

The Making of an Atheist

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INTRODUCTION

There is no one thing whatsoever more plain and manifest, and more demonstrable, than the being of God. It is manifest in ourselves, in our bodies and souls, and in everything about us wherever we turn our eye, whether to heaven, or to the earth, the air, or the seas. And yet how prone is the heart of man to call this into question! So inclined is the heart of man to blindness and delusion, that it is prone to even atheism itself.

Jonathan Edwards

Man's Natural Blindness in Religion

THE NEW ATHEISTS are on the warpath. They come armed with arguments to show that belief in God is absurd and dangerous. They promote purging the world of all religious practice. And they claim that people of faith are mentally ill. Richard Dawkins calls God a “delusion” and Christopher Hitchens declares that “religion poisons everything.”¹ Some of the new atheists openly express their contempt for the Judeo-Christian God. For example, Sam Harris says, “The biblical God is a fiction, like Zeus and the thousands of other dead gods whom most sane human beings now ignore.”² And Richard Dawkins describes the God

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of the Bible as “a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”³

These are strong, disturbing claims. The new atheists do offer arguments to back up their proclamations—at least their less inflammatory claims. Unfortunately for them, they merely rehearse the same tired objections that have been offered up by skeptics many times before—arguments which have been repeatedly rebutted by philosophers and theologians, both Christian and non-Christian. There is really nothing *new* about the new atheism, except the degree of bombast in their claims. Their prose seethes with outrage. Their anger and resentment toward all things religious is palpable.

Yet the new atheists present themselves as having arrived at their conclusions through intellectual inquiry. And Christian apologists have been quick to respond to their arguments.⁴ Indeed, it is tempting just to offer more of the same here. But this book has a different purpose. I want to show that atheism is not ultimately about arguments and evidence. The candid remarks of atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel are telling:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It

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isn't just that I don't believe in God, and, naturally, hope that I'm right about my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.⁵

These comments by Nagel, as well as those above by Harris and Dawkins reveal strong emotions. Could it be that their opposition to religious faith has more to do with the will than with reason? What if, in the end, evidence has little to do with how atheists arrive at their anti-faith? Perhaps we should consider the possibility that skeptical objections are the atheists' façade, a scholarly veneer masking the *real* causes of their unbelief—causes which are moral and psychological in nature. That is precisely my aim in this book. Atheism is *not at all* a consequence of intellectual doubts. Such doubts are mere symptoms of the root cause—moral rebellion. For the atheist, the missing ingredient is not evidence but *obedience*.

The irrational heights to which the new atheists are willing to go in order to resist God are never more plain than in Richard Dawkins's speculation regarding life's origins:

If it were ever shown that life on this planet was designed . . . then I would say . . . it must have been some extraterrestrial intelligence, perhaps following Francis Crick's . . . suggestion of 'directed panspermia' . . . that life might have been seeded on Earth in

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the nose cone of a rocket sent from a distant civilization that wanted to spread its form of life around the universe.⁶

Dawkins appeals to little green men as the creators of life on Earth, yet he calls *theists* delusional? What could inspire such silly thinking? How could an otherwise intelligent person propose this B-movie science fiction plot as a plausible theory? It certainly indicates that something other than a rational, dispassionate review of evidence is at work behind the thinking of Dawkins and the new atheists.

Atheism, of course, is nothing new. The biblical writers were just as aware of religious skeptics as believers are today. It is instructive to note the Scriptural account of atheism. The psalmist says, “the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1), yet we are reminded that “the fool says in his heart there is no God” (Psalm 14:1a). Why? Because “they are corrupt, their deeds are vile” (Psalm 14:1b). In the New Testament we find precisely the same diagnostic. The apostle Paul does not mince words in making clear that lack of evidence is not the atheist’s problem. Like the psalmist, Paul references the overwhelming proof of the reality of God:

Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has

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been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). So atheists have no defense or justification for their unbelief. The evidence is there; they simply refuse to accept it. Why? Paul’s explanation actually appears earlier in this passage: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men *who suppress the truth by their wickedness* (Romans 1:18; emphasis mine).

The biblical message is that there are moral dynamics involved in the abandonment of faith. The human mind does not neutrally observe the world, gathering facts purely and simply without any preferences or predilections. On the contrary, what one *believes* about the world is always deeply impacted by one’s *values*. People are inclined to believe according to their desires; we tend to believe what we *want* to be true. Nagel’s confession above—that “I don’t want there to be a God”—is unusual only for its striking (and admirable) candidness. But the psychological dynamic it discloses is not unusual.

It is important to note that this is true for the theist as well. Most, if not all, believers want there to be a God. We *do* “want the universe to be like that.” In fact, Sigmund Freud’s famous dismissal of theistic belief as a wish projection turned on this very point. So does this even the score when it comes to the psychologizing of religious belief or the lack thereof?

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Hardly. Scripture breaks the tie, and quite decisively, as we have just noted. According to the Bible, God's existence is clearly evident in creation, while atheism is the product of moral corruption.

At this point, skeptical readers may be tempted to cry foul and accuse me of circular reasoning. Am I not, after all, assuming the truth of Scripture in trying to defend my Christian worldview, which includes the belief that Scripture is true? Yes and no. I most certainly am assuming the truth of Scripture. But my aim here is not to defend the Christian worldview nor even theism, for that matter. Rather, my purpose is to present a Christian account of atheism—an account which draws from the Bible, as any Christian doctrine properly does.

Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga analyzes the situation as follows. God designed the human mind such that we would form beliefs through the operation of our cognitive faculties (e.g, judgment, memory, attention, reasoning, concept formation, etc.). When these faculties function properly in the environment they were designed for, we tend to form true beliefs—about everything from the physical objects in our immediate environment (e.g., I believe I see a tree) to moral and theological issues (e.g., I believe the world has a Creator). When it comes to the latter, human beings have a natural awareness of God, which explains why most people

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believe in some sort of deity. However, human beings are also “cognitively fallen” due to sin. Consequently, our minds do not always function properly. Immorality hampers our ability to reason correctly, especially regarding moral and spiritual matters. And the more a person indulges in sin, the more his or her mind is corrupted, sometimes even to the point that one’s awareness of God is deadened. If Plantinga is right, atheism is a product of malfunctioning cognitive faculties.⁷

Some confirmation of the biblical approach to atheism comes, surprisingly, from an influential philosopher of science—Thomas Kuhn. Kuhn’s landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* introduced into popular parlance the now widely used term “paradigm.” Kuhn’s radical thesis—radical, anyway, relative to the world of the 1960s—was that scientists do not observe the world objectively but always *interpret* what they see in light of the scientific theory to which they are committed. Their theoretical framework, or paradigm, impacts all of their experimenting, data gathering, and analysis of results. Thus, even the most carefully constructed scientific research is biased. When data is collected which might threaten to undermine the paradigm, the scientist is likely to interpret the data in a way that is favorable to it. Scientists, Kuhn emphasized, are no different than other people, in so far as their values and beliefs skew their

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observations of the world. They, like the rest of us, tend to see what they *expect* or *want* to see.

Kuhn's claims, although controversial nearly half a century ago, are now widely accepted among philosophers these days. His insights are helpful in explaining the resistance to evidence that people display in various contexts. This includes the atheist's resistance to the evidence for God that is observable in nature. From their own writings, I think it's fair to say that Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens, no less than Thomas Nagel, do not want there to be a God. In fact, their antipathy to the idea is so strong that they find it repugnant. If Kuhn is correct about the way our biases steer our conclusions about the data, then it is no surprise that hard-core atheists should be so confident in their disbelief. Their atheistic paradigm has ensured that they see no trace of God, despite the fact that His fingerprints can be seen in the world around them.

In light of the biblical account of atheism—and its philosophical and psychological reinforcements—believers should not be intimidated by the new atheism. Nor should the church be deceived by the notion that atheism is primarily an intellectual movement. It is little more than moral rebellion cloaked in academic regalia. The new atheists are blinded by their own sin. In fact, if the term “delusion” applies to anyone who persists in a false belief despite its clearly contradicting the facts, then the new atheists are actu-

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ally the delusional ones. (Let me hasten to add the caveat, however, that this does not mean we should ignore the new atheists' criticisms and insights.)

My thesis is an uncomfortable one. To suggest that religious skepticism is, at bottom, a moral problem will likely draw the ire of many people. But my goal is not to provoke or make people mad. Indeed, personally speaking, I would much rather write an irenic tome on the subject showing where folks on both sides of the issue can agree. (Actually, I do some of this in chapter one, but that is not the overarching point of the book.) Furthermore, by turning the tables on the new atheists who claim that theists are delusional, I don't mean to be clever or cute. It is just an ironic fact that they have analyzed religious believers in terms that actually apply to them. In the end, my reason for making the claim I do in this book is because it is *true*. But, like all truth, I think it has many salutary effects, many practical implications that are helpful and encouraging to those who affirm it. For one thing, this means that theists need not be intimidated by the blustering claims of atheists and other religious skeptics. And there are many other benefits, several of which I will discuss in the final chapter.

The truth is that atheism is profoundly false. It is a misconstrual of reality at the most basic level. So it is no surprise that atheism has given rise to such harmful ideologies as Marxism and nihilism. But perhaps most tragic of all is how deeply irrational atheism is—

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a form of irrationality that itself almost defies comprehension. The reality of God is manifest all around us, from the unimaginable vastness of our universe, with its hundreds of billions of galaxies, to the breathtakingly complex micro-universe of individual cells to the elaborate machinations in animal and plant physiologies and the diverse ecosystems they comprise. To this list we could also add the phenomena of human consciousness, moral truths, the existence of beauty, mystical religious encounters, miraculous occurrences, and fulfilled biblical prophecies.

To miss the divine import of any one of these aspects of God's creation is to flout reason itself. Yet this is precisely what atheists do, and it points to the fact that other factors give rise to the denial of God. Atheism is not the result of objective assessment of evidence, but of stubborn disobedience; it does not arise from the careful application of reason but from willful rebellion. Atheism is the suppression of truth by wickedness, the cognitive consequence of immorality. In short, it is *sin* that is the mother of unbelief.