

The Angry "New" Atheists

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Books by the New Atheists (NA) Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens are best-sellers. These NA authors address audiences ranging from a Unitarian church to the New York public library to college campuses. Dawkins complained about one gruelling day in Toronto when he was booked for "five television interviews and one radio, all in one day before breakfast." Why do they find such an eager hearing? Because many have become religiously tone-deaf. They are also convinced that a decline in traditional religious belief will lead to a smarter, more scientifically literate and even a more civilized society. Some even ridicule "people of faith." George Weigel notes that "in the early 19th century, it was thought that an atheist could not be a gentleman; today the atheists argue that religious conviction is for slobs and morons."

Sam Harris

The NA's objective is nothing less than to convert believers into atheists. In his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris asserts that he "set out to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms." And the God whose existence he denies, he also hates. Harris asserts that the God of Abraham is a ridiculous fellow – capricious, petulant, and cruel – one with whom a covenant is little guarantee of health or happiness. But why so vitriolic in the opposition to God if He does not exist? Harris also argues that religion is a curse of the human race. He describes the Bible as inarticulate, morally repugnant and false. He also complains about the "failure of our schools to announce the death of God in a way that each generation can understand."

Richard Dawkins

Richard Dawkins, an Oxford University professor, is now so identified with his attacks on religion that he is described as the "nearest thing to a professional atheist since Bertrand Russell", one of the most prominent British atheist philosophers of the twentieth century. Anthony Flew, a British philosopher and ex-atheist and now a deist, called Dawkins "a secularist bigot". He says that Dawkins is not interested in truth as such. But he is primarily out to discredit an ideological opponent by any available means. And he is called a "Darwinian fundamentalist" even by some of his secular colleagues. For example, Dawkins argues that early religious formation is a form of "child" abuse.

In his *The God Delusion*, Dawkins speaks often of a need for "consciousness-raising" among atheists in America, and the need for atheists "to come out of" the closet, as homosexuals have been doing in ever-larger numbers in recent decades. Dawkins does not mince words in his diatribe against God and the Christian faith. He accuses God of breaking into a "monumental rage" whenever his chosen people flirted "with a rival god" – as "nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind." He calls Yahweh an immoral monster: "What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling monster as Yahweh – and even worse, that they should bossily try to force the same *evil monster* (whether fact or fiction) on the rest of us." He calls conservative Christians in the United States the "American Taliban" who constitute a profound threat to democracy. But with all his

negativism Dawkins is unable to offer any hope for the world. In *A Devil's Chaplain*, he asserts that the universe we observe has no design, no purpose, no evil and no good. There is "nothing but pitiless indifference."

Christopher Hitchens

Christopher Hitchens, an Oxford graduate with a degree in philosophy, politics, and economics, went into journalism, making a name for himself as a writer for Britain's left-of-centre weekly, *The New Statesman*. He immigrated to the US in 1981 and shortly afterwards began writing for *The Nation*, a left-wing magazine that in the 1980s was fiercely opposed to the president and often devoted space to the Soviet viewpoint in the Cold War. He calls himself not so much an atheist as an anti-theist. His book *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, published in 2007, became a best-seller. In it, he lambastes the Christian faith. He believes people of faith are in "their different ways planning your and my destruction." He shows contempt for people who disagree with him. At times he can be cruel and vindictive. For instance, just days after Rev. Jerry Falwell died in May 2007, Hitchens called him "a toad" and claimed Falwell didn't even believe in what he preached. He charges that Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* is "a soap-opera film". And he calls Gibson "an Australian fascist and ham actor, who adheres to a crackpot and schismatic Catholic sect consisting mainly of himself and of his even more thuggish father." He calls John Calvin "a sadist and a torturer and killer." He insinuates that the great mathematician, physicist, and theologian Blaise Pascal (1632-62) was a hypocrite and a fraud, whose "theology is not far from sordid." Even Mother Teresa does not measure up to Hitchens' standards. He charges that the man who originally made her famous was "a distinguished if rather silly British evangelist (later a Catholic) named Malcolm Muggeridge."

Hitchens is convinced of the presumed intellectual superiority of atheism. "We no longer have any need of a god to explain what is no longer mysterious," he writes. "What believers will do, now that their faith is optional and private and irrelevant, is a matter for them." Religion is "man made". He asserts that any of the teachings of Christianity are, as well as incredible, mythical and immoral. He claims that the Old Testament recommends genocide, slavery, genital mutilations, and other horrors. And those who tell this "evil story" should be "condemned by those who shrink from cruelty to children." And in the New Testament Paul expresses "both fear and contempt for the female."

In *Is Christianity GOOD for the World? A Debate*, Douglas Wilson, pastor of Christ Church (Moscow, Idaho) and Senior Fellow at New Saints Andrew College shows the weaknesses of Hitchens' arguments. Wilson tells Hitchens, "You praise reasons to the heights, yet will not give *reasons* for strident and inflexible moral judgments, or why you have arbitrarily dubbed certain chemical processes "rational arguments". Hitchens tells Wilson, "There is no need for revelation to enforce morality, and the idea that good conduct needs a heavenly reward, or that bad conduct merits a hellish punishment, is a degradation of our right and duty to choose for ourselves." Hitchens says to Wilsons "Our morality evolved. Just as we have. Natural selection and trial-and-error have given us the vague yet grand conception of human rights and some but not yet all of the means of making these rights coherent and consistent. There is simply no need for the introduction of extraneous or the supernatural." Wilson replies: "Your entire worldview has evolution as a key foundation stone, and evolution means nothing if not

change. If so, all our innate morality changes with us."

New Atheism's Basis for Morality

How can NA accuse anyone of wrongdoing? If morality is completely subjective then can they condemn any action, however repugnant it may appear to them? Is there any real right or wrong? If there are moral standards, on what are they based? NA make the assumption that there is no authority for rightness and wrongness of human behaviour outside human beings themselves. They are the measure of all things. They decide how our world is to be understood and interpreted, and who we are.

The NA believe the process of evolution is the basis of morality. Their faith in biological evolution knows no bound. But what they are teaching is not new. The leading philosopher of evolutionary theory was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). His *Principles of Ethics* assumes throughout that the more evolved man displays the better conduct. Right and wrong have meaning only in relation to creatures capable of pleasure and pain. Spencer insisted that the ethics we now know is not absolutely right but only relatively so. In his *Evolutionary Ethics*, Julian Huxley (1887-1975) insisted that the development of moral consciousness is a part of the general process of evolution, and he ties in the growth of awareness of moral values with the level of civilization in which a person lives. In his *Religion Without Revelation*, he declares that man's most sacred duty, and at the same time his most glorious opportunity, is to promote the maximum fulfilment of the evolutionary process on this earth, and this includes the fullest realization of his own inherent possibilities.

But if morality is only an evolutionary product, there is then no question of a moral right or wrong. Morality depends then strictly upon the attitude, opinion or belief of the person making moral judgements. If morality is strictly subjective, then raping and killing humans is not really wrong. We just have the *feeling* that they are wrong. In this view of morality there are no objective moral standards that are binding. If I were to say a particular action is wrong, all I would really be saying is "I don't like this action" or "That action offends me." My attitude would be revealed, but that's all. The only true goal of human beings then is the practical pursuit of "self-interest". Consequently, there is nothing in this evolutionary view or morality which produces a strong moral conviction to care for the weak, the aged, and the handicapped.

But some actions have to be either right or wrong regardless how a person feels. As G.K. Chesterton put it, "You cannot possibly know what is wrong with the world unless you have some idea of what is right."

The Consequences of Atheistic Morality

What does a world without objective morality look like? By debunking all religious views of life, it insures that social life will be dominated by whoever's self-interest happens to be the strongest. Beliefs have consequences. The NA gloss over the destructive atheistic ideologies that have led to far greater loss of human life within one century than "religion" (let alone "Christendom") with its wars, inquisitions, and trials. Atheism, not religion, is the real force behind the mass murders of history. Over the course of the last one hundred years or so at

least one hundred million human lives have been sacrificed on the altars of "progress", "development", "social justice", "brotherhood", "national identity", and other abstract "humanistic" ideals.

Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), who influenced several of Russia's most radical revolutionaries, hated God. For instance, he said that "if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him." The godless Soviet experience thoroughly demonstrates that if God is eliminated from public life, a much worse deity inevitably is erected in its place. In December 1917, in Soviet Russia – all the monasteries were closed down. A few days later, the Christian marriage ceremony was replaced by a civil rite. Lenin's successor, the ruthless dictator, Joseph Stalin, is a heinous example of an atheist in power. He hated Christianity. In 1939, he ordered the wholesale destruction of church buildings all across Russia. And he reduced human beings to "mere objects" and "things" which are relatively easily manipulated and controlled. In his 1970 *Nobel Prize Lecture*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn says that the atheist Soviet system demanded victims by the millions. It has no firm, generally approved concepts of goodness and justice. All such concepts are fluid and liable to change, "which means that one should always act in the way that is most profitable to one's own party."

Hitler was fanatically anti-Christian, though this was partly hidden from the German public. In conversations recorded in *Table Talk*, Hitler made it quite plain that he had nothing but contempt for the core beliefs of Christianity. For instance, he said that the reason why the ancient world was so pure, light, and serene was that it knew nothing of the two great scourges; the pox and Christianity. In 1941, shortly after the invasion of Soviet Russia, Hitler asserted that the coming of Christianity had been "the heaviest blow that struck humanity."

Biblical Basis for Morality

The case against God, as presented by the NA, should not worry a believer. When the NA stray into the terrain of Biblical studies, they show an amazing unfamiliarity with it. They definitely fail to notice the unfolding "redemptive movement" of God's self-revelation to His people within the Old Testament. For example, Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt largely generates the motivation for Israel's own treatment of slaves, foreigners, and underprivileged within its borders. Rights and wrongs are clearly stated in laws which are personally revealed by God. Yahweh is not a "monster" but a loving, gracious initiative-taking God (cf. Deut. 30:19-20). Human beings are not things, they have been created in God's image as co-rulers with God over creation. This fact establishes the fundamental equality of all human beings. It defines racial equality. For instance, God approved of Moses' marriage to a black woman (Num.12). Job recognizes that he and his slaves have the same Maker and come from the same place – their mother's womb (Job 31:15). Later in Amos 2:6, 8:6 slavery again is repudiated. The conviction that each individual human being is of inestimable value, the belief that justice and righteousness must prevail – all these beliefs attest to the decisive impact of the Christian religion upon modern society and culture. From the Christian point of view, therefore, as Nicholas Berdyaev, noted, "every single soul has more meaning and value than the whole of history with its empires, its wars and revolutions, its blossoming and fading civilizations."

Unlike the NA, Christianity insists on the absolute incapacity of human beings to solve their

most pressing problems by themselves. Christianity, therefore, denies the core belief of the NA, namely faith in the possibility of autonomous human control over the world. Therefore, there are moral obligations that are binding upon everyone, regardless whether or not one wants them to hold or wants to fulfil them. A claim such as, "It is wrong to torture a person to death just for fun" seems to be true and the obligation to it seems to be binding on all human beings. It is hard, after all, to imagine that such an obligation is binding only because of the desire or goals of an individual or of a society. As Wilson points out to Hitchens, "You believe yourself to live in a universe where there is no such a thing as any fixed *ought* or *ought not*. But God has gifted you with a remarkable ability to denounce what *ought not* to be. "And, so because you reject Him, you have great sermons but no way of ever coming up with a text." And says Wilson, "The Christian faith is good for the world because it provides the fixed standards which atheism cannot provide and because it provides forgiveness for sins, which atheism cannot provide either. We need the direction of the standard because we are confused sinners. We need the forgiveness because we are guilty sinners. Atheism not only keeps the guilt, but it also keeps the confusion."

Conclusion

Should we be concerned about the "popularity" of the NA. Of course, we should. There is still a guarantee for the free exercise of religion, while NA abuse it by constantly attacking the free exercise of religion. When God is denied, humanity is denied. Therefore, we must emphatically say "No" to the challenge of the NA, also for the sake of humanity. History testifies that when God is eliminated from public life, another deity will inevitably take his place. The NA boast in their own "wisdom" and abilities. But we look to the Cross, which is God's merciful provision that executes autonomous pride and exalts humility. What the world calls success, God calls foolishness, and what is of little value in the world is of great value to God (cf. 1 Cor. 1; 25).