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Karen Swallow Prior
Liberty University, kprior@liberty.edu

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New and Unimproved

Atheism's Brash but Ineffectual Makeover

by Karen Swallow Prior

The smoke has not even cleared from her fifteen birthday candles, and my niece has declared herself a materialist, naturalist, and evolutionist. She is, mind you, rather unsophisticated, even for 15Ñthe sort of girl whose articulation (primarily electronic) runs along the lines of "srsly?" "omg!" and "bahahahaha!" So how does a Catholic schoolgirl whose main interests are ballet flats, Paris Hilton sunglasses, text messages, and the color pink come to hold beliefs that are unfamiliar to most of the college sophomores I teach? In short, through the spread of the New Atheism.

The New Atheism is led by an unholy trinity of living (and quite well, by the way) white men whose backgrounds span a range of disciplines: philosophy and neuroscience (Sam Harris), evolutionary biology (Richard Dawkins), and journalism (Christopher Hitchens). What's new about this atheism is an "unprecedented new boldness," Albert Mohler explains in *Atheism Remix,* and the proud embrace of intoleranceÑtoward religion in general, and the Judeo-Christian brand in particular.

The New Atheists believe that reason and religion are absolutely incompatible. This means that religion and religious people are unreasonable. It further means that religion is the source of most of the evil in the world and must be eradicated. And it means that parents who impart their religious beliefs to their children are guilty of child abuse. (Presumably, parents who impose skepticism on their children would not be guilty of this charge; indeed, the atheists now boast a summer program for such children, dubbed Camp Inquiry.)

One might think that all of this makes the New Atheists an inconsequential radical fringeÑbut one would be wrong. Books by the New Atheists have sold by the millions during the past few years; some have held spots on *The New York Times* bestseller list for months. In response, writers from across the theological spectrum have churned out their own books and articles. Even atheists are reacting: Michael Ruse, professor of philosophy at Florida State University, has said that aspects of the New Atheism make him "embarrassed to be an atheist." In short, the New Atheism has spawned an industry.

New Atheist Origins

It began with the 2004 bestseller *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, the kindest and gentlest of the New Atheists (one critic describes him as a self-styled "new Buddha"). Partly out of (understandable) disillusionment over the terrorism of 9/11, Harris envisions in *The End of Faith* a new age in which religion is eliminated by the sheer power of reason and the sufficiency of science. Two years later, Harris published a much shorter book, *Letter to a Christian Nation,* on the same basic topic.

Harris was followed in 2007 by Christopher Hitchens with *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.* A pugnacious, provocative contributing editor of *Vanity Fair,* Hitchens is the most caustic of the bunch, though his book seems largely a regurgitation of the ideas of other New Atheists.

But perhaps the best known and most influential of the New AtheistsÑwith a reputation for academic work long before heading up the New Atheist brigadeÑis Oxford professor Richard Dawkins. In *The God Delusion* (2006), Dawkins draws upon evolutionary biology to explain the origins, use, and obsolescence of religious belief.

Empty Rhetoric

With his regal carriage, dapper dress, and clipped British accent, Dawkins cuts a debonair figure that renders him intellectually intimidating from the get-go. At a lecture hosted by a women's college in my town, he could not have had a more fawning audience when he read one of the most controversial (and most famous) passages of his book:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Tautologies aside, even a devout theist such as myself is mesmerized by the power of such prose. Students from the neighboring Christian university where I teach largely took up the extended question-and-answer session that followed the lecture, merely providing more fodder for Dawkins's sharpÑif sometimes cruelÑwit. When (in a moment immortalized on YouTube) a cheerleaderish-looking young woman mustered up her courage to ask, "What if you're wrong?" Dawkins shot back, "Well, what if you're wrong about the Great JuJu at the Bottom of the Sea?" This garnered him the most hyenic laughter of the evening. But the exchangeÑindeed, the entire eventÑrevealed what Dawkins and all of the New Atheists do best: appeal to a general audience unschooled in either theology or philosophy, one swayed by scientific-sounding arguments that are cloaked in brilliant, biting rhetoric.

However, despite the messianic role that the New Atheists claim for science, the projectÑfrom start to finishÑis more ideological than scientific. The problems begin with sketchy definitions of essential terms such as "faith," "evidence," and even "atheism." While "atheism" means the denial or lack of belief in any God or gods, in Dawkins's loose usage, a Christian becomes an "atheist" of Allah, a Muslim of Wotan, and a Jew of Zeus. Thus, we all become "atheists" in Dawkins's tendentious newspeak. The New Atheists also incorrectly define "faith" as "belief without evidence," explains John F. Haught in *God and the New Atheism,* and though "evidence" is not really defined, they imply that it includes only empirical data.

Yet, much of the data upon which the New Atheists draw is questionable or incomplete. They fail to demonstrate much research beyond the most superficial, facile understandings of God,

theology, and religious belief. As Terry Eagleton (a literary critic who is far from a fundamentalist sympathizer) points out in his brilliant Times Literary Supplement review of *The God Delusion* (aptly titled "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching"),

critics of the richest, most enduring form of popular culture in human history have a moral obligation to confront that case at its most persuasive, rather than grabbing themselves a victory on the cheap by savaging it as so much garbage and gobbledygook.

But none of the New Atheists gives even more than a passing reference, if that, to any of the leading theologians, theistic philosophers, or Christian evolutionists who address these questions at an acceptable level of scholarship and intellectual honesty. (A quick flip through the notes to *The God Delusion* suggests that the bulk of Dawkins's research was conducted not within the august halls of Oxford's Bodleian Library, but through Google.) Additionally, evidence unfavorable to New Atheism's claims is largely ignored. Eagleton complains that

in a book of almost four hundred pages, [Dawkins] can scarcely bring himself to concede that a single human benefit has flowed from religious faith, a view which is as *a priori* improbable as it is empirically false.

Other evidence is misrepresented or distorted so as to constitute, as Oxford professor Alister McGrath puts it, "little more than an aggregation of convenient factoids suitably overstated to achieve maximum impact and loosely arranged to suggest that they constitute an argument." This is illustrated by Dawkins's characterization of the biblical account of Noah as "derived from the Babylonian myth of Utanapishtim," as though this were a verifiable fact for which there is some actual record. Real historians theorize about such influences; they don't state them as facts. But even if all of the borrowings between religious texts were proven true, such a finding would no more disprove the existence of God than would Dawkins's and Harris's borrowings from the biologist J.ÊB.ÊS. Haldane disprove the existence of Dawkins and Harris.

One wouldn't expect arguments built on such flimsy foundations to be strongÑand they're not. Reading the New Atheists, says ThomasÊA. Provenzola, a professor of philosophy and theology at Liberty University, is like entering "a candy store of logical fallacies," because their work is characterized by "simple fallacies of logic and inconsistencies that are repeated line upon line, precept upon precept."

Douglas Wilson's book *Letter to a Christian Citizen* is extremely insightful in exposing such structural problems with Sam Harris's arguments. It points out, for example, that denying the existence of God on the basis of evil done in his name is akin to arguing "that there is no such thing as the Federal Reserve because of a rise in counterfeiting."

Faith-Based Conclusions

The New Atheists seem willfully blinded to the fact that even their conclusions are faith-based. In his review of *The God Delusion* for *The New York Review of Books,* evolutionary geneticist H.ÊAllen OrrÑwho expresses admiration for Dawkins's work in evolutionary biologyÑattributes Dawkins's weakness in philosophical reasoning to his having a "preordained set of conclusions at

which he's determined to arrive"Ñan approach more characteristic of the religious fundamentalist than the pure scientist. In response to Sam Harris's claim that Jesus was not raised from the dead, Wilson points out that such certainty stems from Harris's pre-existing conclusions about the nature of the universe and not from the fact that Harris was "in the room with Peter when he started talking to his invisible friend."

Furthermore, the success of the New Atheists comes largely because they "operate on the faith that their audience is not aware of sophisticated arguments," explains Provenzola:

The New Atheists seem to have more of a flair for archeology than for their own materialistic naturalism. They seem fascinated by the artifacts and relics of theistic arguments that have long gone by the wayside, unaware of the evolution of evidential arguments for the existence of God that have dominated the philosophy of religion over the past three decades. The New Atheists suffer from a kind of "selective evolution," aware of recent developments in biological evolution but seemingly oblivious to the fact that their musings are replete with the sedimentary deposits of the past.

Unfortunately, most people of faith are likewise unaware of sophisticated arguments; na•ve teenyboppers such as my niece aren't the only ones seduced by the New Atheists. I was introduced to New Atheism when a student of mine asked me to meet with her and her boyfriend to discuss doubts they were having about their Christian faith. Nothing had prepared me for the volley of questions, accusations, and distortions that the two of them fired at me one morning at the local StarbucksÑall straight from the New Atheists, but genuinely posed to me by two bright, articulate, and earnest young people who had been raised in the church and educated in Christian schools. Yet, in all those years, they had never been faced with the questions raised by the New Atheists. Thus, they had never been faced with the answers to those questions either.

Having eventually worked through some of these issues, one of the students now considers himself a theist, though he remains uncommitted to his former Christian faith. Looking back at his bout with atheism, he reflects,

I was raised in the church, went three times a week, went to private Christian schools, was active in youth ministry at my church, went to conferences, took nearly ten bible courses, read my bible, and attended bible study regularly for several years, and yet New Atheism sucked me in. As sad as it is, I think that the New Atheists say a whole lot more about the state and culture of modern Christianity than they do about themselves. As crazy as it may sound, the evidence that they put forward (as weak as it is) was intellectually much stronger than anything I had encountered in the Christian church.

If the New Atheists are building their case based on popular misconceptions of religious belief, then clearly part of the problem is the way that these beliefs are popularly understood and expressed by those who hold them.

(Not So) New Atheism

While new in terms of its widespread influence (as well as in its claim to moral superiority), there's not much else new in the New Atheism. Its more philosophical claims (which are fewer than all the hoopla would make it appear) are largely recycled from earlier skeptics and agnostics such as David Hume, Sigmund Freud, and Thomas Huxley. Indeed, Orr says that the arguments of *The God Delusion* "are those of any bright student who has thumbed through Bertrand Russell's more popular books and who has, horrified, watched videos of holy rollers."

Furthermore, many of its arguments are recycled one from another; one finds repeated claims against the existence of God based on the exorbitant number of species of beetles in the world, misinterpretations of Blaise Pascal's famous wager on the existence of God, andÑnaturallyÑthe evils perpetrated in the name of religion over the course of human history. (The evils over the course of human history perpetrated in the name of greed, lust, ambition, politics, envy, pride, and covetousness are largely overlooked.)

But even more significant than what's old about the New Atheism is that atheism is not really what's at its core. Rather, atheism is merely the fruit of an underlying worldview of Darwinism, naturalism, and materialism. What each of these has in common is the rejection of any belief, claim, or explanation that relies on anything beyond empirical evidence; all knowledge is explained in natural, material, and physical terms: origins, adaptations, cognition, emotion, and even religious belief. Taken to their logical extremes, Darwinism, naturalism, and materialism lead to scientism, the belief that true knowledge comes only through data that is observable, repeatable, and verifiable. Nothing beyond the empirical, material, and natural realm can make a valid claim on human experience.

Thus, because they put no stock in the evidence of something as intangible as, say, human tradition, the New Atheists see no distinction between the equally invisible "Great JuJu at the Bottom of the Sea" and the God of Abraham. This is a hyper-modernist materialism, expressed starkly by Hitchens in *god Is Not Great* when he proclaims (with a straight face) that "thanks to the telescope and the microscope, [religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important." Apparently, all I ever really needed to know I learned in ninth-grade Earth Science.

Real atheism looks quite different from the New Atheism, as illustrated by one of the most infamousÑand honestÑatheists of all time, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is best known for his 1882 proclamation that "God is dead." But less known is how thoroughly Nietzsche followed through with the implications of this statement. The inevitable consequences of the "death of God" are outlined by Nietzsche in his 1888 book *The Anti-Christ:*

What is good? All that enhances the feeling of Power, the Will to Power, and power itself in man. What is bad? All that proceeds from weakness.Ê.Ê.Ê. The weak and the botched shall perish: first principle of our humanity. And they ought even to be helped to perish. What is more harmful than any vice? Practical sympathy with all the botched and the weakÑChristianity.

This is the sort of atheism that could inspire a Hitler, what Haught calls "hard-core" atheism. But the New Atheists recoil at the sort of amorality required by the consistent atheism of Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre, and others. With the New Atheists, says Mohler, we get instead a "cultural cheerfulness" that is "perplexing."

The New Atheists want to reject God, not the things of God; even their desire to rid the world of religious belief is advanced in the name of transcendent values: benevolence, compassion, goodness, and morality. So as Wilson indicates, when Sam Harris opens *Letter to a Christian Nation* with moral outrage over the prospect of the rape of a child, the lesson of the story is not, as Harris claims, the alleged futility of her parents' prayers, but rather the fact that Harris claims moral outrage at the same time that he rejects any source of absolute morality.

While the New Atheist "rails against God, denying us any transcendent point of reference," explains Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias, "he fully embraces God's life-defining prerogatives." It is what Wilson calls "sentimental" atheism. And it doesn't sound at all like the death of God as pronounced by atheists of days gone by; it sounds rather more like the kids sending God out on a Caribbean cruise and having a party at his house while he's gone. In other words, the New Atheists want to have their cake and eat it, too. •