

“For my whole Christian life I’ve been saying, ‘My heart cannot rejoice in what my mind rejects.’ Today’s New Atheists seem to be saying something like that: that we should only believe what’s within the bounds of evidence and sound reason. For them, that means we should choose atheism, but in reality nothing could be further from the truth. *True Reason* explains clearly and deeply how New Atheists have both missed and misunderstood the evidence that exists, and why Christianity is by far the better choice for the thinking mind and worshipping heart.”

—**Josh McDowell**, Author and Speaker

“With a clear message and respectful tone, *True Reason* challenges and convincingly refutes the claim of the New Atheists to own reason. The contributors persuasively argue from history, science, and philosophy that the Christian worldview is not only reasonable in itself but also provides the necessary foundation for reason. If you love reason, *True Reason* explains why Christianity is the best worldview for you.”

—**Michael Licona**, PhD, Associate Professor in Theology,  
Houston Baptist University, Author of *The Resurrection of Jesus*

“More than a year before he joined our staff, Tom Gilson came alongside Ratio Christi to help lead dozens of students to the atheist Reason Rally on the National Mall in Washington, DC. They entered a modern-day ‘lions’ den’ to share Christ’s love and truth, giving away bottles of water and excerpts from *True Reason’s* first edition. Armed with logic and *True Reason*, these students engaged in conversation with anyone who would listen. It was a turning point in the growth of Ratio Christi. This book explains the clear difference between the weak thinking represented by the atheists at the Reason Rally, and the strong reasoning accessible through biblically informed thinking.”

—**Rick Schenker**, President, Ratio Christi, student apologetics alliance

“New Atheists have tried to co-opt the word *reason* to describe their hypotheses. Just a few years ago there was even a reported move to refer to atheists as “Brights”! But Tom Gilson asserts that, ‘Reason is the New Atheists’ weakness, not their strength.’ The essays in this volume, coedited by Gilson with Carson Weitnauer, show why the atheists’ ideas are not at all reasonable, whereas Christian beliefs do indeed deserve this description. If the press clippings of the New Atheists bother you, you may acquire some ammunition in the pages of this text.”

—**Gary R. Habermas**, Distinguished Research Professor,  
Liberty University and Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary,  
and Chair, Department of Philosophy

“Numerous books have recently been released in response to the rising influence of agnosticism and atheism. But as attacks on theism and religious freedom have grown, the world of Christian apologetics has truly come into its own. I know of no brighter expression of this than *True Reason*, featuring essays by a number of notable apologists. David Marshall’s response to John Loftus (an atheist hero in some circles) is worth the cover price alone. The same could be said for David Wood’s chapter critiquing the explanatory power of naturalism. I applaud the release of *True Reason*—a compendium of fresh scholarship from contributors who are on the front line of apologetics today.”

—**Alex McFarland**, Director, The Center for Apologetics and Christian Worldview, North Greenville University, South Carolina

“The New Atheists claim the high road of reason, yet for all their bluster about rationality, careful, balanced, logically valid thinking has not been their strong suit. *True Reason*, by contrast, genuinely lives up to its title, and so much more. It takes on the stoutest challenges from the most notable voices on the other side and systematically dismantles them, yet with a grace, respect, and even-handedness rarely seen from their intellectual opposition.”

—**Gregory Koukl**, President of Stand to Reason (str.org), author of *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* and *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*

“Another important work in the growing list of books rebutting the New Atheism, *True Reason* is a refreshing, crisply argued critique of this movement’s frequently ill-informed and ungrounded assertions about science, faith, and reason.”

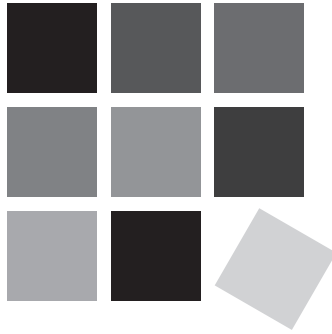
—**Paul Copan**, coeditor of *Contending with Christianity’s Critics* and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University, West Palm Beach, Florida

TRUE REASON



Foreword by **John Stonestreet**, Colson Center for Christian Worldview

# TRUE REASON



CONFRONTING the IRRATIONALITY  
of the NEW ATHEISM

**Tom Gilson & Carson Weitnauer**

GENERAL EDITORS

CONTRIBUTORS INCLUDE:

William Lane Craig, Sean McDowell, & Tim McGrew

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### *From Tom Gilson*

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I wish to express very special thanks to my wife, Sara, and our two children, Jonathan and Lisa, for their love, encouragement, and patience while walking through this intense but exciting project with me—not just once but twice, in the first version and in this revision.

*Lebanon, Ohio  
March 2013*

*From Carson Weitnauer*

I wish to thank Tom Gilson for inviting me into this project as an author and coeditor. The entire process has been a wonderful learning experience. I am also grateful for the dozens of atheist, agnostic, and seeking students who have strengthened my thinking and extended warm friendship to me as we've shared thousands of cups of tea and coffee. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the readers of ReasonsForGod.org, who have both encouraged and challenged me along the way. I look forward to continuing the dialogue. My home church, Church of the Cross, and donors around the country, have offered invaluable support for my work with Telos Ministries at Harvard, Boston College Law School, and other campuses across Boston. Your prayers, encouragement, and support make all of this possible. Thank you.

Most of all, I thank my wife, Mo, for her encouragement, wisdom, and love. You are the love of my life.

*Boston, Massachusetts  
March 2013*

## FOREWORD

John Stonestreet

*September 2013*

Religious fundamentalism is dangerous in any form, we frequently hear. Fingers are generally pointed at Christians and Muslims as the offenders deserving that label, and the two groups are typically lumped together in one category as if there were no distinctions between them worth mentioning.

There are two problems with this analysis. First, Islam and Christianity are radically—and obviously—different. Second, this view ignores other fundamentalisms that exist in our time, among the most vocal of which is practiced by a committed and loud group of secularists.

In August 2013, the Freedom from Religion Foundation vehemently objected to being awarded tax-exempt status. Their complaint had nothing to do with wanting to do their part in paying taxes or supporting government programs. Rather, it was, according to Foundation president Annie Gaylor, because, “We are not ministers. . . . We are not a church.”<sup>1</sup>

However, one need not be a church to be religious, nor need one believe in God. Anyone who makes claims about ultimate reality or seeks to explain where everything came from and why is being religious in at least this sense: they are exploring in the realm of the metaphysical, making claims that cannot be substantiated by empirical investigation.

Atheists, particularly the fundamentalist kind, prefer to deny this fact—a fact obvious even to the IRS. Atheists have science and reason on their side, not superstition (or so they claim). Their beliefs are *obviously* true, not having been corrupted by ancient beliefs in ghouls, goblins, or

gods. As empiricists, they deal in the realm of knowledge, while religious folks deal in the realm of faith. They are reasonable, while the religious are not.

“One can’t prove that God doesn’t exist,” admitted Stephen Hawking in an ABC interview in 2010, “but science makes God unnecessary. The laws of physics can explain the universe without the need for a Creator.” Yet he followed that by saying, “Physics may explain the mysteries of the universe, but it is cold and unemotional, so I try not to let it affect my family life.”

Which is it, one wants to ask Hawking: can physics explain the universe or can it not? It’s big enough to explain gravitational pulls and atomic realities, but is it big enough to explain warmth or emotion or family? In what sense are these everyday realities outside the realm of the universe? This is only one of many examples that show the confident claims of atheists and secularists to be a bit grandiose.

More puzzling, however, is the claim that reason is the exclusive territory of atheists and secularists, which is most heard from the group known as the New Atheists. They see themselves as the ones unfettered by bias, the open-minded ones, embarking on a journey of discovery while the rest of us—especially theists—are repressed by ancient authoritarian sources we should have outgrown by now.

This hubris was on full display in March of 2012 at the Reason Rally gathering in Washington, DC. Billed as “the largest gathering of the secular movement in world history,” the program featured the most prominent antireligious folks of our day, including Richard Dawkins, Michael Shermer, P. Z. Myers, Dan Barker, and—via video—comedian Bill Maher.

At the time, my friend Tom Gilson led an effort along with Carson Weitnauer to expose the fact that many of the claims of the New Atheists are, in reality, not as reasonable as they proclaim. This book is the sum of those efforts, in a revised and expanded form, reflecting the continuing relevance of the issue. Honest readers, while perhaps not agreeing with everything said or written here, will see that the fundamentalists known as the New Atheists have significant blind spots. Not only do they lack grounds for their ability to reason (what Alvin Plantinga calls naturalism’s

“defeater”),<sup>2</sup> but they are forced to explain away the enormous intellectual contribution of Christians and other theists by suggesting that somehow their reasonableness came in spite of their belief in God. There is, of course, much evidence to contradict that claim.

This book shows theism in general and Christian theism in particular to be reasonable, and it exposes areas in which secularism is not at all reasonable. The authors exhibit fine scholarship as they take the reader into this heated debate, but do so in a way that graciously extends the conversation. Any time invested with these authors will result in learning a great deal about reason as well as how to respond reasonably to others in this debate.

### Notes

1. Cheryl K. Chumley, “Atheists Incensed after IRS Grants Them Tax Exemption as Religious Group,” *Washington Times*, August 21, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/aug/21/atheists-incensed-after-irs-grants-them-tax-exempt/>.
2. See Alvin Plantinga, “The Dawkins Confusion: Naturalism ‘ad absurdum,’” *Books and Culture* (March/April 2007), <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2007/marapr/1.21.html>.



*One*

## THE PARTY OF REASON?

Tom Gilson

**T**he New Atheists have branded themselves the party of Reason.

Richard Dawkins leads his Foundation for Reason and Science. Sam Harris cofounded Project Reason, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The Council for Secular Humanism publishes *Free Inquiry: Celebrating Reason and Humanity*. The American Atheists define atheism as “the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason. . . .” On March 24, 2012, Dawkins headlined an atheists’ rally in Washington, DC, described as “the largest gathering of the secular movement in world history.” They called it the Reason Rally.

These atheists’ claim to reason, however, is becoming harder and harder to sustain. We who have contributed to this book believe reason is much more a weakness for them than a strength. Their books, articles, and debates are riddled with fallacies, appeals to emotion, and mishandling of evidence. Their claim to reason is often a matter of public relations rather than of competence in reasoned discourse.

We believe Christianity is on the whole much more reasonable than atheism. Admittedly, that is a bold statement. For some it will be incredible in the strict sense of the word: not credible. Nevertheless, we intend to make the case that it is true.

Christian thinkers down through the centuries have held reason in the highest regard, and have practiced it according to the highest standards.

Obviously that has not been true of all Christians. As with any large group, there are better and worse thinkers within Christianity. Still, the Christian faith as a whole supports sound reason, and Christian thinkers have applied it well. Meanwhile, despite their protestations to the contrary, parallel examples of excellent thinking are often lacking among today's New Atheist thought leaders.

### Reason Not on Display

My first experience with contemporary atheists' reasoning was the 1986 book, *The Blind Watchmaker*. It remains a vividly disappointing marker in my memory. The term *New Atheist*, essentially atheism with a militant antireligion strain, had yet to be coined, and there was no knowing then that before long, the book's author, Richard Dawkins, would be regarded as their chief spokesman and spiritual leader. I picked up the book because of its subtitle: *Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*. I had no idea how Dawkins—or anyone—could make a case for that conclusion, but I had heard good things about him as an author, and I was rather hoping he could bring it off. I was looking for a serious challenge, and if he had a way to disprove design in the universe, I wanted to test my mettle against it.

Dawkins's skill as an author is plainly evident in this book. Although in places his argument seems quite a stretch—he tries, for example, to illustrate evolution's unintelligent capacities by drawing an analogy to an intelligently designed computer program—still he makes a passionate and fascinating case for evolution.

But it was his argument against design that I was looking for, and although he touched on it here and there, he never really landed on it until near the end of his final chapter. Evolution, he said, makes God superfluous, thus there is no design in the universe. That was the crux of his argument. Evolution provides a way for nature to have come about without design, therefore it came about without design.

Did I mention that I was disappointed? I practically sputtered out loud. "Dawkins, you rascal, you've led me on for three hundred pages with a promise of an argument against design—and this is all you've got!?" What a letdown.



Later on, the eminent philosopher Alvin Plantinga would offer his own wry assessment. At best, he said, the book's argument would show, "given a couple of assumptions,"

that it is not astronomically improbable that the living world was produced by unguided evolution and hence without design.

But the argument form

p is not astronomically improbable

therefore

p

is a bit unprepossessing. I announce to my wife, "I'm getting a \$50,000 raise for next year!" Naturally she asks me why I think so. "Because the arguments against its being astronomically improbable fail! For all we know, it's not astronomically improbable!" (Well, maybe it *is* pretty improbable, but you get the idea.)<sup>1</sup>

This then was my introduction to what was to become the New Atheism. It set a pattern that the contributors to this volume have seen played out over and over again: significant failures of reasoned thinking.

### Forms of Failure

These failures come in multiple shapes and forms. Sometimes, as we have just seen, they take the form of fallacious logic. Sometimes they appear as mischaracterizations of Christian belief. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins takes it for granted that God must be an example of "organized complexity" whose origins stand in need of explanation—which is contrary to all Christian thinking on the nature of God.

Sometimes it's the mangling of historical fact. Christopher Hitchens writes, "The best argument I know for the highly questionable existence of Jesus is this. His illiterate living disciples left us no record and in any event could not have been 'Christians,' since they were never to read those later books in which Christians must affirm belief, and in any case had no

idea that anyone would ever found a church on their master's announcements."<sup>2</sup> But no reputable scholar, not even a skeptic like Bart Ehrman,<sup>3</sup> doubts the existence of Jesus. Few agree with Hitchens's radical rejection of the historical record.

Hitchens also writes, "[Maimonides] fell into the same error as do the Christians, in assuming that the four Gospels were in any sense a historical record. Their multiple authors—none of whom published anything until many decades after the Crucifixion—cannot agree on anything of importance."<sup>4</sup> This is an odd assertion to make, when the gospel writers show complete agreement on Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—the most indisputably important events of Jesus' life.

These are but a few instances of the wide variety of rational errors in New Atheist literature. Whatever form it takes, each example adds further evidence that the New Atheists are not as rational as they claim to be.

Yet *reason* is stamped on virtually all their product.

### Views of Reason

But perhaps we are viewing *reason* wrongly; and perhaps at the same time we are thinking of faith wrongly, too. Sam Harris would like us to think so. He tells us in *The End of Faith*, "The truth is that religious faith is simply *unjustified* belief in matters of ultimate concern. . . . Faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse—constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor."<sup>5</sup>

Now if Harris is right, and if faith *by definition* can never be reasonable, then of course the discussion is over. As an argument, however, that seems rather illegitimate: shall we *define* faith out of rational existence? Why not rather apply evidence and logic to assessing its connection with rationality? The former approach is both premature and terribly ironic, for it leads to a conclusion divorced from all evidence, which is exactly what the New Atheists complain that faith does (falsely; see chapters 9, 10, and 11). If, on the other hand, we care to apply proper standards of evidence and logic, we are bound to look for something considerably more thoughtful than that.

Nevertheless, there is a hint here of how a leading New Atheist would define reason. Harris rolls out more of his thinking about reason as he

proceeds through *The End of Faith*, and by the end his position is plain. To be *reasonable*, for Harris, is practically synonymous with confining one's beliefs strictly to what can be demonstrated by objective, empirical, preferably scientific evidence.

This cuts rather too fine a line, as many thinkers have noted. Suppose I take that principle as my rule. Applying its own standard to itself, how can I demonstrate that it's true? Its truth cannot be empirically demonstrated. And if its truth cannot be demonstrated empirically, it fails its own test: if it were true, we could never know it to be true. Yet throughout their writings, New Atheists echo this as their chief canon of reason.

There is a second dominant theme in New Atheists' use of the word *reason*, which is *to act reasonably*. Harris writes, "The Nazis disparaged the 'Jewish physics' of Einstein, and the communists rejected the 'capitalist biology' of Mendel and Darwin. But these were not rational criticisms—as witnessed by the fact that these dissenting scientists were often imprisoned or killed."<sup>6</sup>

But this is by no means just for atheists. While exceptions on the fringes of the faith could undoubtedly be found, virtually no believer in Christ (and certainly none of us involved in writing this book) would endorse killing or incarcerating anyone for their religious beliefs. Still, it's clear that "acting reasonably" differs from one person to another. I was on an overnight train trip in China once, grateful to be feeling cool air blowing in the windows at dusk after a very hot day. To my consternation, our hosts came through the train car and closed the windows—so that we would not get sick from the night air. Was that reasonable? Based on their beliefs it was.

That's not to say there are no right or wrong answers to such matters. Those who believe there is a God believe it is reasonable to worship and to obey him. Those who disbelieve in God think those things are quite silly. The answer to the question, is it more reasonable to worship or to reject God? depends on the answer to the question, is it reasonable to believe God is real?

Believers and New Atheists agree on one thing at least: it's possible to be wrong on the existence of God, and whether one is right or wrong really matters.

These then are the two prominent modes of conceiving of *reason* among the New Atheists—confining belief to what can be supported empirically, and acting reasonably. Unfortunately, I have not often heard them urging an even more fundamental form of *reason*: the practice of logical thinking applied to the process of forming conclusions. We might call this *reason proper*: the very act of reasoning, the rational process by which one draws proper deductive inferences from premises, or proper inductive inferences from evidences, or properly plausible explanations of observations and phenomena. The lack of this ability (or the failure in its practice) is displayed when one commits formal or informal logical fallacies, makes appeals to emotion rather than sound reasoning, or uses evidence selectively.

This *reason proper* is prior to other forms of reason, for unless one knows how to draw a valid conclusion from evidences or premises, one cannot know which beliefs to hold in light of evidences—even scientific evidences, nor can one know what is reasonable to do. No one who is lacking in this can credibly claim to represent reason.

New Atheist literature has surprisingly little to say about reasoning on this level, at least in my reading of what they have written. Now admittedly, I could have missed it. Or perhaps they have just assumed its importance, considering it too obvious to bother mentioning. Even if it were widely discussed among the New Atheists, however, there would remain a valid test of their reasoning on this level: *how well do they do it?* The first few chapters of this book show that some of their most highly respected leaders practice it very poorly. The credibility of their claim on *reason* as their brand and their watchword evaporates on close inspection.

## True Reason

As Christians we are convinced that reason is from God. That does not mean we wave the flag of reason over our heads, as the New Atheists do, for we see life as more multidimensional than that. The greatest commandment, said Jesus Christ, is to love the Lord our God with our whole selves: heart, soul, and strength, as well as mind.<sup>7</sup> There is mystery in Christianity. There is a lived-out life of action in Christ's name. Christians rightly embrace the imagination, the power of narrative, the importance

of beauty and the arts, and the value of community. All of that is crucial. Nevertheless, wrapped up in all this there is a deep and essential reasonableness to the faith.

Christian faith is a friend to reason. Christianity has a tradition of real strength in philosophy, the sciences, literature, and the arts—most or all of which the New Atheists have ignored or swept aside. Internet commenters write, “Most of the great thinkers in history were atheists.”<sup>8</sup> Though obviously an extreme example, it serves to illustrate how desperately uninformed some people are about Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, Galileo, Newton, Kepler, Maxwell, Bach, Dostoyevsky, . . . I could continue for pages—as indeed David Marshall and Tim McGrew have done in chapter 11.

Of course our heritage is not one of unbroken success. We have had our seasons of anti-intellectualism, and our moments of embarrassment—sometimes long moments. We have representatives today who still embarrass reason by their lack of skill in it. We do not defend that, even among ourselves.

It’s easy to find weak reasoning among Christians, just as it’s easy to find atheists who think every great thinker in history was a nonbeliever. We are not looking for the weakest New Atheist thinkers in this book, however. We are focusing on the movement’s thought leaders. It would be unfair to judge the New Atheism’s reasoning by anything other than its reasoning leadership, and we have no intention of committing that injustice to atheism. We have no need to do that. Their most prominent spokespersons demonstrate our point well enough.

## Overview

This then is our argument: the New Atheists’ ownership claim on the brand of *reason* is empty. They don’t practice it at all well, and in fact, as we shall see, reason fits poorly within their presumptions and presuppositions. Reason rightly belongs to God and to the Way of Christ. We who follow that Way want to reclaim that word.

The book develops along four lines: Atheism and reason, Christianity and reason, reasonable responses, and Christianity’s reasonability.

### *Atheism and Reason*

The book's opening chapters provide evidence that the New Atheism fails to live up to its claimed connection with reason.

Carson Weitnauer leads off by showing in chapter 2 the ironic gap between atheists' claimed love for reason and their actual irrationality—much of it freely admitted by their thought leaders. Chapters 3 and 4, by noted Christian philosopher William Lane Craig and Chuck Edwards, respectively, look from two complementary angles at Richard Dawkins and his frequent failures of logic and reasoning in *The God Delusion*, and even his surprising disregard for science.

I show in chapter 5 why one might reasonably wonder how Sam Harris came to be associated with Project Reason, and whether his connection to such a project is appropriate. In chapter 6 David Marshall examines John Loftus's "Outsider Test for Faith," and finds it to be a fine test for truth, but one that leads to a conclusion quite different from that which Loftus thinks it does. Lenny Esposito follows that in chapter 7 with the argument from reason, showing that naturalism (a common contemporary version of atheism) undermines all human reasoning, and David Wood expands that point in chapter 8 by showing several other ways in which naturalistic thinking is the basis for its own demise.

### *Christianity and Reason*

The second set of chapters offers arguments for the rational strength of the Christian worldview.

In chapter 9, Peter Grice demonstrates reason's compatibility with biblical truth, a topic David Marshall expands in chapter 10, where he shows the tight biblical connection between faith and reason. David Marshall and Timothy McGrew expand that yet further in chapter 11 through quotations from many Christian thinkers across the past two millennia. In chapter 12, Samuel Youngs deals with faith, meaning, and morality in close cooperation with one another.

Sean McDowell writes in chapter 13 of Christianity's close conceptual and historic connections with science, which I follow in chapter 14 with a response to the common objection that God and science do not mix.

### *Reasonable Responses*

Answering a common critique, John DePoe explains in chapter 15 that there is no contradiction in the existence of a good God and of evil in the world. Randy Hardman's chapter 16 answers charges that the Bible cannot be trusted, through evidences for the reliability of the New Testament documents. (Because of its first-century subject matter, this chapter runs more on the technical side than others in this volume.)

### *Christianity's Reasonability*

Christianity has often been charged with failures of reasonability in practice. We have selected two representative topics to demonstrate common New Atheist misunderstandings of Christianity. The first is the common atheist accusation that God supported and endorsed genocide in the Old Testament. Matthew Flanagan responds to that with a careful look at what the literature actually meant in historical context. (Like chapter 16, this chapter is somewhat technical, as appropriate to the subject matter.) Finally, there is the charge that the Bible supports slavery, which Glenn Sunshine answers in chapter 18. Taking both a biblical and historical look at the matter, he shows not only that these charges are quite unfounded, but that (with a few tragic exceptions) Christianity has actually been the major force in history for the abolition of slavery.

### *Conclusion*

Finally Carson Weitnauer closes the book with an epilogue on the personal and social implications of what we have discussed.

### Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24–25.
2. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Spoils Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 114.
3. Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).
4. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 111.

5. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 65; emphasis in original.
6. *Ibid.*, 232n21.
7. Mark 12:28–31.
8. See, by way of example, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/01/atheist-group-targets-muslims-jews-with-myth-billboards-in-arabic-and-hebrew/comment-page-58/> (comment by “Aurelius”); <http://www.psychedelicfolk.com/ReverendBeat-Man.html> (“So, therefore I said that all great thinkers were atheists”); <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120113154658AA2Lh8K> (comment by “Sterling”).