

Comments on the New Atheism

by Larry D. Paarmann

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The New Atheists have been in the news of late. According to the “New Atheism” entry in Wikipedia (accessed on October 8, 2011): “**New Atheism** is the name given to a movement among some early 21st century atheist writers who have advocated the view that ‘religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.’” The phrase is commonly associated with five writers: Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Victor J. Stenger. Several best-selling books by these authors, published between 2004 and 2007, form the basis for much of the discussion of New Atheism. Proponents of “New Atheism argue that recent scientific advancements demand a less accommodating attitude toward religion, superstition, and religious fanaticism than had traditionally been extended by many secularists.” This Wikipedia entry also refers to the “Four Horsemen”: “Referring to a 2007 debate, Dawkin’s (*sic*) website refers to four members of the movement – himself, Harris, Dennett, and Hitchens – as ‘The Four Horsemen’, alluding to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” The “New Atheists” are nothing other than anti-theists.

These New Atheists have generated a flurry of new books promoting atheism. There has never been a lack of such books, but these that are written by the New Atheists are very vocal, in your face, aggressive anti-theists who are also very well educated, appear in the public media such as TV and on college campuses, etc., and their books have been very well received with large volume sales. Some have achieved some measure of fame, based in part on their atheistic writings. The names of five such authors have been mentioned above.

Richard Dawkins

By far the most popular of the New Atheists is Richard Dawkins, due in part because he has been in the public eye for decades. Richard Dawkins is Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, and is a well-known, and out-spoken, advocate of materialistic evolution. Dawkins won both the Royal Society of Literature Award and the Los Angeles Times Literary Prize in 1987 for *The Blind Watchmaker*. He also won the 1989 Silver Medal of the Zoological Society of London and the 1990 Royal Society Michael Faraday Award for the furtherance of the public understanding of science. In 1994 he won the Nakayama Prize for Human Science. He was awarded an Honorary D.Litt. degree by the University of St. Andrews in 1995. He received the Humanist of the Year Award in 1996. Since 1996 he has been Vice President of the British Humanist Association. Dawkins was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1997. His many books intended for the general public include the following:

- *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*, Norton, 1996 [1986].
- *The Selfish Gene*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 1989.
- *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, Phoenix, 1995.
- *Climbing Mount Improbable*, Viking, 1996.

- *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*, Penquin Books, 1998.
- *A Devil's Chaplain*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003.
- *The God Delusion*, Mariner Books, 2008 [2006].

To give some indication of how well Dawkins represents the views of noteworthy contemporaries (you may recognize the names) on evolution and its meaning, in addition to the awards mentioned above, below are listed a few quotations from endorsements on pages i and ii and on the back cover of the 1996 edition of *The Blind Watchmaker*:

Edward O. Wilson: “The best general account of evolution I have read in recent years. It is deep enough to be useful to biologists, yet sufficiently simple and well-written [very well-written in fact] to appeal to the same large audience that enjoyed *The Selfish Gene*.”

John Maynard Smith: “The secret of good science writing is that one should understand the ideas oneself: good writing comes from clear thinking . . . In *The Blind Watchmaker* I was repeatedly astonished at the clarity with which Dawkins sees the problems . . . It is abundantly clear, however, that Dawkins has not lost his sense of wonder at the natural world as he has gained intellectual understanding of it . . . I wish I could write like that . . . Dawkins has done more than anyone else now writing to make evolutionary biology comprehensible and acceptable to a general audience.”

Isaac Asimov: “A lovely book, original and lively, it expounds the ins and outs of evolution with enthusiastic clarity, answering, at every point, the cavemen of creationism.”

Michael Ruse: “It succeeds quite brilliantly. Most particularly, again and again, it brings home the nature and force of the central evolutionary mechanism of natural selection in a way that I have never seen or felt previously. The closest analogy I can think of is Galileo's Dialogues which made reasonable the Copernican Revolution, and I hope I will not be thought to be pushing things to an embarrassing point if I say that Dawkins' book can be compared to Galileo's, not only in type but in standard.”

Douglas J. Futumaya: “I could heartily recommend *The Blind Watchmaker* just for the pleasure it will afford the reader who is looking for a treatment of evolution that is not only educational but fun. But the more important reason for reading Dawkins's book is that this is his answer, in clear and often insightful terms, to the opponents of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory.”

The above quotations, as well as his distinguished position and many awards, serve to provide evidence that Richard Dawkins and his ideas are not straws. Rather, Dawkins, in case you are not already aware of it, is one of the most eloquent speakers and writers alive today that presents the case not only for biological evolution, but also for a materialistic philosophy of life. He speaks and writes passionately in favor of atheism. His book, *The God Delusion*, has been enormously successful, at least in terms of sales. The book has evoked a significant number of responses, most from Christians, who point out Dawkins' weak arguments. Below, we will focus on Dawkins' very successful *The God Delusion*:

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Mariner Books, 2008 [2006].

If you've seen the documentary movie *Expelled* by Ben Stein, you may recall the interview of atheist Richard Dawkins by Ben Stein. At one point Dawkins, with his book in hand *The God*

Delusion, quotes from the book his diatribe against the Old Testament God. Stein also interviews Alister McGrath in the documentary, although it is of shorter length, where McGrath opposes Dawkins' point of view. Given the description above of Richard Dawkins and his accomplishments, the things stated in Dawkins' book cannot be dismissed as those of some crackpot, those of somebody on the lunatic fringe. In many ways he is now main stream, at least in academia. What Dawkins' writes in *The God Delusion* is embarrassing to anyone who wants to discuss these issues rationally. For more of my comments, please see my review by clicking [here](#). This review is brief and combines Dawkins' *The God Delusion* with a review of Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, IVP Books, 2007.

Daniel Dennett

Daniel Dennett is the Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University in Medford, MA, and is the Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies. Dennett's personal web site is located as follows: <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/incbios/dennettd/dennettd.htm> As noted above, he is considered to be one of the "Four Horsemen" among the New Atheists. He is clearly an anti-theist, but writes in a reasonable tone such as can be followed, and steers away from the bombastic writing of a Dawkins, Hitchens, or Harris. I can read him and follow where he is going. I do not share his position, to say the least, but he does not go out of his way to be deliberately offensive, and seems to be at least rational. He is a committed Darwinist, and seems to see natural selection operating everywhere such that it explains everything.

Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Penguin Books, 2006.

In this book, Dennett is concerned to break the spell of religion that he observes to be almost universal. He acknowledges that religion may have served some useful purpose in the past, and that as a result evolution has selected it as a meme to be preserved, but that it has now out-lived any usefulness. He makes the appeal for open and honest discussion about religion, which is an appeal that I can wholeheartedly agree with. However, as the subtitle indicates, he wants religion to be discussed only within the context of it being a natural phenomenon, which I could not agree to. As this book indicates, Dennett is an absolutely committed Darwinist. And in a sense I can understand his position. Given that Darwinian evolution is true, and that natural phenomenon can explain all things, then his position seems almost inevitable. But what if Darwinian evolution is not true, in that it does not explain the origin of species, and that the empirical evidence does simply not support it? Then, it would seem, Dennett's position falls apart.

Two noteworthy full reviews of this book are available on the internet, along with others. The first one that I will mention here is by Leon Wieseltier, as published by the New York Times, February 6, 2006. To view this review, click [here](#).

The second one that I will mention here is by Andrew Brown, as presented in the Guardian, as published by the Guardian, February 25, 2006. To see his review, click [here](#).

Victor Stenger

Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*, Prometheus Books, 2009.

Victor Stenger is a physicist and a philosopher. Based on the subtitle of this book, one might expect a reasoned presentation of the new atheism based on science. Unfortunately, such is not the case. I have written a much longer review of this book than what I usually do, due to the nature of his claims, claims that simply do not pass the test of reasoned inquiry. My review of this book may be obtained by clicking [here](#).

In response to the New Atheists, numerous books have been written, primarily by Christians, critical of the writings of the New Atheists:

David Aikman, *The Delusion of Disbelief: Why the New Atheism Is a Threat to Your Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness*, SaltRiver (Tyndale), 2008.

David Aikman is a journalist for *Christianity Today* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Prior to that, he was a reporter for *Time* magazine for some 23 years. He has also written some eight books. The title of the immediately above book summarizes his convictions about the New Atheism. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason & the War on Religion*, Orbis Books, 2008.

Tina Beattie is a serious feminist theologian and thinker. For a review of her book by Richard Norman, click [here](#).

David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*, Crown Forum, 2008.

David Berlinski holds modern-day atheists in contempt, ridicules and makes fun of them. This could not be pulled off by probably anyone but Berlinski, but he does it with great skill and humor. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

John Blanchard, *Does God Believe in Atheists?*, Evangelical Press, 2000.

John Blanchard is a British author, teacher and conference speaker. He is, perhaps, much better known in England than he is in the United States. The title of the book is certainly an interesting question, sort of turning things on its head. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Paul Copan, and William Lane Craig (editors), *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors*, B&H Academic, 2009.

Paul Copan is professor and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University, and William Lane Craig is Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology. They are editors of this volume, consisting of 18 authors, each writing a chapter for this volume, responding to the New Atheists. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Thomas Crean, *God Is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins*, Ignatius Press, 2007.

Thomas Crean does not find much in Dawkins' *The God Delusion* that makes a true argument against theism, but Crean refutes the arguments he does find. Many Christians find it difficult to

even attempt a reasoned response to Dawkins, but Crean has taken him seriously and has written a carefully reasoned response. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, 2009.

This book by David Bentley Hart is one of the better responses to the New Atheists in print. Hart gives a very compelling presentation by one who is very well informed and has clearly thought deeply about this subject. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

John F. Haught is a Senior Fellow in Science and Religion at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. Haught, who has taught theism/atheism college courses and is very knowledgeable of the subject, severely criticizes the New Atheists compared to atheists of an earlier generation. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith*, Zondervan, 2010.

Interestingly, Peter Hitchens is the brother of Christopher Hitchens, where the latter is one of the more outspoken anti-theists of today. Peter Hitchens' book is neither philosophical nor theological, but rather personal and sociological. He describes how things have changed dramatically during his life time in England, for the worse, and how Christianity is losing (mostly has lost) its influence, and how this has greatly harmed England. He describes his childhood, his loss of faith, his becoming an atheist, and after many years returning to Christianity. Perhaps his greatest contribution in the book is his detailed description of how the atheist state of the Soviet Union was very anti-God, and in carrying out its program to destroy Christianity created an intolerable, corrupt, oppressive state where civilization itself was lost. This was done, in Peter Hitchens' opinion, as a result of the leadership in the Soviet Union being committed atheists. He implies that a similar result awaits the West if we continue on our current path.

Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, Doubleday, 2004.

Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. He has a PhD in molecular biophysics, and is principal of Oxford University's Wycliffe Hall and director of the Oxford Centre for Evangelism and Apologetics. In this book, McGrath documents the history of atheism, and his own journey from atheism to Christianity. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Alister E. McGrath, and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, IVP Books, 2007.

The McGrath's acknowledge that there isn't a lot worthy of a response in Dawkins' book. However, they fear that if no response is given that many would simply think that Christians have no response to offer. My review of this book is brief and combines this book with Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. For my review, click [here](#).

Eric Reitan, *Is God a Delusion?: A Reply to Religion's Cultured Despisers*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Eric Reitan teaches philosophy at Oklahoma State University, and writes from a very liberal Christian point of view. In this book, he is very critical of the New Atheists, and I found many of his observations to be perceptive and penetrating. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Douglas Wilson, *Letter from a Christian Citizen*, American Vision, 2007.

Doug Wilson's book is not only a response to Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*, but a response to atheists in general. To view Bill Muehlenberg's excellent review of this book, click [here](#).

In my opinion, it would seem to me that anyone carefully and honestly reading the above materials both for and against atheism, must rationally conclude that reason is on the side of Christian faith and against the advocates of atheism. I acknowledge that this opinion is not shared by everyone, and those with other opinions are free to share them with this SIG on this web site.