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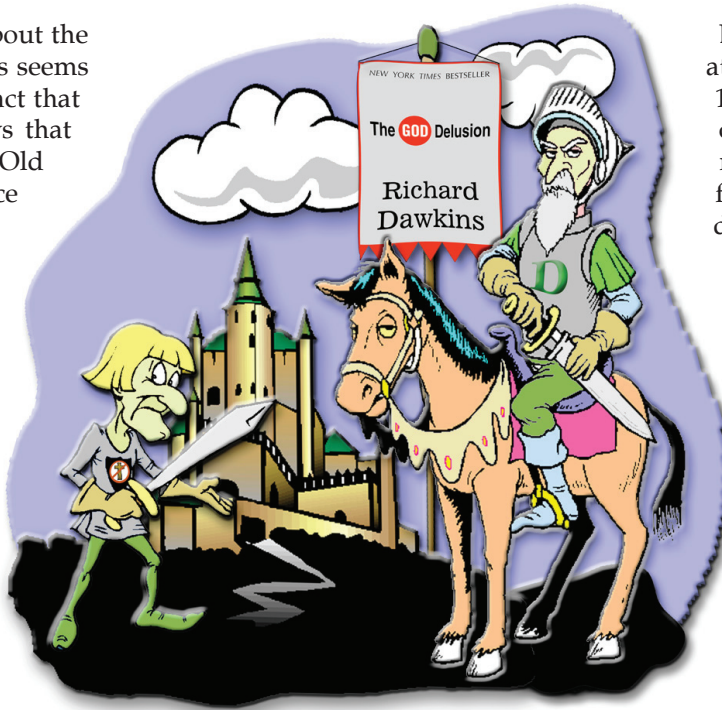
The Godless Crusade of the New Atheism

Understanding the Militant Anti-Theistic Movement of the 21st Century

by Gary E. Gilley

There is much buzz lately about the so-called "New Atheism." This seems to be an odd term given the fact that there are not very many ways that a person can spin atheism. Old Atheism denied the existence of God and New Atheism does the same.

It is true that practical atheism can be traced throughout history. Psalm 14:1 speaks of such a man, termed a fool, who says in his heart, "There is no God." Most see this fool not as a philosophical atheist who mentally denies the existence of God, but as one who lives as if God does not exist, even though intellectually he knows better. Of course, the practical atheist is far more common than those who adopt atheism as a worldview. Most people, especially in the Western world, give God a nod — 80 percent of Americans say they believe in God — then go about living their lives as if He did not exist.



Biblically speaking, the issue of atheism is problematic. Romans 1:18-23 indicates that God made creation to be a constant reminder of His existence. That a few deny this evidence does not diminish the fact that to some degree they know better. And Romans 2:15 confirms what we already know to be true: God has placed in the hearts of each of us a moral standard. His fingerprints are found on our conscience.

A human is not just another mammal; we are different; we bear the marks of the image of God and on some level even self-avowed atheists know this to be true. But such is the hardening of the
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heart and the blinding power of the evil one that some can turn their backs on what they intuitively know to be true and create a worldview that eliminates God altogether. That New Atheism is gaining traction among many such people is evidenced by the sales of this genre of books and the attention afforded its leaders. More of this in a moment, but first let's turn to Old Atheism for a backdrop.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN + FOUR MORE

Albert Mohler identifies Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud as what he calls the "four horsemen" of Old Atheism.¹ These nineteenth-century men have had an incredible impact on modern society as each of them shaped his respective field around atheistic views: Nietzsche influenced philosophy and is sort of a poster boy today for many postmodernists; Marx changed how much of the world understood society and government; Darwin rewrote the scientific textbooks; and Freud redefined the human mind. It would be hard to find anyone in the Western world who has had more influence on how we think and live today than these four men. Each of them, including his body of work and influence, was largely the product of his denial of the existence of God.

Friedrich Nietzsche might be worth a little attention as he is representative of the views of Old Atheism. Nietzsche is famous for his statement, "God is dead." By that Nietzsche was not so much saying that God actually lived at one point and had died, but that God was no longer needed by society. There was apparently a time when a belief in God was necessary in order to bring about moral order within the human race, but it was now time for people to grow up and move on.

Once accepted that God was dead, there would inevitably be an adjustment period that would prove painful for mankind, but ultimately something

far better would emerge. Nietzsche knew, however, that with the loss of an Absolute would come nihilism and despair. Without God where would humans find their reason to live, their purpose, their foundation for morals and values?

Nietzsche took this problem seriously and worked to replace God with what he called the "will to power." Once God was disposed of, men could finally stop wasting time on religion and turn to self-development and to the value of the world itself. Nietzsche believed that the shadows of God would linger for a long time, possibly even thousands of years as the transition from a theistic based world to an atheistic one would be painful. Nevertheless this transition must be completed for the good of all. Still, in Nietzsche, as with most of those representing Old Atheism, there is a sense of loss. Nietzsche is right; despair is hard to shake if there is no God. As a result, Nietzsche, and many other early atheists, lived with unresolved tension between their philosophical systems, which denied God, and the actual reality of living in a universe which seemed to need God to survive and have purpose.

Fast forward to the New Atheism and, according to Mohler, its four horsemen: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.² These men claim to have moved beyond the nihilism of a godless universe and are living Nietzsche's dream: framing the world around the creation — which of course has no creator — rather than around the Creator Himself.

The new four horsemen are thrilled with their beliefs and eager to spread their atheistic gospel. They want converts and they are aggressively taking their message to the masses in popular, easy to digest lectures, books, and articles. Richard Dawkins makes clear his intention when he writes early in his book *The God Delusion*, "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."³

This evangelistic fervor has gone mainstream in some places. For

example, the American Humanist Association launched an ad campaign for Christmas 2008 in Washington, D.C., in which signs were placed on buses that read, "Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness sake."⁴ In Britain a similar campaign, orchestrated by the British Humanist Association, placed messages on London buses stating, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy life."⁵ These groups define humanism as "a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism, affirms our responsibility to lead ethical lives of value to self and humanity."⁶ This is the "good news" the New Atheists want the world to hear.

MAJOR THEMES WITHIN NEW ATHEISM

If the New Atheists want followers, how are they packaging their gospel to attract disciples? Dawkins, the best known of this new breed of atheists, is a good example.

They attack Christianity. While atheism is the denial of any form of theism, it is Christianity which is largely in its sights. Perhaps this is because Dawkins and company know that the majority of their readers will most likely live in Christian cultures, or perhaps it is because Christianity presents the most formidable argument against their view. At any rate, Dawkins reserves his most venomous attacks for the God of the Bible. He states:

"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."⁷

And the God of the New Testament fares no better — perhaps worse. Even though the God of the New Testament seems a bit more admirable than that of the Old Testament, Dawkins suggests:

“...there are other teachings in the New Testament that no good person should support. I refer especially to the central doctrine of Christianity: that of ‘atone-ment’ for ‘original sin.’ This teaching, which lies at the heart of New Testament theology, is almost as morally obnoxious as the story of Abraham setting out to barbecue Isaac.”⁸

From the perspective of the New Atheists, the stories and teachings of the Bible reveal a God so odious as to be unbelievable.

Belief in God is silly. On a scale of one to seven, with one being 100% certainty in the existence of God and seven being 100% certainty that He does not exist, even Dawkins places himself at six, which technically makes him an agnostic rather than an atheist. However, before we say, “See! I told you so,” Dawkins explains himself, “I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden.”⁹ This seems to be the style of the New Atheists.

Lacking a good case, they resort to berating and ridiculing theists. Not only is belief in God on the same level as belief in fairies, but Dawkins dismisses out of hand the evidence presented by Christians throughout the ages. He doesn’t even interact in any meaningful way with the thoughts presented by Aquinas and others, implying that such arguments are unworthy of discussion and not taken seriously by anyone today.¹⁰

Only the teleological argument — that design implies a designer — gets any attention at all and that cursory. Yet, a person hiking through the wilderness of Alaska who finds a fire ring will most certainly assume that someone had camped in that spot and arranged 20 or so stones in a circle, not that it evolved over millions of years. It is amazing that people who would see a designer behind a fire ring can so casually dismiss a designer behind the universe, but such is the mindset of the atheist.

Dawkins’ best retort to the teleological argument seems to be that, if God designed the universe, then who designed God? Unable to unravel this question to his satisfaction, Dawkins concludes that the teleological argument is lame.¹¹

Recent and respected theists — those not subject to chasing fairies around the garden — are similarly dismissed. Of C.S. Lewis’ argument that Jesus must have either been a liar, lunatic, or Lord, Dawkins simply says, “[Lewis] should have known better.”¹² Dawkins suggests that Jesus could have been sincerely mistaken instead. However, it seems to me that such a “mistake” would have placed our Savior firmly in the lunatic category (as Lewis suggests), just as we would place any of our acquaintances making such a claim. No normal person mistakenly thinks he is God.

Dawkins furthers his argument by stating that theistic scientists are either deluded or senile or out of touch with the research. After all, of the scientists who are members of the National Academy of Sciences, only seven percent believe in a personal God.¹³

Natural selection to the rescue. Side-stepping for the moment the issue of who created God, both theists and atheists are left with the question of who or what created everything around us. Theists of any stripe would look to a deity powerful enough to form the universe out of nothing. The atheist, rejecting such a deity, must find something as powerful as God which nevertheless remains impersonal. That something is natural selection. Over and over in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins turns to natural selection as the savior of his system:

“Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that — an illusion.”¹⁴

Dawkins is very sensitive to the charge that natural selection is just a glorified version of luck and chance. Responding to the accusation that the probability of life originating on earth apart from God is as likely as a hurricane sweeping through a scrapyard and forming a Boeing 747, Dawkins retorts:

“This, in a nutshell, is the creationist’s favourite argument — an argument that could be made only by somebody who doesn’t understand the first thing about natural selection: somebody who thinks natural selection is a theory of chance whereas — in the relevant sense of chance — it is the opposite.”¹⁵

If natural selection is not a theory of chance, exactly what is it? For one thing, “Natural selection not only explains the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance.”¹⁶ This sounds like random chance, although Dawkins is ready to explain:

“What is it that makes natural selection succeed as a solution to the problem of improbability, where chance and design both fail at the starting gate? The answer is that natural selection is a cumulative process, which breaks the problem of improbability up into small pieces. Each of the small pieces is slightly improbable, but not prohibitively so. When large numbers of these slightly improbable events are stacked up in series, the end product of the accumulation is very very improbable indeed, improbable enough to be far beyond the reach of chance. It is these end products that form the subjects of the creationist’s wearisomely recycled argument. The creationist completely misses the point, because he ... insists on treating the genesis of statistical improbability as a single, one-off event. He doesn’t understand the power of *accumulation*.”¹⁷

The argument then is that the end product — say a tree, or an animal, or a woman, or a Boeing 747 — would not be possible if it were a “single, one-off event.” A single random act of creation is beyond the possibility of chance, but if the end product is the result of a multitude of random acts of creation, each building on the last, then virtually anything is possible. The *magic*, if we could call it that, lies in the “power of accumulation.” Dawkins accuses the creationist of being someone who “doesn’t understand the first thing about natural selection: somebody who thinks natural selection is a theory of chance,” but it seems that the creationist understands all too well the theory behind natural selection.

Whether creation is a “one-off” chance action, or an accumulation of millions of acts of chance (per created object), it is still chance. And by atheistic definition and necessity, natural selection must be unguided acts of chance because there is no God residing in the universe. Of course, the evolutionist believes that natural selection is not entirely random and will always, eventually, produce a better end product, but to hold to such a belief the atheist must ascribe to natural selection the very attributes that it denies for God: omniscience and omnipotence. To the atheist, natural selection, with its power of accumulation chance theory, becomes his god.

Next up is the sticky issue of how life began. For even the most devoted evolutionist, the origin of life is virtually inexplicable. Natural selection cannot deliver the atheist in regard to origins because there was nothing originally to naturally select. Dawkins skirts the issue of the origin of organic material by complaining that it is harder to explain the existence of God than the eternal existence of matter. But once this premise is accepted, there is still no scenario under which life would form.

In response, Dawkins propounds a theory he calls the “Goldilocks zone.” That is, earth just happened to be situated in the universe at just the

perfect place at the perfect time (the Goldilocks zone) in “ways that singled it out for the evolution of life.”¹⁸

If this sounds a bit like luck, Dawkins ironically agrees. As a matter of fact, there apparently is a lot of luck floating around in the evolutionary pond. “Nevertheless, it may be,” Dawkins admits, “that the origin of life is not the only major gap in the evolutionary story that is bridged by sheer luck,”¹⁹ the origin of human type cells and consciousness are as well.

This element of luck does not diminish Dawkins’ faith in natural selection, for he is convinced “natural selection works because it is a cumulative one-way street to improvement. It needs some luck to get started, and the ‘billions of planets’ anthropic principle grants it that luck.”²⁰

Dawkins incredibly sees the luck factor necessary for natural selection as vastly superior to intellectual design of an omniscient Creator. As a matter of fact, he attributes the “amazing blindness” of theists to “the fact that many people have not had their consciousness raised, as biologists have, by natural selection and its power to tame improbability.”²¹ The arrogance in such a statement is self-evident, but such arrogance, in the final analysis, is all the atheists have.

Atheists are good people too. One of the strongest arguments by Christians against atheism is that atheism provides no foundation for decent and moral living. If God does not exist, then no final authority exists which can arbitrate between right and wrong. Additionally, there is no final judgment facing those who do evil. In light of these ideas, Christians often assume that atheists will ultimately and consistently live out the conclusions of their beliefs resulting in nihilism and anarchy.

Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, states, “How do we define ‘good’ if we don’t believe in God? God in his word, the Bible, tells us what’s good and bad

and right and wrong. If we are each ourselves defining what’s good, it’s going to be a crazy world.”²²

To this issue Dawkins devotes an entire chapter. His strongest rebuttal is that there does not exist any significant difference between the behavior of Christians and non-Christians.²³ Good behavior is ensured by our own selfish need to survive and the reciprocal altruism (“You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”²⁴) that natural selection has hot wired it into the human creature.

Dawkins then concludes that, “we do not need God in order to be good — or evil.”²⁵ The New Atheists have concluded they really have no need of God.

A DEFENSE OF THEISM

Fundamentally, the New Atheism is different from other forms of atheism, not in its beliefs, but in its joyful evangelistic zeal to smash all opposing views and establish Darwinian atheism as the one standing truth claim. It is an unapologetically modernistic approach in a supposed post-modern world, yet it is winning many adherents. For example, billboards were erected in November 2008 throughout Denver by an atheist group called Colorado Coalition of Reason. The billboards read, “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone.”²⁶

The New Atheism is aggressive and out for converts. It has declared outright war on all forms of theism in general and Christianity in particular. Some will be taken in by all the rhetoric, logic, and efforts by Dawkins and company, but upon closer examination it is discovered that their arguments don’t hold water; they leak at several points: scientifically, philosophically, and spiritually.

Scientifically. While Dawkins is an eminent professor at Oxford University and considered one of the most distinguished scientists in the world today, his book is faulted scientifically even by his own peers — both Christian and non-Christian.

Perhaps the most helpful critique from a Christian perspective is that of

Alister McGrath, himself an Oxford professor of historical theology and a fellow scientist with a degree in molecular biophysics. While McGrath respects Dawkins as a scientist (and sadly accepts some form of theistic evolution), he believes that, in attempting to propagate his atheistic views, Dawkins left the evidence of science at the door and launched into a fundamentalist rant. According to McGrath in his own book, *The Dawkins Delusion?*, Dawkins misrepresents his sources, stretches the facts, makes up unpersuasive pseudoscientific ideas to bolster his position, and in general simply does not prove his case.

Science, as Dawkins knows, cannot prove or disprove God. It can, however, examine the evidence and make various hypotheses. Given the evidence, which hypothesis best makes sense of all we see and observe around us:

- The theory of evolution which teaches random chance, omniscient but impersonal natural selection, and a "Goldilocks zone" in which our planet, and life as we know it, formed?
- Or a Creator God who wisely brought all things into existence and placed in balance the highly complicated and integrated universe that we can study scientifically and enjoy physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

The New Atheists have placed their bets on natural selection and evolutionary theory, but they know these things cannot be verified. Dawkins even admits that Darwinism, as he understands it today, may radically change and may even be disproven in the future. He writes, "new facts may come to light which will force our successors ... to abandon Darwinism or modify it beyond recognition."²⁷ Yet Dawkins gamely clings tightly to his evolutionary theories and belittles anyone he considers foolish enough, or deluded enough, to believe in God.

Atheists are placing their faith in a theory that they can reasonably be certain will not be the same a hun-

dred years from now, while Christians place their faith in a God who claims to be the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Ultimately, the New Atheists' rejection of God is not scientific, it is philosophical and spiritual.

Philosophically. Alister McGrath further claims that, "*The God Delusion* is a work of theater rather than scholarship — a fierce, rhetorical assault on religion and passionate plea for it to be banished to the lunatic fringes of society, where it can do no harm."²⁸ He is not alone; even Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton attacks Dawkins for his naïve view that Christians live by blind faith void of evidence. He writes:

Atheists are placing their faith in a theory that they can reasonably be certain will not be the same a hundred years from now, while Christians place their faith in a God who claims to be the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

"Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology. ... For mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always played an integral role in belief."²⁹

Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga challenges Dawkins' basic understanding of philosophical and theological issues involving theism. In rather demeaning words, Plantinga states, "Why, you might say that some of his forays into philosophy are at best sophomoric, but that would be unfair to sophomores."³⁰

The New Atheist has accepted by faith — blind or otherwise — that God does not exist, that the universe has no design or purpose, and that natural selection reigns supreme. This leads to spiritual implications that will be discussed later, but for now we need to think carefully about the evidence. Neither the atheist nor the theist can prove scientifically that God exists — both must express faith to a certain degree. Nevertheless, both must come to their conclusions based upon an examination of the evidence that they have before them.

The atheist attempts to take the high ground here, claiming that science is on his side for, after all, according to Dawkins, as stated earlier, only about

seven per cent of scientists in the National Academy of Sciences believe in a personal God.³¹

But another well-known survey of scientists in 1997 found that 40 percent believed in God, 40 percent did not, and 20 percent were uncertain.³² The difference, as with many surveys, seems to be in how the questions were presented. Nevertheless, the point is well made: Even scientists, handling the same physical evidence, come to different conclusions about the existence of God. It cannot simply be assumed that some scientists are stupid and others are smart.

Apparently, the evidence is not a slam-dunk for Darwinism even among scientists, as the New Atheists

would have us believe. Nor is the evidence of God as weak as Dawkins and company would conjecture. While Dawkins dismisses out of hand the time-honored evidence for the existence of God, Alvin Plantinga, perhaps the most influential Christian apologist and philosopher alive today, believes there are two or three dozen good arguments for the existence of God.³³

These include the fact that something exists rather than nothing, the probability of the universe being so perfectly fine-tuned that humans can exist, the regularity of nature, that purpose exists in the heart of mankind, and so forth. Some of these arguments are closely aligned to the historical arguments that Dawkins debunks without engagement, but that have been rethought and updated by some of Christianity's best thinkers.

Apologist William Lane Craig has written a book on this subject (*Reasonable Faith*) and summarizes some of his arguments in a recent article.³⁴ For example, the cosmological argument is based on the observation that everything that exists has a cause or explanation for its existence and the most plausible cause is God.

The moral argument asserts that the very existence and recognition of moral values (which even most atheists accept) are powerful clues that one exists who has ordained moral values. And the teleological argument — that a design requires a designer — is still a powerful piece of evidence for those who approach the clues with an open mind. The modern debate surrounding this argument focuses on the fine-tuning of the universe that allows life as we know it — what Dawkins calls the “Goldilocks zone.” The updated teleological argument has three premises:

- 1) The fine-tuning of the universe is due either to physical necessity, chance, or design.
- 2) It is not due to physical necessity or chance.
- 3) Therefore, it is due to design.

The first premise is just a list of the options. Premise number two is where most of the debate rages. Physical necessity seems impossible to accept and chance seems ridiculous in light of the complexity of the universe. If physical necessity and chance are dismissed as incredible that leaves design. But who is the designer? The most obvious conclusion is God.

Of course, this does not convince the New Atheists. Dawkins, it seems, would agree with all three premises, but concludes that the designer is natural selection. He examines the same evidence as the theists and concludes that natural selection — which he says is not blind chance — is the omniscient designer of the Cosmos. While he cannot prove this, Dawkins' standard response is that his faith in natural selection is more plausible than belief in God. But Dawkins' position runs counter to every observation in life. Nothing is created without a creator. Chance occurrences rarely produce anything of value and, when they do the outcome is simple, random, and non-recurring.

It is inconceivable to believe that the complexity found in virtually everything from cells to planets is the product of little more than billions of accidents over billions of years. Does faith placed in chance — and the bottom line is that natural selection is nothing more than chance — seem superior to belief in the existence of God? Both the atheist and the theist interact with the same information, yet they draw different conclusions because they begin with different presuppositions. This leads us directly into the spiritual issues involved.

Before we move to the spiritual dimension, and the most powerful argument for the existence of God, let's say a word about postmodernism. Because we are constantly being told that we live in a postmodern world, which does not reason from logic and is not interested in proofs and evidence, but rather focuses on the metaphysical, Christians are being told we should just share our story

and hold a conversation, as per the Emergent church. We are told that rational arguments simply won't work and are out of place. Our culture is postmodern only when it comes to religion and philosophy. When the rubber really meets the road, we are still highly modern people. William Lane Craig writes:

“In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unlivable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of *religion* and *ethics*. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism! That's just old-line verificationism, which held that anything you can't prove with your five senses is a matter of personal taste. We live in a culture that remains deeply modernist.”³⁵

It is interesting that the undeniably modernistic New Atheism has caught such a wave in our supposed postmodern culture. Perhaps the architects of postmodern Christianity (i.e., the emerging/emergent leaders) should take note.

Spiritually. Having said all of that, when we return to Scripture we see that the Lord always frames the rejection of God, either in total or in practice, as a spiritual matter. More than that, it is a rebellion against the clear evidence that God has placed in the world around us, as well as in our hearts.

Early atheism seemed to recognize that if you move God out of the equation, you leave a huge vacuum — actually more than one. Scientifically, the universe is left without a first cause — a Creator — and thus a new theory had to fill the gap, which evolution has attempted to do. But more primary, without God we are left with a spiritual and moral vacuum. If God does not exist, then why do right instead of wrong; why, for example, should we care for the weak and the poor instead of

exterminating them and thus freeing our society of the burden they produce?

This is actually a bit of a problem for Darwinism and its “survival of the fittest” axiom. If the strong bolster the gene pool and the weak diminish it then, according to the evolutionary theory, pouring resources into the survival of the weak is counterproductive to the existence of the human race. And if there is not a moral absolute in the form of God to regulate the conduct of human nature, then no one can say that race genocide or starvation of the poor or murder of the disabled is wrong. Ultimately a society devoid of God will come to such conclusions, as has been seen in communistic countries such as China and the former Soviet Union.

One of the things that distinguishes older forms of atheism from New Atheism is that early atheism recognized these facts and lamented, while New Atheism rejects them and rejoices. For example, Jean Paul Sartre, in his existential novel *Nausea*, tells the tale of a man who finally comes to grips with the idea that nothing we do really matters for the very reason that *we* do not really matter. Sartre’s summary of life is, “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance.”³⁶

It is the goal of the novel to prove this thesis, therefore Sartre, through the fictional character Antoine Roquentin, systematically examines everything from religion to education to work to love and pronounces them all meaningless. When Roquentin looks inside himself, he finds nothing. From this comes his despair; everything is absurd. He is an accident, a product of chance, and therefore nothing matters.

Similarly, Albert Camus in his novel *The Fall* writes about a man who watched a woman drown and did nothing to save her. In his atheistic philosophy, he could see no advantage for this woman to either live or die and, because attempting to save

her could endanger his own life, he simply ignored her and went home. But something deep inside would not leave him alone. The guilt began to eat away at his conscience. Intellectually he could discern no reason for this awful remorse, but his heart simply would not give him peace. Still, the experience did not change him or bring him to God. Instead he was able to frame the whole incident as inconsequential because of his philosophy of life informed him that nothing really matters.³⁷

Because the older atheists “suppress[ed] the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18) by ignoring the outer witness of natural revelation (Romans 1:18-20) and the inner witness of conscience (Romans 2:14-15), God seemingly “gave them over” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) to despair, or at least a grave sense of loss.

When the New Atheists do the same thing, God is seemingly giving them over to a sense of euphoria and intellectual blindness. In an interview with a friend, Richard Dawkins talks to him about people not having any purpose if God does not exist. His friend retorts, “Well I don’t think we’re *for* anything. We’re just products of evolution. You can say, “Gee, your life must be pretty bleak if you don’t think there’s a purpose.” But I’m anticipating having a good lunch.”³⁸

And Dawkins happily confirms that they did have a good lunch. Where the older atheists were driven closer to despair over lack of purpose, the New Atheists are content with a good lunch — and would recommend you have one too. The issues haven’t changed much, but the mood has.

Dawkins may joyfully accept that man has no real purpose, yet he accepts and seems compelled to explain why people have a disposition toward religion and moral behavior without the existence of a personal God. Believing, as he does, that Darwinian evolution targets and eliminates waste, and that “Knowing that we are products of Darwinian evolution, we should ask what pressure or pressures exerted by natural selection

originally favoured the impulse to religion. ... Religion is so wasteful, so extravagant; and Darwinian selection habitually targets and eliminates waste.”³⁹ Religion just does not make sense to an evolutionist.

Dawkins concludes that, “Some religious ideas, like some genes, might survive because of absolute merit”⁴⁰ — that is, they somehow help our species to survive. “There are circumstances — not particularly rare — in which genes ensure their own selfish survival by influencing organisms to behave altruistically.”⁴¹ That is, moral notions and behavior, sometimes stemming from religious ideas, are nothing more than the outworking of our selfish genes which natural selection has provided for us so that we will survive as a species.

This places the New Atheists on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, we are accidents of nature; on the other, we are creatures with morals and values. The late atheistic thinker Stephen Jay Gould wrote:

“We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available. ... We may yearn for a ‘higher’ answer — but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct answers for ourselves.”⁴²

Because there is no higher answer to why we are here, and because our very existence is accidental, then why do we have this sense of right and wrong and why do we often act out this moral obligation? The atheist must invent a theory in which unselfish and altruistic people survived in greater numbers and so perpetuated their unselfish genes. Yet even the atheists get lost in their own arguments. Dawkins, as we have seen,

believes we survive due to our “selfish genes.”

According to this view, selfish genes somehow created unselfish behavior which has allowed morally skewed people to multiply. Even more problematic is that no one can explain where and how these genes (whether selfish or unselfish) originated in the first humans. When the evolutionist looks at nature, he cannot help but recognize that it is a ruthless, violent place. The strong prey on the weak; life is unfair; pain and fear often rule. But the same evolutionist, at least of the New Atheists’ variety, recognizes that it is wrong for humans to behave in the same way as all other creatures in nature behave.

They concoct strange and convoluted theories to get around the obvious. How much better does the biblical account explain what we obviously observe around us and in us. The Apostle Paul provides a reminder of what we already know, “because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:19-20).

The New Atheists, many of whom are scientists and have looked deeply into our created universe, have chosen to reject what they have clearly seen and observed in nature and in their own hearts (“professing to be wise”), and in the process “they became fools” (Romans 1:22). Whenever mankind chooses not to honor God or give thanks, they suffer the fate of futile speculations and a foolish and darkened heart (Romans 1:21). Nowhere is this more evident than with the New Atheists, who have refused to bow the knee before the Almighty Creator and have suffered the fate of being given over by Him to their idols (Romans 1:24-28).

Ultimately the issues surrounding the New Atheism are not scientific and they are not even philosophical; they are spiritual. In rejecting the “clearly seen” evidence of God, they

have reaped the consequences of foolish and darkened hearts predisposed to believe the lie.

CONCLUSION

One of the mystifying things about the New Atheism is that its cheerleaders are eager to make converts. We have to wonder why. It is one thing to believe that we, and the whole universe, are products of billions of little accidents governed by the apparently omniscient but impersonal power of natural selection, but why be so enthusiastic to destroy theism and spread your own ideas devoid of God? Could it be fear?

Atheists from Nietzsche to Marx have assured future generations that theism would die a natural death in due time. But now here we are decades later and religion is stronger than ever. It has not gone away and with the collapse of Communism and the renewed interest in Christianity in Africa and Latin America, atheism has been losing, not gaining, ground.

It is for this reason that Alister McGrath suggests that Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, the most influential book in the New Atheists’ arsenal, “seems more designed to reassure atheists whose faith is faltering than to engage fairly or rigorously with religious believers and others seeking for truth. ... It is this deep, unsettling anxiety about the future of atheism that explains the ‘high degree of dogmatism’ and ‘aggressive rhetorical style’ of this new secular fundamentalism. Fundamentalism arises when a worldview feels it is in danger, lashing out at its enemies when it fears its own future is threatened.”⁴³

Endnotes:

1. R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Atheism Remix, a Christian Confronts the New Atheists*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008, pg. 19.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 39.
3. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. Boston • New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008, pg. 28.
4. “Why Believe in a God?” Ad Campaign Launches on D.C. Buses,” Associated Press report posted on FOXNews.com, Nov. 12, 2008. Document available at: www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,450445,00.html.
5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*
7. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 284.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 74.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-103.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-186.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 117.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 126.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 188.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 138.
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 141.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 147, italic in original.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 163.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 168.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 169.
21. *Ibid.*, pg. 172.
22. “Why Believe in a God?” Ad Campaign Launches on D.C. Buses,” op. cit.
23. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 258.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 247.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 258.
26. Russell Haythorn, “Atheist Billboards to Debut During Holidays,” article posted on ABC 7 News Denver, Nov. 13, 2008. Document available at: www.thedenverchannel.com/news/17977308/detail.html.
27. Richard Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003, pg. 81.
28. Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007, pp. 96-97.*
29. Terry Eagleton, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28, No. 20, Oct. 19, 2006.
30. *Atheism Remix, a Christian Confronts the New Atheists*, op. cit., pg. 79.
31. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 126.
32. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*. New York: Dutton, 2008, pg. 89.
33. Lecture Notes by Alvin Plantinga, “Two Dozen (Or So) Theistic Arguments,” no date. Document available at: www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/two_dozen_or_so_theistic_arguments.pdf.
34. William Lane Craig, “God is Not Dead Yet,” *Christianity Today*, July 2008, pp. 22-27.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 26, italics in original.
36. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964, pg. 133.
37. Albert Camus, *The Fall*. New York: Vintage International, 1997, pp. 6-7.
38. *The God Delusion*, op. cit., pg. 126, italic in original.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 190.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 231.
41. *Ibid.*, pg. 247.
42. As quoted in *The Reason for God*, op. cit., pg. 36, ellipsis in original, quotation rendered in italics in source.
43. *The Dawkins Delusion?*, op. cit., pg. 96.