

The New Atheists

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

An atheist is a person who does not believe in the existence of a god or gods (in contrast to an agnostic, who believes that the existence of a god cannot be known with any certainty). The term “New Atheist” generally refers to popular 21st century atheist authors who are considered “new” because, instead of holding quiet, personal opinions, they boldly promote their criticism of all religious beliefs.¹

Founder:

There is no single founder for New Atheism. Popular New Atheist authors include Daniel Dennet (b.1942), Sam Harris (b.1967), Richard Dawkins (b.1941), and Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011).

Statistics:

The extent of New Atheist influence is not clear, but according to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, the number of Americans who identify as atheists doubled since a survey done in 2007. About 3.1% of Americans call themselves atheists, and 4% call themselves agnostics.² According to a 2015 survey by Gallup International, 11% of the people surveyed worldwide considered themselves to be “convinced atheists.”³

History:

Atheism is not a recent development, although in earlier centuries, atheism was for most people an unacceptable worldview. Modern atheism stems from the elevation of human reason during the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when alternatives to the biblical worldview were more widely embraced. For the New Atheists, the loss of belief in God is hardly more damaging to the culture than outgrowing a belief in Santa Claus. In contrast, atheists of the

¹ “The New Atheists are, in their own way, evangelistic in intent and ambitious in hope. They see atheism as the only plausible worldview for our times, and they see belief in God as downright dangerous—an artifact of the past that we can no longer afford to tolerate, much less encourage.” R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008), 12.

² Michael Lipka, “10 Facts about Atheists,” updated and posted June 1, 2016, at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/10-facts-about-atheists>.

³ Gallup International, “Losing Our Religion? Two-Thirds of People Still Claim to be Religious,” April 13, 2015 at http://www.wingia.com/en/news/losing_our_religion_two_thirds_of_people_still_claim_to_be_religious/290.

nineteenth century, individuals such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Charles Darwin (who might be thought of as the “old atheists”), understood that atheism “demanded a much more radical transformation of human culture and consciousness.”⁴ In his poem, “Dover Beach,” the nineteenth century English poet Matthew Arnold wrote that the loss of faith would leave behind a world that had “neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.”⁵ Atheism would result in a “pointless world.”⁶ Such a world was terribly demonstrated by twentieth century events such as the Holocaust and world wars, circumstances that caused the rise of “protest atheism,” the belief that a good God, if such a God existed, could not allow such evil.

In the more permissive culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, atheism was not only tolerated, but embraced and openly advocated. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, against New York and Washington, D.C., highlighted radical, dangerous religious beliefs, encouraging the New Atheist authors in their criticism of *all* religions. Sam Harris, one of the first New Atheist authors, “expresses what many people, shocked by 9/11 and mystified by daily reports of ideologically inspired violence, are beginning to think … [the New Atheists’] professed concern for world peace, their defiance of fundamentalist expressions of religion, and, of course, their cynicism and skepticism all resonate well with the reading public. This, it seems, will be the new face of unbelief for decades to come.”⁷

The New Atheist authors proclaim their views with missionary zeal. Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, writes, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.”⁸ Dawkins hopes that the “faith-heads” who read his book will be able to overcome years of childhood indoctrination and “break free of the vice of religion.”⁹ Sam Harris, in *Letter to a Christian Nation*, says that he intends “to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms.”¹⁰

Texts:

Popular New Atheist books include *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Daniel Dennet, 2006); *Letter to a Christian Nation* (Sam Harris, 2006); *The God Delusion* (Richard Dawkins, 2006); *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Christopher Hitchens, 2007); *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Lawrence M. Krause, 2013); *The God Argument: The Case Against Religion and for Humanism* (A. C. Grayling, 2013); and *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (Sam Harris, 2015).

⁴ John F. Haught, “Amateur Atheists: Why the New Atheism Isn’t Serious,” *The Christian Century* (February 26, 2008), 23.

⁵ Mohler, 26.

⁶ Haught, 26.

⁷ Adam S. Francisco, “Sam Harris and the New Atheism,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (January 2007): 86.

⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 28.

⁹ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 28.

¹⁰ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), ix.

Beliefs and Practices:

According to author John Haught in his book, *God and the New Atheism*, the New Atheists generally believe that 1) there is nothing apart from nature, no God, no soul and no life after death; 2) nature is not created; it is self-originating; 3) the universe has no overall purpose, although human beings can live purposefully; 4) only science can help us understand all explanations and all causes; 5) all of the various features of living beings can be explained in natural terms by evolution; 6) faith in God is the cause of many evils and should be rejected on moral grounds; and 7) morality does not require belief in God; people actually behave better without faith.¹¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr. suggests additional characteristics—a new boldness in promoting their beliefs and shaming people of faith; an attack on tolerance; and questioning the right of parents to teach their beliefs to their children.¹² Still another trait often expressed in New Atheist writings is a new level of passionate zeal, however misguided. Atheists “claim to believe that God does not exist and yet, according to empirical studies, tend to be the people most angry at him.”¹³ Author David Bentley Hart comments that the New Atheists’ accusations against religion “are attitudes masquerading as ideas, emotional commitments disguised as intellectual honesty.”¹⁴

Concerning God and Creation

Although the New Atheists oppose all religions, the God described in the Bible is a favorite target. Richard Dawkins writes, “The God of the Old Testament is 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 … malevolent bully.”¹⁵ Author Dan Baker says of the God of Israel, “We can choose between reason and human kindness, or we can serve the most unpleasant character in all fiction.”¹⁶ Dismissing the idea of a Creator, Dawkins writes that “the illusion of design in the living world is explained with far greater economy and with devastating elegance by Darwinian natural selection.”¹⁷

Concerning Religion and Faith

For the New Atheists, the beliefs, ceremonies, holy sites and sacred writings of religion are unnecessary. According to Christopher Hitchens, “We atheists do not require any priests, or any

¹¹ Edward T. Oakes, “A Baltimore Catechism for the New Atheists,” *First Things* (August 3, 2012) at <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2012/08/a-baltimore-catechism-for-the-new-atheists>. John Haught’s book is *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

¹² Mohler, 54-63.

¹³ Joe Carter, “When Atheists are Angry at God,” *First Things* (January 2011), at <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2011/01/when-atheists-are-angry-at-god>.

¹⁴ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 19.

¹⁵ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

¹⁶ Dan Baker, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* (Toronto: Sterling Publishing, 2016), 303.

¹⁷ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 24.

hierarchy above them, to police our doctrine. Sacrifices and ceremonies are abhorrent to us, as are relics and the worship of any images or objects (even including objects in the form of one of man's most useful innovations: the bound book).¹⁸ Religion is thought to be man-made, "one natural phenomenon among many."¹⁹ Author A. C. Grayling agrees, commenting that the claims of religion place it "in the same class as astrology and magic. Like these systems of thought, religion dates from mankind's less educated and knowledgeable early history, and like them it has been superseded by advances in our understanding of the world and ourselves."²⁰

While the New Atheists are especially opposed to fundamentalist expressions of religion—within Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or any faith—even non-fundamentalists are derided and accused of "cherry-picking the given religion's doctrines, discarding the uncongenial teachings and reinterpreting the others to make them more comfortable to live with."²¹

According to Richard Dawkins, faith is a "mental virus" that spreads among people even though it lacks testability, evidential support, precision, consistency and other "virtues" such as those found in scientific ideas. In contrast, scientific ideas are scrutinized by forces that do not favor "pointless, self-serving behavior."²² The New Atheists believe that religious faith will never die out until human beings are able to overcome their fear of death and the unknown, and their fear of one another. To this end, New Atheists recommend that people throughout the world should be educated in order to make informed choices about their lives. It is unacceptable to pass faith from one generation to the next. Daniel Dennett writes, "Ignorance is nothing shameful; *imposing* ignorance is shameful. Most people are not to blame for their own ignorance, but if they willfully pass it on, they *are* to blame."²³

Concerning Morality

The New Atheists offer several different critiques of religious morality. Atheist Dan Baker, who was once a Christian pastor, came to think of himself as "a biological organism in a natural environment, and that is all there is."²⁴ Rejecting the belief that human beings are the special creation of a loving Creator, New Atheists believe that morality in such biological organisms does not arise from "the work of the law written on their hearts" (Rom. 2:15), but from life experience and the discovery of different ways to resolve questions. Dan Baker explains that "there is no need for a god. Millions of good people live happy, productive, moral lives without believing in a god."²⁵ Christopher Hitchens complained that the central teaching of the Christian

¹⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 6.

¹⁹ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

²⁰ A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case Against Religion and for Humanism* (New York: Bloomsbury, USA, 2013), 2.

²¹ Grayling, 6.

²² Richard Dawkins, "Viruses of the Mind" (1991) <http://www.inf.fu-berlin.de/lehre/pmo/eng/Dawkins-MindViruses.pdf>.

²³ Dennett, 339

²⁴ Dan Baker, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ulysses Press, 2008), 42.

²⁵ Baker, *Godless*, 40.

faith, the redeeming death of Jesus Christ, is actually immoral: “Under no persuasion could I be made to believe that a human sacrifice several thousand years ago vicariously redeems me from sin. Nothing could persuade me that that was true—or moral, by the way.”²⁶ For Richard Dawkins, atheism is a worthwhile pursuit and a realistic goal, in fact, “a brave and splendid one.” Sadly, but perhaps accurately, Dawkins continues, “You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled.”²⁷

A Lutheran Response:

God and Creation

The apostle Paul asks, “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20) The New Atheists, who may regard themselves as wise debaters of this age, proclaim what Scripture condemns as the opinion of fools: “There is no God” (Ps. 14:1). Fallen human beings “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” about God’s existence. “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” He has revealed His divine attributes “ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:18-20). Creation proclaims the glory of God (Ps. 19:1-4; Job 38:4 to 41:34). God revealed Himself and His plan of salvation through the prophets and finally “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:2)

The Triune God, the God of Israel, describes Himself as “a jealous God” (Ex. 20:5; Ex. 34:14) because He alone *is* God. He says, “My glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols” (Is. 42:8). God reveals Himself as the rightful Lord and Judge of all, severely punishing human rebellion and wickedness. He sends the great Flood, destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, commands the death of the Canaanites, and warns of the final judgment on the Last Day. Yet the accounts of Israel’s history in the Old Testament also show the ways in which God mercifully guided His chosen people, protecting them from their enemies and shielding the family line of the promised Messiah. At times, to draw His wayward people back to Himself, God “sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies” (Judges 2:14), restoring them when they repented and keeping for Himself a faithful remnant (1 Kings 19:18). Far from being the “bully” and “ethnic cleanser” of the New Atheists, this same God so loved the world that He sent His Son to be its Savior.

Religion and Faith

The church father Justin Martyr (110-165 A. D.) said that the early Christians were called atheists because they asserted that the pagan gods were actually wicked demons: “Hence are we called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and other

²⁶ Interview, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/10/12/can-civilization-survive-without-god/>.

²⁷ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 23.

virtues, who is free from all impurity.”²⁸ As Christians, we may perhaps call ourselves “atheists” with regard to the so-called gods of this world (Acts 19:26; Gal. 4:8), but we confess our faith in the one true God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Religions that reject the Holy Trinity and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ are rightly described as man-made. Scripture describes the worker who fells a tree, using half of it to cook a meal and the rest to fashion a god for himself: “Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’” (Is. 44:16-17). The Christian faith, in contrast, is not man-made. It is based in God’s revelation of Himself in His creation (Rom. 1:19-20), in His Word and, finally, in the Person of His Son (Heb. 1:1-2). God’s will for us and the story of our salvation are found in His inspired Word (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Faith is not the “mental virus” described by Richard Dawkins, nor is it lacking in evidential support, as Dawkins claims. Faith in Jesus Christ is a gift of God the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3) and “the assurance of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1). Christian author Greg Koukl comments, “So let’s set the record straight. Faith is not the opposite of reason. The opposite of faith is unbelief. And reason is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of reason is irrationality.”²⁹ New Atheist Daniel Dennett asks if religion is worthy of our loyalty. David Bentley Hart responds: “For Christians the pertinent Question is whether Christ is worthy of loyalty, which is an entirely different matter.”³⁰ In response to the complaint that faith cannot be tested by scientific method, Hart writes, “By that standard, I need not believe that the Battle of Salamis ever took place, that the widower next door loves the children for whom he tirelessly provides, or that I might be wise to trust my oldest friend even if he tells me something I do not care to hear. [Sam] Harris is quite correct to say, for instance, that Christ’s resurrection—like any other historical event—is known only by way of the testimony of others. Indeed, Christianity is the only major faith built entirely around a single historical claim.”³¹ In God’s Word we have eyewitness testimony to that historical claim, the resurrection of our crucified Savior (1 Cor. 15:3-8). In joyful obedience to God’s command, we hand down the teachings of this faith—a faith grounded in historical fact—to the next generation (Deut. 6:4-7; Ps. 71:18; 2 Tim. 2:1-2).

Morality

New Atheist morality is not based on revealed truth but on life experience and personal decisions made in ever-changing circumstances. New Atheists believe that people can live “happy, productive, moral lives without believing in a god.”³² Although a certain morality is possible, Peter Hitchens (a Christian and the brother of New Atheist Christopher Hitchens) warns of the

²⁸ Justin Martyr, The First Apology of Justin, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 164.

²⁹ Greg Koukl, “Is Faith Irrational? [Why It Matters],” in Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow, ed., *Is God Just a Human Invention: And Seventeen Other Questions Raised by the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 30.

³⁰ Hart, 8.

³¹ Hart, 10-11.

³² Baker, *Godless*, 40.

danger of an ever-changing morality that is based on human experience apart from the Law of God: “If morality evolves, then morality changes. Then the things of which we most strongly disapprove now could be things which are permitted later, in which case it’s not really morality, as far as I’m concerned.”³³

The Lutheran Confessions admit that “the human will possesses freedom regarding works and matters that reason can comprehend by itself. It can to some extent produce civil righteousness or the righteousness of works … it can keep back the hand from murder, adultery, and theft.”³⁴ However, “apart from the Holy Spirit human hearts lack the fear of God and trust in God. They do not believe that God hears their prayers, forgives them, or helps and preserves them. Therefore they are ungodly; for a bad tree cannot bear good fruit [Matt. 7:18], and ‘without faith it is impossible to please God’ [Heb. 11:6].”³⁵

Scripture will not permit us to harbor any proud thoughts of a consistent or God-pleasing morality. Speaking of fools who deny God’s existence, the psalmist says, “They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good” (Ps. 14:1). All people, believers and unbelievers alike, fall under God’s just condemnation: “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). We all fall short of the glory of God, and we are justified by His grace as a gift, “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24).

Conclusion

Atheists, new and old alike, truly live “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12) and they need our prayers and our witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus, a witness in which our words are supported by our loving actions. The apostle Peter writes, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12). The need for loving, Christ-centered witness is urgent. New Atheist Sam Harris writes, “So let us be honest with ourselves: in the fullness of time, one side is really going to win this argument, and the other side is really going to lose.”³⁶ As those who trust in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation, we can, with both joy and sorrow, agree with that statement because we already know the outcome.

For Further Reading:

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Baker, Robert C. and Roland Cap Ehlke, eds. *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011.

³³ Interview with Christopher and Peter Hitchens: “Can Civilization Survive Without God?” Pew Research Center, October 12, 2010, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/10/12/can-civilization-survive-without-god/>.

³⁴ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 20, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 233.4-234.6.

³⁵ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 20, *The Book of Concord*, 234. 6.

³⁶ Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 5.

Francisco, Adam. *One God, Many Gods: A Study of World Religions*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008.

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Steinbronn, Anthony J. *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007.

Links and Websites:

<https://www.lhm.org/studies/studydetail.asp?id=26623>

The Journey from Unbelief to Faith (a DVD study from Lutheran Hour Ministries; Session 4: “X-Box Atheist” describes the experience of an atheist who comes to faith in Christ).

<http://www.salvomag.com/new/articles/salvo41/eye-openers.php>

Matt Nelson, “Eye Openers: Eight Common Factors for Atheists Changing Their Minds About God,” *Salvo* 41 (Summer 2017).