

## Preface

THE TITLE OF THIS COLLECTION of twelve essays may require some explanation. Both editors, who have been involved in the academic field of science and religion for many decades, were somewhat surprised when we started meeting people who told us that their pathway to Christian faith began with, or was highly influenced by, the so-called New Atheists. Richard Dawkins was at the top of the list of those mentioned, but the late Christopher Hitchens also played an important role.

This unexpected fact made us wonder whether there might be more people with this kind of story. A little bit of networking and browsing the web soon gave the answer: there were plenty. The personal narratives gathered here are diverse, written by those coming from very different backgrounds, from five different countries, but united in describing how the New Atheists played important roles in their pathways to committed Christian faith. None of our authors saw the contributions provided by the other authors until the book's publication.

We can speak for all twelve of these authors in highlighting the fact that in no way should this book be seen as presenting any kind of personal attack on Richard Dawkins. Indeed, it is very much the opposite. Several authors wish to take the opportunity to thank him

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for playing such an important role in their search for truth. And as a popular writer on evolutionary biology, Professor Dawkins has authored books that are outstanding.

Life is full of surprises, and we wonder whether these accounts might act as a stimulus to many others to reflect upon their world-views and take time to consider where they are leading.

—The editors

# The Ambiguity of Richard Dawkins

ALISTER MCGRATH

ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, A series of coordinated suicide attacks were launched by Islamic terrorists against targets in the United States—events now invariably referred to simply as 9/11. The Dow Jones index slumped 7 percent when Wall Street reopened for business six days later. The “war against terror” became a dominant theme of the presidency of George W. Bush. Public anxiety about the deadly consequences of religious fanaticism reached new levels. Richard Dawkins had been arguing for years that religion was irrational and dangerous, without making much headway. Suddenly his arguments seemed both attractive and culturally plausible to many in Western culture. Someone or something had to be blamed for 9/11. Islamic religious fanaticism was an obvious possibility. In the white heat of anger against this outrage, *Islamic religious fanaticism* was simplified—first to *religious fanaticism* and then simply to *religion*.

Dawkins played a central role in changing the cultural mood within Western liberal circles. Four days after the attack Dawkins wrote, “To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind, is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised

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if they are used.”<sup>1</sup> Dawkins’s words suggest that the events of 9/11 revealed religion to be dangerous because it is irrational; when it fails to win arguments, it resorts to terror instead. While some regarded these comments as ridiculously simplistic, others saw Dawkins as a bold thinker willing to tell the overdue truth. Religion is dangerous. It is not to be respected but to be feared—and, wherever possible, neutralized. It is a time bomb waiting to explode; a loaded gun, just waiting to kill people. The tragic events of 9/11 turned out to be the intellectual and moral launchpad for what is now generally known as the New Atheism, with Dawkins as its central figure.

It might therefore seem strange to suggest that this same Richard Dawkins, regularly cited as the “world’s most famous atheist” during the heyday of the New Atheism, might have caused some to rediscover religious faith and others to embrace it for the first time. So how might Dawkins have helped some find their way to faith? It is a fascinating question, with multiple aspects. While the contributors to this volume each tell their own story, it is helpful to reflect on the context of this development. In what follows, I shall note five elements of the growing disillusionment about the New Atheism that appear to be part of a shifting cultural mood, suspicious of slick certainties, aware of the need to live with a degree of uncertainty, and open to reconsidering religious belief.

First, Dawkins’s public attacks on religion, particularly Christianity, seem to have generated a surge of interest in exploring religious faith. As the sociologist Tina Beattie remarked shortly after the publication of Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, it seemed that Dawkins had reawakened public interest in God “more effectively than any preacher could have done.”<sup>2</sup> This was certainly my experience. Before 2006, my own public lectures on the relation of science and faith attracted audiences in the low hundreds; for a period of more than five years afterward, the audience size increased dramatically, often forcing lecture organizers to turn people away. The tone of the

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question-and-answer sessions after those lectures also changed. Before *The God Delusion*, the questions were often academic or technical. What did I think about Albert Einstein's approach to science and religion? Was Dawkins's idea of the "selfish gene" helpful in illuminating the idea of original sin? From 2006 onward, questions became much more personal and existential, as audiences wanted to know how they could hold together science and religious belief.<sup>3</sup> Dissatisfied with what seemed to them Dawkins's simplistic dismissal of faith, they wanted to go deeper. Many of those asking weightier questions were clearly sympathetic toward Dawkins yet were suspicious of his aggressive rhetoric, which they suspected might mask intellectual shallowness and evidential precariousness.

Second, many of Dawkins's critics since the publication of *The God Delusion* have been leading atheist philosophers who were alarmed at the damage they thought his shrill and superficial engagement with life's deepest questions was doing to the intellectual reputation of atheism. The British public philosopher John Gray, for example, ridiculed the banality, superficiality, and shallowness of Dawkins and his circle, who offered a "tedious re-run of a Victorian squabble between science and religion."<sup>4</sup> Philosophically, this amounted to little more than an outdated positivism; culturally, it disingenuously ignored how such forms of "evangelical atheism" spawned violence and brutality (Gray highlights the violence of the French Revolution, the Soviet Union, and Mao's China). "Evangelical atheism is the faith that mass conversion to godlessness can transform the world. This is a fantasy. If the history of the past few centuries is any guide, a godless world would be as prone to savage conflicts as the world has always been."<sup>5</sup>

For Gray, the crude slogans of Dawkins and other New Atheists reduced atheism to a populist "media phenomenon," a "type of entertainment" that conducted its debates through sloganeering rather than serious argument.<sup>6</sup> For most philosophers, Dawkins's arguments

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lead only to agnosticism, not atheism, leaving Dawkins in the difficult position of being unable to prove his own core beliefs, despite demanding that his religious opponents should prove theirs. Dawkins thus uses intellectual criteria to judge his opponent's positions that he fails to apply to his own position. This epistemic asymmetry has left many potential fellow travelers feeling uneasy, wondering whether Dawkins was overlooking the vulnerability of his own position. Gray, recognizing the importance of this point, suggests that the discussion ought now to move on from a pointless discussion about whether God's existence can be disproved to the more significant exploration of why some people find that they have "no use" for God and are thus moved to search for "God-surrogates."<sup>7</sup>

Third, Dawkins's outlook on religion was deeply shaped by what now appears to have been an uncritical acceptance of the "warfare" model of the relation of science and religion, which dominated Western culture in the closing decade of the twentieth century, despite growing scholarly suspicions of its evidential foundation.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of his belief that there exists a total dichotomy between science and religion, Dawkins argues that a proper scientist simply cannot be religious. If science and religion are at war, then a scientist with religious beliefs is either a traitor or an appeaser.<sup>9</sup> To his critics, Dawkins seems unwilling to reflect critically about his own belief system, apparently believing it to be self-evidently correct—a position often associated with religious fundamentalism. Since the 1990s, however, the historical basis of the "warfare" model has been dismantled within the academic community and shown to be a social construction serving the needs of certain cultural power groups, thus leaving the New Atheists on the wrong side of intellectual history.<sup>10</sup> This point is particularly important, in that some were drawn to Dawkins because they felt his approach represented the future; they are now coming to realize it might instead represent a retreat into the socially constructed "certainties" of a bygone past.

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Fourth, the New Atheism's certainties, though initially appealing to many, were soon deconstructed. This point was picked up by Gary Wolf, the journalist who coined the term "New Atheism" in 2006 to designate the messianic atheism of Dawkins and his colleagues Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris and to highlight the rhetorically aggressive means whereby they asserted their beliefs. Wolf was struck by the trenchant certainties of these leading proponents of atheism, noting that many people found these asserted certainties to be arrogant and improbable, amounting to a significant intellectual overreach on their part. "People see a contradiction in its tone of certainty. Contemptuous of the faith of others, its proponents never doubt their own belief. They are fundamentalists."<sup>11</sup>

Fifth, the New Atheism began to show the same habits of thought and behavior that Dawkins had presented as characteristic of religious people and institutions. For P. Z. Myers, a biologist at the University of Minnesota, it was a serious error of judgment to allow Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens to assume a leadership role within the movement. How, he asked, did that happen? Within a year, a "cult of personality" had emerged in which Dawkins and Hitchens were "turned into oracles whose dicta should not be questioned, and dissent would lead to being ostracized."<sup>12</sup> Had atheism, many wondered, morphed into a new religious movement, with its infallible prophets and authoritative texts—above all Dawkins and his *God Delusion*? Perhaps it was no surprise that the movement fragmented into "a shambles of alt-right memes and dishonest hucksters mangling science to promote racism, sexism, and bloody regressive politics."<sup>13</sup>

Today, the New Atheism, of which Dawkins was a leading representative, is generally regarded as having imploded, increasingly (though perhaps unfairly) seen as the crystallization of the cultural prejudices of old, white, Western males. Many of its former members, disenchanted by its arrogance, prejudice, and superficiality,

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have distanced themselves from the movement and its leaders.<sup>14</sup> The cultural mood began to shift, as many who had initially embraced the New Atheism found that it failed to deliver the secure knowledge they longed for or a sustainable vision of the “good life.” The New Atheism may have presented itself as an antidote to religious delusions; its critics argue that it merely propagated a somewhat different delusion about the omniscience of reason and science. And, disillusioned by such spurious pseudocertainties, many began to look for better answers, wondering if there were alternatives that might be more credible, attractive, and satisfying. As the extent of Dawkins’s personal and intellectual overreach became increasingly clear, some chose to look again at the alternatives.

In their own distinct ways, each of the contributors to this volume is a witness to this process of reconsideration and reevaluation—a process that Dawkins catalyzed, though not in the way he might have wanted. In this introduction, I have outlined a context that may be helpful in understanding each of the narratives of reconsideration and reflection gathered in this volume. But what really matters are these individual stories, which need to be heard and appreciated. We begin with the scientist Sy Garte, who tells the remarkable story of how his emerging Christian faith was invigorated rather than challenged by Dawkins’s *God Delusion*.



## Chapter 1

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# A New Christian Meets New Atheism

SY GARTE

### Old and New Atheism

ON THE FIRST PAGE OF my recent book, *The Works of His Hands: A Scientist's Journey from Atheism to Faith*,<sup>1</sup> I describe the worldview of my family. My parents were not the least bit religious—they were Marxists, former members of the American Communist Party, and very militant atheists. My own long journey from that beginning to Christian faith is told in the book. The culmination of that journey happened to roughly coincide with the beginning of the New Atheist movement.

If we define atheism as the lack of belief in God, gods, or the supernatural, or even if we define atheism as the positive belief that gods do not and cannot exist, it appears that atheist philosophy is based on one simple, negative statement about reality. If things ended there, there would be little to nothing to discuss. My own original atheism, which was of the stronger version (“no gods exist”), was not something I spent any time thinking about, nor did I see it as an important part of my identity. I am pretty sure that was true for the majority of atheists I knew back then. The only time our atheism ever came

up was if someone said something like “Pray with me” or “Do you believe in God?” For me, working in an academic scientific setting, this was a very rare occurrence.

This is probably still true for many nonbelievers today, but times have changed. New Atheism insists on taking atheism out of the closet and loudly proclaiming it to the world as an important and proud vision of reality. The slogan of the London “atheist bus campaign” (“There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life”) is one of many examples of this new, in-your-face, public expression of atheism.<sup>2</sup>

The original “Four Horsemen” of New Atheism—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett—made it popular to go far beyond politely declining an invitation to go to someone’s church or to pray for a mutual friend. The public is exhorted to confront theists, demand rational evidence for their harmful and foolish nonsense, and proclaim the truth of atheism in the public square by publishing books, giving interviews, writing articles, and producing TV shows, films, videos—getting the word out by any and every method imaginable that gods are not real.

The original four have been joined by scientists like Lawrence Krauss, Jerry Coyne, Sean Carroll, and Peter Atkins; entertainers like Penn Jillette, Bill Maher, and Ricky Gervais; and YouTubers like Aron Ra, Seth Andrews, and a slew of others. There are now atheist conventions, atheist rallies, and many atheist organizations.

At the time when this new aggressive approach to confronting Christianity burst forth on public consciousness (around 2005–08), I was a new Christian, still quite private and quiet about the faith I had come to a year or two earlier.

### **Some Personal History**

Before discussing how the emergence of New Atheism affected my newfound faith, I need to say a bit more about my original version

of atheism. My youthful worldview was what would now be called progressive. It was based on three major pillars: science as the most important (but not necessarily the only) proven epistemology, history as the primary method to understand the nature of humanity, and a form of liberal moral ethics that stressed human dignity and equality, the inherent rights of humankind.

The value of science, history, and human dignity in understanding reality has remained the central core of my philosophical and emotional outlook to the present. But as a child, along with the importance of these three pillars, I was also learning atheistic and far-left narratives in each of these areas. I was taught that science had firmly ruled out anything supernatural or magical and that history had illuminated the evildoings of the church and religions in general. The books I was given made it clear that religious belief had been used by rulers and owners as a tool of oppression all over the world. The issue of human dignity and freedom was cast in stark relief by the plight of the American Negro (the term used back then), as well as the historic struggle for a decent life by working people everywhere.

The “facts” I had learned were clearly distorted by political and antireligious bias. When I later read the works of the New Atheists, their similarity to the legends I had absorbed as a youngster was uncanny—they were easily recognizable to me as the falsehoods I had been taught so long ago.

### **Science and Scientism**

My father, a chemist, gave me an excellent introduction to science, especially the fundamental facts of physics and chemistry as well as the basic elements of scientific thinking. He included a dire warning against scientism—the idea that science and science alone can answer all questions. While that might seem odd coming from an atheist, it has been my experience that most scientists (as opposed to atheist

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fans of science) also reject the notion that the scientific method is the only way to understand anything of importance in our world.

As it happened, it was science, history, and liberal humanism that slowly and inexorably broke down the structural supports of my atheism and then of my agnosticism. The most important battering ram of the three was science. The more I learned about science, both in terms of methodology and the facts that research in many fields was discovering, the more I found my original deterministic and materialistic view weakening. I no longer felt that science buttressed pure atheism—it did not at all rule out the hand of some higher power. When science, a deeper study of history, and my new perspectives on human worth had left me open to hear and follow the Holy Spirit, I was blessed to be brought to a faith in Jesus Christ that was as surprising to me as it was glorious.

But it was also somewhat shaky. I did not know any other scientists who were Christians. I wondered if there were any, or if I was some strange, anomalous beast who would eventually go insane from all the contradictions and cognitive dissonance. It was around this time that the New Atheists burst on the scene. Harris's *The End of Faith*,<sup>3</sup> Dawkins's *The God Delusion*,<sup>4</sup> and Hitchens's *God Is Not Great*<sup>5</sup> were published in quick succession.

*The God Delusion*, especially, came as a tremendous blow since Richard Dawkins had been a hero of mine for decades. I thought of Dawkins as a brilliant exponent of biological science (I still do), and I was quite gratified when he mentioned me as the discoverer of a letter from Darwin to A. R. Wallace that showed that Darwin was in fact aware of particulate inheritance. Dawkins wrote about this letter in his foreword to a new student edition of *The Descent of Man*,<sup>6</sup> later reprinted as an essay in *A Devil's Chaplain*.<sup>7</sup>

I had found *The Ancestor's Tale*<sup>8</sup> to be a stunning magnum opus and was still deep in admiration of the mind of this man when out of the blue (at least for me) came *The God Delusion*. Later, I read

Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath's brilliant antidote, *The Dawkins Delusion*,<sup>9</sup> which put things right for me.

Of course, *The God Delusion* was not, strictly speaking, that much out of the blue. The very same book that included the discussion of Darwin's letter (*A Devil's Chaplain*) also contained essays full of Dawkins's awakening forceful antitheism. McGrath's response, *Dawkins' God*,<sup>10</sup> a rebuke of the unconvincing components of Dawkins's atheism, preceded *The God Delusion*. What disturbed me was not so much Dawkins's strident defense of atheism, which I had only recently left behind me, but the descent in the tone and content from the brilliance of his previous works to a style that came off the pages as snarling vitriol. It was hard to believe that the same person who had written *The Ancestor's Tale* also wrote *The God Delusion*.

### Dawkins and Morality

Reading *The God Delusion's* section on human morality was especially poignant for me. I started it with some trepidation that the brilliant mind of the writer would have an answer that would rock my still-tender faith, but I found the opposite to be true. It was a welcome surprise: if the most scientifically based book arguing against theism could not provide any better answer to why we see good and evil in the world, then I need not worry about other, potentially less weighty arguments. My faith, in fact, could grow stronger rather than weaker.

Dawkins's view, of course, is that morality (like just about everything else involving life) is simply a result of evolution.<sup>11</sup> He makes the case that humans do good things either as a tit-for-tat, "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" kind of bargaining (reciprocal altruism) or because evolution selected for people doing good things for their kin, who carry copies of some portion of their genes (kin altruism).

Dawkins then goes on to postulate what he calls "misfirings" of altruistic genes, by which altruistic behavior originally focused on

relations and friends could be extended to all members of the species and even to other species.<sup>12</sup> This, the story goes, is why people are good. And, of course, the explanation for evil is much simpler: humans, like most mammals, do what they must to survive and help their offspring survive, even if it means being mean or cruel to others.

What is interesting about this solution is that, at least for some New Atheists, the morality that evolves this way is *objective*. Sam Harris, who holds to the same view on the evolution of human morality, frequently speaks of “moral facts” that are objectively true. He has claimed that certain practices, like stoning women for adultery or corporal punishment of children, are objectively bad based on the fact that—well, according to him—they *are* morally bad.<sup>13</sup> But millions of people in other cultures do not agree with him, which could make a very strong argument for *subjective* morality.<sup>14</sup>

Harris says that, ironically, he gets lots of agreement from theists, many of whom also hold to a version of objective morality that comes from God and is written in our hearts and in Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Of course, for Harris that is also an illusion, and the inevitable references to slavery and genocide soon follow.

But what really bothered me in Dawkins’s explanation was not the question of objective versus subjective morality but the proposed mechanism: evolution. At that time, I had not done any professional research into evolutionary biology other than how it might relate to certain aspects of cancer progression, but I had read widely on evolution, and as a molecular biologist I certainly understood the theory and its fundamental mechanisms. The almost glib assertion that people had of course evolved to be good or bad due to natural selection, much as they had evolved to see colors or to walk upright, did not make a lot of scientific sense to me.

As Patrick Bateson says in his book *Behaviour, Development and Evolution*, “The common image of a genetic blueprint for behaviour fails because it is too static. . . . Strands of DNA do not, on their

own, make behaviour patterns or physical attributes.”<sup>16</sup> Genes do not code directly for behaviors; they code for proteins. Some of these proteins are neurotransmitters, or they are part of the sensory apparatus or make up signaling pathways in brain cells. Highly complex interactions between many of these proteins can ultimately produce a combined phenotype that includes a new instinctual behavior. If that behavior (like caring for babies or appearing attractive to the opposite sex) results in some survival or reproductive advantage, evolution happens, and the genetic variant that produced the novel allele will spread through the population—but this happens over a long period of time.

And that is the other problem. Human beings are a “baby species,” only about 200,000–300,000 years old. Since the dawn of *Homo sapiens*, there have only been a few known genetic variants that led to further evolution, and some of them are still not fixed in the human population (i.e., found in everyone). These include the ability of adults to tolerate dairy products<sup>17</sup> and the ability to consume alcohol without getting sick.<sup>18</sup> Milk tolerance has been slowly (from our human perspective) spreading among people for ten to twenty thousand years, but we all know people who are lactose intolerant, as we call what is in fact the original, or *wild type*, genetic form. Those of us who can tolerate milk as adults are the mutants.

So the question is, If human beings, while they were hunting and gathering, making various increasingly complex implements, and eventually growing food and domesticating animals—in other words, while being human rather than being chimps or other primates—had “evolved” genetic variants for being good to one another, exactly what genes are we talking about? Which proteins make us nice? And which alleles of that protein make us not so nice? How do those different alleles work? And how do they spread among the population to the point where every person on the planet knows (and has known throughout recorded history, at least) that there are good and bad

behaviors, even if the definitions of what is good and bad differ with time and place?

Recent omnigenic models, which hold that many complex phenotypes could involve hundreds or thousands of different alleles, each with a tiny effect, raise other problems.<sup>19</sup> For morality to be determined by natural selection, which and how many of the multitudinous individual alleles responsible for an inherited moral genetic trait would need to be under strong selection? And can we really make the case that smiling at your neighbor or offering to carry her load would be under the same degree of genetic selection pressure as color vision, enjoying the taste of sugar, being attracted to healthy-appearing members of the opposite sex, or even being aggressive and selfish enough to grab the most desirable part of the hunt for one's own consumption?

Furthermore, enough studies have been done on a variety of behavioral traits to show that the genetic component of such phenotypes is roughly between 30 and 50 percent,<sup>20</sup> with cultural and other nongenetic sources making up most of the contribution to how people behave. Moral behavior is clearly among those.

Dawkins's purely evolutionary explanation simply does not fit with our scientific understanding of how biological evolution works. What we see here instead is another kind of evolution, namely, *cultural evolution*, a field in which Dawkins clearly took a strong interest when he coined the term *meme* to mean the cultural equivalent of a gene.<sup>21</sup> Memes include ideas, beliefs, moral codes, styles—all varieties of human thought. It is a brilliant concept but entirely different from biological evolution. New cultural memes about good and evil do spring up all the time, spread very quickly, and can become fixed in a population for some time, until a new meme is born and disseminated. But memes only behave like genes in a superficial sense; the mechanisms behind meme and gene activity and evolution are entirely different.



Here is why. Genes are specific sequences of nucleotides in DNA that are transcribed into a stretch of RNA, which is then translated by a system comprised of transfer RNA, several enzymes, and a machine called a ribosome to make proteins of a very specific amino acid sequence and structure to convey a very specific and highly functional catalytic activity on the protein to allow it to perform one of the thousands of essential chemical reactions that keep cells alive. Memes are . . . basically thoughts. The depths of reasons why these two things are so utterly different is impossible to fully illustrate here, but hopefully the point is made.

### **Dawkins and the Anthropic Principle**

My skepticism about Dawkins's facile and ad hoc explanation for the scientific basis of human morality led me to wonder whether the book contained other dubious scientific statements. I found that indeed it did.

Perhaps the most difficult problem in biology that is also of major theological importance is the origin of life.<sup>22</sup> Dawkins begins his discussion of abiogenesis with an introduction to the anthropic principle—the argument that it is pointless to wonder about how it happened, against great odds, that our planet (or universe) is friendly to life; if it were not, we would not be here to wonder about it.<sup>23</sup> He invokes the anthropic principle as the alternative to theism, or design, for both the origin of life and the fine-tuning of cosmological constants, and he expresses surprise that theists do not see it that way. I must admit I am one of those theists—I do not think the anthropic principle is in any way relevant to the existence of God.

When I read *The God Delusion*, I already understood that the earth was very special, and Dawkins helpfully lays out some of the unusual properties of our home planet that make it fit for life to start and prosper. Among other things, he mentions our location within the temperature zone for liquid water, the nearly circular orbit that

ensures a stable climate, and the presence of Jupiter, whose gravitational pull protects us from asteroids. He also admits that the origin of life was an extremely improbable event (one in a billion, he proposes for the sake of argument), but he stresses that it only had to happen once.<sup>24</sup>

He then reminds us that the number of planets in the universe is about a billion billion;<sup>25</sup> therefore, a probability of one in a billion would in fact guarantee life on a billion planets. His conclusion is that, given the large number of planets, the probability of life arising from chemistry is essentially certain; and, again, the anthropic principle tells us why it happened on ours: we are here because our planet was one of the life-friendly ones. Similarly, at the cosmological level, we are observing that every physical constant of our universe is exactly what it needs to be (within a very narrow range) to allow stars and planets to form, thus making life possible—because if they were not, we would not be here to observe anything.

But it seemed to me that the anthropic principle does not actually address either abiogenesis or cosmology at all. It simply states that we are sure to observe anything about our universe that allows us to be here to observe it. But that truism says nothing about why the universe has the constants it has—unless it is one of an enormous number of universes, all with different values of the constants. The extremely rare event of a universe getting just the right values of constants is only likely to occur at least once if there are billions and billions of other universes that are quite different. If this is the only universe, then the probability of its occurrence, despite the value of it for human beings, is effectively zero.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the “strong” version of the anthropic principle, as defined in the book *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* by John Barrow and Frank Tipler, says that “the Universe must have those properties which allow life to develop within it at some stage in its history.”<sup>27</sup> The word *must* suggests that there is a natural law that requires observers such as humans to exist.

This is not at all what Dawkins means by the anthropic principle, since it raises the question, Why must it, if not because the universe was specifically created to allow for human beings?

When it came to the origin of life on our planet, I found the statistical argument somewhat stronger, since it is known that the number of planets is huge, while the number that could support life is unknown but likely greater than one. But, again, I was surprised that Dawkins the biologist includes none of the chemical and biochemical difficulties that are known to exist when trying to understand the emergence of biology from chemistry. There is not enough space to list these here, but the origin of life clearly remains a shrouded mystery, outside the purview of what we know about biological evolution, as Darwin himself makes clear in *On the Origin of Species*.<sup>28</sup>

All in all, the scientific arguments in *The God Delusion* left me more convinced that my recent embrace of Christianity was not in any way threatened by maintaining my lifelong scientific worldview. Dawkins—and certainly Harris and Dennett—did not have anything to say that would lead me to stumble in my faith in Christ on scientific grounds. This discovery came as a great relief and resulted in a buttressing of my faith that has remained with me ever since.

### **Historical Distortions**

As good Marxists, my parents instilled in me a love and deep understanding of historical thinking. Learning how to read and interpret historical works and how to think about their meaning in contemporary terms was an important part of my childhood.

From my reading of communist and left-wing sources (such as books by American communist Howard Fast), I had learned truths that had been deliberately covered up or distorted by the American public educational system of the 1950s and 1960s. These included ugly facts about slavery and the Reconstruction period in the post-Civil War South. Even in the comparatively liberal New York City

public school system, we had textbooks telling us that many slave owners were good to their slaves, who were happy and better off than they would have been on their own, and that after the Civil War, the Northerners who went south to help the newly freed slaves (the “carpetbaggers”) were evil troublemakers and opportunists rather than an early version of civil rights workers. After reading *Freedom Road*<sup>29</sup> (by Fast) and other “subversive” literature, I came to understand that what we learn about history is quite dependent on who is writing it.

It was not long before I began applying the same skepticism to the communist versions of historical truth I had been taught. I learned about Soviet crimes against humanity—Stalin’s reign of terror, the Katyn massacre, the crushing of the Hungarian Uprising—and as I got older, I realized they could not *all* be Western propaganda. The watershed moment came when, as a college student in 1968, I heard my mother obediently defending the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. I understood then that historical distortion was a critical aspect of communist doctrine and always had been.

There was another distortion of history that I was blissfully unaware of as a young man. What I had learned about the history of Christianity, from its origins to its influence in Europe and elsewhere, was entirely negative. It was another couple of decades before I found out that, just like the glories of communism, many accounts of the horrors of Christianity not only had been exaggerated but were in fact simply untrue. I began looking into this history while I was still an agnostic, thinking about religion in general and wondering about how new movements like Christianity came to exist.

### Modern History and Dawkins

While Dawkins does not delve into Christian history much in *The God Delusion*, one section caused me to raise my eyebrows. Among my historical interests, the Second World War has long been a

favorite. Reading Dawkins's discussion of Stalin and Hitler raised alarm bells. As a young man, I had read *The Morning of the Magicians*,<sup>30</sup> which includes an account of Hitler's occult interests. British historian Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's 1985 book *The Occult Roots of Nazism*<sup>31</sup> provides an in-depth study of the same. Yet the fact that Hitler, along with his close friend and mentor Alfred Rosenberg, were obsessed with Nordic polytheism, esoteric "border science," astrology, mythical supermen, and the like is entirely missing from Dawkins's narrative. While the text does include hints that Hitler's supposed Christianity was a front to avoid public and church disapproval, there is no mention of his true "religious" beliefs.

Even worse than this omission is the discussion about Stalin, who Dawkins admits was indeed an atheist. But he then argues that Stalin's crimes were not committed in the name of atheism. This may be true in the sense that there are always complex power struggles and political calculations behind any targeting of specific groups for persecution and genocide. (For the same reason, of course, antitheist claims that Christianity or religion in general is to be blamed for most wars, slavery, and all the evil in the world are historically flawed.) From my own background and early training, though, I knew that Stalin and many of his communist followers did in fact hate religion, and especially Christianity, passionately.

While the Soviet state never outright outlawed religion but, rather, alternated between degrees of actively suppressing and infiltrating or controlling religious institutions according to political interests and pragmatic considerations, its official worldview, taught in schools and upheld in all areas of culture, was scientific atheism. It is therefore hard to separate the slaughter of thousands of Russian Orthodox priests, the closure of countless churches, and the harassment of worshippers throughout the Soviet Empire from the idea of atheism. Catholic priests and nuns were routinely murdered as "enemies of the people" by the Stalinist faction of the Republican alliance during

the Spanish Civil War. Stalin vowed to destroy religion, and if it were possible to do so, he would have succeeded. After World War II, the same policy was carried out to varying degrees in Eastern Europe, where being religious was a major expression of rebellion against Soviet tyranny for many decades.

In general, the New Atheist overviews of historical trends and perspectives rang a familiar bell from my Stalinist upbringing. They smacked of a great deal of hyperbole, exaggeration, and possible distortion. I decided to investigate some of these historical arguments. I already knew that the pre-Christian tribes of Europe—the Saxons, Danes, Visigoths, and others—were not merciful, compassionate devotees of reason and high moral standing. Whether their eventual conversions to Christ made them better people could be debated, but there is no evidence that it made them worse.

### **New Atheist Version of European History**

When I began reading discussions of earlier European history in Sam Harris's book *The End of Faith* and in *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens, I quickly realized that I needed to go back to more neutral sources to check their accuracy. What I found completely confirmed my suspicions that the New Atheists were not giving an accurate account of what happened in the past.

Fortunately, I had a set of Will and Ariel Durant's classic multivolume work *The Story of Civilization*.<sup>32</sup> While the Durants were not Christians, they were actual historians. I remember that when I first read their volume on *The Age of Faith*<sup>33</sup> (covering the Middle Ages) in my strong atheist twenties, I was taken aback and annoyed at sections of the book that seemed to extol the more positive aspects of the Christian domination of Europe. While I did not doubt that the church had indeed done a few good things (like starting universities and hospitals, or encouraging art and scholarship), at the time I did not pay much attention to this part of the book since I had already

learned the “terrible truth” about the evils of Christianity (the Crusades, the Inquisition, the religious wars) from my Soviet-published sources.

As I looked back now, it was clear that the Durants’s treatment of the role of Christianity in European history differed considerably from the New Atheists’ interpretations. These atheists were telling me that the majority of wars and human death and suffering could be attributed to the Christian religion, and that freedom of thought, liberal ideology, and the application of reason and logic were the sworn enemies of popes and priests. “The history of Christianity is principally a story of mankind’s misery and ignorance rather than of its requited love of God,” writes Sam Harris.<sup>34</sup> While there is no question that mankind has endured centuries of misery and ignorance, blaming Christianity for all of it looked like historical nonsense to me.

In the same vein, Dawkins writes in *The God Delusion* that “religious wars really are fought in the name of religion, and they have been horribly frequent in history.”<sup>35</sup> He contrasts this with his “proof” that atheism cannot lead to war since “why would anyone go to war for the sake of an absence of belief?”<sup>36</sup> Of course, he is technically correct in that atheism per se has not led to any major wars, but, as we saw above, that completely sidesteps the fact that atheistic regimes have indulged in a great deal of murderous escapades, including warfare.

As I reread my trusted sources, it did not take long for me to put to rest the claim that religion (including but not limited to Christianity) was the source of most of the casualties from war and other forms of mass oppression in world history. There have indeed been religious wars, blood spilled between rival Christian groups and between different religions, but the fact is that about ten times more deaths have been caused by nonreligious warfare. I discuss the details in my first book of how Christianity might be said to account for roughly

5 percent of human death from war and related strife, but the main takeaway is that people fight wars, and religion is a minor reason for actual violence.

Part of the conclusion I eventually came to was that, contrary to what I was hearing from the adherents of New Atheism, Christianity has been a major force for peace in the world. This was especially true during those terrible years in Europe when warlords filled the governance gap left by the collapse of the Roman order with centuries of constant terror and destruction. During that truly dark period, it was the church, the monasteries, the clergy, and the faithful who provided the only havens of peace, security, learning, and eventually scholarship in a hostile and violent world. As the warlords slowly morphed into a Europe-wide extended family of avaricious kings and landowning aristocracy, the church was (initially, at least) a respite for people oppressed in every possible way.

### **Christianity and Science According to the New Atheists**

Another common claim made against the church is that it has been the unrelenting and all-powerful historical enemy of science and reason, while heroic rebels like Galileo risked their lives to bring the light of truth to a population struggling under the weight of superstition and ignorance. I had absorbed much of this kind of historical propaganda in childhood. English translations of Soviet children's books had filled my young mind with the wondrous achievements of Stalin's support for science that brought the benefits of technology to the common people. But with time, and after learning about Comrade Stalin's own blood-stained history, I could see at least some of the distortions in these accounts. Looking into the actual historical record allowed me to assess the myths about Christianity's anti-science horrors in the same way.

I learned from Ted Davis's columns on the BioLogos website that the Galileo affair was far more complicated than the popular version



has it.<sup>37</sup> The church was divided on the issue, with many powerful clerics taking the side of Galileo and heliocentrism. The 2010 book *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion* by Ronald Numbers dispels the myths that Galileo was tortured and imprisoned and that Giordano Bruno was killed for his scientific beliefs.<sup>38</sup>

### **Historicity of Early Christianity**

I knew next to nothing about the history of the first century AD in the Roman province of Palestine, but most of what I read about it from New Atheists and their followers rang hollow to my historically trained mind. I found the idea that Jesus Christ never existed absurd even before looking into all the evidence, because when I read the Gospels, they struck me as reports of actual events. The resurrection, of course, seemed like a mystery, but there was one historical fact that could not be denied and needed an explanation: the explosive growth of Christianity in the years before, during, and after the Jewish War and the fall of Jerusalem. I wondered about all those churches that Paul wrote to and visited in the 50s and 60s, only a few decades after Jesus's death. How did they come to be established so quickly in so many parts of the empire if something quite extraordinary had not taken place? The New Atheist explanations I have seen, ranging from the idea that Paul made it all up to Peter somehow spreading his own hopeful hallucinations to every place around the known world, have always struck me as historically untenable. Later, after reading books by Gary Habermas and Mike Licona, Lee Strobel, and others,<sup>39</sup> I came to judge the New Atheists' historical arguments against the scriptural version of the origin of Christianity so weak as to be useless. As a new Christian, I found I could embrace the resurrection of Jesus without any hesitation. And, of course, if Jesus truly rose from the dead, there is not much else to discuss.

In summary, I did not find a convincing historical argument against

belief in Christ or in support of the warfare model of the science-faith relationship in any of the writings of current or earlier atheists. As with the New Atheists' arguments from science, this resulted in a further strengthening of my new faith in God.

### **Human Dignity: Civil Rights and Justice**

At the summer camp I attended as a child, we sang songs like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “We Shall Overcome,” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” It might be surprising that such overtly Christian songs were sung at a “commie camp,” but there *was* an explanation that we learned for why most of the Negro spirituals we were taught included references to God or Jesus. Black people had been so oppressed, we were told, that they got fooled into becoming Christians, and some of them just did not know any better and were not ready to give it up, at least for now. The blatant underlying racism of this notion was not discussed at the time.

During my childhood and adolescence, I found the contradiction between being in favor of civil rights (good) and being a Christian (bad) troubling. I was confused, but I never accepted the explanation of Black people being easily fooled and just too ignorant to understand the truth of atheism. I had no answer for this dilemma.

I later found that Christopher Hitchens had come up with his own view that civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. were “nominal” rather than “real Christians.”<sup>40</sup> I was struck by the absurdity of this answer to what is clearly a perplexing question for atheists. Hitchens apparently was as stumped as I had been.

I have always considered myself to be a humanist, in the strict sense of the word: I am in favor of human beings, and I think they are great. A true humanist, the way I understand it, is someone who believes that human beings are truly special, and that tribalism, nationalism, racism, and so on are morally wrong. I have always held such an understanding of humanism to be true—what changed when

I became a Christian was my awareness of the source of such feelings and convictions.

It turns out that while union strikes and picket lines for racial and economic justice incorporate these values, their source is not Karl Marx, Lenin, or any other communist ideologue but (as I was surprised to find out) none other than Jesus Christ. It was not the Greek philosophers who declared there is no difference between Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female: it was Saint Paul. It was not the senate of the Roman Empire that declared that love between all people was the central commandment; it was Jesus Christ. And it was not because the Black preachers and ministers who began, sustained, and carried through the American Civil Rights Movement were, you know, not that bright, that they sang songs about God and were fervent Christians. It was because Christianity turned out to be the best way to live and breathe those ideals I had learned as a child.

### **Human Spirituality**

Is there a spiritual dimension of reality in people? Some time ago, you could be an atheist and answer yes. But the New Atheists not only deny the existence of God—they also deny that there is anything spiritual in human existence. Along with their attacks on religion, militant New Atheist philosophers have embraced an extreme form of materialism. In his book *Consciousness Explained*, Daniel Dennett proposes that human consciousness itself is basically a myth.<sup>41</sup> According to him and his colleagues in the New Atheist movement, we are deceived by the neural networks of our brains, which evolved for other purposes, into thinking we are conscious beings with a clearly felt sense of self, when in fact we are not. The concept of free will has also come under attack; Harris even wrote a book about it.<sup>42</sup>

I would never have agreed with the view that human consciousness and free will are an illusion even when I was still an atheist. I find this view scientifically untenable. Dennett's approach reminds

me of the early behaviorists, who decided to ignore higher mental talents and insights to the point of denying that they were worth studying. Denying the existence of a phenomenon because it does not seem amenable to current scientific analysis is the height of folly for true science.

Along with spirituality, human consciousness, and any sense of higher purpose, some people would throw out—in the name of “science”—the reality of *anything* that makes human beings special. According to this view, we are not at all much different from other animals, who can do almost everything we can do (some of it better). And, after all, our planet is a tiny, insignificant speck in a remote region of a ho-hum galaxy, making us humans small and insignificant as well. I could never quite follow that logic, but the idea that humans are not that special is one of those insane myths that sometimes sweep through a culture, against all obvious evidence and logic. Love, humor, art, music, science, creativity, spirituality, and other uniquely human attributes are denigrated as being “merely” artifacts of natural selection. I fail to understand why the fact that we evolved should be used as an argument against the idea that our transcendent qualities have real importance.

### Antitheism

An important feature of New Atheism is that it goes beyond disbelief in gods to an all-out attack on religion as a useless or even evil force in human society. When Sam Harris writes in *The End of Faith*, “Religion, being the mere maintenance of dogma, is one area of discourse that does not admit of progress,”<sup>43</sup> he calls for a movement of resistance and a more aggressive stance against religion. The followers of New Atheism, rather than considering the value of this absurd view of religion, joined the “holy war” against the concept of *the holy*.

When I revealed on social media that I was a working scientist of strong Christian faith, I was called a fool, a liar, a fraud, and much

worse. The sheer rage and uncontrolled hatred that my existence as a scientist of Christian faith provoked among the online followers of this new God-free moral philosophy is illustrated by the following recent example of a reply tweeted to me:

[profanity] You diluted [profanity]. Your ignorance is only magnified by your beliefs in a feckless god. You and your ilk make me sick. I hate you. [more profanity]

I answered the woman who wrote this by telling her that I did not feel in the least bit diluted but in fact had come to feel quite concentrated in my love of Christ. I wonder how many Christians she convinced to give up their ignorant beliefs and join her in the thoughtful, well-reasoned, and morally upright practices of her version of the New Atheism.

When, after becoming a Christian, I learned that it was not necessary for me to immediately denounce evolution as a plot of the devil or reject any part of my long-held scientific worldview, I was quite relieved. But I also came to understand that, due to my acceptance of evolution, I was considered by both atheists and some Christians to be a “moderate Christian.” I thought that being in that camp would allow me to be able to dialog effectively with more conservative, fundamentalist Christians as well as with atheist scientists, since I shared so many viewpoints with each group. I even made a comment or two on Jerry Coyne’s blog, *Why Evolution Is True*.

How naive I was! One of Coyne’s followers let me know that “moderate Christians,” including those who accept evolution, are actually the worst kind of enemy, for while they have learned “the truth,” they continue to indulge and support the great lie of theism. It turned out that this attitude was a common New Atheist trope, and that making common cause to promote good scientific education was harder than I thought. Never mind the powerful contribution that

Catholic Ken Miller made to the outcome of the Dover trial;<sup>44</sup> forget the fact that a Christian named Francis Collins was soon to become director of the National Institutes of Health, the US's medical research agency. In fact, Harris and others wrote scathing editorials against President Obama's choice of Collins.<sup>45</sup> No, it was clear that for many New Atheists, no quarter could be given to Christians who actually agreed with the scientific points the atheists were supposedly championing.

Harris writes in *The End of Faith* that "religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed,"<sup>46</sup> whatever that means. He sees nothing good in any Christian, at any time in history. While he admits that Luther stood up to the established church, he then reminds us that he became a bigot and a supporter of tyranny. Even Saint Francis of Assisi is attacked: Harris quotes Bertrand Russell, who writes that the net result of the saint's life, through the Franciscan order he founded, was "to facilitate the persecution of all who excelled in moral earnestness or freedom of thought."<sup>47</sup> It appears that some New Atheists hate religion more than they love science and reason.

### **New Atheist Claims**

The arguments of the New Atheists utterly failed to weaken my new-found Christian faith since I found nothing in any of them either convincing or even very coherent. I rejected the claims that religion exists to explain the natural world and that methodological naturalism is the one and only valid epistemology. Arguments against the existence of free will, human consciousness, and human exceptionalism made no sense to me, even when I was an atheist, and looked even less rational now that I was a Christian. I found the scientific backing for such arguments weak, as I did the idea that evolution can

be used to explain all human characteristics. I knew that the claim of the immense historical evil of Christianity and religion in general was simply false.

I found the application of strict reductionism to deny the reality of purpose or meaning in the universe or in human lives not only terribly gloomy but contrary to ordinary experience and a throwback to long-discredited philosophical viewpoints. I also saw many fallacies and much confusion about what science is and is not; for example, claims that the resurrection is scientifically impossible since people do not rise from the dead ignore that Jesus was not simply a “person” and that his resurrection was a miracle, which by definition is outside of common experience or current scientific investigation. Some New Atheist claims were contradictory in an almost entertaining way, such as the notion that religion is dogmatic and rigid, unlike science (ask any scientist if there is any dogma in their field!), and the similarly common complaint about the large number of denominations disagreeing with each other and all claiming to be the “true” one. Clearly, a dogmatically unchanging Christianity cannot also continually undergo fracture into many sects.

Of course, not all New Atheists hold the same views on everything. There are political and social rifts within the “organized” atheist movement that have resulted in bitter feuds and disputes, including the cancellation of atheist conferences, hostility between prominent atheists, and a dawning suspicion that atheists may have little in common to talk about other than the stupidity of believers—a topic that can eventually get old.

I would argue that attempts to forge a philosophical consensus of what kind of ideas should replace belief in God have so far failed. Science is not a philosophical position but a method to find natural truths. One can use this method (originally formulated by people who were believers) no matter what one’s religious or philosophical beliefs are, which is why, as Elaine Ecklund so clearly describes in her book

*Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think*, scientists (including many Nobel Prize laureates) are not all atheists but are also Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and more.<sup>48</sup> And most Christians accept evolution and mainstream science.<sup>49</sup> Atheists cannot claim science as their specific and exclusive domain of knowledge or worldview.

The same goes for liberal political activity and social justice. Yes, some Christians endorsed slavery at one time, but both the abolitionist and civil rights movements were led by Christians. When it comes to the social and political issues of the present, Christians and atheists alike can be found on the conservative as well as the progressive side.

### Conclusion

If it makes no sense to conflate atheism with science or with social justice, what should be the positive content of modern atheistic philosophy? If all that is left is the original core belief that there are no gods, there is not much to have a movement about. If atheists are unable to come up with some sort of positive message (other than “stop worrying”), it could spell the eventual demise of the New Atheist movement. I predict that within a few years, someone will coin a new phrase: “New Atheism is dead; God, not so much.”

Reading the original books of the New Atheists and engaging with other New Atheist content since the movement’s origins fifteen years ago has not changed what I believe, but it does make me feel that if I had not already crossed the threshold to belief in Jesus Christ, I would have done so in response to the empty rhetoric, poor science, mythological history, and wrongheaded view of human worth and spirituality that they espouse. As it was, since I had already embraced the faith, the New Atheist onslaught strengthened and confirmed all the reasons I had rejected a hopeless, barren, atheistic worldview and came to walk in the light of my Savior.