempt for traditional theistic arguments is seen by the fact that he believes he can dismiss them so quickly.

Dawkins devotes no more than one page to the cosmological argument as formulated by Thomas Aquinas. Dawkins brief summation of Thomist arguments distils the main issue to the fact that they all rely on the “idea of



a regress and invoke God to terminate it” (2007:101). They make the “entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress” (2007:101). As Nash points out critics of theism have often used Aquinas’s arguments as their foil in an attempt to discredit the rationality of belief in God but as Dawkins demonstrates for us, many have misunderstood Aquinas’s position (Nash 1999:175). Aquinas seeks a Cause that is first, not in the temporal sense, but in the sense of rank. As Copleston states; “when he speaks about the impossibility of an infinite regress in the series of efficient causes, he is referring to an infinite regress not in the temporal order but in the order of ontological dependence” (Copleston 1961:175). Aquinas argues for the logical impossibility of an infinite chain of causation or else nothing would have come into existence in the first place, thus there must exist a first uncaused Cause of being. The real potency of Aquinas’s argument is not that every series must have a temporal beginning but that in order to have existence it must depend on something outside the series. It is not a logical rebuttal to say that everything must have a cause, so what’s the cause of the cause? Aquinas does not invoke a premise that states everything needs a cause; he is really saying that everything that exists in the universe needs a cause. On Aquinas’s Aristotelian-inspired meta-physics, every existing finite thing is composed of essence and existence and is therefore radically contingent. Any finite substance is sustained in existence immediately by the Ground of Being (Craig/Moreland 2003:465). This being is not a contingent being, it is not part of the series and therefore the rules of



causation do not apply to him, the explanation must be a 'necessary' being. Aquinas identifies this being with the God whose name was revealed to Moses as "I am" (Ex.3:14.).

This being said there is some validity to critiquing the Thomist approach to this argument due to its over reliance on Aristotelian cosmology which argues from the assumption of the eternity of the universe. It is unfortunate that Dawkins deals with this argument only in its traditional form without interacting with the more prevalent contemporary model known as the *Kalam* cosmological argument. The twentieth century interest in this argument is born from the astonishing new empirical evidence of astrophysical cosmology for the beginning of space and time. The *Kalam* argument may be formulated as follows:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

Conceptual analysis of what it means to be a cause of the universe then aims to establish some of the theologically significant properties of this being. Logically if the first two premises are correct the conclusion necessarily



follows. The first premise seems obviously true, at least more so than its negation. It is rooted in the metaphysical intuition that something cannot come into existence from nothing (Craig/Moreland 2003:469). The skeptic Hume even said that the idea of something arising out of nothing is absurd (Greig 1932:187). Premise two is supported by both deductive, philosophical argument and inductive scientific arguments. Both Einstein's General Theory of Relativity and the Redshift discovered by Edwin Hubble caused cosmologists to conclude that the universe had a beginning. Even Stephen Hawking who tried desperately to popularise a theory that avoids a beginning to the universe in his 1988 book *A Brief History of Time*, now declares that "almost everyone now believes that the universe, and time itself, had a beginning" (Hawking 1996:20).

New Atheist attempts to evade the theistic implications of this argument have been comparable by their approach and subsequent failings. Sam Harris asks "if God created the universe, what created God?" (2007:73) similarly Dennett misstates the first premise as "everything that exists must have a cause" giving rise to his retort "What caused God?" (Dennett 2007:242). However this is to caricature the argument, the claim is only that whatever begins to exist has a cause. The universe and time itself requires a cause because premise two is valid, the universe had a beginning. God by definition is the creator of the universe and of time therefore he is not bound by this



created time dimension, i.e. He is eternal and thus does not require a cause. This also shows that God cannot be physical as physical matter itself had a beginning. A supernatural, i.e. non-material being is the best explanation of the first cause. Dennett who seemingly affirms premises one and two must give an account for the cause of the cosmic beginning. His naturalism forces him to exclude any non-material cause and thus he states that the universe “performs the ultimate bootstrapping trick; it creates itself ex nihilo. Or at any rate out of something that is well-nigh indistinguishable from nothing.” (Dennett 2007:244). It is hard to digest a statement like this coming from a philosopher and demonstrates the lengths the New Atheists will go in their anti-theism. Firstly for the universe to create itself it would need to exist before its existence! It would need to be both chronologically and explanatorily prior to itself. This is an implausible logical absurdity. Secondly Dennett evinces a lack of the appreciation of the metaphysical chasm between “something” and “nothing”. Arguments that use the subatomic or primordial vacuum as the “nothing” are playing word games as these vacuums are not “nothing” but rather a sea of fluctuating energy endowed with a rich structure and subject to physical laws (Craig/Moreland 2003:469).

The final argument seems to tacitly acquiesce to the strength of the argument. Harris declares that “even if we accepted that our universe was created by an intelligent being; this would not suggest that this being is the



God of the bible”<sup>9</sup>. This is a valid point and should serve as a reminder to Christian apologists that the *Kalam* argument is not a fulfilment of the great commission. However in reality this is well known and apologists will use the *Kalam* argument as one part of a cumulative case for the God of the Bible as it does help narrow down some characteristics of the First Cause. The implications of the *kalam* argument indicate that this First Cause shares many characteristics of the God of the Bible. The Cause must be nonphysical or spiritual (John 4:24), eternal (Psalm 90:2, 1 Timothy 1:17), changeless (Malachi 3:6), and all-powerful (Jeremiah 10:12).

## **THE NEW ATHEISTS AND THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN.**

Refuting the teleological argument constitutes “the central argument of my book” says Dawkins. He gives a useful six point outline of his argument on pg 187-188. In summary his argument is that the greatest challenge to human intellect is to explain the “appearance of design” in the universe. It is tempting to explain design using a designer “watchmaker” analogy but this is false because this raises the problem of who designed the Designer. Natural selection is the most powerful explanatory solution and “we can now safely say” that design is simply an illusion. We do not have an equivalent explanation in physics “maybe some kind of multi-verse theory” will do the

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20060815\\_sam\\_harris\\_language\\_ignorance/](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20060815_sam_harris_language_ignorance/)



same but we should not give up hope of finding something as powerful. This is basically all there is to his argument and if it fails the book fails too. His startling conclusion from this is that therefore "God, almost certainly does not exist" (2007:189). Now if Dawkins six point summary is to be taken as premises of a logical argument then no logical rules of inference would permit you to draw this conclusion. If they are intended as six steps in a cumulative argument then, assuming they are all valid the most we can deduce is that we should not infer God's existence based on the appearance of design (Craig 2009:3). However simply rejecting design arguments does not prove that God does not exist; maybe our belief in God is based upon the Cosmological argument, or the Moral argument or the historical teaching of Jesus?

As it happens there are some considerable problems with Dawkins six premises. His contention that inferring a designer as a causal explanation for design is invalid because it raises the bigger problem of "who designed the Designer" is wrought with problems. Dawkins objection fails, first, because it does not negate a causal explanation of one event to point out that the cause of that event may invite a causal explanation. As Stephen Meyer comments:



*"A proximate explanation of one event is not negated by learning that it does not supply a comprehensive or ultimate explanation of all the events in the causal chain leading up to it" (Meyer 2008:390).*

Dawkins objection presumes the opposite; that a causal explanation only counts if there is a separate comprehensive narrative that explains how the cited cause came into existence and only then if it doesn't involve an infinite regress of other past causes. Dawkins cannot seriously apply this principle in any other case. If we insist that Dawkins criterion of explanatory adequacy is applied consistently it would prevent us from inferring design in cases where no one, not even Dawkins, questions the legitimacy of such inferences (Meyer 2009:390).

Secondly Dawkins thinks that in the Design hypothesis the designer is just as complex as the thing to be explained so that no explanatory advance is made. In Dawkins understanding of the argument, if specified complexity always points to an intelligent source then positing the existence of a designing mind would only serve to point to a prior designing mind. The accusation is that to break this chain of infinite regress we must violate our own rule that specified complexity points to a designer. Thus to infer an uncaused designer is an unjustified exception to this principle. In response I



would point out that in both scientific materialism and theism something must stand as the ultimate reality. Both require a point that the regress must ultimately terminate with explanatory entities that do not themselves require explication by anything more primary (Meyer 2009:393). As a materialist Dawkins must assume that matter and energy stand as the prime reality and he simply assumes that a material process must function as the primary explanatory principle for complex information and all appearance of design. This however seems to commit the logical fallacy of begging the question with regard to the origin of information and design. He simply presupposes that mind cannot function as the ultimate explanation for specified complexity. However as both material and immaterial starting points are constrained by the same restraints why couldn't mind be as equally acceptable as matter and energy for the fundamental explanatory principle? The real question should be; what is the better candidate to be the first cause of this phenomenon: mind or matter? Our uniform experience is that minds have the capacity to produce specified information, which lies at the root of the design inference. Conversely we also know that random material processes do not exhibit this capacity. So as far as the origin of information, mind is the better candidate to be the fundamental explanatory entity (Meyer 2009:394). In addition to this it is not proven that the designer must be equally as "complex" as its design. In contrast to the contingent and variegated universe with all its inexplicable physical quantities and constants, a divine mind is startlingly simple (Craig 2009:5). It is a category error to



use materialistic conceptions of complexity i.e. heterogeneity of parts, and apply it to a non-material entity. A principle of divine simplicity is that no attribute is distinguishable from another regarding God's being. God, as a nonphysical entity is not composed of parts and his metaphysical composition cannot be formulated as such.

Finally the fact that Dawkins has no problem placing his confidence in the Multi-verse theory displays his propensity to accept a belief if it is anti-theistic rather than being evidentially supportable. If so, this would mean he is guilty of displaying the same type of "faith" that he lambasts believers for adhering too. So what is the evidence for the Multi-verse theory? It would seem, very little. Weinberg notes "these are very speculative ideas...without any experimental support" (Weinberg 1993:38). The many worlds hypothesis is essentially an effort on the part of partisans of the chance hypothesis to multiply their probabilistic resources in order to reduce the improbability of the occurrence of fine tuning (Craig/Moreland 2003:487). This is nothing more than metaphysical speculation. To posit that everything that could happen does happen (in some universe ontologically separated from all the rest) is bizarre and gratuitous (Groothuis 2011:259). Quantum Physicist John Polkinghorne says it is "pseudo-science" and a "metaphysical guess that there might be many universes with different laws and circumstances" (Polkinghorne 1996:6). It is only invoked in order to avoid a Designer but is



actually no less metaphysical than the Design hypothesis itself. If we apply the logical principle of Ockham's razor to the fine tuning/Design argument, that is, we should not multiply causes beyond what is necessary to explain the effect, or as Sagan put it; "when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data, choose the simpler" (Sagan 1996:211) we should find the Design hypothesis preferable. Why? Simply because as Barr observes, in order to "abolish one unobservable God", we then have to postulate "an infinite number of unobservable substitutes" (Barr 2006:157). The simplest most commonsensical explanation is that the "appearance of Design" is due to the work of a designer.

## **THE ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE AND THE NEW ATHEISTS**

When engaging the New Atheist arguments from scripture you will encounter a rambling pastiche of errors consisting of anarchic theological assertions, out of context quotations and a voluminous amount of ill-informed historical data. Literary critic Terry Eagleton began his own review of *The God Delusion* with the following words:

*"Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the Book of British Birds, and you have a rough idea of*



*what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.” (Eagleton 2006)*

Dawkins dismisses ‘scriptural arguments’ in just five pages. Dismissing centuries of evidence for the Bible’s reliability offered by some of the world’s most eminent scientists, historians, archaeologists and legal experts. Instead he chooses to rehash the unsubstantiated beliefs of discredited higher critical scholars. Dawkins’ first error is a statement about Jesus. He claims “there is no good historical evidence that he ever thought he was divine” (2007:117). Again no evidence for this claim is forthcoming and as usual it is clear that no volume of divinity has been consulted. Even a cursory perusal of the many works covering Christology would have discredited this careless assertion. Dawkins seems to be relying on the work of Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, who in much the same way as Bultmann, seek to demythologise the Gospel tradition by removing the Christian myths (i.e. His divinity) and legends (miracles) that they contend are later interpolations. Only then are they able to uncover the real Jesus of History. However the Jesus Seminar represents only a radical fringe of New Testament Scholarship, most are unconvinced of the validity of their methods that use a voting procedure to establish authentic sayings of Jesus. Their conclusions are contrary to the overwhelming evidence for the historicity and reliability of the New Testament witness. Most importantly it is imperative to recognise that their



results are based on an unsubstantiated anti-supernaturalism, which incidentally is shared by Dawkins (Geisler 2006:388).

The positive evidence for the divinity of Jesus is fairly substantial especially when interpreted in light of first century Jewish monotheism. Jesus divine self-understanding is evident explicitly in the Christological titles he used by way of self-reference and implicitly by his teaching and behaviour (Craig 2008:300). Perhaps the clearest assertion to not only eternal pre-existence but also to actually being the Yahweh of the Old Testament is found in his "I am" statements in John's Gospel (Reymond 2003:234). D.A Carson notes that two of these, John 8:58 and 13:19 "are undoubtedly absolute in form and content and constitute an explicit self-identification with Yahweh" (Carson 2001:585). In addition Jesus identified with God by claiming a number of prerogatives that are reserved for God alone. He claimed to be equal with God (Mark 2:5-11), he claimed he should be honoured as God (John 5:21), claimed to be Messiah (Matt.26:63-64), accepted worship as God (Matt. 14:33) and claimed to have equal authority with God (Matt.5:21). Gruenler sums it up: "It is a striking fact of modern NT research that the essential clues for correctly reading the implicit Christological self-understanding of Jesus are abundantly clear" and he concludes that there is "absolutely convincing evidence" that Jesus intended to stand in the place of God (Gruenler 1982:74).



Another argument the New Atheists bring against the bible is the charge that the Gospels are not historical eyewitness accounts. Hitchens describes this claim as “patently fraudulent” (Hitchens 2008:111) and Dawkins claims that “nobody knows who the evangelists were” yet still confidently asserts “they almost certainly never met Jesus personally” (2007:122). How they establish whether a historical document is reliable or not is never stated, they give no method of historiography and no criteria for establishing authenticity. There is no engagement with the positive criteria offered by scholars for the authenticity of the Gospels’ such as:

1. The criterion of Multiple attestations
2. The criterion of Coherence
3. The criterion of Dissimilarity. (Stein 2009:95).

Dawkins does offer some specific examples that he believes bolster his case. However even in presenting them he ends up contradicting himself. He first asserts that the gospels “are not a reliable account of what happened in the history of the real world” (2007:118) then on the very next page when trying to disparage the account of the census under Quirinius (Luke 2), he says Luke “tactlessly mentions events that historians are capable of independently



checking" (2007:119). So obviously some of Luke's recorded history is accurate and Dawkins has no problem utilising it in his arguments when it suits his purpose. Why does he accept Luke's reporting of a historical census as accurate but reject Luke's claim that they were "eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:3-4)? As it happens, the alleged problem is not insurmountable. He is referring to the fact that Luke records that the census decreed was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. We know Quirinius did not become governor until 6AD, and we know Christ was born before Herod the Great died around 4BC meaning the two time periods are irreconcilable. This elicits Dawkins disparaging comment that Luke "screws up his dating" (2007:119). Two plausible solutions have been offered to this issue; N.T. Wright comments that (*prōtos*) not only means 'first', but when followed by the genitive can mean 'before'. Therefore the census around the time of Christ's birth was one which took place before Quirinius was governing Syria (Wright 1992:89). A second option with archaeological support is that Quirinius was governor of Syria on two separate occasions once in 7BC and again in 6AD. A Latin inscription discovered has been interpreted to support this option (Geisler 2006:385). Under this scenario, Luke's use of *prōtos* refers to the first census in 7 BC, rather than the well-known one in 6 AD mentioned by Dawkins. Both options offer plausible explanations and make it totally erroneous to discount the entire biblical corpus on account of this issue.



Dawkins most disingenuous comment is that "it is even possible to mount a serious, though not widely supported, historical case that Jesus never lived at all" (2007:122). Why such an easily refutable comment is included in the book is a mystery, perhaps the provocative strength of its conclusion is enough! In reality it is possible to mount a "serious, though not widely supported case" for anything. However possibility is not synonymous with validity, which is the real question. Dawkins offers the work of G.A. Wells to provide credibility to this charge. The charge of the 'Christ myth' has existed on the fringe of New Testament scholarship for centuries but has never come to be accepted by scholars. R.T France states "that he existed as a figure in history is almost universally admitted by atheist and believer alike" he goes on to mention that "G.A. Wells remains a lone voice in arguing there was no historical Jesus" (France 2006:367). Dawkins does admit that "he probably did exist" but as "reputable biblical scholars" don't consider the bible a reliable testimony "I shall not consider it further as evidence" (2007:122). This is a seriously convoluted argument, what "biblical scholars" is he referring to? Well those who agree with him! There is no effort to engage with the majority of biblical scholarship that does argue for the reliability of the scriptures. This fact alone disinvests any last remnant of credibility from his case.



## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand and engage critically with the New Atheist movement. This was achieved by analysing the underlying philosophical framework of the New Atheism in addition to engaging some of the specific arguments advanced by them. The recent emergence and popularity of this particular brand of atheism makes it vitally important to fully understand their approach. The paper firstly addressed the metaphysical presuppositions held by the New Atheists as well as indicating what role sociological trends played in bringing this movement to the fore. Secondly the paper examines the interplay between science and faith and how this has shaped contemporary conceptions. Finally the study engaged with three specific arguments advanced to counter traditional theistic arguments; these were the cosmological argument, the teleological argument and the argument from scripture.

The findings of this research paper revealed that underneath all New Atheist arguments and ideology lays an extreme form of naturalism which rules out the existence of God *a priori*. It was demonstrated how adherence to this form of naturalism often results in a number of contradictory assertions about reality. In addition the role of secularism and the events of 9/11 were found to play a significant role in the rise of the New Atheism because they



created a suitably hostile environment towards religion which meant the aggressive rhetoric of the New Atheists was readily accepted. The “warfare scenario” of science vs. religion was dismissed as consisting of outmoded scholarship and the New Atheist definition of faith was wholly deficient and totally arbitrary. The analysis then moved on to assess their response to the cosmological argument. There was a paucity of substance to their arguments and their chief objection, an infinite regress of causes was answered in detail. The teleological argument was found to be supported by a number of unsustainable premises, chiefly the objection of “who designed the designer” fails as a proximate explanation of one event is not negated by learning that it does not supply a comprehensive or ultimate explanation of all the events in the causal chain. The final arguments we examined were from scripture. This area was extremely weak with simple replication of liberal scholastic arguments. One obvious error was the lack of engagement with mainstream biblical scholarship. We offered some plausible solutions to a sampling of the objections used to attack the bible.

There are a number of implications that we can infer from these results. Firstly the New Atheism should serve as a wakeup call to the church. Dawkins is not altogether wrong when he claims religion has become “little more than a pleasant social pastime” (2007:62). The church should seek to respond when a hostile atheist like Dawkins laments the level of “biblical



ignorance" (2007:383) he finds among educated people. Secondly, while we should not imitate their style, it may be worth taking some time to reflect on why the culture is listening to them and not us. Have we failed to adapt our message to the audience? This is an area of future research for the Church. Thirdly a positive result of the New Atheists has been to place religion back in the forefront of the public eye; this presents great opportunities for those prepared to take them. There has been a plethora of academic and popular level apologetic works produced on this subject. These are causing the Church to really think about the validity of its faith. Finally the debate shows no signs of seriously abating which means the issues raised will be current for the foreseeable future and this will require an informed and articulate response from the Church.

The study has achieved its aim of critically engaging the New Atheism. We have exposed their naturalistic approach to science, religion and faith. The New Atheist attempts to undermine traditional theistic arguments were shown to be seriously lacking in substance and that their approach to theological issues exposed a glaring deficiency of interaction with current scholarly literature. The New Atheism has fallen far short of the expected academic standard for making assertions of this magnitude.





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