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COMMENTARY

The New New Atheism

By **PETER BERKOWITZ**

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"There is nothing new under the sun," proclaims the Book of Ecclesiastes. The rise of the new new atheism confirms this ancient biblical wisdom.

Of course the famous words of Ecclesiastes should not be taken in a slavishly literal sense, a technique that is all-too-common among those who think they can refute belief in God by showing that the Bible abounds in demonstrably false and self-contradictory statements.

But one stunning new development under the sun is that promulgating atheism has become a lucrative business. According to a recent article in The Wall Street Journal, in less than 12 months atheism's newest champions have sold close to a million books. Some 500,000 hardcover copies are in print of Richard Dawkins's "The God Delusion" (2006); 296,000 copies of Christopher Hitchens's "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything" (2007); 185,000 copies of Sam Harris's "Letter to a Christian Nation" (2006); 64,100 copies of Daniel C. Dennett's "Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon"; and 60,000 copies of Victor J. Stenger's "God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows that God Does not Exist" (2007).




Profitability is not the only feature distinguishing today's fashionable disbelief from the varieties of atheism that have arisen over the millennia. Unlike the classical atheism of Epicurus and Lucretius, which rejected belief in the gods in the name of pleasure and tranquility, the new new atheism rejects God in the name of natural science, individual freedom and human equality. Unlike the Enlightenment atheism of the 18th century, which arose in a still predominantly religious society and which frequently went to some effort to disguise or mute its disbelief, the new new atheism proclaims its hatred of God and organized religion loudly and proudly from the rooftops. And unlike the anti-modern atheism of

Nietzsche and Heidegger, which regarded the death of God as a catastrophe for the human spirit, the new new atheism sees the loss of religious faith in the modern world as an unqualified good, lamenting only the perverse and widespread resistance to shedding once and for all the hopelessly backward belief in a divine presence in history.

So Messrs. Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and the rest have some fair claim to novelty. But not where

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it really counts. They contend that from the vantage point of the 21st century, and thanks to the moral progress of mankind and the achievements of natural science, we can now know, with finality and certainty, that God does not exist and organized religion is a fraud. The disproportion between the bluster and bravado of their rhetoric and the limitations of their major arguments is astonishing.

The case for the new new atheism has been restated most recently and most forcefully and wittily in "God Is Not Great" by my friend Mr. Hitchens. It must be said that Mr. Hitchens is simply incapable of uttering or writing a dull sentence. And it should be added that only a very daring or very foolish person would throw down the gauntlet on an issue so close to Mr. Hitchens's heart.

But his arguments do not come close to disproving God's existence or demonstrating that religion is irredeemably evil. Consider Mr. Hitchens's contention, elaborated at length and with gusto, that religion by its very nature compels people to behave cruelly and violently. According to Mr. Hitchens, religion educates children to hate nonbelievers, encourages grown-ups to engage in slaughter and conquest for God's greater glory, and obliges the "true believer" to restlessly circle the globe subduing peoples and nations until "the whole world bows the knee."

The bloody history of oppression and war undertaken on behalf of the gods and God, from time immemorial, makes all decent people shudder. But Mr. Hitchens knows perfectly well that human beings are not born in Rousseauian purity and freedom, and then made savage by the imposition of the chains of religion. Therefore, he should have asked whether and to what extent the varieties of religion have inflamed or rather disciplined humanity's powerful built-in propensity, attested to by social science, to fight and kill. But he didn't.

Such a question opens intriguing possibilities. Mr. Hitchens mocks the crudity of the biblical principle known in Latin as *lex talionis*, or an "eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot." But suppose, as Jewish teaching suggests, that the biblical principle put an end to the practice of taking a leg for a foot and a life for an eye, and in its place established a principle that, though differently interpreted today, remains a cornerstone of our notion of justice - that the punishment should fit the crime.

Similarly, Mr. Hitchens heaps scorn on the biblical story of Abraham's binding of Isaac, in which, at the last moment, an angel stays Abraham's hand. What kind of barbarian, wonders Mr. Hitchens, would prepare to sacrifice his son at God's command, and what kind of morally stunted individuals would honor such a man, or the deity who made the demand? Yet Mr. Hitchens's categorical claim that religion poisons everything is undermined by the common interpretation according to which God's testing of Abraham taught, among other things, that the then widespread practice of child-sacrifice was contrary to God's will, and must be put to an end forever.

At the same time, Mr. Hitchens has next to nothing to say about the historical role of religion, particularly Christianity, particularly in America, in nourishing the soil in which our widely and deeply shared beliefs in liberty, democracy and equality took root and grew strong -- a subject dealt with perceptively by Yale professor of computer science David Gelernter in his recent book "Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion."

Mr. Hitchens anticipates that critics will point to those crimes against humanity, dwarfing religion's sins, committed in the name of secular ideas in the 20th century. He attempts to deflect the challenge with sophistry: "It is interesting to find that people of faith now seek defensively to say that they are no worse than fascists or Nazis or Stalinists." But who is behaving defensively

here? Mr. Hitchens is the one who unequivocally insists that religion poisons everything, and it is Mr. Hitchens who holds out the utopian hope that eradicating it will subdue humanity's evil propensities and resolve its enduring questions.

Nor is his case bolstered by his observation that 20th-century totalitarianism took on many features of religion. That only brings home the need to distinguish, as Mr. Hitchens resolutely refuses to do, between authentic and corrupt, and just and unjust, religious teachings. And it begs the question of why the 20th-century embrace of secularism unleashed human depravity of unprecedented proportions.

Even were he to concede that religion doesn't poison everything, Mr. Hitchens presumably still would cling to his claim that the findings of modern science prove that God does not exist. Thanks to the knowledge we have attained of how the natural order actually operates -- in particular the discoveries of Charles Darwin and modern physics -- he concludes that "all attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule."

This conclusion, however, contradicts that of the late Stephen Jay Gould, to whom Mr. Hitchens himself refers as a "great paleontologist" and whose authority he invokes in support of the proposition that randomness is an essential feature of evolution. Noting surveys that showed that half of all scientists are religious, Gould commented amusingly that "Either half my colleagues are enormously stupid, or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs -- and equally compatible with atheism."

These lines are quoted in "The Dawkins Delusion," by Alistair McGrath, who holds a doctorate in molecular biology from Oxford, where he is now professor of historical theology, and by his wife Joanna Collicutt McGrath, who studied experimental psychology at Oxford and is currently a lecturer in the psychology of religion at the University of London. According to the McGraths, Gould was correct to think that both conventional religious belief and atheism are compatible with natural science, in part because "there are many questions that by their very nature must be recognized to lie beyond the legitimate scope of the scientific method." Such questions -- toward which the mind naturally wanders, though it is susceptible to ambush by the crude scientism of which Mr. Hitchens occasionally avails himself -- include: Where did the universe come from, and is it governed by purpose?

As for his claim that the Bible abounds in falsehood and contradiction, Mr. Hitchens makes great sport with an old straw man. Yes, traditions teach that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, yet the Pentateuch refers to Moses in the third person and tells the story of his death. Yes, Matthew and Luke disagree on the Virgin Birth and the genealogy of Jesus. And so on. The literalness of Mr. Hitchens's readings would put many a fundamentalist to shame.

However, isolating the supposed religious significance of the Bible from the communities and interpretive traditions that have elaborated its teaching is invalid. It is like deriving the meaning of the Constitution today by reading its provisions without reference to "The Federalist Papers," which provides authoritative commentary on its principles; without reference to the two centuries of cases and controversies through which the Supreme Court has sought to construe its meaning; and without reference to the two centuries of experience through which the American people have sought to put the institutional framework it outlines into practice.

In making his case that reason must regard faith as an enemy to be wiped out, Mr. Hitchens declares Socrates's teaching that knowledge consists in knowing one's ignorance to be "the

definition of an educated person." And yet Mr. Hitchens shows no awareness that his atheism, far from resulting from skeptical inquiry, is the rigidly dogmatic premise from which his inquiries proceed, and that it colors all his observations and determines his conclusions.

Mr. Hitchens is by far the most erudite and entertaining of the new new atheists. But his errors and his excesses are shared by the whole lot. And these errors and excesses have pernicious political consequences, amplifying invidious distinctions among fellow citizens and obscuring crucial differences among believers world wide.

Playing into the anger and enmities that debase our politics today, the new new atheism blurs the deep commitment to the freedom and equality of individuals that binds atheists and believers in America. At the same time, by treating all religion as one great evil pathology, today's bestselling atheists suppress crucial distinctions between the forms of faith embraced by the vast majority of American citizens and the militant Islam that at this very moment is pledged to America's destruction.

Like philosophy, religion, rightly understood, has a beginning in wonder. The most wonderful of creatures are human beings themselves. Of all the Bible's sublime and sustaining teachings, none is more so than the teaching that explains that humanity is set apart because all human beings -- woman as well as man the Bible emphasizes -- are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

That a teaching is sublime and sustaining does not make it true. But that, along with its service in laying the moral foundations in the Western world for the belief in the dignity of all men and women -- a belief that our new new atheists take for granted and for which they provide no compelling alternative foundation -- is reason enough to give the variety of religions a fair hearing. And it is reason enough to respect believers as decent human beings struggling to make sense of a mysterious world.

Mr. Berkowitz, a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, teaches at George Mason University School of Law.

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