

THE NEW ATHEISM



SOUTHWESTERN
JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

The New Atheists: Lessons for Evangelicals

John D. Laing
J. Dalton Harvard School for Theological Studies
Houston, Texas
jlaing@swbts.edu

Introduction

In this article, I will argue that evangelicals have something to learn from the “new atheism.” While most seek to respond to Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and others with critical engagement and/or hostile retort, I will demonstrate that Dawkins, et al. have provided the church and Christian academics with valuable opportunities for self-evaluation, spiritual refinement, and academic development. Rather than merely attacking the new atheists for their views, we may profit from first considering the substance of their arguments and refining our own thoughts about God, faith, and the proper way to respond to unbelief. This process can aid theological development and clarify our view of the relationship between the academy and the church. It can thereby strengthen our apologetic and evangelistic efforts, as well as our own relationships with God. Specifically, we will see that the concerns raised by the new atheists are valid and worthy of an answer, that apologetic presentations should offer a sound theology, and that the new atheism has a spiritual component. Each of these truths has implications for how we approach the apologetic task.

Apologetics, the Ivory Tower, and the Church Pew

First, our engagement with the new atheists can remind those of us in the academy that the debate does not merely impact the ivory tower. One of the criticisms lodged against the new atheists is that some of their arguments have more in common with rhetorical flourish than philosophical rigor. Perhaps the work that has drawn the greatest amount of such criticism is Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. Two examples of scholarly responses should suffice to demonstrate the common nature of this critique. Alvin Plantinga, senior philosopher at the University of Notre Dame, refers to Dawkins’ work as “an extended diatribe against religion in general and belief in God in particular,” and goes on to offer the following critique:

Now despite the fact that this book is mainly philosophy, Dawkins is not a philosopher (he’s a biologist). Even taking this into

account, however, much of the philosophy he purveys is at best jejune. You might say that some of his forays into philosophy are at best sophomoric, but that would be unfair to sophomores; the fact is (grade inflation aside), many of his arguments would receive a failing grade in a sophomore philosophy class.¹

Consider the comments of Alister McGrath:

The God Delusion is a work of theater rather than scholarship—a fierce, rhetorical assault on religion. . . . Dawkins seems to think that saying something more loudly and confidently, while ignoring or trivializing counterevidence, will persuade the open-minded that religious belief is a type of delusion. . . . [T]he fact that Dawkins relies so excessively on rhetoric rather than the evidence that would otherwise be his natural stock in trade clearly indicates that something is wrong with his case.²

But what Plantinga, McGrath, and other professional philosophers have not fully appreciated is that although Dawkins' arguments are weak (or "jejune"), they are nevertheless persuasive to many laypersons.³ That is, while apologetics is a technical academic discipline, we need to remember that it impacts the average person on the street and in the pew. A cursory Google or YouTube search will reveal hundreds, if not thousands, of blog and/or video entries dedicated to perpetuating the arguments presented by the new atheists, and these are read and viewed by strong believers and unbelievers, as well as those we may deem, "the undecided."⁴ There is often a disconnect between those of us in the academy and those in the "real world." In fact, some of my students have complained about this when required to read Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil* as a textbook.

I have typically assigned it in my apologetics classes because in a relatively short work, two of this most influential philosopher-apologist's arguments are presented in an accessible manner (his modal version of the ontological argument and the free will defense). It affords the apologetics student exposure to the academic discussion in the discipline without overwhelming him with material which is too technical or involved for the novice. While Plantinga's arguments are elegant, ingenious, and convincing

¹Alvin Plantinga, "The Dawkins Confusion," *Books and Culture* 13.2 (2007): 21.

²Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 96–97.

³I realize that some could take issue with this claim, since both Plantinga and McGrath took the time to write responses to Dawkins' work and to address his arguments, but my point is that we often address rhetorical arguments with philosophical disputation rather than with rhetorical response and this can leave the average reader with a sense that the real objection has not been addressed.

⁴Of course, anyone who is truly undecided about Christ must be characterized as an unbeliever, but what I have in mind here is that group of persons who are not staunch atheists, but have not yet accepted the gospel.

to at least some scholars, many students complain that all of the appeals to analytical philosophy, modal logic, and technical philosophical jargon make the arguments virtually useless in pastoral ministry. After all, it is the rare instance that someone becomes convinced of Christianity's truth because he was shown that, on possible worlds semantics, he must affirm the truth of God's existence or replace his agnosticism with a hard-core atheism grounded in formal argumentation for the incoherence of the traditional attributes of God! It would seem difficult to find many, if any, converted under such circumstances. So while Plantinga has offered some powerful arguments, their technical nature can appear unhelpful to the masses.

Perhaps we can find solace in the fact that it is not only Christian academics who are guilty of this error. A similar disconnect occurs between atheist philosophers and their lay constituency as well. For example, Keith Parsons criticizes Alister McGrath for responding to what he calls, "messianic atheism," the idea that a utopian society dominated by peace and tolerance would result if everyone accepted atheism. Parsons complains that atheists simply do not make any such claim:

I know of no major atheist thinker who has said that the general adoption of atheism, even if feasible, would per se be *sufficient* to deliver mankind from oppression and ignorance. Unless McGrath can supply us with some substantiating names and claims here, it is hard not to suspect that he is tilting at windmills.⁵

But a closer examination of Parsons' argument reveals that he is here demanding an analytical rigor which fails to address the broader point, looking for arguments which present a relationship of entailment between acceptance of atheism and an utopian society, and we must grant that he is technically correct that none exist. This approach to argumentation is a common tactic of philosophers—to ignore or discount the power of suggestive argument because it does not provide for strong cause/effect relationships—on both sides of the theistic fence. But the fact of the matter is that often suggestive arguments do have a force that is not only convincing to the masses, but also carries some substantive weight. While McGrath cannot provide names of atheists who argue for an entailment relationship between acceptance of atheism and an utopian society, he can demonstrate that many have made a suggestive claim of this sort. In fact, many of the new atheists make arguments to this effect when they suggest that all terrorism, war, and destruction are the result of religious belief. For example, in the context of his discussion of the religious basis for Islamic terrorism, Sam Harris suggests that religion itself or religious thinking, no matter which religion is in view, is the culprit:

⁵Keith M. Parsons, "Atheism: Twilight or Dawn?" in *The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008): 53.

We live in an age in which most people believe that mere words—“Jesus,” “Allah,” “Ram”—can mean the difference between eternal torment and everlasting bliss. Considering the stakes here, it is not surprising that many of us occasionally find it necessary to murder other human beings for using the wrong magic words, or the right ones for the wrong reasons.⁶

When he is confronted with the atrocities of atheist regimes, Harris responds that those actions have nothing to do with the theistic claims (or lack thereof) or worldview of the perpetrators. Rather, he argues that the real culprit is fanaticism: “The problem with religion—as with Nazism, Stalinism, or any other totalitarian mythology—is the problem of dogma itself.”⁷ He goes on to suggest that if all persons were liberal, open-minded atheists, suffering, which results from institutionally driven moral evil, would disappear: “Countries with high levels of atheism are also the most charitable both in terms of the percentage of their wealth they devote to social welfare programs and the percentage they give in aid to the developing world.”⁸

Unfortunately, more than one Christian apologist has responded to these claims that religion leads to terrorism by simply denying that terrorism must follow from religious belief, rather than responding to the force of the objection. That is, as a Christian philosopher, I can point out that an entailment relationship does not exist between theism and terrorism, and this would be pretty easy to make. After all, there is nothing inherent in belief in God that would lead one to commit acts of terror, but such an answer is hardly the case I would want to make. Instead, I want to demonstrate not only that Christianity does not *necessarily* lead to terrorist tendencies, but that Christianity, properly construed, *cannot* lead to terrorist tendencies. For his part, Parsons has not really answered McGrath’s objection and ironically, in the process has unwittingly discounted the force of the religious terrorism argument used by atheist apologists like Harris. It seems to me that this strategy of merely answering the specific objection raised is short-sighted because, while it technically refutes the claim, it also ignores the force of the argument. The individual who is not theologically or philosophically trained may not understand the finer points of the response, and thus, find the original claim persuasive. Those of us in the academy need to take note and respond appropriately.

Apologetics and Theological Fidelity

Second, since apologetics often manifests itself in the popular culture, those who engage in it must be careful to employ its arguments in ways

⁶Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 35.

⁷Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 43.

⁸*Ibid.*, 46.

which are theologically responsible and which present biblical truth in a clear and concise manner. The dangers of misinterpretation and misinformation are ever-present. By way of example, I will consider the widespread use of Pascal's Wager in popular apologetics. Christopher Hitchens, well-known journalist and new atheist apologist, was recently diagnosed with throat cancer and authored a series of articles reflecting on his experience battling the disease. He has apparently received a large number of letters related to the spiritual aspects of his situation. Some have callously wished him a happy eternity in Hellfire, but most have expressed an earnest desire for his salvation—both physical and spiritual. Hitchens has made it clear that he plans to doggedly maintain his atheism to the end (at least as long as he keeps his sanity, he has sarcastically noted), and this, despite the seemingly sound logic of Pascal's famous Wager, which many have utilized in an attempt to cause him to reconsider. At the popular level, the Wager is typically presented as a choice for the atheist between two options, with four possible outcomes. If the atheist remains in unbelief and he is correct, nothing will change, but if he is incorrect, he will lose infinitely (i.e., be condemned). If, however, he believes in God and is wrong, he will not have lost anything, but if he is right, he will gain something of infinite value (i.e., eternal life). When considered in terms of a decision matrix with unbelief resulting in either no change or substantial loss, and belief resulting in either no change or substantial gain, the rational thing to do is believe, and in fact, to remain in unbelief is unwise, irrational, and irresponsible! Hitchens' response has been to attack the Wager as denigrating the nature of faith and salvation, and thus, question its use in apologetics and evangelism. He writes,

Ingenuous though the full reasoning of his essay may be—he was one of the founders of probability theory—Pascal assumes both a cynical god and an abjectly opportunist human being. Suppose I ditch the principles I have held for a lifetime, in the hope of gaining favor at the last minute? I hope and trust that no serious person would be at all impressed by such a hucksterish choice. Meanwhile, the god who would reward cowardice and dishonesty and punish irreconcilable doubt is among the many gods in which (whom?) I do not believe. I don't mean to be churlish about any kind intentions, but when September 20 [pray for Christopher Hitchens day] comes, please do not trouble deaf heaven with your bootless cries. Unless, of course, it makes you feel better.⁹

⁹Christopher Hitchens, "Unanswerable Prayers: What's an atheist to think when thousands of believers (including prominent rabbis and priests) are praying for his survival and salvation—while others believe his cancer was divinely inspired, and hope that he burns in hell?" *Vanity Fair* (2010): 93. Sam Harris, another of the so-called, "Four Horsemen" of the new atheism, makes a similar point regarding the Wager and what is communicated about the nature of saving faith: "But the greatest problem with the wager—and it is a problem that

The complaint about the Wager's inadequate presentation of the nature of faith is not new. William James famously criticized it along these lines as immoral: "We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality: and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this patten from their infinite reward."¹⁰ There are several ways that one could respond to James here, from questioning his confidence in his own knowledge of what the Deity should do (not to mention the hubris required to make such an assertion!), to requiring clarification of his reference to "believers of this pattern," noting that true believers are all the same.¹¹ But these issues aside, what is of greatest concern here is the presentation of the nature of faith and how it works. James rightly regards the idea of "believing by our own volition" as "simply silly," and unworthy of biblical faith.¹²

It is worth noting that Pascal would concur, and anticipated objections of this sort. In his presentation of the Wager, he agrees that persons cannot simply choose to believe, but he identifies the inability as a spiritual problem, or a problem of the "passions," and not as a defect of the intellect or reason.¹³ While the most reasonable response to the Wager is belief, people are not always able to act in the most reasonable way. It is at this point that Pascal's apologetic takes on a pastoral tone; the cure to the spiritual problem of unbelief is to begin with acts of piety which will diminish the passions. While Pascal, consistent with Catholic faith, focuses primarily on the sacraments as a means of sanctification or enabling belief, the broader point is one with which many modern evangelicals can agree. As one struggles with unbelief and opens himself to the work of God through acts of piety—Bible study, worship, personal devotion, prayer, Christian service, and charity—the transforming work of the Holy Spirit will create, enable, or strengthen faith.¹⁴

infects religious thinking generally—is its suggestion that a rational person can knowingly will himself to believe a proposition for which he has not evidence. A person can profess any creed he likes, of course, but to really believe something, he must also believe that the belief under consideration is true. . . . Pascal's wager suggests that a rational person can knowingly believe a proposition purely out of concern for his future gratification. I suspect that no one ever acquires his religious beliefs in this way (Pascal certainly didn't)." Sam Harris, "The Empty Wager," *The Washington Post*, 18 April 2007, http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/the-emp/ (Accessed 20 March 2011).

¹⁰William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans Green & Co. 1896), 6.

¹¹James Cargile, "Pascal's Wager," *Philosophy* 41 (1966): 252.

¹²James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 6.

¹³Pascal believed that he had already demonstrated that no good objection to belief in God exists and therefore, the most reasonable thing to do is believe. Thus, the barrier to faith must be spiritual and not intellectual. He writes, "get it into your head that, if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimar (New York: Penguin, 1995), 124.

¹⁴For a contemporary discussion of Pascal's view of faith, see Virgil Martin Nemoianu,

The most common attack on the Wager is to claim that it gives little direction regarding which deity one should bet on (and hence, worship) and can be used to argue for belief in just about any god. This is commonly known as the “many gods objection.”¹⁵ A variation on this argument, known as the “many practices objection,” notes that different religions often have religious rites and practices which are incompatible, and that this reduces the value of the Wager to nil. A somewhat humorous example of this kind of critique can be found in Richard Gale’s “sidewalk gods,” imaginary divine beings who reward or punish persons based on the number of cracks in the sidewalk they step upon during their earthly lives.¹⁶ There could be a virtually infinite number of sidewalk gods, all with mutually exclusive requirements for proper piety, beginning with a sidewalk god who rewards for stepping on one crack and punishes for stepping on any other number, then another god who rewards for stepping on two cracks, etc. Such conflicting religious directions—whether conceived as to which being one ought to swear allegiance, or which practices one ought to adopt—leave the Wager unable to assign a probability of any value to one belief or practice over against any other. So, for example, in the Ancient Near East, followers of the Canaanite god, Molech, could use a version of the Wager to convince persons to sacrifice their own children at Megiddo, while at the same time, Israelites could use it to convince persons that following Yahweh, with His prohibitions against human sacrifice and requirement of animal sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, is the most reasonable move. While there is certainly a point to be made, the many gods and many practices objections fail to take the context and limited goal/function of Pascal’s Wager seriously.

The Wager is not intended to stand alone as an argument or to function as one argument for belief in God alongside other traditional “proofs” for God’s existence (e.g., ontological, cosmological, teleological, moral, etc.). Rather, it is meant to serve two limited roles in apologetic discourse. First, it can serve as the culmination to a dialogue between a theist and non-theist *if and only if* the unbeliever has agreed that rational argumentation about God’s existence leads to a relative parity between theism and atheism. Immediately prior to his presentation of the Wager, Pascal claims that arguments for and against the existence of God cannot demonstrate their

“Pascalian Faith and the Place of the Wager,” *Heythrop Journal* 52.1 (2011): 27–39. Nemoianu notes that in Pascal’s writings, faith is not conceived as mere intellectual assent, but rather is the inclination of the will to love God.

¹⁵The articles and essays propounding the many gods objection seem endless. Some of the more notable and classic formulations can be found in the following works: Michael Martin, “Pascal’s Wager as an Argument for Not Believing in God,” *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 57–64; Antony Flew, “Is Pascal’s Wager the Only Safe Bet?” in *The Presumption of Atheism and other Philosophical Essays on God, Freedom, and Immortality* (New York: Harper, 1976), 61–68; J.L. Mackie, “Belief Without Reason,” in *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 199–216; Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 345–54.

¹⁶Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 350.

cases beyond all doubt, though he thinks there are good reasons to believe. Second, it can serve as a beginning point for further discussion about the relative strengths of Christianity over other religions, a discussion which might include apologetics for the historicity of the Gospels or Bible, the veracity of the resurrection, or the triune nature of God. The Wager itself is not meant to demonstrate or convince one of the truth of Christianity, but only to show that it makes sense to explore religion further in order to possibly engender faith.¹⁷ In fact, following his presentation of the Wager, Pascal offers numerous arguments in favor of Christianity, including appeals to the historicity of the Bible, personal experience of Christ, the antiquity of the Old Testament and the consistency between it and the New, fulfilled prophecies, the exemplary and unwavering lives and testimony of the apostles, and the teachings and person of Christ.

It seems to me that at least three things follow from this. First, the Wager should not be trotted out every time we engage an atheist and have a hard go of it. If the atheist is convinced that his worldview is more rational than theism, the Wager will not sway him and may very well turn him off. This seems to be the case with Hitchens. Second, the most common criticisms of the Wager are unfounded, as they critique it for results it was not intended to obtain. Just because the Wager does not help one decide which god is the best or which practices to adopt does not mean that it is virtually useless and unhelpful in the dialogue between believers and some unbelievers. All that follows is that it has a limited application. Third, since the Wager has a limited function and is susceptible to both misuse and misinterpretation, care must be taken in its use. The response of Hitchens to the presentation of the Wager in many of the letters he received serves as evidence of the lack of care and precision with which many of us engage in apologetics, theological discourse, and even preaching. Another example should make this clear.

A story that has become something of a stock illustration of the Christ's Passion in at least some evangelical circles is that of a father who works as

¹⁷Some proponents of the many gods objection claim that even here the Wager fails, for it relies on some specific claims about the nature of God. Saka notes that a generic god-concept will not work because there can be competing claims about the very nature of god. Paul Saka, "Pascal's Wager and the Many Gods Objection," *Religious Studies* 37.3 (2001): 321–41. See also the debate between Alan Carter and Douglas Groothuis over the goodness of God and the requirement that He be trustworthy if one is to bet on Him. Alan Carter, "On Pascal's Wager; Or Why All Bets Are Off," *Philosophia Christi* 3.2 (2001): 511–16; Douglas Groothuis, "Are All Bets Off? A Defense of Pascal's Wager," *Philosophia Christi* 3.2 (2001): 517–24; Alan Carter, "Is the Wager Back On? A Response to Groothuis," *Philosophia Christi* 4.2 (2002): 493–500; Douglas Groothuis, "An Unwarranted Farewell to Pascal's Wager: A Reply to Carter," *Philosophia Christi* 4.2 (2002): 501–08. Anderson, however, recognizes that the proponent of the Wager must make certain claims about the nature of God, something akin to the process involved in the ontological argument; there has to be some agreement between the atheist and theist over what a being called "god" would be like. However, he thinks this reduces the strength of the argument because it severely limits its use and application. Robert Anderson, "Recent Criticisms and Defenses of Pascal's Wager," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37.1 (1995): 51.

a drawbridge operator for the railroad (or some other similar hazardous occupation) in his community. As the story goes, the man's son followed him to work one day and, although he had been repeatedly warned of the dangers, was found to be playing amongst the gears of the switching mechanism for the bridge just as a train was approaching. The father is forced to make the horrifying decision to lower the bridge, save the passengers, and doom his son to a slow and agonizing death. This, of course, is meant to communicate the immense sacrifice of the cross, whereby God's Son died for the salvation of humanity, but the story is fraught with problems, the least of which is not that it fails to account for the active role of the Son in the passion.¹⁸ Careless illustrations like this one have led many modern theologians to criticize the penal substitutionary model of the atonement as child abuse.¹⁹ Such characterizations miss the mark partly because they too closely align the analogy of human father-son relationships to that of the first and second persons of the Trinity, and partly because they view the gospel as analogous to a pagan story of a father's sacrifice of his son to a malevolent deity. But this is a misunderstanding of the cross, which is a story of the self-giving of God in the person of the Son, and of the perfect union of His infinite justice, wrath, mercy, and love.

The point here, then, is that we must take care when using illustrations, analogies, or apologetic arguments to communicate or defend truths of the faith to unbelievers. Hitchens was presented with a very self-serving and dysfunctional, as well as unbiblical, view of faith by the irresponsible use of Pascal's Wager. It is unfortunate that he could see it while the well-meaning believers who wrote to him could not. It is our responsibility from God and before God to honor His Word by presenting it accurately and with integrity. When we engage unbelievers in dialogue and make use of apologetic

¹⁸Other problems persist: the son in the story dies partly as a result of his own disobedience, a claim we would hardly wish to make of Jesus; the father is depicted as conflicted regarding who to save, but the Son's crucifixion was part of God's will and plan before humanity sinned or even existed, etc.

¹⁹These arguments became most prominent in the liberation theologies of the latter part of the twentieth century, particularly in feminist and womanist theology. See, for example, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 1–30; Julie M. Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology: Jesus of Nazareth, European Women, and the Christological Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 50–52; Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 55–57; Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 151; Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 161–67. However, such characterizations of substitutionary views of the atonement have begun to emerge in so-called "evangelical" writings. A firestorm erupted with the publication of Steve Chalke's *The Lost Message of Jesus*, largely because he suggested that the penal substitutionary view of the atonement is like "cosmic child abuse," and is devoid of love. Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 182. Others in the emergent church movement (e.g., Brian McLaren and Rob Bell, among others) have made similar suggestions.

arguments, we should take care to analyze the theological implications of the arguments used, lest we present a misleading or blatantly false vision of the holy God we serve. While the desire to make arguments accessible to all is laudable, care must be taken to retain the theological substance and subtlety where needed, so that our defenses of the faith truly protect the integrity of our theology and our presentations of the gospel lead people to the one true Lord, one true God, and one true faith (Eph 4:5). The process of refining arguments will help the believer in his own theological reflection and devotional life by focusing his attention on the meaning of Scripture and the nature of God and will aid in evangelistic efforts with unbelievers by properly representing the good news.

Apologetics, New Atheism, and Spirituality

Third, we must remember that while apologetics is an exercise of the mind, spiritual forces are at work; as the Apostle Paul says, our battle is not against flesh and blood, but rather against “rulers,” “authorities,” and “spiritual forces of evil in the heavens” (Eph 6:12). This spiritual aspect of the new atheist assault on traditional religious belief (notably, Christianity) can be most readily seen in the ferocity with which it is undertaken and the vitriol used by its proponents. But apart from the seemingly self-evident nature of its ungodly and demonic basis, some rather clear examples of the new atheism’s spiritual component can be given, and this has implications for how we understand and address the movement. I will outline three here, two from popular culture and one from the academy.

Recent news stories featuring atheist complaints about the supposed preference for religion in American culture abound. From legal challenges to the inclusion of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance to complaints about prayers offered at public events and ceremonies, atheists are protesting more loudly than ever. Along with the more vocal approach to their position, many in this new generation of atheists are taking a more religious approach to their unbelief. There appears to be a burgeoning movement among atheists for a spirituality of their own. Consider the titles of two recent publications, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, and *The Good Book: A Humanist Bible*. Both attempt to address the need of the non-religious to have a religious life, the former by explaining the meaning of spirituality for those who deny God’s existence, the latter by feeding such a spirituality through the offering of writings similar in style and genre to those found in holy writ, but which have been mined from the works of secular philosophers.²⁰

One rather curious development among the new generation of atheists is the rising popularity of the practice of “debaptizing,” in which atheists

²⁰Andre Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, trans. Nancy Huston (New York: Penguin, 2007); A.C. Grayling, *The Good Book: A Humanist Bible* (New York: Walker & Co., 2011).

utilize a hair dryer to symbolically remove the holy waters of baptisms past. The seriousness with which persons participate in these activities is hard to gauge. While it is clear that some do so in jest, viewing the activity as something of a party-joke, many others seem to view it as helpful and even liberating. The most famous leader in the movement, American Atheists' legal director, Edwin Kagin, performs the debaptism ceremony with all the pomp and circumstance of a full-blown religious ritual, complete with monk-style robe and mock-Latin incantations. He does so with something of a wry smile, but also recognizes that for some, he is performing a deeply spiritual service. Lest we think this is all done in order to make fun of Christians with no real spiritual aspect for the atheists involved, we should pause to consider the numbers of Brits who actually paid money (£3 each) in order to receive de-baptism certificates from the website of the London-based National Secular Society (NSS) and petitioned to have their names removed from the Church of England rolls. According to NSS sources, over 100,000 debaptism certificates have been purchased, and the numbers are increasing. Said NSS President Terry Sanderson, "The growing amount of interest in the concept of de-baptism indicates that people are not just indifferent to religion—which has been the traditional British approach—but are actually becoming quite hostile to it."²¹

In addition to the use of quasi-religious rites and ceremonies in order to express their (lack of) faith, some atheists have even sought positions of anti-religious spiritual leadership. Recent headlines told of a petition from some atheist groups to have an atheist commissioned chaplain in the United States Army. The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF), working in cooperation with the Humanist Society, has asked each of the military service branches to consider allowing humanist chaplains to serve alongside their more traditional religious counterparts. According to the MAAF website, the humanist chaplains would function in much the same way and provide many of the same services that chaplains already provide; they would just do so as Humanists, rather than as Christians, Muslims, Jews, or Buddhists. Humanist chaplains would advise commanders on religious accommodation and religious issues in the area of operations that could impact mission success, organize secular alternatives to traditional worship services, provide counsel to service members, and serve as leaders at ceremonial events (e.g., weddings and funerals) for those service members who are not religious.²² While some may balk at the suggestion of atheist chaplains, it should be noted that such already exist.

Harvard University has a Humanist Chaplain, Greg Epstein, and this fact alone illustrates the need of some atheists for transcendence and meaning beyond the pure naturalism of science. Commenting on the cover story in *Wired Magazine* entitled, "The New Atheism: No Heaven. No Hell. Just

²¹<http://www.secularism.org.uk/debaptise-yourself.html> (Accessed 2 September 2011).

²²<http://www.militaryatheists.org/chaplain.html> (Accessed 22 September 2011).

Science,” Epstein notes, “But ‘Just Science’? Such language raises concern that the new atheism is cut off from emotion, from intuition, and from a spirit of generosity toward those who see the world differently. . . . Books on science . . . can less often say important things about what we ought to value most in life, or why. Science can teach us a great deal, like what medicine to give to patients in a hospital. But science won’t come and visit us in the hospital.”²³ Epstein hopes to offer a humanism that moves beyond the cold nature of a fact-based natural science, and the philosophical argumentation of the new atheist wars against religion. Following Humanist rabbi Sherwin Wine as his example, he hopes to convince both religious and non-religious alike that life can have meaning and people can have good reasons for being moral, even if there is no god.

What is of particular interest in these discussions is the religious nature that Humanism has taken on for so many. MAAF President, former Army Captain Jason Torpy, says, “Humanism fills the same role for atheists that Christianity does for Christians and Judaism does for Jews. It answers questions of ultimate concern; it directs our values.”²⁴ Similarly, Epstein notes that humanists, atheists, and secularists have held their own in the worldview arena and in debates with religionists, but have only produced an intellectual movement. This, he complains, misses a fundamental human need for community, love, and ultimately, transcendence:

We have articulated positions on a number of crucial issues, and defended those positions against all manner of unfair attacks. But now we need to sing and to build. We need to acknowledge that as nonreligious people, we may not need God or miracles, but we are human and we do need the experiential things—the heart—that religion provides: some form of ritual, culture, and community.²⁵

To be fair, Epstein is not considered a “new atheist” insofar as he is much more congenial in his presentation, and he is even critical of many in the movement (or at least of the spirit in which they undertake their work). However, what I find interesting is the seeming new trend among atheists to express their spirituality, a trend that is also found among some of the key players in the new atheist movement.

Perhaps the clearest example is Sam Harris, one of the celebrated and self-proclaimed “four horsemen” of the new atheist movement. A neurobiologist by trade, he has written extensively about transcendence and spiritual experience, and has even suggested that atheists should develop something

²³Greg M. Epstein, *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), xvi.

²⁴“Atheists Seek Chaplain Role in the Military” *New York Times*, 26 April 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/us/27atheists.html> (Accessed 10 September 2011).

²⁵Epstein, *Good without God*, 175.

akin to a humanist religion in order to meet this fundamental human need. I have noted elsewhere that this suggestion may be viewed as proof of humanity's need for life beyond itself and as contrary to the naturalistic worldview implied by atheism.²⁶ As a Christian, I see it as confirmation of the Bible's claim that humans have an innate need not only for self-transcendence, but for communion with God.

On his blog, Harris responds to some questions fellow atheists have had about his endorsement of atheist spirituality.²⁷ He recognizes that many religious people have had transcendent experiences and view them as confirmation of their beliefs, and many atheists have failed to have such experiences—some after having tried to do so in earnest—and see this as another reason to reject religion, but he believes there is a middle road. He argues that these experiences speak to the qualitative character of the human mind. What he seems to have in mind is this: transcendent experiences (which, curiously enough, may be reached through something akin to Buddhist-style meditation practices, among other activities) can have a profound effect on one's happiness, morality, self-awareness, and even understanding of psychology and neurobiology, and point to the nature of humanity.²⁸

He questions the prevailing assumption among scientists that the total explanation of the human soul or consciousness is to be found in the physical operations of the brain (a view known as "physicalism"), pointing out that science is ill equipped to speak definitively about the nature of human consciousness. He sees spiritual disciplines like those utilized in most of the world's religions as attempts to understand and/or manipulate the consciousness, and views the scientific study of these practices as the best prospect for understanding this aspect of humanity.²⁹

Harris notes that most, if not all, persons believe that they are more than a body; that the "I" (or self) is distinct from the body, and he contends that the recognition of this dualism by individuals is the source of virtually all problems humanity has faced. He proposes a spirituality which undermines this dualism, but which excludes traditional beliefs about religion and God.³⁰ He offers the Eastern practices of meditation as "a rational enterprise" by which destructive dualism may be undone, and suggests that it may be

²⁶John D. Laing, review of *Letter to a Christian Nation*, by Sam Harris, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 51.1 (2008): 91–94.

²⁷Sam Harris, "What's the Point of Transcendence?" 1 July 2011, <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/whats-the-point-of-transcendence> (Accessed 8 September 2011).

²⁸He writes, "Our spiritual traditions suggest that we have considerable room here to change our relationship to the contents of consciousness, and thereby to transform our experience of the world. . . . It is also clear that nothing need be believed on insufficient evidence [i.e., religious faith and dogma] for us to look into this possibility with an open mind." Harris, *The End of Faith*, 207.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 208–10.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 214.

studied by science and thereby incorporated into a total scientific picture of the human person.³¹

Harris' final paragraph of a chapter devoted to exploring the relationship between human consciousness, spirituality, and rationality is worth quoting at length:

A kernel of truth lurks at the heart of religion, because spiritual experience, ethical behavior, and strong communities are essential for human happiness. And yet our religious traditions are intellectually defunct and politically ruinous. While spiritual experience is clearly a natural propensity of the human mind, we need not believe anything on insufficient evidence to actualize it. Clearly, it must be possible to bring reason, spirituality, and ethics together in our thinking about the world. This would be the beginning of a rational approach to our deepest personal concerns. It would also be the end of faith.³²

We can agree with his claim that humans have an innate need for transcendence and that a purely naturalistic worldview (represented by physicalism) is inadequate to fully capture this fact, but also disagree that his atheist spirituality offers a truly viable and rationally consistent and coherent alternative to the religious worldview. Nevertheless, we should take care lest we use this as merely an entrée to debate, for at the end of the day, Harris' appeal to transcendence, along with the other examples of atheist spirituality referenced, points to the spiritual nature of the new atheism, and this should spur us to address the movement not only on intellectual, but also on spiritual grounds.

Conclusion

In this article, I have noted the importance of remaining positively engaged with the atheist critique as it is an increasingly important intellectual and spiritual force in our culture. In the section discussing apologetics as both academic and redemptive act, I noted that apologetics must be relevant to the populace, and therefore, ought to address the underlying concerns of the atheist argument as well as its details. It is no mere intellectual exercise, and the Christian apologist should not seek to simply win the debate on the finer points of argumentation. The discussion of Pascal's Wager emphasized that apologetic interactions must be theologically sound and sophisticated. It is imperative that the apologist concern himself with teasing out theological ramifications of his arguments. The examples of debaptism ceremonies, atheist chaplains, and Harris' atheist spirituality remind us that spiritual forces—both

³¹Ibid., 221.

³²Ibid.

positive and negative—are at work in the new atheism. A comprehensive Christian response should include prayer as well as argumentation.

Each of these issues speaks to approach, goal, and motive in apologetics. Our apologetic work ought to be both practically relevant and theologically responsible; we must answer the objections to religion generally, or Christianity specifically, at the scholarly as well as popular levels, and must do so with a view to a positive end. The goal should not be to win the argument alone, but rather to present the truth of the gospel in a way that is compelling, convicting, and transformative. In order to meet this goal, we must take pains to ensure that our motives are pure and that we do not divorce our apologetic endeavor from our theological reflection and evangelistic efforts. Perhaps an illustration will clarify this point.

Upon reading Epstein's defense of atheist morality and spirituality, my first inclination as a philosopher of religion and Christian apologist was to develop an argument which could be used to convince him that belief in God is a necessary component of a coherent morality, that his own desires for community, transcendence, morality, and service are really grounded in a subconscious belief in God (inherent in all human beings, but also instilled in him as a young boy growing up in a Jewish family). A corollary to this line of argumentation is that claim that atheist humanist morality is incoherent because it has no foundation and actually runs afoul of the Darwinist ideology normally at its base.

But it seemed to me that if I were to adopt this approach to engagement with Epstein and were successful at convincing him of this philosophical point, I may not achieve the desired effect. While I would like his realization that spirituality must be grounded in God to lead him to faith, it could have a very different outcome. Rather than turning to the LORD, he could simply acknowledge the logic of my argument and then cease his activities in helping others! He could say, "John, I see your point. A consistent atheist ought not care about the welfare of others—at least those with whom he is not already related and concerned—and since I am convinced that no god exists, I will live my life for myself; I'll simply look out for Number One, and the rest of the world be damned, metaphorically speaking of course!"

While I doubt that Epstein would actually respond this way—he strikes me as the kind of person who would rather live with the tension than abandon morality and service to others—the point still stands that any given atheist could respond this way to the moral argument for God's existence when it is used to question the validity of atheist morality and spirituality. The point I hope to make is this: it would be tragic for the result of my apologetic efforts to be someone's abandonment of charitable work.³³ I applaud

³³I acknowledge that some may question this assertion on the grounds that Epstein's work is not grounded in Christ and therefore, improperly based, or on the grounds that my support of his work somehow affirms his false beliefs. However, it seems to me that if a secular organization gives food to the hungry and thereby prevents a child from starving to death, it does a good thing, even if the motives are not entirely pure. In one sense, no works are good

Epstein's (and others') efforts to offer solace and comfort to those who are hurting or need shelter, even if I disagree with the substance of his answers (since true solace, peace, and comfort are found in Christ). Here my motives must be checked. If my engagement with him is driven by my desire to see him come to Christ, then it is rightly focused. I am then obliged to choose my approach based on what will be most effective to that end. However, if my goal is simply to win the argument under the guise of evangelism, then I ought to rethink my use of apologetics. Apologetics is both an intellectual and spiritual exercise and should always begin with prayer born out of love for the lost. Even when engaged in defensive apologetics where we respond to attacks on the faith, our goal should be clarification of our beliefs with a view to strengthening believers and reaching the lost. The earliest Christian apologists recognized this connection between apologetics, theology, and evangelism, and saw the real enemy as Satan, not the humans with whom they contended and by whom they were persecuted. May our examination of the new atheism drive us to a greater depth of knowledge of God and the Scriptures and more robust prayer life so that we grow in holiness and increase in evangelistic effectiveness.

because of the wickedness of the human heart, but in another sense, it is a good thing to feed the hungry and care for the weak.