

# Why Christian Faith Still Makes Sense

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A RESPONSE  
TO CONTEMPORARY  
CHALLENGES

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# Preface

This book grew out of an invitation I received to give the Hayward Lectures at Acadia Divinity College at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, October 15–17, 2012. The general title of the lectures was “Christian Belief in the 21st Century: Responding to the New Atheism.” Of course, the three lectures have been expanded to make a proper book, but some of the character of the book no doubt reflects its origins as a lecture series. In some ways, the subtitle of the lecture series is misleading. As readers of the book will quickly note, I do not engage very seriously with the leading “New Atheist” writers. This is primarily because I do not find the arguments and ideas of these writers worthy of serious refutation. In comparison with contemporary atheist philosophers of religion such as William Rowe, Paul Draper, and Evan Fales, whose writings constitute thoughtful and serious challenges to faith, the New Atheists show a lack of philosophical understanding and sophistication. (The exception to that claim is Daniel Dennett, who is a first-rate philosopher but who still reveals a lack of expertise in the philosophy of religion.)

Nevertheless, I think the subtitle is still accurate. I take it that the major complaint (though not the only one) of the New

Atheists about religion is that faith is intellectually baseless. In this book I try to give a clear case that belief in Christian faith still makes sense and thus answer that criticism. Although Christian faith requires the ability to stare down some of the intellectual fads and fashions of our age, it does not require the sacrifice of the mind. So the book answers a major charge the New Atheists make not by responding to their specific complaints but by showing how a thoughtful Christian might “give a reason for the hope” that faith embodies. In making a positive case the book transcends the criticisms of the New Atheists and thus can be read with interest by anyone wanting to explore the truth of faith questions. The other major complaint of the New Atheists is that religion “poisons everything” and is a net harm to society. On that score I am content to refer readers to other writers who are more competent to respond to that criticism than I am.

Some of the ideas in the first part of the book were developed in a more rigorous and lengthy form in my book *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*. The germ of my approach goes back even further to *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*. However, I believe that in this work I have been able to say some of the things I have said before in new and clearer ways. The second half of the book, particularly the discussion of criteria for revelation, contains some ideas I have not discussed in print before. However, I believe it will be obvious how much I have profited from a lifetime of reading and study of Kierkegaard’s work, so I claim no great originality for my approach. However, given Kierkegaard’s forthright denunciation of apologetics, I dare not claim that this is a book he would have liked, however much it draws on his insights.

I must in conclusion express my deep gratitude to Craig Evans and the Acadia Divinity College faculty for the invitation to give

the Hayward Lectures. I am honored to be included among the distinguished scholars who preceded me. The Acadia community welcomed my wife and me with such wonderful hospitality that this time will always be remembered fondly, not least for the chance to experience the beauty of Nova Scotia.

I must also thank Baylor University for a research leave during the spring semester of 2014 and Biola University for a research fellowship awarded by the Center for Christian Thought for the same semester. Although this book was not my primary project during that semester, the release from teaching my normal Baylor classes provided valuable time, and the congenial environment of the Center for Christian Thought at Biola provided the perfect milieu to bring this project to fruition. I must also thank my graduate research assistant, Matthew Wilson, who made a number of helpful suggestions and also tracked down some quotations and references for this book. I also wish to thank Maureen Ryan for compiling the index. Finally, I must thank my wife, Jan Evans, without whom I would accomplish nothing, for her wise advice, unwavering support, and steadfast love.

C. Stephen Evans  
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## Who Are the New Atheists, and What Are They Saying?

From the earliest periods of the Christian church, God has called some to defend the faith against the attacks of unbelievers. In the ancient world early Christians were variously accused of being atheists (because of their rejection of local gods), superstitious (because of their acceptance of miracles, such as the resurrection of Jesus), and subverters of the social order (because of their refusal to worship the emperor and their inclusion of people of all social classes in their communities). Such writers as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen responded to all these charges and more. Many apologists have taken 1 Peter 3:15 as providing a kind of charter for the apologetic enterprise: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” Peter may not be referring directly to what has come to be known as apologetics, but this verse does seem to imply that Christian hope is not baseless or groundless. A person who possesses Christian faith can approach the world with an attitude of hope regardless of

what transpires in this world, and this hope is one that is reasonable, at least from the perspective of faith. Recently, a number of writers, often collectively called “the New Atheists,” have loudly claimed that Christian faith is anything but reasonable. What should the church say in response to such claims? I shall try to answer this question in this book. In this introductory chapter I must first say something about the New Atheists. Who are they? What exactly are their accusations against religious faith in general and Christian faith in particular?

### The “Four Horsemen” of the New Atheists

A host of writers could be included under the label of the New Atheism, but I shall limit my discussion to four of the best-known writers: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, a quartet sometimes described as the “Four Horsemen” of the movement. (Though perhaps one should say that the Four Horsemen are now only a trio, since Christopher Hitchens passed away from pneumonia stemming from cancer in 2011.) Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist now at Oxford, first came to public attention with the publication of *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, a popular work in evolutionary biology that proposed that an organism should be thought of as merely a way that genes reproduce themselves.<sup>1</sup> Dawkins later argued in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) that the universe is fully intelligible without resort to any intelligent design or cause and in *The God Delusion* (2006) that religious belief is not only irrational but positively harmful.<sup>2</sup> Dawkins is unafraid to voice his contempt for biblical faith: “The God of the Old Testament is

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

2. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986) and *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

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.”<sup>3</sup>

Christopher Hitchens, educated at Oxford, was a British leftist (Trotskyite initially) who made a living as a journalist, writing for *The Nation*, *The New Statesman*, and a variety of American publications, including *The Atlantic* and *Vanity Fair*. Besides his regular work as a journalist, Hitchens wrote a series of mostly biographical books, some on figures he admired (George Orwell, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson) and others on figures he detested (Henry Kissinger and Mother Teresa, no less). Hitchens acquired some notoriety by deserting his leftist friends and giving whole-hearted support to the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, even if he deviated from his leftist political views, he nonetheless remained consistent to the end in his vehement opposition to religious belief. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* expresses his view that religion is not only false but pernicious, a cancer that right-thinking people should try to extirpate, though Hitchens is pessimistic that this is possible in the foreseeable future. Hitchens is probably even more quotable than Dawkins and is similarly unafraid to voice his outrage that religion persists in the contemporary world: “Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a worldview, to *prevent* the emergence of rivals, it can now only impede and retard—or try to turn back—the measurable advances that we have made.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 51.

4. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 282.



Sam Harris received a PhD in neuroscience but is best known for his vociferous attacks on religious belief. His books include *The End of Faith* (2005) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), a short response to criticisms of the first book.<sup>5</sup> Harris has recently written *The Moral Landscape* (2010), in which he argues (naively) that ethical questions can and should be answered scientifically, and a short book entitled *Free Will* (2012).<sup>6</sup> Harris's attacks on religious belief, like those of Dawkins and Hitchens, do not focus solely on fundamentalism or extremist forms of religion. He thinks that even moderate forms of religious belief are destructive and harmful to our civilization: "We will see that the greatest problem confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism; it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself."<sup>7</sup>

The last of the "Four Horsemen" I shall briefly describe is Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at Tufts University best known for his work in the philosophy of mind and on free will, particularly with respect to the question of whether artificially constructed machines could ever be said to be conscious. Although Dennett's views in philosophy of mind, like all such views currently on offer, are controversial and hotly debated, he has won a reputation as an accomplished and influential philosopher in this area through such works as *Brainstorms* (1978),<sup>8</sup> *The Intentional Stance* (1987),<sup>9</sup> and *Consciousness Explained* (1991).<sup>10</sup> (Though I respect Dennett as a philosopher, I cannot resist

5. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

6. Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010) and *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

7. Harris, *End of Faith*, 45.

8. Daniel C. Dennett, *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology* (Montgomery, VT: Bradford, 1978).

9. Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

10. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).

passing on a standing joke among philosophers that Dennett should have called that last-mentioned book *Consciousness Explained Away*.) In 1995 Dennett shifted from narrow issues in the philosophy of mind to broader questions about a naturalistic worldview by defending the power of Darwinism to explain just about everything in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*.<sup>11</sup> He moved toward explicit criticism of religion in *Breaking the Spell* (2006), which on the surface is simply a call for the scientific study of religion but (as the title implies) suggests that such study will break the hold that religion has on the minds and lives of people.<sup>12</sup> After the publication of *Breaking the Spell* Dennett participated in a memorable exchange with Alvin Plantinga, a distinguished Christian philosopher, and the exchange (including replies from each to the other) has been published as *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (2011).<sup>13</sup>

## The New Atheist Claims

What do these “Four Horsemen” have to say to us? What, if anything, is new about the New Atheism? In some respects, little is new in the attacks on religion mounted by these four thinkers. There are frequent denunciations of religion as outmoded and primitive and grand claims that religion is “unscientific.” Religious beliefs are described as simply preposterous for a scientifically educated person; in fact, Harris claims that if the kinds of beliefs held by religious people were not widely shared, they would be regarded as evidence of mental illness. However, there is little in the way of detailed arguments to back up such

11. Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

12. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006).

13. Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

grand claims, and in reality none of the Four Horsemen has any real competence in the philosophy of religion or (apparently) much familiarity with classical and contemporary debates in the field. I have privately heard from atheist philosophers of religion that they find the writings of the New Atheists somewhat embarrassing. In any case the assertions that religious beliefs are unsupported by evidence and have somehow been undermined by science have been stock claims made by atheists since at least the early nineteenth century. The idea that a naturalistic or materialistic worldview is somehow a more “scientific” view is practically a cliché.

There are, to be sure, a few novel arguments for the falsity of religious belief given by the New Atheists. A good example can be found in Richard Dawkins’s claim that a God posited to explain the design of the natural order would be immensely improbable because “any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right.”<sup>14</sup> In effect Dawkins is arguing that postulating God explains nothing, since what is posited is just as much in need of explanation as what God is supposed to explain. Even worse, Dawkins thinks that postulating God to explain the natural order in this way would lead to an infinite regress of causes, presumably because we would need to postulate another God, equally complex, to explain God, and yet another God to explain God #2, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

It is an understatement to say that this argument fails to impress. First of all, even if Dawkins’s argument were sound, it would not necessarily be damaging to the theist. Many theists believe that God is not affirmed on the basis of any kind of argument or inference, so even if the argument from design fails, this would not affect their belief. This is the view held by

14. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 139.

15. *Ibid.*, 109.

Alvin Plantinga and a group of philosophers called “Reformed epistemologists,” whose views will be discussed later. However, even those who think that belief in God should be based on arguments may well think that there are other, better arguments than the argument from design, so the failure of this one argument is not necessarily a problem.

Another significant problem for Dawkins is that the key premise for his argument, which is his assumption that the cause of complex order must always be as complex as the order it causes, seems very weak. Why should one think this claim is true? It certainly is not obvious that some simple reality or event could not cause some very complex event. After all, one person assassinating an archduke is commonly said to be the cause of World War I, which is certainly a complex reality!

However, the most serious problem with Dawkins’s argument is that it reveals a basic lack of understanding of what theologians mean when they talk about God. Anyone knowledgeable about the history of theology would know that one of the traditional attributes of God (going all the way back to Plotinus and Plato) is simplicity. Any being with parts, certainly any being with material parts, would not be God just because that being has parts. Dawkins’s attempt to argue that an infinite series of explanations would be problematic actually mimics another classical argument *for* God’s existence. This is the cosmological argument, which (in one of its versions) holds that one must postulate a simple, uncaused cause of the universe precisely because the universe consists of complex entities that require a cause. If one postulates another complex entity as that cause, then an infinite regress threatens. One can avoid such a regress only by postulating an ultimate cause that is not complex but simple, having no parts. Such a cause would be God, at least as many philosophers have understood God. Ironically, then, Dawkins’s critique of the argument from design comes close

to being another one of the classical arguments *for* God's existence. At least it includes key elements of such an argument. Most of the New Atheist criticisms of religious belief turn out to be familiar and not new at all; the genuinely new arguments (such as the one just examined) seem too weak to warrant a serious rebuttal.

There are, however, elements in the writings of the New Atheists that seem somewhat new. One is a brash confidence the New Atheists have in their antireligious claims and a willingness to assert them loudly and publicly. The New Atheists do not want to write articles for philosophy periodicals; they want to write best sellers that will command cultural attention. And they have been remarkably successful at this. Many bookshops now have a section of "New Atheist" titles that rival their religion section.

A second element in New Atheist writings that is at least relatively new is a conviction that religious beliefs are not only false and unreasonable but are ethically and socially harmful. Older atheists sometimes made such arguments but were often willing to concede that religious people had done good things as well. The New Atheists are absolutely convinced that many of the social ills that beset the twenty-first century can be traced to religion, including wars and violence of all kinds, sexism, and homophobia. They think that in the past some atheists have given religion too much credit for the good that happens in society. Those older atheists argued that although religion may produce social benefits (it cannot be denied that religious believers established the first universities and hospitals, for example), a person of intellectual integrity cannot be religious. The New Atheists are unwilling to concede any such benefits to religious belief. On their view, religion is not just intellectually groundless; it is positively harmful, both to the individual and to society, especially in the political realm. Furthermore, they think that this harmfulness is not merely something that stems

from religious extremism or fanaticism. Rather, they argue that even religious moderates “provide protective coloration for their fanatical coreligionists.”<sup>16</sup>

It is probably this second element that leads to the shrillness of the New Atheist polemics, and it leads to a third element, which may be the most novel aspect of their thinking: a questioning of the principle of religious tolerance. Most unbelievers in the past have accepted the idea of religious freedom, wanting only to ensure that the principle extends to unbelief as much as belief. The New Atheists think that religion is so irrational and so harmful to society that it may be something that should not be tolerated. While not willing to go so far as to propose some kind of atheist inquisition that would have power to punish religious believers, some of them are willing to consider whether restrictions should be put on the religious instruction of children. Hitchens, for example, provocatively asks, “Is religion child abuse?” and implies in the chapter of that title that it is that and worse.<sup>17</sup> He also affirms that “if religious instruction were not allowed until the child attains the age of reason, we would live in a quite different world.”<sup>18</sup> There is a general view among the New Atheists that religious beliefs are harmful enough that they deserve no special protections or privileged status in society.

Here we see a genuine reversal in thinking. Prior to the development in modern times of societies tolerant of religious beliefs, it was often thought that the lack of religious faith was something so harmful to society (and to the individuals who lacked faith) that it should not be tolerated. As a result, people of good will and with good motives wound up persecuting religious dissenters, a practice now generally believed, in European

16. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 301. Dennett here echoes and applauds a theme in Sam Harris’s *End of Faith*.

17. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 217–28.

18. *Ibid.*, 220.

and North American countries at least, to be profoundly wrong. The New Atheists seem to think that the harmfulness of religious beliefs may, in a similar way, justify policies of intolerance toward religion. We have thus gone from intolerance of unbelief to serious discussion of (or outright support for) policies that at least border on intolerance of belief.

### How Should Christians Respond?

A comprehensive response to the New Atheism should touch on all of the issues I have just mentioned, and much good work has been done toward this end. For example, the claim that Christian belief is incompatible with science has been examined and found wanting by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga as well as scientists such as physicist John Polkinghorne and biologist Francis Collins.<sup>19</sup> The charge that religious belief in general, and Christian belief in particular, has been and continues to be ethically destructive also deserves a serious reply. Of course, Christians should honestly admit that the Christian church, as well as many individual Christians, has often exhibited moral failure, something that the Christian doctrine of sin implies should not be surprising to us. However, the narrative provided by the New Atheists on the moral effects of Christian belief, both in the past and today, is one-sided and inaccurate. They focus on the less-than-adequate ways Christians have expressed their faith while ignoring or minimizing the incredible ways Christian love and compassion have changed society for the good.

Good work has been done in this area as well. Distinguished philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, has argued

19. See Alvin Plantinga's recent *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Also see John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), and Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

convincingly that the important doctrine of human rights historically stemmed from biblical faith and that even today there is no adequate replacement for a religious vision of human nature as a basis for human rights.<sup>20</sup> Distinguished historian Jeffrey Burton Russell has answered many of the “viral” lies and legends found in New Atheist writings in his book *Exposing Myths about Christianity*.<sup>21</sup> Rodney Stark, in *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*,<sup>22</sup> presents a powerful answer to the New Atheist attack. Stark’s narrative may at times be a bit unbalanced on the other side in his defense of Christian belief, but he makes a strong case that the success of science and the development of political freedom, both developments that are highly prized by the New Atheists, were the outgrowth of a religious view rather than something made possible by secularization.

Given the unoriginality of the New Atheists’ intellectual attacks, one might well think that the most important area of response lies in this clearing of the historical air by reexamining the historical and ethical implications of faith. This kind of response is indeed extremely important. The New Testament says that “by their fruits you shall know them,” and so the charge that Christian faith leads only to bad fruit must be confronted, even while the church’s mistakes are honestly admitted and repented of. However, I believe that it is also important to confront the New Atheism on basic intellectual grounds. A failure to clearly articulate why reasonable people can believe that Christian faith is true plays right into the hands of anti-theists.

20. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

21. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Exposing Myths about Christianity: A Guide to Answering 145 Viral Lies and Legends* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).

22. Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005).



It is true that the New Atheists think that religious believers have many more faults than being intellectually unreasonable; on their view religious beliefs are a prime source of violence and suffering in today's world. However, since the New Atheists see themselves as committed to reason, particularly as exercised through science, the first sin of religious believers in their eyes is to not follow reason. Presumably, if the New Atheists were convinced that some set of religious beliefs was solidly grounded in reason, and we therefore had strong evidence of the truth of those beliefs, then they would affirm that all of us would be right to believe those claims regardless of any untoward ethical implications the beliefs might have. (At least this is what they ought to say, as people who claim to be committed to following reason and evidence.)

It is of course the case that a central belief of Christianity, and of Judaism and Islam, is the existence of God, an all-perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing being who is responsible for the existence of everything in the universe. The central importance of belief in God can be seen simply by looking at the titles of the New Atheists' books, which include *The God Delusion*, *God Is Not Great* (which argues for the nonexistence of God rather than simply his lack of goodness), and *The Blind Watchmaker* (which puts in place of a personal creator God a blind, random, natural process). The first part of a response to the New Atheists requires facing the question of whether belief in God makes sense in the contemporary world. Does reasonable belief in God require "proofs" or arguments? In the next chapter I shall try to show that although belief in God can be reasonable without the support of arguments, there are strong reasons for belief in God.