

Amateur atheists: Why the new atheism isn't serious

by [John F. Haught](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

For many years I taught an introductory theology course for undergraduates titled "The Problem of God." My fellow instructors and I were convinced that our students should be exposed to the most erudite of the unbelievers. Our rationale was that any mature commitment that intelligent young people might make to a religious faith should be critically tested by the very best opponents.

The recent books by Richard Dawkins, Samuel Harris and Christopher Hitchens would never have made the required-reading list. Their tirades would simply reinforce students' ignorance not only of religion but also of atheism. The new atheists do little more than provide a fresh catalogue of the evils wrought by members of the theistic faiths.

Meanwhile, truly inquisitive young minds remain restless for deeper insight. Even Freud's theory of religion's origin, no matter how flawed it may have seemed to my students, at least held their attention and got them to thinking about whether the whole business of religion might be an illusory human creation. My students would have found Hitchens's book rather tame stuff compared to the works of old masters of the projection theory of religion. For while Feuerbach, Marx and Freud provided interesting theoretical frameworks for their theories, Hitchens provides nothing of the sort.

Students might have been titillated by the recent writings of Dawkins and others who profess to give a biological, evolutionary explanation of why people believe in God. But they would have learned in our course that there is no good theological reason to object to any scientific attempts to understand religion, even in evolutionary terms. The course would have made it clear that religion can and indeed should be studied as a natural phenomenon. After all, this is the only way science can study anything, and its insights are completely compatible with any good theology. And my students would have rightly wondered whether evolutionary

theory, or any natural or social science, can give a complete and adequate understanding of religion. During our one-semester course students would already have encountered in Freud's thought the claim that science alone is a reliable road to true understanding of anything. And they would have learned from other readings that this claim is a profession of faith known as scientism, a modern belief system that is self-contradictory.

Why self-contradictory? Because scientism tells us to take nothing on faith, and yet faith is required to accept scientism. What is remarkable is that none of the new atheists seems remotely prepared to admit that his scientism is a self-sabotaging confession of faith. Listen to Hitchens: "If one must have faith in order to believe in something, then the likelihood of that something having any truth or value is considerably diminished." But this statement invalidates itself since it too arises out of faith in things unseen. There is no set of tangible experiments or visible demonstrations that could ever scientifically prove the statement to be true. In order to issue the just-quoted pronouncement with such confidence Hitchens already has to have subscribed to the creed of a faith community for which scientism and scientific naturalism provide the dogmatic substance. And Hitchens must know that most people do not subscribe to that creed. Perhaps this is because there is no evidence for it.

"Our god is *logos*," Freud proudly exclaims in *The Future of an Illusion*, candidly signifying the creedal character of the central dogma enshrined by the whole community of scientific rationalists. The declaration makes for good class discussion, but whenever I asked my classes to evaluate Freud's claim that science is the only reliable road to truth, it did not take them long to recognize that the claim itself is logically self-defeating, since it could never be justified by any conceivable scientific experiment. So most of my students would have had no difficulty realizing that scientism is also the self-subverting creed that provides the spongy cognitive foundation of the entire project we are dignifying with the label "new atheism."

After taking "The Problem of God," the vast majority of undergraduates would have deemed it silly for anyone to maintain that science can decide the question of God. Yet this is exactly what Dawkins, the world's best-known evolutionist, claims. Harris and Hitchens agree with Dawkins, even though they seem too circumspect to blurt it out so plainly. Science, Dawkins believes, can decide the question of God because of its potential command of all the relevant evidence. Yet this claim likewise makes no sense—for the simple reason that scientific method by definition has nothing to say

about God, meaning, values or purpose.

Logic, however, was not the only issue that our introductory theology course had to consider. Also at stake was whether, if we seriously held atheism to be true, it would make a big difference to our lives and self-understanding. The new atheists respond that it should make a big difference. But would it? The image of human fulfillment that emerges from their books is one in which our lifestyles remain pretty much the same, minus the threats posed by terrorists and creationists. Our new self-understanding would be informed by Darwinian biology, but we could expect that our moral and social instincts, rooted in biology as they are, would remain unmodified except for slight cultural corrections that would need to be made after religion disappeared.

The classical atheists, by contrast, demanded a much more radical transformation of human culture and consciousness. This is most evident when we consider works by Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre. To them atheism not only should make all the difference in the world; it would take a superhuman effort to embrace it. "Atheism," as Sartre remarked, "is a cruel and long-range affair." Like Nietzsche and Camus, Sartre thought that most people would be too weak to accept the terrifying consequences of the death of God.

By contrast, the recent atheist authors want atheism to prevail at the least possible expense to the agreeable socioeconomic circumstances out of which they sermonize. They would have the God-religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—simply disappear, after which we should be able to go on enjoying the same lifestyle as before. People would then continue to cultivate essentially the same values as before, including altruism, but they would do it without inspired books and divine commandments. Educators would teach science without intrusions from creationists, and students would learn that evolution rather than divine creativity is the ultimate explanation of why we are the kind of organisms we are. Only propositions based on evidence would be tolerated, but the satisfaction of knowing the truth about nature by way of science would compensate for any ethical constraints we would still have to put on our animal instincts.

This, of course, is precisely the kind of atheism that nauseated Nietzsche and made Camus and Sartre cringe. For them, atheism of this sort is nothing more than the persistence of life-numbing religiosity—it is religiosity in a new guise. These more muscular critics of religion were at least smart enough to realize that a full

acceptance of the death of God would require an asceticism completely missing in the new atheistic formulas.

The blandness of the new soft-core atheism lies ironically in its willingness to compromise with the politically and culturally insipid kind of theism it claims to be ousting. Such a pale brand of atheism uncritically permits the same old values and meanings to hang around, only now they can become sanctified by an ethically and politically conservative Darwinian orthodoxy. If the new atheists' wishes are ever fulfilled, we need anticipate little in the way of cultural reform aside from turning the world's places of worship into museums, discos and coffee shops.

In this respect the new atheism is very much like the old secular humanism that was rebuked by the hard-core atheists for its mousiness in facing up to what the absence of God should really mean. If you're going to be an atheist, the most rugged version of godlessness demands complete consistency. Go all the way and think the business of atheism through to the bitter end. This means that before you get too comfortable with the godless world you long for, you will be required by the logic of any consistent skepticism to pass through the disorienting wilderness of nihilism. Do you have the courage to do that? You will have to adopt the tragic heroism of a Sisyphus, or realize that true freedom in the absence of God means that *you* are the creator of the values you live by. Don't you realize that this will be an intolerable burden from which most people will seek an escape? Are you ready to allow simple logic to lead you to the real truth about the death of God? Before settling into a truly atheistic worldview you will have to experience the Nietzschean madman's sensation of straying through "infinite nothingness." You will be required to summon up an unprecedented degree of courage if you plan to wipe away the whole horizon of transcendence. Are you willing to risk madness? If not, then you are not really an atheist.

Predictably, nothing so shaking shows up in the thoughts of Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens. Apart from its intolerance of tolerance and the heavy dose of Darwinism that grounds many of its declarations, soft-core atheism differs scarcely at all from the older secular humanism that the hard-core atheists roundly chastised for its laxity. The new softcore atheists assume that, by dint of Darwinism, we can just drop God like Santa Claus without having to witness the complete collapse of Western culture—including our sense of what is rational and moral. At least the hardcore atheists understood that if we are truly sincere in our atheism, the whole web of meanings and values that have clustered around the idea of God in Western culture

has to go down the drain along with its organizing center.

"If anyone has written a book more critical of religious faith than I have, I'm not aware of it," declares Harris. My students might not be so sure of that. Has Harris really thought about what would happen if people adopted the hard-core atheist's belief that there is no transcendent basis for our moral valuations? What if people have the sense to ask whether Darwinian naturalism can provide a solid and enduring foundation for our truth claims and value judgments? Will a good science education make everyone simply decide to be good if the universe is inherently valueless and purposeless? At least the hard-core atheists tried to prepare their readers for the pointless world they would encounter if the death of God were taken seriously. They did not form a project to kill God since they assumed that deicide had already taken place at the hands of scientism and secularism. But they wanted people to face up *honestly* to the logical, ethical and cultural implications of a godless world.

It is hardly relevant to point out that Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre also failed to embody the tragic heroism they thought should be the logical outcome of atheism. They turned out to be very much like the rest of us. Still, their failure fortified the conclusion that at least some of my students arrived at: a truly consistent atheism is impossible to pull off. And if hardcore atheism cannot succeed, it is doubtful that the soft-core variety will make it either.

After one reads Nietzsche's fevered discourses about the creation of new values that would need to take place once people realized that the God-idea is fiction, the ethical prescriptions he endorsed end up sounding at best like a juiced-up version of the old values. He thought that once we realized there is no Creator, our own newly liberated creativity would be able to impregnate with wholly new meanings and values the infinite emptiness left behind. After we had drunk up the sea of transcendence, there would be endless room for a whole new set of ethical imperatives. Yet one can only be disappointed with what Nietzsche came up with. His new set of rules for life sound at one extreme suspiciously like monkish asceticism, and at the other like run-of-the-mill secular humanism: "Be creative." "Don't live lives of mediocrity!" "Don't listen to those who speak of otherworldly hopes!" "Remain faithful to the earth." Nietzsche in no way leaves behind what he first heard from the Bible. His call to a fresh "innocence of becoming" and "newness of life" is at least a faint echo of the biblical prophets and St. Paul, only without the virtues of love and hope.

Similarly, Camus made a curious transition—without telling us exactly why—from the absurdism of his early writings, *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, to the moving humanism of *The Plague* and the rather traditionalist preoccupation with moral guilt in *The Fall*. He must have come to realize that the utter hopelessness of his early nihilistic atheism could not provide a space within which people can actually live their lives.

Meanwhile Sartre, once he had assured us that there are no God-given commandments, ended up sounding almost religious in issuing his “new” imperative, namely, “Accept your freedom!” For the early Sartre it was always wrong (“bad faith”) to deny our freedom and that of others. But as much as he wanted all of this to sound radically new, in order to make his atheism palatable he had to argue that his existentialism was really a form of humanism after all. If even the hard-core atheists failed to carry out their program of erasing every trace of transcendent values from their moral universe, then how much less can our soft-core atheists expect to accomplish such a goal?

The hard-core atheists set very exacting standards about who would be allowed into the society of genuine unbelief. They insisted that every serious atheist must think out fully what atheism logically entails, even if they did not succeed in doing so themselves. The new soft-core atheists don’t even try. They agree with their hard-core cousins that God does not exist. But where logical rigor would require that they also acknowledge that there is no timeless heaven to determine what is good and what is not, their ideas go limp instead. Our new atheists remain as committed unconditionally to traditional values as the rest of us. They do so most openly in every claim they make that religious faith is bad, and that for the sake of true values moral people must rid themselves of it as soon as they can.

All three of our soft-core atheists are absolutely certain that the creeds, ideals and practices of religion are essentially evil. In fact, a distinguishing mark of the new atheism is that it leaves no room for a sense of moral ambiguity in anything that smacks of faith. There is no allowance that religion might have at least one or two redeeming features. No such waffling is permitted. Their hatred of religious faith is so palpable that the pages of their books fairly quiver in our hands.

Such outrage, however, can arise only from a sense of being deeply grounded in an unmovable realm of rightness. The fervor in the new atheists’ outrage against faith, and especially belief in God, is as resolute as any evangelist could marshal. To know

with such certitude that religion is evil, one must first have already surrendered one's heart and mind to what is unconditionally good. But in making this surrender our critics must not be very far from exemplifying the theological understanding of faith.

With the hard-core atheists one has to ask this newer breed: What is the basis of your moral rectitude? How, in other words, if there is no eternal ground of values, can your own strict standards be anything other than arbitrary, conventional, historically limited human concoctions? But you take them as absolutely binding. And if you are a Darwinian, how can your moral values ultimately be anything more than blind contrivances of evolutionary selection? But again, in your condemnation of the evils of religion you must be assuming a standard of goodness so timeless and absolute as to be God-given. Of course, no one objects to your making moral judgments. But if you, your tribe or mindless mother nature is the ultimate ground of your values, why does your sense of rightness function with such assuredness in your moral indictment of all people of faith? Can your own frail lives and easily impressionable minds—since you are human just like the rest of us—be the source of something so adamant as your own sense of rightness? “Excuse us for being so direct,” my students would ask, “but if you are going to fall back now on evolutionary biology, how can random events and blind natural selection account for the absoluteness that you attribute to the values that justify your intolerance of faith? Or, if you do not want Darwin to give the whole answer, can the historically varying winds of human culture account fully for the rocklike solidity of your righteousness?”

Dawkins declares that the biblical God is a monster, Harris that God is evil, Hitchens that God is not great. But without some fixed sense of rightness how can one distinguish what is monstrous, evil or “not great” from its opposite? In order to make such value judgments one must assume, as the hard-core atheists are honest enough to acknowledge, that there exists somewhere, in some mode of being, a realm of rightness that does not owe its existence completely to human invention, Darwinian selection or social construction. And if we allow the hard-core atheists into our discussion, we can draw this conclusion: If absolute values exist, then God exists. But if God does not exist, then neither do absolute values, and one should not issue moral judgments as though they do.

Belief in God or the practice of religion is not necessary in order for people to be highly moral beings. We can agree with soft-core atheists on this point. But the real

question, which comes not from me but from the hard-core atheists, is: Can you rationally justify your unconditional adherence to timeless values without implicitly invoking the existence of God?

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