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Gary R Habermas
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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE PLIGHT OF THE NEW ATHEISM: A CRITIQUE

GARY R. HABERMAS*

Contemporary trends, both popular and scholarly, have had a significant impact on religious issues over recent decades. There was the New Age Movement. Overlapping with that and extending far past it is Postmodernism. Now the New Atheism is in full bloom. Although the overall percentages are fairly small, some polls tell us that atheism is on the increase in the United States, especially among teenagers and young adults.

As many writers have noted, this last trend has manifested some very interesting characteristics. For example, leaders of the New Atheism such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris have been referred to as atheistic evangelicals, secular fundamentalists, preachers, and so on. These epitaphs are apparent references to the zeal, fervor, and bombastic methods with which they not only write, but perhaps apply even more to their public presentations, debates, and interviews.

Some have charged that their methods are more bombastic than they are substantial. Interestingly, these critiques are sometimes offered not only by conservatives, but also by the atheists' secular peers.[1] Their "converts" perhaps come more frequently, not from the rigorous intellectual arguments that are offered, but because of all their public and written vehemence. In other words, there are signs that the movement may be miles wide but only inches deep, at least intellectually.[2]

To be sure, the New Atheists can be excellent writers and, unquestionably, they sell myriads of books, a fair indication of their popularity. They can also appear as masters of hyperbole, while seemingly attempting to incite the masses with diatribe and flowery wording, seemingly designed to invoke frothed-up responses among their followers. On some occasions, it would appear that the result is the exultant fist-pumping that issues forth into a "yeah . . . yeah" sort of rant amongst their followers, not unlike what one might hear at a sporting event . . . or a church.

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[1] As just one example, atheist philosopher of science Michael Ruse commented on Richard Dawkins: "*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist . . . ," from the front of the book by Alister and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007).

[2] See McGrath and McGrath, *Dawkins Delusion* 11–12.

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Consider the following comment by Hitchens: "Many religions now come before us with ingratiating smirks and outspread hands, like an unctuous merchant in a bazaar."[3] Such comments might make one stop and think, or laugh, or even marvel at the use of the written word. But one thing is clear: such verbiage does not constitute an argument! So is this simply an unrepresentative example of the extravagant speech mentioned above, or is this sort of response more characteristic of these works?

I. CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

In this article, my purpose is to respond to two representative volumes of the New Atheism. The first is Christopher Hitchens's book *God is Not Great.*[4] Hitchens begins with some reminiscences from his own life along with some reflections on the failure of religion (chap. 1). Here he also recounts some of the differences between atheists themselves, stating that responses to alternate viewpoints should be made with "evidence and reasoning and not by mutual excommunication" (p. 5). In the second chapter, "Religion Kills," Hitchens looks at various locations around the world where religious conviction has led to murder and mistreatment. Chapter 3 is a brief digression that addresses dietary injunctions in various religions, such as the Jewish and Muslim strictures against pork. Chapter 4 provides examples of religion opposing medical advances that could save millions of lives.

When we get to chapter 5, "The Metaphysical Claims of Religion are False," one might be forgiven for thinking that Hitchens is finally going to consider some of the stronger arguments given by believers. He mentions a host of topics such as scientists who were believers, medieval disputes such as the length of angels' wings (p. 68), and Christians who think they should take a "leap of faith" (p. 71).[5] But we find no serious discussion of any of the key issues that would occupy even an undergraduate discussion of metaphysics.

The next chapter title, "Argument from Design," also gives the impression that actual, serious arguments, perhaps from either proponents or opponents of Intelligent Design, are going to be considered in detail. But this conclusion would also be mistaken. Hitchens begins with some personal thoughts along with an account of a trip he took to Sri Lanka. Then he briefly considers William Paley's watchmaker thesis (pp. 77–78) before turning to creationist controversies in America. The rest of the chapter meanders through discussions of the human eye, genes, the Cambrian explosion, and so on. Throwing in an occasional name of a scientist, Hitchens should at least be given credit for discussing several items that sometimes occupy the hinterlands of the contemporary evolution-creation debate. But at no point is there any detailed

[3] Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York.: Twelve [Warner Books], 2007) 67.

[4] Ibid. Page numbers will appear in the text.

[5] To say that Kierkegaard scholars would probably react to Hitchens's mistaken portrayal of this philosopher's position would probably be an understatement.

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consideration of recent, sophisticated discussions for and against propositions in the current Intelligent Design dialogue, or other such debates.

In chapter 7, subtitled "The Nightmare of the 'Old' Testament," we finally get a few more substantial questions, along with some significant objections. Noting that the three great monotheisms make use of the OT Pentateuch, Hitchens argues that there are few better proofs "that religion is man-made" (pp. 98–99). Then he discusses both the cruelty as well as the silliness of some of the commands in these five books, such as the mass genocide of several ancient Canaanite tribes, the allowance of slavery, and the killing of witches and others (pp. 99–102).

The next chapter title says it all: the NT even exceeds the evil of the OT! Here Hitchens mentions some contemporary critical issues that have occupied scholars, such as Luke's census under Quirinius, the so-called "Q" sayings document, the Gospel of Judas, and the use of Isa 9:6 in the NT. Hitchens makes a few thoughtful remarks here that might be addressed with some benefit. But the chapter is also severely marred by the highly anachronistic ways in which these issues are brought up or evaluated, as well as by the more frivolous complaints, such as those directed at the "soap-Opera film . . . by an Australian fascist and ham actor named Mel Gibson" (p. 110).

In chapter 9, Hitchens takes aim at the Qur'an (which he spells "Koran," per the older usage). Hitchens's main complaints are that this text is a hodgepodge writing that plagiarizes freely from Jewish, Christian, and other myths. The result, he claims, is that the Qur'an contains many doubtful philosophical concepts, contradictions, and myriads of compilation and textual issues. Hitchens points out that this is further complicated, even beyond repair, by the quarreling unto death by Mohammed's followers, arising immediately afterwards, the destruction of early texual copies, as well as the rise of the Muslim commentary in the *hadith*, which is far too late to be helpful regarding the early stages of the religion.

Chapter 10 addresses the subjects of miracles and hell, although it is almost entirely concerned with the former. Hitchens chiefly makes the point that when miracle claims are investigated, the evidence strangely seems to disappear. His main examples are the Roman Catholic efforts to canonize Mother Teresa by proving at least one miracle on her behalf. Hitchens concludes by stating his hope that he has undermined the faith of religious persons (p. 153).

After a meandering discussion at the outset, the next chapter addresses corruption found at the origins of particular religions. Hitchens's chief example is Joseph Smith and the founding of Mormonism, though he also includes Mohammad among his targets. The majority of the chapter addresses the character and teachings of Smith and his "ridiculous cult" (p. 161). Hitchens recounts example after example to illustrate his points, from Smith's 1826 conviction in a New York court of law, to the angelic visitation and his reception of the "two magic stones" and the golden plates, serious problems with the book of Mormon text itself, the teaching that America was populated by the lost Jews, problems with the book of Abraham, polygamy, and convenient revelations to correct problematic issues.

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A short respite, chapter 12 provides a brief look at failed religion. It is primarily concerned with Jewish messianic figure Sabbatai Sevi, a seventeenth-century prophet who, when pressured by Muslims, renounced his Jewish faith. It also mentions the Hasidic Chabad sect of Judaism that apparently predicted the onset of a redemptive age after the death of its leader, Menachem Schneerson, who died in 1994, though nothing has come of this prediction.

Chapter 13—"Does Religion Make People Behave Better?"—considers reformers like Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi, comparing the ethical stances of religious persons to those of the non-religious. He closes with some gruesome examples of African atrocities committed in the name of religion, concluding that "the church had mainly been wrong and often criminal in the past" (p. 193).

What about the religious approaches offered in Eastern religion? As the title of chapter 14—"There Is No 'Eastern' Solution"—indicates, Hitchens thinks that the Eastern religious option is no better. He complains that, in the name of doctrines that deny materialism and espouse oneness with others, Eastern thought too frequently ends up being just as materialistic, militant, irrational, and immoral as its Western counterparts.

The next chapter (p. 15) consists of a diatribe aimed at several precepts of religion. Most of the time is spent criticizing the concepts of blood sacrifice and atonement for sin, before rambling off into a brief discussion of religious sexual mores.

Chapter 16 is chiefly concerned with the question, "Is Religion Child Abuse?" Here Hitchens discusses how children can be a harmed irreparably by their parents' evil religious teaching done in the name of their beliefs. He chooses one immoral teaching—concerning the subject of abortion (pp. 220–23)—and one immoral practice—"the mutilation of infant genitalia" (pp. 223–26)—for special consideration. (Intriguingly, Hitchens thinks science has "demonstrated" that the human embryo is a separate entity, and not a growth in the female body, while still holding that there are sometimes good reasons for abortions [p. 220]). The chapter ends with Hitchens berating the Roman Catholic Church for child abuse in the form of the sexual misconduct of priests, which he terms "the systematic rape and torture of children, positively aided and abetted by a hierarchy which knowingly moved the grossest offenders to parishes where they would be safer" (p. 228).

In chapter 17, Hitchens imagines a major objection against secularism. Strangely enough, rather than using religious violence down through the centuries as a reason to decry faith, as seems to happen in the New Atheism, Hitchens anticipates the religious comeback "that secular and atheist regimes have committed crimes and massacres that are . . . at least as bad if not worse" (p. 229). He discusses Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Chinese communism, and so on. But rather than account head-on for the horrible realities of such atheistic systems, he charges that religion should have done more to oppose these atrocities (pp. 237–52)!

In his final two chapters, Hitchens trots out a cartel of famous names especially from Enlightenment times that resisted religion (chap. 18). This

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is followed by his conclusion in chapter 19: "Above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment" (p. 283).

II. SAM HARRIS

The second volume to be considered in this essay is Sam Harris's much briefer text *Letter to a Christian Nation*.[6] Harris notes that he received thousands of responses to his first book *The End of Faith*.[7] His theme in *Letter* is to address some of these challenges and "to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms" (p. ix)

Harris's volume is much more succinct than Hitchens's work, probably due to Harris's intended theme of answering specific challenges. But there are also other significant differences. Harris has fewer catchy phrases, less picturesque language, comparably very few personal anecdotes, and certainly stays on topic better than with the rambling commentaries that Hitchens seems to love so dearly. Harris is much more straightforward, and his responses often carry more academic punch.

Further, while Hitchens takes aim at religion as a whole (though concentrating chiefly on the three major monotheisms), Harris deals almost completely with Christianity, as indicated by his title. Thus, his commentary treats more specifically various topics that reflect Christian angles on the various subjects.

Harris's text contains no chapter divisions, but includes sub-sections on various topics. It begins with thoughts on the Bible's teachings, morality, and good works, moving on later to whether atheists are evil, God's goodness, prophecy, the clash between science and religion, the origin of life, and religious violence.

Still, Harris has a tendency to repeat many of his ideas, so it is somewhat difficult to think of a specific, logical format as a blueprint for his thoughts. So rather than comment on each brief individual section of the book, I will try to cover several of his major themes.[8]

Harris is more successful in pointing out some potential inconsistencies or other problems for Christians. For example, he asks why Christians expend so much energy opposing abortion, stem cell research, and extramarital sex resulting in AIDS, while ignoring much of the greater amount of suffering in the world (p. 26). Or, he asks why Christians sometimes resist a vaccination program for papillomavirus (HPV) on the grounds that this disease is an impediment to premarital sex, instead of being more concerned about the 200,000 people who die of this virus every year (pp. 26–27).

Christians often retort that they oppose abortion, stem cell research, and pre- or extramarital sex because these practices are ethically wrong. But

[6] Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

[7] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004).

[8] This approach will inevitably involve the citation of more page numbers then were needful with Hitchens's chapter divisions.

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Harris thinks that this response misses much of his point. He states, "There is nothing wrong with encouraging teens to abstain from having sex" (p. 27), but he thinks that Christians often misplace their moral responsibility. For example, he says that Christians are too selective in their choice of moral causes. While it is fine to support moral, pro-life issues, why do they neglect areas in the greater pro-life arena, such as the starvation of millions that affect far more persons? In other words, why do they pick and choose between the pro-life ethical issues that they are going to support most of all? Harris concludes, "In fact, relieving suffering seems to rank rather low on your list of priorities" (p. 26).

Further, sometimes the Christians' favorite causes seem more trivial that the larger problems: "you are not worried about the *suffering* caused by sex; you're worried about sex" (p. 28; emphasis original). This may give the impression that Christians are more interested in the actual "do's and don'ts" than they are in the real people who actually suffer. Or, by opposing an HIV vaccine, Christians support the condemnation of millions of people to death, almost as if they deserve not having a vaccine because they sinned. Harris asserts, "This is one of many points on which your religious beliefs become genuinely lethal" (p. 28).

Of course, even if Harris is correct, these criticisms are aimed, not at the *truth* of Christianity, but largely at the consistency of Christian convictions. He points out that Christians sometimes pick and choose their ethical positions, rather than taking a pro-life position in all matters, especially those that cost the largest number of lives and are equally well supported in Scripture.

But in the majority of matters, Harris seems to miss the mark with his criticisms of Christianity. Perhaps his most often repeated epitaph is that Christians hold to their beliefs totally by faith, without any evidence (pp. 25, 33, 43). We use our moral beliefs to confirm Scripture, and then use Scripture in order to confirm our morality; hence we are arguing in circles (p. 49). Or, Christians "should be obliged to present evidence for his [God's] existence" (p. 51). We dispute the claims of science on the basis of horrible evidence (p. 64), while treating religion as the one area where we do not need evidence (p. 65). Christians ought not to use faith without evidence as their grounds for believing in Jesus' resurrection (p. 67). Yet, when Muslims employ the same sort of spiritual reasoning, we are unimpressed with their arguments, since neither side makes claims that may be corroborated (pp. 6–7).

The bottom line is that Christians should stop holding ethical and spiritual views which are "flagrantly irrational" (p. 87). They must require sufficient justification for their positions (pp. 88–91). This is probably Harris's most frequently repeated criticism. Christians need evidence for what they believe. Unfortunately, a few Christians will agree with Harris's assessments and ignore or even oppose good reasons for faith. Thankfully, the evidence is still there, regardless!

Harris also adds a number of other challenges to Christian belief. Eventually, it will be proven that one side is either right or wrong (p. 5). Atheism is neither a philosophy nor a worldview; it is simply a denial of something

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(p. 51)! Natural disasters indicate "God's failure to protect humanity" (p. 52), and they disprove religion (pp. 50–57). The Bible contains contradictions (pp. 58–61). While we do not know how either the universe or the process of evolution began, this does not cause us to espouse the existence of God (pp. x, 68–79). Religious beliefs, especially of the Muslim variety, impede human progress (pp. 79–87).

On the other hand, atheism presents a better option than religion. Atheists do not need a Bible in order to be well behaved; in fact, they can even believe in objective morality (pp. 23–25). Further, the statistics prove that atheism is it least compatible with living civilly, while "belief in God does not ensure a society's health" (p. 45). Moreover, atheists tend to give away a greater percentage of their wealth to support social welfare programs and other forms of aid (p. 46).

III. ANSWERING THE NEW ATHEISM

In the remainder of this essay, I will respond to a number of these atheist claims. I charged that many of the New Atheist arguments are long on rhetoric and short on substantive arguments against religion. With that in mind, I will progress through several categories here, beginning with some areas where the New Atheists present thoughtful critiques and may even be correct. Then I will move to some of what I consider to be their "shoulder-shrugging" arguments, which are of the sort that I would greatly enjoy hearing from my opponent in a debate, because they are simply neither here nor there—but they certainly do not challenge religiosity. I will save until the next section the bulk of my critique, where I will treat Hitchens's and Harris's arguments that are somewhat more substantive.

1. *Thoughtful challenges.* Even Christians sometimes resonate with atheists when it comes to complaints about the behavior of religious persons, all the worse when it is Christian behavior, and when the result is the unjustified taking of lives down through history. Therefore, whether it is the Crusades, religious inquisition, witch trials, or other opposition such as the fighting that afflicted Ireland in recent years, I think Christians agree generally that such actions are despicable. They would certainly agree with atheists that there is no place in the world, either, for Muslim suicide bombers and other unjust attacking of Christians and Jews, as well as other Muslims. Sure, the issues are complicated, but the bottom line is roughly the same. There is no need to belabor this point.

I have also indicated above that I think Sam Harris raises particularly good questions regarding Christians who pick and choose which pro-life issues should be supported and which should be ignored. I have for many years asked my students why widespread famine throughout the world often has been largely ignored by Christians until just recently, and still by far too few believers. Incredibly, these are often the ones that claim far more lives!

I hasten to add here that, in my opinion, the proper evangelical response is *not* to jettison current pro-life stances, but to get radically involved with

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the ones that we have ignored for far too long, such as worldwide hunger. Thankfully, evangelicals do a much better job with worldwide relief efforts after natural disasters, whether it was hurricane Katrina in New Orleans or tsunamis on the other side of the world. Still, I think that, generally, Western Christians are still far too materialistic and far too unwilling to share more than a pittance with those in need. Radical teachings such as those by Jesus (such as Luke 10:25–37; 12:33–34; 14:33) and others (such as 1 Tim 6:8–10, 17–18; 1 John 3:16–18) need to be heeded and taken in all their literalness.

2. *Shoulder-shrugging arguments.* Atheists often present an entire litany of emotional tirades against Christians who are generally said to be inconsiderate, worldly, materialistic, overly nosy, or just plain fail to live up to Jesus' teachings.[9] There are a large variety of such complaints that often take up many pages of ranting. I will simply call this category the "Christians can be jerks" objection.

My response is to repeat that believers need to obey our Lord, both in easy matters as well as in the far more difficult ones that require self-sacrifice. It is true that believers have often grown lazy and seemingly attempted to avoid the radical commitment called for in Scripture. As far as the violence against others, I have also just said that this is totally out of place.

But to the atheist I pose the question: "Do you consider variations of the 'Christians can be jerks' complaint to be real arguments? It sure seems to bother you a lot." Then I would point out that, *no matter how badly Christians behave*, it does not even begin to disprove Christianity. While it definitely may indicate that Christians misbehave, this does not constitute even the slightest argument against the truthfulness of the Christian worldview. In fact, it simply helps to reinforce the Christian doctrine of hamartiology. And the Bible teaches that even believers are sinners (e.g. 1 John 1:6–8).

Some have argued that nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche leveled one of the most damaging criticisms against Christians when he said that "there never was more than one Christian, and he *died* on the Cross."[10] But Christians should willingly concede that we often do not think or behave in the proper manner. It seems to me that this is obvious not only in everyday life, but in the pages of Scripture itself. Even saints such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist, and Peter had their rough times.

But neither is any of this an argument against the veracity of Christian belief. That is strictly an issue of the truth or falsity of particular doctrines, not whether some believers live inconsistently with those doctrines. For example, Nietzsche could be correct that Christians are even incredibly inconsistent, without this counting at all against the truth of Christianity. Even Hitchens himself realizes that religious people who behave badly clearly do

[9] There are also the more serious objections that Christians down through the ages have too often persecuted or even killed those with whom they disagree. But I just acknowledged above my own abhorrence of such behavior, so I exempt that criticism here.

[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (trans. Anthony M. Ludovici; Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000), section 39 (54), his emphasis.

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not thereby discredit the religious systems themselves (p. 185). But having said this, one wonders why he repeatedly speaks as if religious misbehavior discredits beliefs, as he does throughout his book.

3. *Responding to more substantial atheist arguments.* Here I will address approximately a dozen complaints that Hitchens and Harris make against Christianity that tend to be of a more substantial nature. In other words, these are the sorts of issues that, if true, would count against the truthfulness of Christian doctrines.

I will often be responding to topics which are sometimes simply mentioned only in passing by Hitchens and Harris. A few might even be termed "one-liners" because the point is made so briefly; thus, I will often emphasize a point more than these two authors do. The reason for this is that, generally, these authors virtually never develop any of their arguments or push them to specific conclusions that might challenge religion. Never is an argument stated rigorously, or in a logical step-by-step manner. Rather, as we have noted throughout, they are content simply to rabble-rouse and leave their case to the non-specialists who will join them in unison, in what must sound to them as a joyful ranting.

I have said that neither Hitchens nor Harris develop careful or detailed arguments in any of the areas that we will discuss. So I will simply respond strictly to their arguments, without developing further any particular rejoinder. Most obviously, I cannot do so in the scope of a single article. But I will attempt to give reasons for their failure at each juncture.

a. *God's existence.* If one is going to be an atheist, he or she should have some solid reasons for holding that position. Apparently Harris agrees, for he sagely reminds us that we should not believe anything without evidence (p. 67). However, not only do Hitchens and Harris fail to develop such a case, but they often sound as if they think that atheism follows naturally from the mere fact that some religious persons appear to be stupid.

We have mentioned that in a chapter that purports to address the "Argument from Design," Hitchens meanders to and fro through a variety of often disconnected thoughts regarding trips he has taken, or of scientific discoveries here or there, without specifically developing any real arguments. How in the world this treatment is an argument or demonstration of *anything*, let alone either a defense of atheism or an attack on theism, is simply baffling.

While more sophisticated, Harris mostly limits his comments to the truth of evolution and the inability of Intelligent Design to bring God into the process. But along the way, he stumbles at various philosophical points. For example, it does not help his case to acknowledge freely that, "How the process of evolution got started is still a mystery . . ." (p. 73), or, "the truth is that no one knows how or why the universe came into being" (p. 75).

Because atheists are plagued by such lack of knowledge regarding these absolutely bedrock truths regarding the origin of both the universe and evolution, how can they possibly be so positive that God was not the Author? If I were an atheist, this honestly confessed ignorance in such crucial areas would simply plague my thinking with question marks.

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To worsen his case further, Harris charges that even if he conceded that the universe indeed had a designer, it does not mean that that designer is the biblical God, for the world might have been created by "an evil God" (p. 73). While we still might be a mile away from the Bible, Harris's supposition would certainly seem to play havoc with his thesis of atheism, for if there were a God *of any sort*, atheism of course fails.

Most readers would also recognize that Harris's suggestion that the universe may have originated from "an alien supercomputer" (p. 73) only begs the question of where that alien race came from. Would Harris really have us believe that since 99% of all earthly species are now extinct, "This fact alone appears to rule out intelligent design" (p. 75)? He also says that God himself would also need to be created (p. 73), without stopping to think that even atheism needs an ultimate point of origin. It just happens that finite sources cannot fit the bill, which includes all that we presently know about nature. Therefore, simply taking for granted the process of evolution, as Harris does, again begs the subject of the ultimate origin of the process.

But somehow Harris seems to construe Christian believers as being unwilling to present evidence for God's existence (p. 51). This alone indicates that he is probably out of touch with the conservative, Bible-believing Christian to whom he addresses the book (p. viii). To confirm this, all he would need to do is to check out many of the scholarly treatments of God's existence.[11] But more than that, it is hoped that Harris, as well as his colleagues Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, would actually interact with them.

b. *Absolute morality?* We have already seen that both Hitchens and Harris insist that atheists can be just as moral as Christians. Harris takes it a step further: he insists more than once that atheists can also embrace "objective morality" and hold that some moral principles are simply grounded objectively; therefore rape, murder, and slavery are absolutely wrong (pp. 19, 23–25).

I wonder if philosophically-inclined atheists cringe when they read Harris's words. In discussions of ethical theory, one will almost never find philosophical atheists who argue for absolute ethical standards. The chief reason they deny intrinsically grounded, absolute ethical standards seems to be rather obvious: objective moral standards cannot be expected to result from an atheistic, evolutionary system grounded in the impersonal principles of the improbable but chance development of life. Rather, atheists almost always argue that societies develop their own morality, often declaring that the underlying principles are something like those of pragmatic utilitarianism. But on atheism, no ethical principle is intrinsically right or wrong, and morality is not objective.

At the very least, Harris seems unaware of the philosophical discussions within his own worldview and uses his terms carelessly and without the

[11] For just a few examples, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (rev. ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Stephen E. Parrish, *God and Necessity: A Defense of Classical Theism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997); J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), chaps. 1–4.

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proper precision. But if he insists that he indeed has strong grounds for his claims that morality is objective in nature, he cannot explain this sort of ethics within his atheistic system. Further, theists will rejoice because his concession has actually backfired into granting the most important premise in the construction of a moral argument for God's existence.

c. *The problem of evil.* Harris also questions the goodness of God in allowing events such as Katrina's devastation of New Orleans, the Holocaust, and other natural or moral catastrophes. He thinks these disasters indicate that God "is either impotent or evil" (pp. 50–57).

As stated above, I obviously could not even fully address this aspect of the problem of evil in the scope of a single article. But then again, neither does Harris. Yet, he seems to be oblivious to the bind into which he has gotten himself. If he maintains his belief in objective moral standards, as per the previous point, then theism is the most likely result of his belief, because objective morality backfires into a probable argument for God's existence.

But if Harris rescinds his position of absolute morality in favor of the almost unanimous verdict of his fellow atheists, namely, that ethical standards are not objective but proceed from the development of society, he has lost the ability to wage this objection from the standpoint of his atheistic system.[12] The reason for this should also be clear. If there is no such thing as absolute morality, then atheists are incapable of even recognizing objectively the presence of evil. In other words, if absolute morality is to be rejected as a figment of the theists' mindset, then it must be admitted that even horrible atrocities such as the Holocaust are no more than events that contradict our private notions of morality. Thus, one may have a strong, personal disgust for eating eggplant, but such an act is far from being immoral. Similarly, what we commonly view as evil in the world on an atheistic ethical system amounts to personal distaste, not to an objective problem for theism. Atheists have lost their favorite argument against theism.

To summarize briefly, we cannot have it both ways: we can accept absolute morality and face the strong probability of the theistic universe, or we can deny it and acknowledge that we cannot lay evil at God's feet, for there would be no such thing as objectively recognized wickedness. Either way, atheism receives a serious blow.

[12] Rather than accept Harris's personal assurance that certain things are just plain morally evil (pp. 18–19, 24), a more sophisticated atheistic rejoinder is to actually admit the problem here, agreeing that atheists have no intrinsic ability to recognize the objectivity of evil events such as the Holocaust. But then they will point out that they are waging the objection *not* from within their own system, but as an inconsistency *within* the theistic system. I think that such a move is a very positive situation for the theist, and not only because of the admission itself. But if the problems of evil and suffering are going to be waged within theism, then any of theism's evidenced tenets such as God's existence, absolute morality, the existence of life, as well as an afterlife, all need to be considered, as well. Further, evidenced doctrines of particular theisms such as Christianity would also have to be considered, such as the reliability of Scripture, the resurrection of Jesus, other miracles of Jesus, along with any purported notions of fulfilled prophecy, and so on. It is much easier to answer the problems of evil and suffering from *within* a theistic (and especially Christian) worldview where all these other doctrines exist, than it is to explain all these other concepts in light of pain and suffering.

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d. *Miracles.* Hitchens concentrates on Roman Catholic efforts to canonize saints by proving that they performed wonderful events. This is one of the topics where I would most enjoy a personal discussion. While I cannot pursue the details here, I will simply point out that, in my view, the case for the resurrection of Jesus could withstand his questions on the subject. Further, such a case can be established when utilizing only the data which are allowed for good reasons by the vast majority of critical scholars (including skeptics) who study this topic.[13]

Hitchens provides a hint of the road he might take in his brief accusation that parallel mythology mimics Christian miracle claims (p. 23). In a dialogue, this also would be a most welcome charge. Hitchens seems to be utterly unaware that many of the accounts that he mentions are actually *post-Christian,* date many years, even centuries, after the writers themselves, and generally concern mythological figures such as Hercules. We actually have no clear accounts of pagan resurrection claims before the first century AD.[14]

e. *The rationality of religion.* By now it should be rather obvious that I am not the sort of Christian who will agree with Harris or Hitchens regarding the irrationality of the Christian faith. As we have already seen above, whether we are discussing the existence of God, the basis for human morality, the existence of the universe or life, or the resurrection of Jesus, I think it is imperative that believers have a strong rational and empirical basis for their beliefs. I would add other subjects to this list, as well. So I would challenge their view of the nature of the Christian faith and assert that Christianity is more than able to hold its own in evidential discussions.

f. *Old Testament morality.* A favorite claim of the New Atheists is that the OT includes various sorts of immoral accounts, teachings, and commands. A first line of defense, once again, would be to inquire where atheists like Hitchens and Harris even get their notions of right and wrong. To repeat, they can admit their belief in absolute ethics, which would both fail to follow from their own philosophical system, as well as backfire into an argument for God's existence. Or they could deny absolute ethical standards and thereby lose the grounds for their objection. So they should first provide the rational basis for their notion of an "immoral" God, given their atheism and hence their inability to objectively recognize evil in the first place.

Further, after providing a long list of such OT atrocities, Hitchens repeatedly and clearly indicates that none of these evil events ever occurred—they are religious mythology! He summarizes: "we must come to those things which probably did not happen and which we must be glad did not" (p. 106). But if these events, including genocide, did not actually occur, has he not

[13] Of my publications on the subject of Jesus' resurrection, see especially *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) and (with Michael Licona) *The Case of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

[14] For a brief discussion, see Habermas, *Risen Jesus and Future Hope* 14, 29–30.

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removed the majority of the sting from this charge of OT immorality? Granted, the issue of the Canaanites is a tough one, but much of the punch has been removed both by the atheist rejection of absolute morality, as well as by those who consider the entire scenario to be mythical. Even more of the objection would be eliminated if we treated these texts by observing normal hermeneutical principles, such as realizing that telling a story is not the same as condoning it.[15]

g. *New Testament problems.* Harris also cites various issues in the NT, such as contradictions in the question of sources behind the Gospels. Actually, this is one of Hitchens's weakest chapters. It is not because no such issues exist, but because critical scholars generally think that they do *not* invalidate the major historical questions. For example, I have argued that the majority of critical scholars today believe that Jesus was raised from the dead in some literal sense.[16] How could such an incredible event be affirmed by most critical scholars if Hitchens's questions invalidated the NT text?

h. *Corrupt religious origins.* Hitchens charges that religions like Mormonism and Islam originated in a series of highly questionable circumstances. Without going further into this charge, he seems totally oblivious to the fact that he has committed the informal logical mistake known as the genetic fallacy. The reason these claims are fallacious should be obvious: *regardless* of where religions originate, the question is primarily one of truth. Presumably, our religion could begin under very suspect conditions, and still have central teachings that are true.

i. *Final justification.* Harris charges that the time will come when one side will finally win the argument, and one side will lose (p. 5). Once again, Harris is unaware of another serious philosophical problem with this position. The irony of the situation is that if atheism is correct, he will never know that for sure, because no one would exist after the death of their brains in order to confirm it.[17] But on the other hand, if Christian theism turns out to be true, then indeed, Harris's statement will be correct. Unfortunately for him, however, as he sadly acknowledges (pp. 3–4), then he *would* know that he lost.

j. *More philosophical problems.* We have seen that both Hitchens and Harris are generally at their worst when entertaining philosophical theses. As a last example, Harris parrots the tired secularist theme that atheism is

[15] See the excellent response by Paul Copan, "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics," forthcoming in *Philosophia Christi*; for a popular treatment of these points, see David Marshall, *The Truth Behind the New Atheism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2007), chap. 6.

[16] Gary R. Habermas, "Mapping the Recent Trend toward the Bodily Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Light of Other Prominent Critical Positions," in *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (ed. Robert B. Stewart; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

[17] Hence, Harris has walked right into John Hick's famous dilemma which he expresses in his classic essay "Theology and Verification," *Theology Today* (1960).

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not a worldview, but simply the absence of a position, as in the term "non-astrologer" (p. 51). This would be to hold that one's own view is neutral, while all others, especially theists, are prejudiced! The truth is that *all* views have an agenda, atheism included; to say otherwise is to argue that atheism's parent position, naturalism, is not a worldview. This is simply philosophically naïve, as the vast majority of scholars will recognize.

k. *Religious versus atheist killing.* The New Atheists seem eager to charge that many have died in the name of religion.[18] But there is absolutely no comparison here: atheist and secular regimes in the twentieth century alone have killed well over 100 million people, more than one hundred times the *total* deaths caused by Christians from the Crusades until the present.[19] Still, this is far from excusing ourselves; we have said that Christians should be embarrassed over even these significantly lower figures.

l. *Charity and positive social behavior.* Harris also argues that predominantly atheist nations tend to be the healthiest (p. 45), while individual atheists are the most charitable (p. 46). Hitchens holds that it is "impossible to argue that religion causes people to behave in a more kindly or civilized manner. The worse the offender, the more devout he turns out to be" (p. 192). These charges simply fly in the face of an entire cadre of recent findings.

Is Harris correct about charitable giving? In one recent survey, American atheists and agnostics were *far less likely* to volunteer for non-church charities (20%) than were their active-faith counterparts (30%), to work in their communities (41%–68%), or to serve a homeless or poor person (41%–61%). Moreover, individual atheists and agnostics donated an average of only $200 apiece in 2006, seven times less than those who were active in their faith. Further, almost a quarter of agnostics and atheists (22%) contributed nothing to charity that year, compared to only 7% of the religious group.[20]

Is Harris correct about atheists being healthier? His dubious claim is based on a general health report issued by the United Nations in 2005 that ranks entire nations. Harris then takes his health statistics from "Countries with high levels of atheism" (pp. 43–46), hardly the best way to gain specific statistics concerning the benefits of atheism.

But myriads of specific studies argue just the opposite. Mayo Clinic researchers reported the results of an in-depth meta-analysis of about 1200 studies of physical and mental health in relation to spirituality. The conclusion was that a majority of these studies "found that religious involvement

[18] Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* 18–22, 99–102, 188–93, 237–52.

[19] Dinesh D'Souza, *What's so Great about Christianity* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2007), especially pp. 214–15. Actually, D'Sousa might be considered much too conservative. See R. J. Rummel, *Statistics of Democide: Democide and Mass Murder Since 1900* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

[20] "Atheists and Agnostics Take Aim at Christians," The Barna Group, June 11, 2007, http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=272 (accessed 9/24/2007).

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and spirituality are associated with better health outcomes," a conclusion that "seems valid" even if establishing strict causality is more difficult.[21]

Other studies have likewise concluded that being religious promotes significantly greater emotional and mental health among college students,[22] higher employment rates,[23] and a greater level of happiness, including a description that begins, "Those with religious beliefs are likely to be happier than atheists or agnostics."[24] The Barna study cited above also reported that the perception of experiencing peace by atheists and agnostics (67%) was much lower than that reported by the actively religious group (90%).[25] At each of these points, then, atheism appears to be at an often large disadvantage.

IV. CONCLUSION

New Atheist authors such as Hitchens, Harris, and Richard Dawkins often vary between catchy prose and bombastic, sometimes rambling, commentary. But one major characteristic is that their pithiest critiques are short on substance, rarely hit crucial areas, and present far too many openings that simply beg for critique. In boxing terms, they tend to lead with their faces! Most of all, their factual charges aimed at the heart of Christianity are refuted by the data. For authors who claim that it is all about the evidence,[26] their presentations leave much to be desired.

[21] "Study, Review and Editorial Focus on Religion, Spirituality and Medicine," Mayo Clinic, December 11, 2001, http://www.mayoclinic.org/news2001-rst/921.htrml (accessed 4/2/2008).

[22] Sarah Hofius, "A Spiritually Inclined Student is a Happier Student," *USA Today*, October 27, 2004, http://www.usatoday.com/educate/college/education/articles/20041031.htm (accessed 4/2/2008).

[23] "Religion to Thank for High Employment Rates, Study Shows," *Times Online*, October 1, 2007, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article2566736.ece?print=yes&randnum (accessed 10/4/2007).

[24] "Go to Church and Pray If You Want to Be Happy, Say Scientists," *The Daily Mail*, March 17, 2008, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=537628&in_ (accessed 3/24/2008).

[25] "Atheists and Agnostics Take Aim at Christians."

[26] Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* 5; Harris, *Letter* ix, 67).

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