

# Religion and the New Atheism

A Critical Appraisal

*Edited by*

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ix
Foreword.....	xi
RICHARD HARRIES	
Preface.....	xiii
REZA ASLAN	
1. Introduction: What is the New Atheism? .....	1
AMARNATH AMARASINGAM	
<i>I. Religion and the New Atheism</i>	
2. Judaism and Atheism: The Challenge of Secular Humanism .....	11
ROBERT L. PLATZNER	
3. Beating 'God' to Death: Radical Theology and the New Atheism .....	25
JEFFREY W. ROBBINS AND CHRISTOPHER D. RODKEY	
4. Religion as Phantasmagoria: Islam in <i>The End of Faith</i> .....	37
RORY DICKSON	
<i>II. Science and the New Atheism</i>	
5. What Has Atheism Ever Done for Science?.....	57
STEVE FULLER	
6. Cognitive Science and the New Atheism .....	79
WILLIAM SIMS BAINBRIDGE	
<i>III. Sociology and the New Atheism</i>	
7. One-Dimensional Rage: The Social Epistemology of the New Atheism and Fundamentalism .....	97
WILLIAM A. STAHL	
8. The New Atheism and Sociology: Why Here? Why Now? What Next? .....	109
STEPHEN BULLIVANT	

9. The New Atheism and the Secularization Thesis.....	125
MICHAEL IAN BORER	
10. The New Atheism and the Empowerment of American Freethinkers .....	139
RICHARD CIMINO AND CHRISTOPHER SMITH	
<i>IV. Philosophy, Ethics and the New Atheism</i>	
11. Ethics, Out-Group Altruism, and the New Atheism.....	159
GREGORY R. PETERSON	
12. Disparate Destinations, Parallel Paths: An Analysis of Contemporary Atheist and Christian Parenting Literature .....	179
JEFF NALL	
13. Is God a Hypothesis? The New Atheism, Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, and Philosophical Confusion .....	203
RYAN C. FALCIONI	
Afterword .....	225
MARK VERNON	
About the Authors.....	233
References.....	237
Index .....	251

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE NEW ATHEISM?

Amarnath Amarasingam

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 misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

– Richard Dawkins (2006, 31)

One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human pre-history where nobody—not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms—had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs).

– Christopher Hitchens (2007b, 64)

It is safe to say that almost every person living in New Orleans at the moment Hurricane Katrina struck shared your belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and compassionate God. But what was God doing while Katrina laid waste to their city? Surely He heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Do you have the courage to admit the obvious? These people died talking to an imaginary friend.

– Sam Harris (2008, 53)

The term ‘new atheism’ has been given to the recent barrage of anti-religion and anti-God books written by Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2008), Christopher Hitchens (2007b), Daniel Dennett (2006), and others. Statements like those above can be found in abundance throughout their writings. They are characteristically petulant and provocative, challenging yet cranky, urgent but uninformed. The new atheist writers and their respective books have been selling extremely well; they have conducted conferences dealing, largely uncritically, with their own material, and have had a significant media presence discussing and debating their ideas with journalists and other

scholars. A rigorous academic treatment of their ideas, however, as well as an exploration of how their arguments are important for larger debates in religious studies and the social sciences, remains wanting. The academic community, with a few exceptions, has largely dismissed their writings as unsophisticated, crude, and lacking nuance. As such, most of the work dealing with the new atheist corpus has tended to be equally crude, mocking, or dismissive. Instead, this book brings together eminent and rising scholars in the fields of religious studies, sociology of religion, sociology of science, philosophy, and theology in order to engage the new atheist literature and place it in the context of larger scholarly discourses and debates. It will serve to contextualize and critically examine the claims, arguments, and goals of the new atheists in order that the scholarly community and educated general reader can become more informed of some of the debates with which the new atheists inevitably and, at times unknowingly, engage.

When I mentioned to colleagues that I was preparing an edited book on the new atheism, there were generally two responses. First, I was told that there was in fact nothing *new* about the new atheism. Everything that is said by the likes of Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett had already been said, and said better, by Russell, Paine, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and others. There is, of course, much truth to this. As Damon Linker (2008, A14) writes, the new atheism is “not particularly new. It belongs to an intellectual genealogy stretching back hundreds of years, to a moment when atheist thought split into two traditions: one primarily concerned with the dispassionate pursuit of truth, the other driven by a visceral contempt for the personal faith of others.” Although much of the content of the new atheism may have precedents, what *is* original is the newfound urgency in the message of atheism, as well as a kind of atheist social revival that their writings, lectures, and conferences have produced. In other words, the ‘new’ atheism is not entirely about new ideas, but a kind of evangelical revival and repackaging of old ideas. One only needs to peruse the Converts’ Corner on RichardDawkins.net to get a sense of the influence of the new atheism. The thousands of reader comments posted on the site state ad nauseum that *The God Delusion* had given them the arguments and the courage to confidently profess their atheism (see also Bullivant 2008a). To provide just one example: “Thank you, Dr. Dawkins, for giving me the words to explain, in clear, convicted and coherent voice, that which I have always felt. I have never felt so empowered, so humbled, so awestruck or so electrified as when I read

*The God Delusion*. All of the pieces, which I had been clumsily trying to fit together for a long time, slid into place with an easy grace.”

Second, I was told that the bookshelves are already littered with responses to the new atheism. What is the purpose of yet another? Although there have been more than twenty responses to the new atheism,<sup>1</sup> largely from Christian scholars, there has been little attempt to understand the significance of the movement as a whole. The purpose of this book, for example, is not to provide a defense of theology. This has been done by John Haught (2008), Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (2007), and others. This book will also not be a traditional response to the new atheism. As McGrath and McGrath (2007, 13) have noted: “Every one of Dawkins’s misrepresentations and overstatements can be challenged and corrected. Yet a book that merely offered such a litany of corrections would be catatonically boring.” Instead, this book, although containing some corrective chapters, approaches the new atheism more broadly. I also did not want this to be another work dealing with the interplay between religion and science (although this is at times unavoidable), simply because there is already an abundance of literature in this area. Rather, this book places the new atheism within a larger context of debates going on in academia in fields as diverse as cognitive science, sociology of religion, philosophy of religion, and ethics.

So who are the new atheists? Richard Dawkins (1941– ) was the Charles Simonyi Professor in the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University (he is retired as of September 2008). He has gained repute as a prolific author and popularizer of science. His most famous book before *The God Delusion* was *The Selfish Gene* published in 1976. Some of his other books on the topic of religion have been *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996), and

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<sup>1</sup> Some sample titles of these books are: *Atheist Delusions* by David Bentley Hart; *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* by Terry Eagleton; *The Truth Behind the New Atheism* by David Marshall; *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* by Edward Feser; *Deluded by Dawkins?* by Andrew Wilson; *Atheism is False* by David R. Stone; *Darwin’s Angel* by John Cornwell; *Is God a Delusion?* by Eric Reitan; *The God Delusion Revisited* by Mike King; *What’s So Great About Christianity?* by Dinesh D’Souza; *God is No Delusion* by Thomas Crean; *The Irrational Atheist* by Vox Day; *Delusion of Disbelief* by David Aikman; *I Don’t Believe in Atheists* by Chris Hedges; *Answering the New Atheism* by Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker; *The End of Reason* by Ravi Zacharias; *Beyond the God Delusion* by Richard Grigg; *The God Solution* by James A. Beverly; *The Godless Delusion* by Joe Egan; *Doubting Dawkins* by Keith Ward; *The Devil’s Delusion* by David Berlinski; *The Dawkins Letters* by David Robertson.

*Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998). Christopher Hitchens (1949– ) is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* and a visiting professor of liberal studies at the New School. He is the author of seventeen books, and has gained prominence as an acerbic polemicist and critic. He has published biographies of Thomas Jefferson (2005) and Thomas Paine (2006), has called for the prosecution of Henry Kissinger for war crimes in Indochina, Bangladesh, Chile, Cyprus, and East Timor (2001), and has launched a caustic criticism of Mother Theresa under the double entendre title, *The Missionary Position* (1995). Daniel Dennett (1942– ) is currently the co-director of the Center for Cognitive Studies, the Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy, and a University Professor at Tufts University. He has authored many books, including the famous and controversial *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1996). Sam Harris (1967– ) has a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Stanford University and is currently a doctoral candidate in neuroscience at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he is studying the neural basis of belief with functional magnetic resonance imaging. He is also a Co-Founder and Chairman of The Reason Project, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society.

This book is divided into four parts. The first part contains three chapters, and explores the relationship between the new atheism and Judaism, Christianity, and Islam respectively. Robert Platzner's chapter argues that the Western Enlightenment offers the Jewish community in Europe (and subsequently America) the possibility of a secular reevaluation of Jewish values and beliefs. He notes that Baruch Spinoza is the first of a succession of Jewish intellectuals who distance themselves from a traditionalist worldview, and more specifically who undertake a humanistic redefinition of Judaism's God-concept. Platzner argues that the increasing secularization of Jewish discourse in the modern era can be measured by the gradual abandonment of both the personal deity of biblical and rabbinic tradition and the increasing rejection of a teleological view of Jewish history. This pattern of denial and subversion becomes especially clear after the Holocaust in the writings of such figures as Richard Rubenstein and Sherwin Wine, for whom the idea of a beneficent and controlling God is simply incompatible with any intellectually coherent view of human history.

Jeffrey Robbins and Christopher Rodkey begin their chapter by introducing Paul Tillich's argument that the problem with most religious conceptions of God, especially within Christianity, is that they

are a form of 'theological theism'—that is, their understanding of God only works as a piece of a metaphysical puzzle within a particular metaphysical system of thought or belief. So given, Tillich concluded, atheism is the proper, if not Christian, response to theological theism. Atheism, however, also errs by itself, trapped within the logic of theological theism whenever it is expressed as a categorical rejection of God and any sense of ontological understanding of the world. In other words, atheism replaces one flawed puzzle for another with different pieces. Consequently, many Christian responses to the new atheism are an argument among and within theological theisms. Their chapter argues that the new atheists are guilty of the same problems that Tillich predicted of future atheism. Robbins and Rodkey propose a radical theological critique employing the theology of the American 'death of God' movement and recent continental philosophy of religion. They argue, in other words, that the new atheists do not go far enough in their critique of traditional Christianity; the new atheism is insufficiently radical and has little argument upon which to stand against a radical Christianity.

Rory Dickson argues that Sam Harris, in *The End of Faith*, presents a woefully inadequate picture of Islam, caricaturing the religion in terms of its most pathological manifestations. Dickson highlights key elements of Islamic history, law, and spirituality that Harris fails to adequately deal with, and concludes that Harris's failure to appreciate these central elements of Islam leads him to provide a two-dimensional presentation of the religion.

The second part of the book, containing two chapters, deals with the relationship between science and the new atheism. The section begins with a chapter by Steve Fuller who notes that until the advent of the new atheists, self-professed atheists have typically opposed religion more on moral than epistemological grounds. Thus, today's new atheism is distinctive in its claim to a scientific and not simply a libertarian basis. But, he asks, what exactly is this scientific basis? In surveying Western intellectual history for an answer, Fuller distinguishes 'atheism,' an anti-clerical philosophy associated with the Enlightenment that basically secularizes key Abrahamic theological concepts in the name of human progress, and 'Atheism,' a more thoroughgoing anti-theistic worldview that descends from Epicurus and denies any cognitive privilege to humanity or, indeed, any purpose to history or the universe. He notes that although the arguments of the new atheists vacillate between these two senses of atheism, their intent is clearly to



promote the latter view, which explains the talismanic significance of Charles Darwin. However, Fuller intriguingly argues that had such Atheism been as widespread in history as the new atheists would have it be today, the science on which they base their views would never have developed.

William Sims Bainbridge argues in his chapter that while atheism is often defined as disbelief in God, the recent atheistic school of thought in cognitive science attacks religion's basis more broadly. He argues that this school of thought also debunks the notions of soul and faith, because both concepts are based on naive notions of how human mentality actually functions. His chapter begins with a survey of the origins of cognitive science, an academic discipline that emerged from a multi-disciplinary social movement encompassing cognition-oriented work in philosophy, psychology, computer science, neuroscience, linguistics, and anthropology. Bainbridge then examines how cognitive scientists have critiqued the supposed unity of an individual human mind, stressed the provisional and probabilistic nature of belief, and applied the same scepticism to God's mind and God's own beliefs.

The four chapters in the third section of the book provide a more sociological treatment of the new atheism. In addition to critiques, the chapters in this section explore the movement as a whole and attempt to gauge its social significance. William Stahl's chapter argues that the new atheists are often dismissed as fundamentalists in their own right, and the new atheists just as quickly dismiss this criticism as flawed. His chapter attempts to explore the sociology of this symmetry in more detail. Stahl notes that beneath superficial stylistic similarities lay deeper structural and epistemological parallels. He argues that both the new atheism and fundamentalism (using Creation Science as an exemplar) are attempts to recreate authority in the face of crises of meaning in late modernity.

Stephen Bullivant's chapter argues that, from a sociological point of view, the new atheists' remarkable publishing and media successes are surprising and puzzling. He notes that the socio-religious cultures of neither Britain nor the United States (the new atheism's twin epicentres) seemed to be ripe for such a phenomenon—but for very different reasons. His chapter suggests a number of social and cultural factors, present in either one or both of Britain and the United States, which may cumulatively help to explain the new atheism's rise. More speculatively, Bullivant makes some tentative predictions concerning the phenomenon's lasting effects.

Michael Borer's chapter examines the debates surrounding the rise and decline of the 'secularization thesis' and attempts to show how the emergence of the new atheists provides evidence that both supports and contradicts many precepts of the thesis. Placing the new atheists within the historical and ongoing debates about secularization sheds light on new atheism as a minority 'movement' that aims to show how and why religious faith is an inferior form of knowledge that, in turn, fosters misguided worldviews.

Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith's chapter addresses how the new atheism has created new space for 'freethinkers.' They note that the space for atheism in America has been and continues to be cramped, particularly as many atheist leaders and activists claim that their personal and social identities have carried a fair degree of stigma. The appearance of the new atheism may signal a weakening of the 'atheist taboo' in American society, especially as atheists themselves see the phenomenon as a harbinger of advancing secularism. Cimino and Smith argue that the new atheist books and the responses, debates, and criticisms they have generated create a new space where atheists are empowered and mobilized through their interaction and contention with each other and with their antagonists.

The final section of the book, containing three chapters, explores some of the philosophical arguments put forth by the new atheists. Gregory Peterson's chapter notes that a central plank of the new atheist attack on religion is the claim that religion leads to immoral behaviour and that the atheist accounts of morality provide a superior undergirding of moral norms, including specifically norms of out-group altruism and compassion. However, many of the new atheists' critiques of religious ethics are highly problematic. Peterson argues that there is good reason to believe that support for out-group altruism and compassion is better given in a theological framework than a naturalistic one. Although his chapter focuses on the Christian case, the arguments have more general implications as well.

Jeff Nall draws attention to the recent birth of atheist parenting literature that implicitly challenges the assumption of many in the American public that children are better served when raised in a religious environment. Moreover, he notes, the literature explicitly critiques religious approaches to parenting, a minority of which express concern that religious indoctrination harms children. In particular, Nall's chapter tests the prevailing wisdom about the differences between atheist and Christian approaches to parenting. He argues that while

the overarching aim of these parenting approaches is fundamentally different, both Christian and atheist parenting approaches are enthusiastically committed to instilling in their children a deep appreciation of honesty, consideration of others, and honest living. His chapter also shows that emerging leaders within the atheist movement are highly critical of the ridicule and abuse of religion exerted by the new atheists.

Finally, Ryan Falcioni's chapter attempts to demonstrate the fundamental philosophical confusions involved with the methodology of the new atheists. He argues that these same confusions are in play in the works of many contemporary philosophers of religion. The new atheists as well as many 'serious' philosophers of religion tend to treat religious beliefs as putative hypotheses about the world. For them, the existence of God is a broadly 'scientific' hypothesis that is in need of clear, analyzable evidence for its truth to be confirmed. Falcioni attempts to unpack this assumption and show how it is confused. Put simply, it fails to do justice to the nature of religious beliefs. He argues that it is only through paying close attention to the forms of life in which religious claims occur that we can begin to make sense of their meaning and thus understand how best to go about analyzing or critiquing them.

The book ends with an afterword by Mark Vernon, who begins his exploration by asking a broader question, which also runs through all of the new atheist writings: how are we to navigate the plurality of worldviews that is characteristic of the modern, secular, age? For the new atheists, tolerance of intolerance (often presented in the guise of relativism or multiculturalism) is one of the greatest dangers in contemporary society. Disagreements abound, but what cannot be denied about the new atheists, is that they have brought these important discussions into the public sphere with force and vigour. It is my hope that the essays in this book will further contribute to the conversation.

IS GOD A HYPOTHESIS? THE NEW ATHEISM,  
CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION,  
AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONFUSION

Ryan C. Falcioni

In this chapter, I plan to demonstrate some of the fundamental philosophical confusions in the methodologies of the New Atheists, and their counterparts in the philosophy of religion—both theistic and atheistic—with regard to their view of religious belief. These confusions have led to bad philosophy as well as bad science, and stand as an obstacle to understanding religion in all of its varieties. The New Atheists, and others, have developed a straw man in treating religious claims as hypotheses, and thus their criticisms (and defences) miss their mark. The structure of this chapter is as follows: (1) demonstrate the relationship between The New Atheists and contemporary philosophy of religion; (2) discuss the God Hypothesis (GH) in its various forms, including its epistemology of evidentialism, and show why it is philosophically confused; and [3] address the effects of these confusions on the study of religion and analyze their ideological origins in the hope of avoiding them in the study of religion.

UNLIKELY BEDFELLOWS

I have found it particularly fascinating that in the barrage of critical literature (much of it by serious philosophers) on the New Atheists there has been a dominant mantra regarding the ‘utter failure’ of these authors to do justice to their alleged subject matter: religion. In a popular review of *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books*, Terry Eagleton (2006) remarks,

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. Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins, who is the nearest thing to a professional atheist we have had since Bertrand Russell, are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don’t believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding.

This is why they invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be.

Georgetown theologian John Haught (2008, xi) has commented that “the new atheism is so theologically unchallenging. Its engagement with theology lies at about the same level of reflection on faith that one can find in contemporary creationist and fundamentalist literature.” He states also that “Their understanding of religious faith remains consistently at the same unscholarly level as the unreflective, superstitious, and literalist religiosity of those they criticize” (2008, xiii). Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga (2007), in his critique of *The God Delusion* opined, “You might say that some of his forays into philosophy are at best sophomoric, but that would be unfair to sophomores; the fact is (grade inflation aside), many of his arguments would receive a failing grade in a sophomore philosophy class.” To summarize, critics have pointed out the lack of philosophical and theological sophistication of the New Atheists, who they accuse of holding to an ill-informed conception of what religious beliefs *really* are. Furthermore, they accuse the new atheists of a self-serving, predatory selectiveness in choosing their battle partners.

The central criticism here is that New Atheists create straw men; they misunderstand the nature of religious beliefs, focus on the wrong things in religion, and generally fail to get at the real ‘essence’ of religious belief. Many of these critics of the new atheists say that they must look deeper to see the religious meaning that lies beyond or beneath the bad science and metaphysics, the abuses of religious leaders, the paradoxes of faith, etc. I am essentially making a similar claim; namely, that these atheist thinkers have missed their mark. However, I am taking this criticism one step further in claiming that many academic philosophers of religion (both defenders and detractors of religious belief) fall victim to the same misdirection in more or less the same way. The critics above are right in condemning the poor philosophy and theology of the new atheists, yet they fail to see that this is really an indictment of a dominant tradition in mainstream philosophy and theology itself. So the new atheists may fail to do justice to religious beliefs, but they are not entirely outside of the philosophical and theological tradition. Much of academic philosophy of religion actually supports the view of religious beliefs (as hypotheses standing in need of evidence) offered by the new atheists. There is an

irony here that I hope to make more explicit as this work develops. The philosophers are (mostly willing) victims of, and contributors to, the same errors in thinking.

Both implicitly and explicitly, the philosophers give legitimacy to the kinds of claims about the nature of religious belief that these popular atheists assume and criticize in their works. So, in putting these thinkers in dialogue with each other, I hope to show that far from being an aberrant or fringe discussion on religion, the atheist critics are making claims that are consistent with, and legitimized by, deeply confused presuppositions and specific beliefs of major thinkers in contemporary philosophy.

Therefore, my central contention is that the God Hypothesis and its attending evidentialism fail to do justice to the nature of religious beliefs and that this can be remedied only through paying close attention to the role that religious beliefs play in the lives of believers. To be clear, I am not advocating a fideistic approach wherein religious beliefs are immune from criticism simply because they are believed. Furthermore, I am not claiming that religious beliefs cannot be confused, superstitious, or outright false. Religious beliefs can be and have been all of these things. But whether they are fundamentally hypotheses, metaphysical claims about the world, non-rational expressions of our deepest values, meaningless utterances, etc., must be argued for. The New Atheists and many philosophers of religion have not done this work and assume a view of the nature of religious beliefs that is incommensurate with any substantive analysis of these beliefs. Their diatribes thus rest upon a foundation of fundamental philosophical confusion. It is only through paying close attention to the forms of life in which religious claims occur that we can begin to make sense of their meaning and thus understand how best to go about analyzing or critiquing them.

### THE GOD HYPOTHESIS

At this point, let us take a closer look at the basic features and the individual distinctives of this perplexing understanding of the nature of religious beliefs that we see amongst the New Atheists and their counterparts in contemporary philosophy of religion. The first and most significant claim made by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Victor

Stenger is that religious beliefs are hypotheses about the world.<sup>1</sup> This is really the seminal claim made by all of the New Atheists as well as (in some form or another) by their philosophical colleagues. Fundamentally, they all take belief in God to be a putative truth claim about the nature of reality. Dawkins lays out his case for the failure of this hypothesis in several of his texts. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins offers a fairly sophisticated account of the origins and nature of the 'God Hypothesis.' For Dawkins, belief in God emerged during a particularly ignorant phase in human evolutionary history. He fundamentally repeats the view of religion as advocated in the intellectualist tradition in anthropology: Early humans postulated the existence of invisible powers in an effort to understand and control the natural elements.

Belief in God is in this way an explanatory hypothesis aimed at describing a feature of the world and the source of most everything that we see around us. It is thus a rival hypothesis both to the claims of other religious traditions and to naturalistic claims about reality and origins. And, like all truth claims, it is open to investigation as to its truth or falsity. It is really this 'debate' that concerns me most. It seems like most people in the English-speaking world (and elsewhere for that matter) have accepted the terms of the discussion as framed by the theists and their anti-theist counterparts. That this has been tacitly accepted is seen in the general types of responses to, and criticisms of, the works by these authors. One common concern is over how successful the polemics have been. Critics chide the atheist authors for failing to disprove the veracity of religious claims to their satisfaction, while sympathizers have claimed that these works are a substantial contribution to the cumulative case against the truth of religious belief. There has not been a substantial voice criticizing the sense of this entire enterprise of debating religious beliefs. The notion of 'debate' betrays a conception of the nature of religion and religious belief wherein religious claims are akin to some sort of hypothesis (a notion that both Harris and Dawkins utilize with great frequency). This hypothesis, or family of hypotheses, is open to the sort of investigation that the 'Great

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<sup>1</sup> Now, at this point, we could entertain a most lengthy discussion about what exactly is meant by 'hypotheses' here. And, there are some worthwhile distinctions to be made in regards to the ways that each of these thinkers conceives of this notion. But, it is my contention that there is a fundamental commonality shared by all of these thinkers with regard to the nature of religious beliefs that can be fairly captured by the notion of hypothesis.

Debate' is aimed at providing. To be clear, I am convinced that this approach to religious belief is ultimately non-sense. The fact that religious beliefs are not hypotheses, natural or supernatural, can be seen through a cursory investigation into the grammar of religious beliefs. It is this cursory investigation that seems to be lacking in the works of all parties involved in this 'Great Debate.'

Dawkins (2006, 31) specifically takes the GH to be a hypothesis about origins: "there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us." He juxtaposes this hypothesis with a clear rebuttal, "any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution" (2006, 31). Thus, the existence of the God invoked in the GH is subject to the same natural, evolutionary processes as the rest of the universe. For Dawkins, the GH is much less probable than a simpler, natural explanation of origins. Dawkins then sets before us the two rival hypotheses: (1) The universe is the result of a designer's handiwork; or (2) the universe is the result of natural, evolutionary processes. Theism and atheism are competing hypotheses about the fundamental cause of the origins of the physical universe. After surveying various arguments for God's existence, and the 'evidence' for creationism (particularly in its latest manifestation in the Intelligent Design movement), Dawkins concludes that the hypothesis has failed. Dawkins grants that not all religious believers (or scientists) believe that religion is in the business of making scientific claims. There are less-than-fundamentalist believers, and colleagues in the sciences such as Stephen Jay Gould, who argue for the notion that religion and science are separate enterprises and should be analyzed and assessed in different ways. Put simply, science and religion do not ask the same questions and do not put forth the same types of answers. But, for Dawkins, thinkers like Gould represent an aberration in the history of religious belief. This 'new movement' is not consonant with the origin, nature, and function of the 'God Hypothesis.' Dawkins has developed his notion of 'memes' as a unit of cultural evolution. For Dawkins, religious beliefs (along with jokes, rituals, songs, poems, theories about life) are transmitted across cultures and are generally in the interest of survival of that given culture. And, religions are a particular form of toxic meme that Dawkins likens to a 'mind virus.' This mind virus is comprised of a host of false beliefs and bad habits of thought and action that threaten to kill off the human species. So, unless the memes



of science replace the competing memes of religion, nothing less than the future of humanity is at stake. Like his New Atheism companions, he believes that we have an intellectual and moral duty to follow the evidence wherever it leads. As it turns out, in this case, it leads us away from the GH and indeed further from religion altogether.

For Dawkins, both hypotheses aspire to explain the universe, why we are here and the meaning of life. All of these questions are susceptible to a scientific explanation, and, religion has long been in the business of giving answers wrongly. For Dawkins, there is plenty of overlap between the discourses of science and religion, and religion just offers us a shoddy science. Dawkins (2007a) has made it clear that God's existence "is a scientific hypothesis and should be analyzed as skeptical as any other." And, it has clearly been falsified by the evidence.

Although I will not give here an extensive treatment of Harris's version of the GH, suffice it to say that he echoes this general approach throughout his writings. In one particularly clear instance, he argues that "beliefs about the way the world *is*, must be as evidentiary in spirit as any other" (Harris 2004, 63). Harris's focus is really on the propositional nature of all language. His view is a version of the 'picture theory of language' that Wittgenstein chides for being too simplistic in its failure to recognize and do justice to the various usages to which language is put. In Harris's (2004, 51) view, "Believing a given proposition is a matter of believing that it faithfully represents some state of the world...[this] reveals why we cannot help but value evidence and demand that propositions about the world logically cohere. These constraints apply equally to matters of religion." Religious claims, like all others, are aimed at picturing the world as it *really* is. And analyzing such claims comes via evidentiary investigation. Again, we are offered a view of religious belief as a competing hypothesis about the nature of reality and origins.

Physicist, philosopher, and recently deputized New Atheist, Victor Stenger, offers the most direct and consistent treatment of religious beliefs as hypotheses. Stenger makes it clear that religious beliefs are not only hypotheses, but also scientific ones that stand in need of clear and distinctively empirical evidence. In the preface to his most recent book *God: The Failed Hypotheses* he states, "My analysis will be based on the contention that God should be detectable by scientific means simply by virtue of the fact that he is supposed to play such a central role in the operation of the universe and the lives of humans" (Stenger 2007, 13). Stenger then sets out to see if God's hand is indeed

detectable in a variety of scientific contexts in which we are told he has played some role. If there are “phenomena that, if observed, cannot be of material origin beyond a reasonable doubt...his presence would be signaled, beyond a reasonable doubt, by the empirical verification of such phenomena” (Stenger 2007, 14). The seeming circularity of this claim aside, it sets up an empirical standard for the verification of the GH. Stenger admits that even if one cannot detect unevidenced phenomena it is still logically possible that God exists, but the absence of evidence would count as evidence of absence in this case. For, if God’s presence is not manifest in places in which it should be (according to the basic claims of religious believers), then we have good reason for doubting the existence of such a being. In short, the probability of God’s existence rapidly approaches zero, as he is continually absent in places where we have good, doctrinal reasons, to suppose his presence. Both interesting and philosophically contentious in many regards, my goal here is not to critique the minutiae of Stenger’s approach but rather to offer a general critique of the presuppositions behind his general approach to understanding the nature of religious beliefs that is revealed in such methods. This ‘lack-of-evidence argument’ is laid out as follows:

1. Hypothesize a God who plays an important role in the universe.
2. Assume that God has specific attributes that should provide objective evidence for his existence.
3. Look for such evidence with an open mind.
4. If such evidence is found, conclude that God *may* exist.
5. If such objective evidence is not found, conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that a God with these properties does *not* exist (Stenger 2007, 43).

Stenger does just what he promises. He looks for the evidence of God’s work in a variety of contexts and, unsurprisingly, does not find any. The world seems to run just fine according to its initial conditions and natural laws. For Stenger, this is proof positive that God does not exist.

Atheistic philosopher, J. L. Mackie (1982, 6) offers us a similar account of the hypothetical nature of religious beliefs and the role of evidential arguments for/against religious propositions:

All such arguments [for/against God’s existence] can be seen as resting on one general principle, or sharing one basic form and purpose: they are arguments to the best explanation. The evidence supports the

conclusion, it is suggested, because if we postulate that conclusion is true—or better, perhaps, that it is at least an approximation to the truth—we get a more adequate overall explanation of the whole body of evidence, in the light of whatever considerations are cited, than would be given by any available alternative hypothesis.

For Mackie, both empirical and broadly rational evidences in the form of classical theistic arguments should be analyzed. Mackie cites Descartes and Locke as supporting the general view that we must use ‘reason’ in arguing for the truth of religious claims. In *The Miracle of Theism*, Mackie carefully weighs the relative merits of traditional theistic arguments, the evidence for miracles, and the evidence of religious experience and finds them insufficient to prove the existence of God. He also considers the traditional arguments against God’s existence (e.g., the problem of evil) and sees them to be further, and ultimately superfluous, evidence for the non-existence of God. Mackie shares this cumulative case approach with both the New Atheists and many theistic philosophers. In summing up the case for the God hypothesis he concludes:

In the end, therefore, we can agree with what Laplace said about God: we have no need of that hypothesis. This conclusion can be reached by an examination precisely of the arguments advanced in favour of theism, without even bringing into play what have been regarded as the strongest considerations on the other side, the problem of evil and the various natural histories of religion. When these are thrown into the scales, the balance tilts still further against theism. (Mackie 1982, 253)

Theistic philosopher, Richard Swinburne, also thinks of the existence and activity of God in terms of testable hypotheses. Although he may not share a commitment to scientific naturalism with Dawkins and Stenger, he does indeed share an understanding about the epistemological nature of belief in God: that the question of God’s existence is a question about the truth of a proposition, or a matter of fact, that is open to both empirical and rational investigation. Either God exists (and has done things such as creating the universe) or God does not exist. And, furthermore, the truth of this question can be assessed by a careful look at the evidence.

Dawkins and Swinburne have become unlikely bedfellows in this debate. For, as much as they are opposed to each other’s conclusions, they share a distinctively probabilistic approach to fundamental religious claims. Dawkins (2007a) recently made the claim that, “Either there is or is not a God...this is a scientific question...you can put a

probability on it, and that is very low.” And if one has read any of Swinburne’s more recent texts, it would be clear that he could make the same statement albeit with the final clause reading something more like ‘and that is relatively high, or at least 50/50.’ For Swinburne (1996, 2) “The very same criteria which scientists use to reach their own theories lead us to move beyond those theories to a creator God who sustains everything in existence.” The existence of God can be inferred inductively through an understanding of natural phenomenon. God serves as an ultimate explanatory hypothesis for the existence and maintenance of the universe. Beyond this particular approach to the GH, Swinburne has argued evidentially and inductively for many of the central claims of Christianity (including creation and the resurrection). He has put forth a barrage of arguments aimed at demonstrating the probability of these ‘events’ occurring in history. He utilizes evidence from archaeology, anthropology, scriptural criticism, sociology, and psychology in making his cumulative case for the rationality and indeed probability of Christian Theism. But this concept is problematic; it betrays the attempt to reduce belief in God to a hypothesis. ‘Theism’ has now become a lowest common denominator name for the belief in God, a belief which now comes to us purer and simpler than the particulars of a ‘god’ entrenched in a specific historical tradition, or in the lives of individual believers. We now have a rather bare ‘Theism’ that can be independently assessed for its rationality as a general claim about the universe. As has been stated earlier, it is precisely this move that evidences a great confusion in such an understanding of God. A ‘god’ apart from a tradition is senseless. And, it is one of the claims of this chapter that it is precisely this senseless notion of God that is being defended and critiqued in the current debate. As stated in the introduction, belief in God is not a hypothesis. Treating it as such has been, and continues to be, problematic for the academic study of religion.

#### EVIDENTIALISM AND THE GOD HYPOTHESIS

As later analysis will demonstrate, religious beliefs are not hypotheses about the world. They do not function this way in the lives of believers in any noticeable way. Yet, the dominant epistemology of the New Atheists and their philosophical friends, treat them this way. And, it is this epistemological approach that distorts the meaning and value of religious beliefs. It is through an analysis of their shared evidentialism

that we can most acutely see the disastrous effects of treating religious beliefs as hypotheses.

Evidentialism comes in many varieties but is essentially the view that the truth value (and relative strength) of a proposition is dependent on evidence. The evidentialist debate is at the core of epistemological discussions in contemporary philosophy of religion. Sam Harris offers a particularly lucid discussion of his epistemology. He claims that believing in God is epistemologically equivalent to believing that there is a diamond the size of a refrigerator buried in one's back yard. This belief is farfetched yet, in principle and in fact, is open to empirical and rational investigation. It is a claim for which it would make sense to speak of settling the facts. We understand that evidence is what is required to demonstrate the truth of these claims, yet evidentialism as a legitimate approach to religious epistemology only makes sense if we first hold to a conception of religious beliefs as the types of things that can or should be investigated evidentially. My goal here is not to attack evidentialism in any general sense, because hypotheses are exactly the types of things that stand in need of evidences. The question that I am addressing is not whether or not it makes sense to argue for the truth of any and all claims evidentially, but rather the narrower question of whether or not it makes sense to do so with religious claims.

To the extent that evidentialism applies, we know precisely what kind of evidences to look for. With questions about the existence of objects, a simple empirical observation could confirm/disconfirm these claims. For the New Atheists and their philosophical friends, the existence of God is fundamentally a claim of this type that can and should be assessed through an examination of the evidence. But the New Atheists are not the first to appropriate evidentialism. There are rough versions in the ancient world, modern evidentialism can be traced to Enlightenment empiricism. (The New Atheists share a strongly empirical approach to religious questions). Philosopher Linda Zagzebski (2007, 224) credits John Locke with an early and pervasive form of evidentialism wherein "we ought to proportion our beliefs to the evidence." W.K. Clifford, the most prominent evidentialist of the nineteenth century, expands Locke's notion into a moral demand that it is "irresponsible to believe anything on pragmatic grounds...and if we believe anything on insufficient evidence, we are wronging human-kind" (Zagzebski 2007, 224). And, although many contemporary religious thinkers criticize evidentialism, it is still alive and well in many

areas of analytic philosophy, especially, and somewhat ironically, in philosophy of religion. To be clear, not all evidentialists have this scientific approach. Many of them utilize other types of evidences from philosophy, experience, etc. Yet, a surprising amount of the literature focuses on the allegedly empirical data that can confirm/disconfirm religious claims.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL CONFUSION IN THE GOD HYPOTHESIS

At this point, I hope that it is sufficiently clear that the GH and its attending evidentialism is thriving in the academy and that this view is shared with the New Atheists. Forgetting my earlier comments, I imagine that many readers at this point might still be in agreement with the legitimacy of this enterprise. For, is it not the case that many claims of religious believers are of a factual sort? Is it not reasonable to conclude that many of the claims about cosmological origins, divine intervention, and even the historical Jesus are at least in part scientific claims or claims that, if true, would have empirical consequences that could be verified/falsified? Many religious believers seem to think that this is meaningful work, that their religious beliefs are, or can be, bolstered by such investigation. The current popularity of religious apologetics ministries provides ample evidence of the significance of this way of viewing religious beliefs.

Indeed many of these claims and questions have a point. It is the case that a broadly evidentialist approach to the study of religious beliefs has recently gained. Yet, as philosopher D.Z. Phillips has pointed out, we cannot do philosophy by Gallup Poll. In other words, we cannot merely ask people to give a philosophical account of their religious beliefs and then take them at face value. This would be a convenient philosophical heuristic, but we have a duty to do a conceptual investigation of such beliefs. What religious beliefs amount to must be seen in the lives of believers. This is a logical point about the nature of language that I believe is quite simple but warrants a more thorough discussion. To briefly make this point, how are we to determine the meaning of any given statement? If someone were to say, "the gods are sure angry today," how would we begin analyzing this? Could we merely begin the hunt for said gods and their alleged anger? Where would we look? And, what methods would we employ? Is godly anger detectable in the same way as human anger?

Before we could begin this or any analysis, we would necessarily have to consider who was saying it and in what context. And, as with all statements, we could imagine a variety of contexts in which this statement could be uttered. The individual making the utterance, the way in which it was uttered, and its relationship to other modes of discourse and life are all indispensable aspects of understanding the possibilities of sense for this claim. Each of these contexts would have far-reaching implications for any consequent investigation. I could make this claim in a tongue-in-cheek fashion as a way of casting blame for the current bad weather. In such a case, I would clearly not be advancing any sort of hypothesis, causal claim, or even an authentically religious one. One would only need to know me, my background in religion, and my propensity to say ridiculous things in order to understand that this was merely a poor attempt at sarcasm. But wait, my meaning might seem to be parasitic on the primary context for this claim, namely in the lives of some polytheistic culture who believed that there were gods and that they did cause things (e.g., thunder storms) to happen. The New Atheists might claim that my usage actually betrays the original meaning and is even dependent for its meager comedic value on the reality that it was rooted in a failed view of the world. This may be the case, but this view, like the view of my own usage must be shown in the lives of those that speak this way. And it seems to be the case with many polytheistic cultures that they too are not advancing any causal hypotheses when gods are cursed for various natural and social ills. It may actually be a way of just cursing in general, a way of expressing hopelessness in regard to the weather that is beyond our control, or it may be an attempt at primitive science. Yet, once again, what these beliefs amount to must be shown, not merely assumed. The only point made here is that religious beliefs may be many different things. They are not always failed hypotheses. Wittgenstein's critique of this latter 'intellectualist' view of traditional religious claims is most instructive here and will be addressed later in this discussion.

When dealing with the basic GH of the New Atheists and their philosophical friends, there is a further complication. For, as mentioned in the introduction, they often get support for their view that belief in god is really a GH by religious believers (and religious philosophers themselves). The New Atheists regularly indicate that the Gallup Poll can do philosophy. Harris's (2004, 232) tirade against religious moderates and liberals makes much use of the fact that their (less metaphysical and

scientific) views are the aberration and the 'real' views are those of the devout believer for whom "religious faith is the belief in historical and metaphysical propositions without sufficient evidence... Faith is simply the license they give themselves to *keep believing when reasons fail*." It is not clear that the devout believer in fact believes in this way, there is a more important point that needs to be made here. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that many believers do in fact take their beliefs to be hypotheses, it is quite possible that they are doing bad philosophy. People who have meaningful and coherent religious beliefs and practices may give deeply confused philosophical accounts of them when asked. They may think that their religious beliefs are scientific claims and are justified by historical and empirical evidence, yet their lives show us that they cannot mean this. Whether or not their own religious beliefs are ultimately a putative hypothesis about the world and therefore a matter of evidence can only be settled by seeing the role that these beliefs play in their lives, not by the accounts that they may give if asked. As mentioned earlier, for religious beliefs to play the same (or even similar) role in their lives as do scientific claims would be an abnormal occurrence to say the least. Put simply, when we look at the nature and function of the religious claims of believers, we see that they are not hypotheses. Even a fairly perfunctory investigation into the nature of these beliefs shows us this. The New Atheists and their philosophical counterparts are guilty of a major distortion of these beliefs when they treat them as hypotheses. And again, this can only have awful consequences for the study of religion. It is a diversion that keeps them (and, tragically, many others who are influenced by them) from doing justice to the real nature, meaning, and function of religion.

In furthering this discussion of the confusion involved in the notion of the GH, I would like to ask what might seem like a rhetorical question, but I think it makes a significant point. Namely, assuming that most of us have had some experience with religion or at least have seen the way people engage in religious beliefs and practices, how could it occur to anyone to see them as hypotheses in the first place? Are there features of religious beliefs that are similar to hypotheses as advanced in the sciences? When religious believers make statements, are they advancing putative truth claims like one might do in the sciences? Maybe there are some similarities in the surface grammar of many religious claims (e.g., 'God exists' shares a grammatical structure with 'Trees exist' or 'The tree is my brother' shares a structure with 'Benjamin



is my brother'). However, the differences between the two types of claims are rather deep. We are often lured into thinking that very different kinds of statements are more similar than they are, due, in part, to grammatical similarities. But we must investigate this similarity. Are we really making the same kind of claim when we utter these statements? Could we ask the same questions of the members of each pair of claims? Could we reasonably conduct the same type of investigation into their meaning and truth?

It would be fundamentally wrongheaded to go about analyzing the claim 'the tree is my brother' in the same way as the claim 'Benjamin is my brother.' This is intuitively obvious, but why is this a confused approach to understanding this claim? The concept of 'brother' used in each case carries a rather different meaning. And, we come to know this by seeing the role that this concept plays in the lives of those who use it. There is a simple, yet often overlooked, truth in Wittgenstein's maxim that 'meaning is in use.' Failure to pay close attention to the role that these concepts play in the lives of people can lead to disastrous forays into analysis. I imagine the naïve scientist, who takes all claims to be scientific hypotheses, running genetic tests between trees and men in order to prove whether or not men and trees are brothers. Of course we recognize that the claim of the tree being the man's brother is not a scientific statement and is not in need of an empirical test. To treat it as such is to demonstrate ignorance of the possibilities of meaning for this statement. The history of pseudoscience is littered with experiments grounded in such ignorance. Medieval alchemists weighing the human body pre- and post-mortem in order to establish the existence (and empirical properties) of the soul is but one poignant example. And yet it seems that many of us would still be comfortable asserting that statements of trees being brothers, souls, and the like can be meaningful. The meaning of talk about brother trees, souls, and houseplants can only be seen through a conceptual investigation of the role that these notions play in the lives of those who talk this way. We would have to see the way in which these terms are used and their relationships to other ways of speaking and living. Upon such analysis, belief in God does not seem to be a broadly scientific (or rational) hypothesis. It is not a claim about an object in the world that may be discovered or proven through an objective investigation. The problem is, as D.Z. Phillips (1993) argues, inquiring about divine reality is not like inquiring about the reality of this or that object, but rather like inquiring about the existence of objects in general. In other words, it is

an inquiry into a kind of reality, not the reality of one or another element inside a kind of reality. Yet, this is what we are offered by the New Atheists and their philosophical friends. When I encountered the barrage of New Atheist literature, I was quite surprised to see a revamped version of the notion of God as a scientific hypothesis. Have the advances and boundaries cultivated over the last 200 years of philosophy and science been ignored?

Although it is not within the scope of this paper to address all of the ways in which religious claims are not like hypotheses, I would like to address a few of the fundamental differences between religious claims and broadly scientific ones. My goal here is to show that these differences are of great logical significance in understanding the meaning of religious claims, and that ignoring these differences results in philosophically confused and distorted accounts and criticisms of religious beliefs. Ingolf Dalferth (1988, 6) offers an account of this confusion in his text *Theology and Philosophy*:

Scientific beliefs, for example, are held rationally if they are held tentatively and in proportion to the evidence available. Religious beliefs, on the contrary, are not tentative, but unconditional. Believers—as Wittgenstein has pointed out (1970, pp. 55ff)—do not hold their beliefs with conviction proportionate to evidence as is the case with scientific beliefs. Their beliefs are neither probable nor well founded in a scientific sense; and the apologetic attempt to make them look scientifically respectable is completely misconceived. For not even their indubitability would be ‘enough in this case. Even if there is as much evidence as for Napoleon. Because the indubitability wouldn’t be enough to make me change my whole life’ (p. 57). Wittgenstein concluded from this that religious beliefs are neither reasonable nor unreasonable; they are not the sort of belief to which reasonability would apply.

Dalferth goes on to say of Wittgenstein’s remark that “the conclusion, obviously, is too strong,” but he does believe that there are indeed logical differences between scientific beliefs and practices, and religious ones. D. Z. Phillips makes much of these logical differences, claiming that it is not that there is no rationality to religious beliefs, but rather a different type of rationality, one that is internal to (or better yet, seen in) religious lives and practices. Whatever it is, it is not the same thing as rationality or evidence in the sciences, and if we are to take seriously the investigation into what type of rationality this is, we must actually look at the religious practices themselves.

We must also take a close look at the form of life in which such beliefs occur and endeavour to elucidate the meaning and internal

rationality therein. One of the first things that is made apparent through even a cursory investigation is well captured in Wittgenstein's quote above; namely, that religious beliefs do not occupy the same space, and are not held in the same way as scientific beliefs are held. They are not tentative and are not held in proportion to evidences. A statement of religious belief is a statement about one's life, one's values, about ultimate things. The religious believer does not engage religious beliefs as hypotheses that may or may not turn out to be true. To believe in the religious sense is an act of commitment. This confessional element of religious belief is logically significant in understanding the very meaning of religious claims. By way of example, could we imagine a person who *merely* believes in the propositional truths of Christianity but thinks nothing of their significance for her life? I imagine this person stating, "Of course I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins, was resurrected on the third day, is God incarnate and is Lord of all, but this just does not matter to me." This may be logically possible, but what could we make of it? It does not seem to have much to do with religion. In the ordinary sense, to say that Jesus is Lord of all is an act of confession, an act of worship. The statement is not a claim about propositional truth value; it is a profound statement about one's life in relation to God. Religions demand that believers to give their lives to God, and this could never be a matter of evidence however convincing. In other words, a mere intellectual assent to the propositions of a given faith (based on evidential arguments) is not what is meant by having religious beliefs. To be a Christian is to live a certain way; to accept the demand upon your life that Christ has made. Believing in particular propositional truths is not 'believing' in the ordinary sense of religious belief. For the religious believer, "It is not a *matter of fact* God will always exist, but it *makes no sense* to say that God might not exist" (Phillips 1993, 1). As Phillips points out here, the believer's claim that God exists is not a hypothesis of any sort. It is not something that she takes to be true but could turn out to be false if that is where the evidence leads. As he states, "It makes as little sense to say, 'God's existence is not a fact' as it does to say, 'God's existence is a fact'" (1993, 2). The believer finds herself believing and living her life in a religious way. It is the religious way of life that shows us the meaning of her religious beliefs.

The New Atheists and their philosophical friends seem to have reversed the logic of this relationship. We do not first believe in religious propositions (because of their alleged evidential support) and

then go about being religious. Rather, it is through our religious lives that we see what religious propositions mean. Thus, to see belief in God as a tentative hypothesis is to distort the meaning of religious belief as seen in the lives of believers. Put simply, believers do not, generally speaking, believe in God because of the soundness of the evidential proof for the GH. Their beliefs are not predicated upon any objective grounds. One of the most striking features of any descriptive account of religious beliefs is that they are not normally the types of things that we come to accept through any form of broadly rational investigation. Religious beliefs may be the least volitional of our beliefs. For most of us, we are born into a family and find ourselves a part of a religious tradition that few of us stray from. In reality, most believers neither accept nor reject this way of life. Whatever religious beliefs mean can only be understood in light of this most fundamental descriptive fact about religious life.

At this point, I anticipate an objection from the New Atheists and their philosophical friends. They undoubtedly grant the descriptive fact that many religious believers do not believe in God on the basis of evidences and that they engage with and hold these beliefs in a way that is very different from scientific ones. But, they may claim, this does not mean that such evidences do not exist or are not or should not be at the epistemological foundations of such beliefs. They state that the religious believer who holds her beliefs in the absence of evidence is a rather naïve believer who has not done justice to her alleged faith. As a rational being, she has the duty to search deeper in order to ground or prove those beliefs. Or, if she does not have a personal duty to conduct such an epistemological investigation, the foundation of her beliefs is in the hands of others who are labouring on her behalf to ground them; in this case, she is at least epistemologically (and maybe morally) indebted to such underlabourers. Either way, there is a demand for evidential justification.

Yet many things seem wrong about this move. First, where does this alleged epistemic duty come from? Secondly, what counts as evidence here? In addressing the first question, it seems clear that the alleged epistemic duty is not generally revealed in the religious practices themselves. As we saw in the earlier discussion, for many believers, religious claims are not a matter of evidence. Evidences neither compel nor repel religious beliefs. They simply play no role at all. Therefore, assertions such as William Kingdon Clifford's famous evidentialist dictum that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon

insufficient evidence.” Although there are several dimensions to Clifford’s evidentialist mandate, it is fundamentally a moral claim that simply cannot be supported philosophically. Furthermore, this seems to be another instance of the abject failure of the alleged parallel between religious beliefs and scientific hypotheses. The epistemic duties we have as scientists are not the same as those we have as practitioners of faith.

A related issue here is about determining and defining the nature of the evidence. Even if we assume that evidence is relevant for religious beliefs, we still have the task of elucidating the grammar of ‘evidence’ in this case. What counts as evidence is indeed different in different investigations. For the sake of argument, let us accept Clifford’s moral imperative that we are in dereliction of our epistemic duty if we believe in religious matters without basing them on evidence. Serious philosophical work must be done in order to clarify what evidence amounts to in the case of justifying religious belief. We cannot merely assume what kinds of evidences are admissible in grounding such beliefs. For what counts as evidence in one mode of inquiry may have no application in another. Take for instance the interdisciplinary differences in the sciences broadly conceived. A psychologist is not interested in the same sorts of evidences as a particle physicist. This is true even, or especially, when they are investigating the same sort of phenomenon. Both can investigate the cause(s) of a particular mental illness, yet they are engaged in observing, isolating, and testing different variables. The psychologist and the physicist are engaged in a common act of scientific investigation; yet do not recognize the same or even similar sorts of evidence. In short, what counts as evidence is determined by the nature of the practice in question.

As we have seen in the works of the New Atheists and their philosophical friends, there is rough agreement about the types of evidences that are germane to the discussion. And, oddly, they agree that scientific evidences are appropriate. Yet, the central claims of religion seem altogether removed from the scientific discourse. Even taken in a propositional way, what evidence could one offer for the claim that Jesus died for the sins of the world, that Muhammad is the seal of the prophets, or that God is love? These beliefs are at the core of their respective traditions and yet they do not seem to be amenable to scientific or even broadly evidential investigation. To even attempt to investigate the meaning or truth of these claims would evidence a gross ignorance of the type of claims that are being made. Standards of

meaning and the methods of investigation that are appropriate are revealed in the religious traditions themselves. There is not a universal criterion of logic, science, or evidence that can be imposed from without. What evidence amounts to is something that can only be seen within a given practice. Christians may speak of evidence of the salvation that Christ provides on the cross, but this generally comes in the form of testimony. The evidence of the truth of the atoning work of Christ is the life transformed by Christ. This is indeed a form of evidence, but it has a different grammar than the evidence required by the sciences. What would scientific evidence for salvation look like? To confuse the two is bad for science and bad for religion.

#### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

So, if this view of the nature of religious beliefs is confused, why does it dominate this discourse? There are undoubtedly many historical and ideological factors involved, but one sticks out as significant. The New Atheists share some particular perspectives on the historical, evolutionary, and anthropological development of religious beliefs: they are an unfortunate intellectual remnant of our primitive past. The New Atheists tell us a story wherein religious beliefs emerged out of the noble quest for understanding the world by our early human ancestors. The problem here is that our human ancestors lacked scientific sophistication, and in its stead, they hypothesized about various supernatural explanations and causes for the phenomena that we experience.

Dawkins offers a slightly nuanced perspective that is particularly revealing. For him, religious beliefs may be the by-product of primitive survival instincts (2006, 176). Specifically, “Natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them. Such trusting obedience is valuable for survival...But the flip side of trusting obedience is slavish gullibility. The inevitable by-product is vulnerability to infection by mind viruses.” This learned trait combined with other aspects of our evolutionary psychology has led to the aforementioned hodgepodge of false supernatural attributions to natural phenomena. So we find ourselves believing in fatuously stupid and superstitious things about the world because of a peculiar detour in our evolutionary history. The mind virus of faith forced our primitive ancestors to forego reason and

postulate all sorts of spirits, witches, miracles, and other pseudoscientific explanations of the world.

Yet, with our knowledge of this fact, we are no longer forced to believe such things. We do not have the excuse of belonging to an earlier, ignorant phase of human existence. For Dawkins and other New Atheists it is important that religious beliefs are both false and that they are part of our primitive past. We thus have both an intellectual and moral imperative to rise up from our lowly origins and evolve! Understanding this perspective gives the reader some insight into the evangelical fervour of much of their writings.

Is this story of religious beliefs as part of our evolutionary history a correct one? More importantly, does it do justice to the nature and function of the beliefs themselves? Early British anthropologists, Sir James Frazer and E.B. Tylor, are credited as pioneers of this 'intellectualist' view of 'primitive' religious beliefs. Frazer sees such beliefs as growing out of the primitive desire to understand the world. This view is not only patronizing of our evolutionary ancestors, but also, as numerous philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists have pointed out, it completely misunderstands the nature of the religious beliefs that they were allegedly investigating. The critiques of this view of the nature of traditional religious beliefs are too numerous to count. Fundamentally, these views err in forcing a modern understanding of science on earlier peoples which leads to a revisionist understanding of their beliefs and practices. By way of just one brief example, many early accounts of rain dances envision the participants engaging in them because of a causal (read: proto-scientific) view of their. In short, the primitives are said to dance *because* of their belief that this will cause the rain. And, to be clear, when asked, the oft-given answer was: "We dance to bring the rain." However, the claim that they understand this in a causal way reveals a vast ignorance about the meaning of such practices as seen in the lives of the participants. They are not as ignorant as the intellectualists suppose. Such peoples clearly understand basic causality. As Wittgenstein (quoted in Clack 1999, 23) noted, "The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy." Rituals to bring the sunrise only take place right before the sunrise. When they want light in the evening, they do not invoke gods, "they simply light a torch." They are not mistaken about the nature of cause and effect in any of these rituals. They are not putting forth a theory of what causes the rain, death, or the

light. Merely looking reveals that this is so. Only someone bound by a theoretical commitment to what all language and ritual must be could confuse them.

It is logically significant that primitives danced during the rain season and not during the drought. They understood when nature brought the rain and they danced in celebration of what they knew would come. A simple and beautiful act of celebration can easily be distorted into a failed hypothesis if we do not take the time to look and see the meaning that it actually has in the lives of practitioners. The logical point about the different meaning of these beliefs is hopefully clear. In a particularly pointed piece of ire Wittgenstein (quoted in Clack 1999, 13–14) criticizes Frazer and his intellectualist view of primitive religion: “Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century. His explanations of the primitive observances are much cruder than the sense of the observances themselves.” Religious beliefs are not a primitive form of science. The intellectualist tradition of viewing religious beliefs as primitive hypotheses suffers from a simple failure to take a careful look at the phenomenon in question.

The failure to stop and look can be seen most poignantly in the contemporary battle over Intelligent Design. The New Atheists take particular umbrage with the attempts (some of them successful) to have this form of creationism taught alongside evolutionary theory in the science classroom. Fundamentalists and Darwinists alike take the religious notion of a creator to be a rival hypothesis to Darwinian evolution. Yet, both have failed to take a look at the biblical context and the role that the notion of creation plays in the lives of believers. The Bible itself does not treat the creation story as a scientific theory. Certainly, some fundamentalist versions of Christianity do in fact seek to replace much of science with a crude, literalist theology, but a literal, fundamentalist reading of scripture is in no way inherent. Most believers take a more dynamic approach, such that biblical stories teach many things: the meaning of life, the consequences of sin, gender roles, redemption, providence, etc. In this context, they are not doing science, they are learning about life, morality, and religious meaning.

These features of the nature and function of creation are logically significant for understanding the meaning of creation. I understand that the New Atheists may have no interest in excavating what is meaningful about creation and are content to accept fundamentalist views



as the only view of scripture. Indeed, I can appreciate their anti-Intelligent Design movement as a social and moral campaign against pseudoscience. Yet as scholars who claim to study religion, all of their work is still ahead of them. Intelligent Design is deeply confused, but the New Atheists do not move beyond this confused understanding. Instead, their current works attempt to brand this confusion as the authentic religious account itself. They are intent upon showing the stupidity of all religious beliefs and are invested in clinging to the confused account. In treating creation as a scientific hypothesis that should be understood and evaluated in terms of empirical evidence, fundamentalists and the New Atheists exhibit a profound failure to do justice to the religious notion of creation. They have distorted what can be very profound and meaningful. Intellectualism is alive and well in the works of the New Atheists and their philosophical friends. We would do well to revisit the historical critiques that demonstrated the manifest failures of intellectualism. The way out invariably involves understanding how we got here in the first place.