

**Is
GOD
Just
a
Human
Invention?**

**And Seventeen Other Questions
Raised by the New Atheists**

Sean McDowell | Jonathan Morrow

 **Kregel**
Publications

To our professors at Talbot School of Theology.
You taught us not only how to love God with our hearts and
souls, but also with our minds.

*Is God Just a Human Invention? And Seventeen Other Questions
Raised by the New Atheists*

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INTRODUCTION

A Tale of Two Oxford Atheists

I therefore put to my former fellow-atheists the simple central question: “What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute a reason for you to at least consider the existence of a superior *Mind*?”

—Antony Flew

On March 26, 1941, little Clinton made his grand entrance into the world in Nairobi. The expansive Kenyan skies would be his first laboratory and would launch his investigation of a very big world. By the age of six, Clinton was already boring his sister with facts about the planets and how they worked.¹ Eight years later, his family moved back to England (his father joined the Allied Forces in Britain during World War II). It was the big questions of life—Why are we here? Where did we come from? What is our destiny?—that led Clinton to science. But around the age of sixteen, after encountering Darwinism for the first time, he lost his “harmless Anglican faith” and went off to Balliol College at Oxford University. Upon graduation in 1962, he decided to continue his studies at Oxford by pursuing a doctorate in zoology, specializing in ethology, under Niko Tinbergen. Then, following a brief stint lecturing at the University of California at Berkeley, Clinton returned to Oxford as a professor in 1970.

In 1953, young Alister made his grand entrance in the capital

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city of Belfast in picturesque Northern Ireland.² Like Clinton, Alister was fascinated by how the world worked. At the age of ten, he built a small reflecting telescope so that he could “study the wonders of the heavens.”³ As he would later put it, “By the age of thirteen, I was hooked. There was no question what I would do with the rest of my life. I would study the marvels of nature.”⁴ This passion for discovery fueled his study of chemistry and physics at the Methodist College in Belfast. But along the way and coming of age in war-torn Northern Ireland, it had become evident to him that “the sciences had displaced God, making religious belief a rather pointless relic of a bygone age.”⁵ So, in 1971, Alister was off to Oxford University to pursue a doctorate in chemistry, specializing in molecular biophysics. And after a season of teaching at Cambridge University and other professional opportunities, he joined the faculty at Oxford in the early 1990s.

Both Clinton and Alister cut their intellectual teeth on atheism. One of these boys would grow up to doubt his atheism; the other would fully embrace it. One would come to be known by such colorful titles as the “Devil’s Chaplain” and “Darwin’s Rottweiler”; the other would doubt the intellectual foundations of atheism and go on to earn a second doctorate—this time in theology. Both of them joined the faculty of Oxford, the oldest university in the English-speaking world.⁶

As you may have guessed, Clinton is the atheist and author of *The God Delusion*, the prominent evolutionary biologist Clinton Richard Dawkins. Alister is the Christian theist and author of *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology*, theologian Alister McGrath.

How can two intelligent, inquisitive, Oxford-trained scientists arrive at such different conclusions about God? We will return to that fascinating question later in the book.

THE NEW ATHEISM: COMING TO A BOOKSTORE OR BUS STATION NEAR YOU

Atheism is making a comeback. From bookstores to bus campaigns, the question of God’s existence is up for public de-

bate.⁷ Perhaps you've seen some of these books topping the best-seller lists: *The God Delusion* (Dawkins), *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Christopher Hitchens), *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (Sam Harris), and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Daniel C. Dennett). Yes, atheism of a certain flavor is making a comeback and Clinton Richard Dawkins is leading the charge with *The God Delusion* (which has now sold over 2 million copies). With evangelistic zeal he writes, "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."⁸ And these atheists are taking their newfound commitment seriously—some are even getting "debaptized" with a hair-dryer ceremony.⁹

If you peruse the books mentioned above, you will encounter some bold claims:

- "Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important."¹⁰
- "When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion."¹¹
- "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."¹²
- "I would be the first to admit that the prospects for eradicating religion in our time do not seem good. Still, the same could have been said about efforts to abolish slavery at the end of the eighteenth century. . . . The truth is, some of your [Christians'] most cherished beliefs are as embarrassing as those that sent the last slave ship sailing to America. . . . Clearly, it is time we learned to meet

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our needs without embracing the preposterous. . . . Only then will the practice of raising our children to believe that they are Christian, Muslim, or Jewish be widely recognized as the ludicrous obscenity that it is.”¹³

One thing is crystal clear from reading these books: these authors—who are leaders of a group the media has dubbed the New Atheists—are on a crusade against religion. And while they are against religion in general, they aim most of their criticisms and complaints at the fastest growing religion in the world and the almost two billion people who embrace it—Christianity. If you were to use their writings to create a New Atheist mission statement, it would read, “Christianity isn’t just false; it’s dangerous and must be eliminated.” The aim of this book is to respond to such claims.

Now to be fair, not all atheists are cut from the same cloth and many do not employ or endorse the New Atheists’ shrill rhetoric. In fact, some of the strongest criticisms of the aforementioned books have come from professionally trained, atheistic philosophers. For example, New York University Professor of Philosophy Thomas Nagel found Dawkins’s attempts at philosophical argument “particularly weak” and the work of an “amateur.”* Unfortunately for Dawkins, the vast majority of *The God Delusion* is not the popularized scientific writing for which he has become famous, but philosophical arguments against God, religion, and Christianity. Nagel is not the first to point out that Dawkins is

* See Thomas Nagel, “The Fear of Religion,” review of *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, *The New Republic* (October 23, 2006). One of the leading theistic philosophers in the world, Alvin Plantinga, called Dawkins’s philosophical arguments sophomoric: “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. This, combined with the arrogant, smarter-than-thou tone of the book, can be annoying. I shall put irritation aside, however and do my best to take Dawkins’ main argument seriously.” “The Dawkins Confusion,” review of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *Books and Culture*, March/April 2007, <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2007/marapr/1.21.html> (accessed April 17, 2009).

clearly out of his element. Prominent Darwinist philosopher Michael Ruse went as far as to say that “*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist.”¹⁴

WHY ALL THE HOSTILITY AGAINST RELIGION?

It wasn’t too long ago that the idea of books like these becoming *New York Times* best-sellers would have been hard to imagine. So what happened? Why are people reading books bashing God and ridiculing the faithful? Well, that’s a complex question, but we think two reasons must be included in any answer.

First, we live in a post-9/11 world. The events of that terrible day, when three thousand people lost their lives, are seared in the collective memory of our nation, and Americans had front-row seats to see where religious fanaticism can lead. Until that point, such fanaticism had always been going on “somewhere else.” It is hard to overstate how drastically this event changed our world.

In the days that followed, the cultural conversation turned to the role and value of religion in the public square and in our global society. Such conversations are certainly legitimate and appropriate and can be healthy if done in the right way. But events like 9/11 helped create the cultural context in which the hyperaggressive claims of the New Atheists could actually be entertained by a nation founded on Judeo-Christian principles.

Second, there is a growing undercurrent of unbelief in America. A *Newsweek* cover story, “The End of Christian America,” reported that “the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent.”¹⁵ Why is this? While sociologists of religion have more than enough polling data to analyze, we think Timothy Keller offers a plausible explanation in his excellent book *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*:

Three generations ago, most people inherited rather than chose their religious faith. The great majority of people belonged to one of the historic mainline Protestant churches

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or the Roman Catholic Church. Today, however, the now dubbed “old-line” Protestant churches of cultural, inherited faith are aging and losing members rapidly. People are opting instead for a non-religious life, for non-institutional personally constructed spirituality, or for orthodox, high-commitment religious groups that expect members to have a conversion experience. Therefore the population is paradoxically growing both more religious and less religious at once.¹⁶

Behold the fruit of pluralism and secularization. It seems a growing number of people—on both sides of the God question—are no longer content to “play church.” Either what people believe is true and they are going to attempt to live out their faith *in all areas* of life, or it’s false and people shouldn’t waste their time going through the motions of their childhood faith if it really doesn’t make any difference.

So these two factors have generated a cultural conversation about faith and God in the twenty-first century. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for people of faith. But these phenomena also created space for a small yet well-publicized and increasingly vocal New Atheism, whose advocates tell anyone who will listen that if we simply get rid of religion, we can free ourselves from childish nonsense and be about the business of living. Or as the atheist bus campaign ad says, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

IS ATHEISM NEW?

Is atheism new? No, it isn’t. Atheism has been around for quite a while.¹⁷ It had its heyday in America during the “God is dead” movement of the 1960s.* What *is* new is the biting and

* See the April 8, 1966, cover of *Time*. The “God is dead” movement so popular in philosophy departments during the 1960s is being reversed by the resurgence of contemporary philosophers who are theists. See the cutting-edge arguments for God’s existence in William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). An interme-

powerful rhetoric, as well as the cultural visibility of the New Atheists due to the explosion of the Internet, blogs, and 24/7 coverage of anything and everything—the more controversial and polarizing the better.

Why engage the New Atheists? As we have already seen from the critiques of the New Atheists by fellow atheists, serious doubts have been raised as to whether their arguments are sound. But we must also remember that ours is a society driven by images and slogans, not carefully reasoned discourse or critical analysis. We like our updates in 140 characters or less. We don't have time for the whole story—the sound bite will have to do. Let's be honest: our attention span can handle Twitter, Facebook, and *American Idol*, but long, detailed explanations are, well . . . *too long*.

So in a world of sound bites and unexamined slogans, the New Atheists' forceful rhetoric can seem emotionally compelling and disturbing to those who are unfamiliar with the solid evidence for God in general and Christianity in particular. This is especially true of the emerging generation, which is skeptical of authority and has not been given a compelling, whole-life vision of Christianity, including the hows and whys to faith's honest questions.¹⁸

We have talked to enough people under the age of thirty to know that these books are causing some to walk away from their faith. We felt it was important to speak to the issues raised by the New Atheists in an accessible yet rigorous manner and from a distinctively Christian perspective so that people can make up their own mind after considering the evidence.

ENGAGING THE CLAIMS OF NEW ATHEISTS

Our task will be responding to the major arguments and complaints raised against Christianity. The New Atheists support

diate work is Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser, *The Rationality of Theism* (London: Routledge, 2003). To begin exploring these questions, see Francis Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland, *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

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their central thesis that “Christianity isn’t just false; it’s dangerous” by appealing to two main lines of evidence—*scientific/philosophical* and *moral/biblical*. Accordingly, we have divided our book into two parts addressing each of these in turn. By the end of the book, we will have explored eighteen important questions raised by the New Atheists.

Before we outline where we are headed in this book, a quick word is needed regarding the New Atheists’ tactical approach in their writings and public debates (which thousands are watching on YouTube). Hoping that *something* hits the mark, the New Atheists tend to throw everything and the kitchen sink at people. They provide examples and anecdotes designed to appeal primarily to the emotions, and they skillfully use sarcasm and humor—this is especially true of Christopher Hitchens. But humor is not an argument; neither is ridicule (and neither is having a British accent). As with any issue, keep an eye out for whether the claims are actually supported by the evidence or if they are just eloquently communicated. In questions as important as these, you want to base your decisions on a firm foundation.

In part 1 we will deal more specifically with scientific and philosophical challenges to belief in God. Part 1 will include topics such as the nature of faith and its relationship to reason, the possibility of miracles, the origin of the universe, the existence of the soul, and whether Darwinian evolution is really the only game in town.

Part 2 will deal more specifically with moral and biblical challenges to belief in God. Some of the topics discussed will include whether religion is inherently dangerous, the nature of hell, whether the Bible endorses slavery and genocide, the problem of evil, and whether there is any relevant difference between believing in the flying spaghetti monster and believing in Jesus of Nazareth.

We will round out the book by sharing from our spiritual journeys before returning to our “tale of two Oxford atheists” to see how it is that they could end up at such different places on the question of God. At that point, it will be up to you to decide

if the New Atheists have made their case or if the uncaricatured view of Christianity expressed in this book emerges as the most compelling worldview.

The vast amount of literature on these topics can be overwhelming. To help navigate through the literature, we have listed two books at the end of each chapter for further engagement. Also, be sure to check out the appendixes at the end of the book that cover a few other relevant issues (such as, how faith and doubt can coexist, and whether the Bible has been corrupted through the centuries).

CHANGING THE TONE OF THIS CULTURAL CONVERSATION

The truth about God is too important *not* to be seriously investigated and honestly discussed. Unfortunately, it doesn't take very long for friendly conversations to devolve into shouting matches—and this helps no one. The fact of the matter is that belief and unbelief are here to stay: neither one will be disappearing anytime soon. So it does no good to vilify the other side. If any real progress is to be made, we must change the tone of this conversation.

In his thought-provoking book *No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers*, Michael Novak contends that “unbelievers and believers need to learn a new habit of reasoned and mutually respectful conversation.”¹⁹ We agree. And that is the spirit we hope found its way into the pages of this book.²⁰

FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

Berlinski, David. *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.

Flew, Antony, and Roy Abraham Varghese. *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. New York: HarperOne, 2007.