

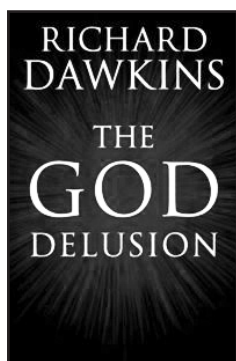
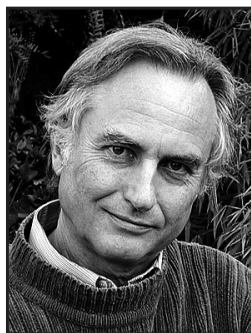
The new atheism: why?

by Greg Clarke

Does it strike anyone else as strange that atheism is such big news? After all, most people in most cultures at most times in history have believed that there is a God, or at least gods. Atheism has never been a majority position. Furthermore, I rarely hear discussion of atheism outside of university circles or their media equivalents (that is, late night radio programmes for ‘thinkers’). So why are there now four books about atheism sitting in the Top 10 non-fiction lists in last weekend’s newspapers?

Has atheism acquired the fascination that often accompanies ‘marginal’ views? Or are there broader reasons for its current appeal? Before offering my 10 theses on the flurry of interest in atheism, it will be worthwhile introducing some of the key players in recent public discussions.

Most prominent is Professor Richard Dawkins, Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford. Dawkins is a well-known science writer and academic biologist whose doctoral research was on the pecking behaviour of chickens! He rose to prominence following the publication of his book, *The Selfish Gene*, where he argued that we need to oppose our remorseless genes in order for the human race to flourish. His recent book is *The God Delusion*, in which he presents a spray of arguments, anecdotes and opinions

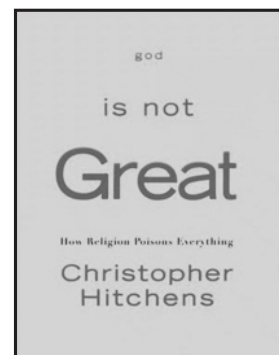


regarding the malevolence and foolishness of religion. These are, in brief: none of the traditional philosophical arguments for God’s existence seems to work; there is an argument against God’s existence that does work (called the argument from improbability); Darwin’s theory of evolution really can explain the entire universe; religions are simply cultural clusters of information

(‘memes’) that evolve in the same way as genes, and; morality has no basis in theism and the Bible in particular leads to great immorality, oppression and unhappiness. Dawkins’s book has missionary aims: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down” (p.5).

Daniel C. Dennett, a cognitive scientist, is responsible for a more specialised but no less aggressive book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. His argument is that evolutionary biology will eventually show us that human religiosity arose because of a cognitive adaptation that saw advantage in explaining things that were mysterious to us by appeal to an ‘agent’ of some sort, leading us to the belief in a God. Dennett admits that this hypothesis has no scientific foundation, but seems to think that by naming it as a possibility he has debunked religion.

The journalist and infamous alcoholic, Christopher Hitchens, adds his personal condemnation of religion in *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. This book explores religion at its worst, railing further against everything on Dawkins’s hate-list, but also condemning Eastern religions (for their irrationality). Like Dawkins, Hitchens is most interested in circumscribing what the ‘Good Life’ looks like sans God; unlike Dawkins, Hitchens does appreciate some of what religion has given to culture.¹



Sam Harris is the youngest of these writers, penning *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*

while an American graduate student in neuroscience. We might summarise his approach as a call to replace religion with a common-sense kind of reason (which has no place for revealed truths) and the sort of love found in Eastern spirituality. Theology he considers to be “a branch of human ignorance”, while reason is “nothing less than the guardian of love”.

Finally, there is Michel Onfray, a French intellectual whose first book was about the eating habits of philosophers. His current book is *The Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*. By far the most philosophically expansive of these books, Onfray nevertheless offers a standard nihilistic critique of religion, one that would do Nietzsche and Bataille proud. Religion is pleasureless, violent, controlling and repressive. Furthermore, most beliefs held in most religions are false, says Onfray, as he states that Jesus probably never existed. Onfray is adamant that atheism is the new faith, and should have its own traditions, too.

One Australian newspaper reviewer found all of this hard to take, summarising his review of the book with the words, "its covers were too far apart".²

As promised, I have 10 brief thoughts on the subject, some of them reasons for the phenomenon of new atheism and some simply Christian reflections on it, and I look forward to the further thoughts of *Thinkpiece* readers (director@mcsi.edu.au):

1. *Post September 11, there is a critique of religion taking place that is quite healthy and ought to be encouraged.* Some of the attacks on fundamentalism in these books are entirely justified. There are versions of religious belief that are not defensible in doctrine or practice, and we should admit it unblinkingly. And the issue of the public influence of religion in secular, pluralist societies is very important to Christians.

2. *There are plenty of behaviours of which Christians are not proud.* Many of the actions attributed to religious people in these books (such as child abuse) would or should never be considered acceptable behaviour by Christians. Let's repent of such things.

3. *It is incredibly naïve to think that atheism would cause people to lead better lives.* These books insist that removing religion will leave a residual goodness in people's attitudes and actions. The track record of atheism in the last 200 years suggests otherwise.

4. *Many of the values and ethics espoused by the new atheism are in fact parasitic on Judaism and Christianity.* Values such as humility, love of strangers and kindness do not just emerge universally – they have a history connected with the God of Israel.

5. *These writers are unwilling to engage with the best of Christian thinking, instead preferring dismissal by anecdote and appeal to the 'worst case'.* I look forward to seeing Dawkins v. Plantinga; Dennett v. Pannenberg; Onfray v. Swinburne (but I'm not holding my breath).

6. *If Christians adopted the same rhetoric towards atheists, they would be sued.* But we need not fight for the right to deride others! Rather, we must express our objections in love, patience, gentleness and self-control – 1 Corinthians 13 gives us the better way.

7. *The rise of atheism is not due to new evidence or new arguments against God or for unbelief.* We haven't discovered the 'God gene', or settled the problem of suffering against God, or anything like that. Dawkins does present one new argument for God's non-existence, based on the idea that a creator of an incredibly improbable universe would himself have to be even more improbable. But this fails when we consider that God is viewed in most orthodox theology as ontologically separate from and prior to the universe.

8. *We need to oppose the new atheist's idea that people 'grow out' of theism by making sure our understanding of Christianity grows at least at the same rate as the rest of our understanding of the world.* Too often, Christians leave their theological minds back in Sunday School while their scientific, economic, ethical and historical minds continue to grow and expand. We need to attend to this!

9. *Despite these books, it will remain rare to meet an atheist. The default human position seems to be that there is a divine being.* This is quite often a reasonable starting point for discussion: not "is there a God?" but "what is God like?"

10. *As with The Da Vinci Code, the current celebrity of atheism should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat.* Christians need to equip themselves to make the most of this arousal of people's interest in 'the God question', and be ready to give a reason for the hope we have.

¹ It was fascinating to discover that Peter Hitchens, Christopher's brother, is a Christian. See http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2007/06/the_certainty_d.html. Retrieved 11/5/7.

² <http://www.theage.com.au/news/book-reviews/the-atheist-manifesto/2007/05/25/1179601646002.html>. Retrieved 11/5/7.

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Dr Greg Clarke is the new Director of MCSI and co-director of a new initiative with Dr John Dickson for a city-based institute dedicated to the public understanding of Christianity. Greg was formerly the director of the Centre for Apologetic Scholarship and Education (CASE) based at New College, University of New South Wales. He has a doctorate in English Literature and publishes in the field of theology and culture. Greg is married to Amelia and they have three primary-age children. They live in Botany in Sydney's south-east. ■