

The New Atheism: Really?

Introduction

What is the so-called “new atheism”? Is it all that new? And who am I to comment on this recent attack on religious belief? In the last few years, several authors—the best-selling among them are Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris—have all published books that assert one thing in common: all religion is bad, or as one of them, Hitchens, puts it: “religion poisons everything.”¹ Dawkins, a biologist who occupies a chair for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford, leaves little doubt as to the breadth of his attack: “I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.”²

Why are they dubbed the “new atheists”? Shouldn’t Jews and Christians be careful about mistaking what has been around for millennia—unbelief—as something new? After all, the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that “what has been, that will be; what has been done, that will be done. Nothing is new under the sun. Even the thing of which we say, “See, this is new!” has already existed in the ages that preceded us” (1:9). The Book of Ecclesiastes notwithstanding, there is something new about this recent outbreak of atheism: its sweeping dismissal of all forms of belief coupled with an upbeat assessment of global progress based on science and technology. Compared to the great 19th century atheists—Johann Fichte, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, to name a few of the most prominent—these atheists specialize more in assertion than argument and are bully about science and technology in ways that their immediate predecessors were not. For them, atheism is a great painless gain. They suffer no sense of loss as did Nietzsche’s madman who realized what the crowds did not: that if God is dead, then something of unspeakable worth had disappeared. Unlike Jean Paul Sartre who realized that atheism

¹ *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve; New York, Boston), 2007.

² *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston), p. 36.

“is a cruel and long-range affair,” these new atheists expect only goodness and freedom to flourish once the gods are banished.

But why the new atheism now? Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Religion* (W. W. Norton and Company; New York) was published in 2004, Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Adult) in 2006, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* also in 2006, and Hitchens’ *God is not Great* in 2007. These authors tell us why they are compelled to write now. They are alarmed by Islamic terrorists and fed up with the influence that the Christian right has had in the United States, especially during the presidency of George W. Bush. Commercial presses, like political leaders, know how to exploit fear, especially fear of religious fanaticism, for their own profits.

But it should be noted that the political and religious reality of our times is a bit more complex than these writers might have us think. Much of Islamic terrorism draws its motivation not from Islam but from U.S. policies in the Middle East. As Kevin Hart explains, “their overwhelming aim is secular: to frighten Western democracies into withdrawing their military forces from Arab states.”³ But it cannot be denied that the religious right has exercised considerable influence in American politics over the past thirty years, though some other Christians challenge how deeply religious it really is, how comprehensive its political preoccupations are, and how well they embody the political ramifications of Christianity. It still seems possible to say of the religious right what it is not possible to say of the Catholic vote: they tend to vote in a block.

Some Personal History

³ Kevin Hart, “Belief, Too, Can Start with a Bang,” in *The Australian*, July 2, 2008, p. 2. Many writers have made similar observations, including a Muslim scholar friend of mine from UCLA’s Center for Islamic Studies, Jihad Turk. Of course, others are suspicious that self serving explanations of the relationship between religion and violence are offered by both atheists and believers—atheists who wish to connect all violence to religion, and believers who want to disassociate legitimate religious practice from religious fanaticism. This problem of the sources of violence will be treated later.

Having identified the new atheists and suggesting why they are publishing their books now, I think I should say something about myself, about how I might approach this topic this afternoon. As a Catholic priest and a theologian, I could surely be asked whether it is at all possible for me to be objective in talking about atheism. I mean, if the atheists are right, I am not only out of a priestly ministry, but also out of a job as a theologian. Putting aside the complicated question of what “objectivity” might mean, I must confess that I have been interested in questions about religious belief and disbelief since high school. I can remember getting into long discussions with friends after our baseball games and on dates about the grounds for faith and whether God existed—though that wasn’t, of course, the only thing we talked about. As a young brother in the Marianists and an undergraduate philosophy major here at UD, I read books by Georg Hegel, Johann Fichte, Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. I also remember reading with great interest Henri de Lubac’s *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, a copy of which I still have, along with a copy of Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, both of which I read during my junior year. The *Brothers Karamazov* contains that haunting fifth chapter entitled “The Grand Inquisitor,” in which a powerful case for atheism—the suffering of children—was put forth with such dramatic force by Ivan, one of the three Karamazov brothers and an atheist. Just imagine: all this exposure to atheism, mainly because of a superb Marianist professor Fr. Bernard Neubauer, right here in little old Dayton Ohio, even though the authority of the index of forbidden books was abrogated only in 1966, the year I graduated. During those same years when I was an undergraduate, the great drama of what might be called Christian humanism was being played out across the ocean in the form of the Second Vatican Council. It was, to say the least, an exciting time for which I am still very grateful.

Why the New Atheists Fall Short

My interest in atheism continued in graduate school where, at Georgetown University, Louis Dupre taught one of the most stimulating courses I’ve ever had on atheism and belief. So, this issue has long been of interest to me. I have benefitted from reading especially those 19th century atheists: they forced me to think harder about what I

continue to believe and challenged me to live my faith in ways less vulnerable to their criticisms. But a long-standing personal interest in a subject hardly guarantees expertise in it. Nevertheless, this afternoon, I am going to comment not only about one of the new atheists, but about several of them. And I should be candid with you. These new Atheists do not challenge me the way the older ones do. But since so many people are buying their books, some observations may be worth making.

Though both Hitchens and Dawkins are good writers (Harris' prose is plodding), all three seem unable or unwilling to attack mature targets. That is to say, they pick off the low-hanging fruit, especially Christian fundamentalists and anyone in any religious tradition who has committed violent acts in the name of religion. Those of us who are familiar with the centuries of thoughtful theological scholarship and biblical interpretation and criticism immediately spot their mockery of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures and theology for what it is: ignorance. Of Dawkins competency, literary critic Terry Eagleton wrote:

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. Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins...are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don't believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding. This is why they come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be. If they were to pass judgment on phenomenology or the geopolitics of South Asia, they would no doubt bone up on the question as assiduously as they could.⁴

Besides their ignorance of theological and biblical criticism, these authors lack, in my opinion, a basic attitude that characterizes all great scholars: the desire to understand carefully what they write about. I think of it as respect, or to put it more religiously,

⁴ Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching," in the *London Review of Books*, October 19th 2006.

reverence. John Henry Newman once remarked that it is an error as common as it is fatal to think that truth may be approached without homage.⁵

For many years now I have been extensively involved in cross-disciplinary conversations and research. Slowly, and only with considerable effort, I have come to learn about the sophisticated ways in which colleagues in other disciplines think about the subjects to which they have devoted their lives. Needless to say, one has to be open to learn from others about things one knows little about. Time and again I have found that the most thoughtful of my colleagues are quite aware of what they themselves don't understand about their own subject; even more important, they are also aware of what seems beyond their discipline's ability to explain and comprehend.

Having told you briefly and in general where I stand on the new atheists, I now need to be more specific. I will identify four areas where their serious misunderstandings undercut their arguments against religion. Again, speaking of course as a Catholic Christian, I think that they misunderstand God; they misunderstand scripture; they misunderstand freedom; and perhaps most ironic of all, they misunderstand science—in particular, the limits of science. If they understood any or all of these matters with the sophistication they owe their smartest opponents (not the easiest targets), they would find that their case against religion is much harder to make.

Who is God?

It is dangerous to speak about God. Most people typically speak of God anthropomorphically; that is, they think about God as though God were somebody who thinks pretty much the way we humans do. More rarely, a few people, when they are tempted to speak about God, simply fall silent, realizing that God's ways are not their ways, and how God thinks is utterly beyond them. They realize that what they would say might only darken counsel. The new atheists, however, suffer no such hesitation. And when they speak, they lapse into anthropomorphisms. They reject God because they misconstrue who God is. They typically imagine God to be a being along side other

⁵ John Henry Newman, "Faith and Reason," in *Fifteen Sermons* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 198.

beings, but just the biggest and strongest being in the universe. Since they think God is a thing, they think a scientist should be able to examine him. As Dawkins puts it, “god’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe,” and that “the presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question.”⁶ But biologists, like Dawkins, study living matter. I have to ask, then, why does he assume that God is just like a plant, an animal, or a human being? Again, why should God be considered to be a being, even if the biggest and most powerful being?

I remember my disappointment as a child when on my first ride in an airplane I kept looking out the window disappointed, unable to spot God.⁷ I was pretty naïve then—someone who had not yet had the opportunity to study centuries of theological reflection on the nature of God. That scholarship consistently affirms that God is not an entity, a being like other beings. That scholarship distinguishes between created beings (like us) and uncreated being, which believers call God. Moreover, whatever is said about uncreated being, must be said only by analogy. Outside, on the wall of this Humanities Building, is a quotation in Latin from Aquinas that states that when we speak of God, we do not speak univocally or equivocally, but only analogically. That is to say, when we speak of God, whatever we end up saying about God is more dissimilar than similar to who God is. For example, God’s wisdom is unlike human wisdom in that it infinitely surpasses human wisdom. In fact, the word God is not really a name at all. Nicholas Lash likens the word “God” to the word “treasure,” meaning something that is held in high esteem. Whatever it is, it is treasured. Similarly, the word “god” refers to what is worshipped, what persons set their hearts on. The word God then tells us nothing other than that which is spoken about is what is to be worshipped.⁸

Listen to the influential German theologian, Karl Rahner, who had this to say about a type of god that does not exist:

⁶ Dawkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 50 and 58-59. I have benefited greatly from Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2008, especially pp. 5-8.

⁷ Two hundred years ago, Hegel remarked that “God does not offer himself for observation” (see Lash, p. 6. note 11).

⁸ Lash, *Op. cit.*, p. 21. I am following Nicholas Lash here,

That God really does not exist who operates and functions as an individual existent alongside other existents, and who would thus be a member of the larger household of all reality. Anyone in search of such a God is searching for a false God. Both atheism and a more naïve form of theism labors under the same false notion of God, only the former denies it while the latter believes that it can make sense of it.⁹

I realize that such theological reflections may be a little difficult to follow. An example from Scripture may help. Remember how God is described as revealing Himself (pardon the anthropomorphism) to Moses who, when he stands before the burning bush and asks God what/who he should say is sending him, a voice from the bush answers, “I am who am” (Exodus 3:15). Another more literal if somewhat awkward translation might be, “I shall be that I shall be.”

More than a millennium later, Aquinas asked, in the light of this text from Exodus, whether the word “God” represents a “nature” or an “operation.” Thomas is actually asking whether God is a noun or a verb. As usual, Thomas says both, since it is hard, when considering who God might be, to separate being from pure act. God, then, might be said to be (forgive me for sounding redundant) that which is “to be.” Now, where would one find the “to be” in the universe of things? Not under a microscope in some laboratory, and certainly not perched on some cloud outside the window of an airplane!

It might be asked, however, “OK, I understand what you are saying about God. But, what about Jesus Christ?” He’s certainly a noun, a being and someone who actually did exist and whom Christians believe to be God. I will return to this good question later in my remarks. In the meantime, just keep in mind that the God whom atheists deny is not the God whom informed Christians affirm.

Biblical Literalists: Fundamentalists and Atheists

⁹ *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (trans. William V. Dych (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), p. 63, cited by Lash, p. 20.

The New Atheists are fundamentalists when it comes to their understanding of Scripture. The many ways to interpret the Scriptures, from the writings of the great scholar Origen of the third century, through the medieval period when Christian and Jewish theologians interpreted their scriptures in at least four ways (with the literal sense being only one of those ways), to the modern period of critical historical studies of Scripture—all of these rich and varied ways to understand the different books of the Bible are ignored by the new atheists. One of their favorite targets, of course, is the two Genesis stories of creation in six days.

Dawkins and Hitchens are especially hard on the Jews. They are scandalized by certain texts in the *Tanakh*, or what Christians call the Old Testament. For example, in a chapter entitled “Revelation: the Nightmare of the ‘Old’ Testament,” Hitchens lists texts that legitimize the slaughter of Israel’s [SP] enemies, including women and children. Dawkins describes Judaism as “The oldest of the three Abrahamic religions, and the clear ancestor of the other two...originally a tribal cult of a single fiercely unpleasant God, morbidly obsessed with sexual restrictions, with the smell of charred flesh, with his own superiority over rival gods and with the exclusiveness of his chosen desert tribe” (p. 37). Dawkins makes no effort to sketch the historical development of Judaism, nor refer to the many texts of tenderness and love, and note the laws which required the Israelites to welcome the alien and the stranger.

Dawkins and Harris, to take two of these authors, find the Bible taken literally to be truly dangerous. And for their arguments to carry weight, it is important that the Bible in all respects be taken literally. Harris tells his readers that if they “really believed,” that is precisely what they would have to do. Anticipating an objection, Dawkins refers to those “irritated theologians” who “protest that we don’t take the book of Genesis literally anymore,” and accuses them of picking and choosing which bits of Scripture to believe.¹⁰ He thinks this whole process of picking and choose what is to be understood literally and symbolically has no objective basis?¹¹ That scripture scholars have in fact been able to distinguish different genres or types of writings in the Scriptures, and do so reliably and

¹⁰ Dawkins, p. 238.

¹¹ Dawkins, p. 247

not arbitrarily, is dismissed out of hand by Dawkins as a convenient writing off by believers of embarrassing texts.¹² The ignorance of the new atheists of the history of rich and varied interpretations of the Bible by both Jews and Christians, assuming that if they really believed they'd all be literalists—and therefore quite dangerous—misses the mark.¹³ Criticizing Scriptural texts because they are inadequate guides to the empirical world is a little bit like correcting the grammar of a love letter—you may be right, but you're missing the mark, to say nothing of the point.

Freedom and God

The third misunderstanding of the new atheists is that God and religion are the enemies of human freedom. Dawkins has famously remarked that raising children within a religious tradition is the worst form of “child abuse.”¹⁴ Chapter 13 of Hitchens' book asks “Does Religion Make People Behave Better?” Much of the content of the books of the new atheists repeat the many misdeeds, indeed the wickedness, of those who claim to be believers. Believers surely have done bad things. Ergo, religion, concludes Hitchens, does not make people behave better. In fact, Hitchens, along with the other authors, argue that religion makes them behave worse.

By contrast, Hitchens believes that on the whole, when examining the American scene for examples of people who have fought for social justice, that “person for person, American freethinkers and agnostics and atheists come out the best” (p. 180). Underlying the thinking of the new atheists is the assumption that being fully human and believing in

¹² Most of these authors love to criticize Christian fundamentalists who take the Genesis stories of creation literally. Dawkins does not refer to the majority of biblical scholars who believe that the story of Abraham called upon to sacrifice his son Isaac is best interpreted as a condemnation of human sacrifice; rather, he spends several pages mockingly describing this story (sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike), as “an example of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defense: ‘I was only obeying orders’” (p. 242).

¹³ I am not denying that there have been interpretations of their traditions by both Christians and Jews that have been arrogantly exclusive and have led to bloodshed. What I am saying is that both Jew and Christians have a continued history of exegesis that has identified in their sacred texts and traditions things to be treasured and things to be left behind. Unlike fundamentalist Christians, Catholics teach, as most recently stated by the bishops assembled at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), that the Bible is completely reliable in everything that is meant for salvation (see paragraph 11 of *Dei verbum*). Just what “meant for salvation” means remains for the Church itself over time to search out continuously.

¹⁴ See pages 315ff. in *The God Delusion*.

God is incompatible. When they imagine such a god existing—remember that for them God must be a big strong, authoritarian being who tells his followers that they are chosen and know all the truth—people who are believers are not only robbed of their freedom and prone to violence, they end up doing worse things than if they were freethinkers. And the officials of such religions—rabbis, priests, and imams—see to it that their congregants remain ignorant and unquestioning—in a word, remain in shackles. One is reminded of Diderot who dramatically shouted, “Man will not be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.”¹⁵

Now it has to be admitted that not a few believers hardly have a distinguished record when it comes to good deeds, and possess no corner on the market when it comes to ethical behavior. There are in fact a number of atheists who, from all appearances, have lived admirably moral lives. I think, for example of an Albert Camus or a Jurgen Habermas.

That said, serious Christians realize that there is an intimate relationship between being free and being truthful. Even more, these Christians have experienced that dedicating themselves to discovering and living the truth makes them free. It is, of course, Jesus who claims both that “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32) and that He is “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In other words, we are called to be free in a relationship of friendship (“I have not called you slaves, but friends” [John 15:15]).

Put more philosophically, because the new atheists tend, as mentioned earlier, to think of God as a being, they also understand freedom as radical autonomy and independence. According to Nicholas Lash,

Learning to use the word “God” well is a matter of discovering that our absolute dependence, as creatures, on the mystery of God is the antithesis of servitude, for we have been created to be friends of God and, in that friendship, to find our

¹⁵ Cited by Eugene McCarraher, review of Hitchens’ *God is Not Great*, in *Commonweal*, June 15, 2007, p.24.

identity and freedom. Learning to use the word “God” well is a matter of discovering that everything we have and are is given; that our existence is the finite form of God’s self-gift, God’s self-communication.¹⁶

In other words, humanity and divinity are not opposites or antagonists. We are not created to stand alone but to be in relationship to each other. I believe that the more we become like God the more human we become. Saints are the most human people among us, even though many of the older written lives of the saints would lead us to think otherwise.¹⁷

The Limits of Scientism

Fourth and finally, Dawkins and Harris assume that the only reliable source of knowledge is science. Dawkins, for example, begins his final chapter with this statement:

Religion has at one time or another been thought to fill four roles in human life: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration. Historically, religion aspired to explain our own existence and the nature of the universe in which we find ourselves. In this role, it is now completely superseded by science.¹⁸

The first thing to note here is that Dawkins refers to “science” in the singular.¹⁹ Before the 17th century, that is before the emergence of science as mainly an empirical discipline, people in the universities commonly referred to the sciences in the plural.

¹⁶ Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims*, p. 26.

¹⁷ See Pope Benedict’s second encyclical, *Spe salvi*, published in November of 2007, where speaking of the importance of both reason and faith, he writes that reason must be open to the “saving forces of faith”: “Only thus does reason become truly human. It becomes human only if it is capable of directing the will along the right path, and it is capable of this only if it looks beyond itself. Otherwise, man’s situation, in view of the imbalance between his material capacity and the lack of judgment in his heart, becomes a threat for him and for creation. Thus where freedom is concerned, we must remember that human freedom always requires a convergence of various freedoms. Let us put it very simply: man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope” (Par. 23).

¹⁸ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 347.

¹⁹ I am here following Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims*, pp. 12 ff.

Indeed, theology was understood as a science, not in the way that law or medicine was a science, but all the same, a science—a legitimate way of knowing. All the sciences, different though they were, were considered to be the sources of reliable knowledge. Today, when we refer to the College of Arts and Sciences, as we do in this and most Universities, we tend to think of only one type of discipline as a science, and we might also be thinking, and I add erroneously, that only the sciences create reliable knowledge.

Second, I have to admit that I have no idea what “religion” is. I have an idea what Judaism is, and what Christianity is. I do not know what religion is. Religion is an abstract word first employed in this way only during the Enlightenment. But religion on the ground is never abstract. If you discuss religious matters with a Jew, the conversation will likely be different depending on whether that Jew is orthodox or reform, Chabad or Reconstructionist. Similarly, if we speak of Christianity, we are met with, in the United States alone, a bewildering variety of Christians. I think it is significant that in almost all these books, when the authors attack religion, they are attacking mainly Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and all three only in their most dangerous forms. What I think is important to remember, then, is that just as there is no single form of science, there is also no single form of religion. And to be fair, then, these authors would have made better arguments had they recognized the diversity that exists within faith traditions.

And third, Dawkins assigns to religion four roles: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration. It is true that in the past some theologians attempted to use the Bible to explain things better understood through the empirical sciences. However, what is missing in Dawkins list is something that, as British theologian Nicholas Lash reminds us, points to religion’s most fundamental role: “namely, the attempted expression, in word and deed, in language, ritual and behaviour, of appropriate *response* to invitations not of our invention.”²⁰ In other words, Dawkins fails to include in his list of religion’s functions the need to worship—the very experience, I would add, that renders religion capable of imparting consolation, of giving inspiration, that grounds exhortation, and that sheds light on, if not offers full explanations of, our purpose in life.

²⁰ Lash, p. 15.

This same sort of “scientism” shapes Sam Harris’ argument as well. Scientism, as opposed to science, presumes that it can explain all of reality empirically. For Harris, who espouses scientism, faith is belief for which there is no evidence. To be accepted as true, everything must have evidence. Faith, according to Harris, affirms things “without any examination of the world, or of the world of experience”:

Ignorance is the true coinage of this realm—“Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (John 20:29)—and every child is instructed that it is, at the very least, an option, if not a sacred duty, to disregard the facts of this world out of deference to the God who lurks in his mother’s and father’s imaginations.²¹

John Haught, a Catholic theologian who has spent the better part of his life writing about issues of Catholicism and science, says the scientism of these new atheists is self-contradictory. Why? “Because scientism,” he writes, “tells us to take nothing on faith, and yet faith is required to accept scientism.”²² In other words, there are no empirical experiments that can prove that we should take nothing on faith—whatever, of course, “taking something on faith” might be construed to mean. Those scientists who espouse scientism make an act of faith that only science will yield reliable knowledge. As a consequence, they believe that human behavior, which includes ethical tendencies and religious practices and desires, can be explained ultimately through evolutionary biology and the new genetic science. That theological departments, and the theologians who work in them, still exist strikes them, in Haught’s words, as a “nauseating anachronism.”²³ As Sam Harris writes, “Surely there must come a time when we will acknowledge the obvious: theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance. Indeed, it is ignorance with wings.”²⁴

²¹ Harris, first quotation is from p. 66, the second p. 65.

²² John E. Haught, “Amateur Atheists: Why the New Atheism isn’t Serious,” in *Christian Century*, February 26, 2008, p. 22.

²³ Haught, “True Believers: Have the New Atheists Adopted a Faith of Their Own?,” in *America*, May 5th, 2008, p. 16. See also Haught’s recently published *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

²⁴ Haught, “True Believers,” pp. 17-18.

Fourth, and finally, in defense of my fellow theologians (and all academics who do not advocate scientism), I'd like to suggest that there is more to reality than that which can be empirically measured, and that faith does not require belief without any evidence. While matter matters (I am not spiritualist), and while the discoveries of modern science are to be applauded (especially as they have advanced in the various fields of medicine), reality is multiple and superabundant, as Thomas Aquinas used to repeat. Good scientists do their best to be "objective" (sorry to use again that contested and easily oversimplified word); they try, in their laboratories, to ignore gender, history and human desire. Good scientists try to become detached, assume a neutral posture and provide a description of the reality they can measure. Scientists are interested in what is general and repeatable, not in what is personal and unique. But being a human being, entering into friendships, is hardly an exercise in detachment or an avoidance of what is particular. May I dare suggest that theologians, among others, explore the personal and the particular, exercise critical thinking within a life-commitment, and try to describe, however inadequately, the relationship that God and human beings ought to have.²⁵

Jesus Christ

Up to this point in my talk, I have argued that the new atheists miss their mark largely because they misunderstand God, Scripture, freedom and science. When thinking of the final misunderstanding—the nature and limits of science—I find myself thinking even further on what science can not lead us to— knowledge of Jesus Christ. I am

²⁵ Dennis O'Brien, "Good Faith: What the New Atheists Get Wrong," in *Commonweal*, September 14, 2007, p. 22. Robert Bellah describes the scientific approach to reality as follows: "By using the prestige of science to support social and cultural change long at work in Europe quite independently of science, Enlightenment thinkers abandoned not only religion as a way of relating to reality but, in an important sense, everyday life as a way of relating to reality. The scientist brackets the world of everyday life, suspending its taken-for-grantedness so that anything and everything can be called into question. In so doing, the scientist must strictly limit, so far as possible, all his or her own cultural and social preconceptions—religious, personal, even emotional. Whatever form of reality comes under study must be investigated without prior prejudice, revealing its own truth and not that of the investigator. In no other human realm is the distance between subject (the scientist) and object (whatever is studied by the scientist) greater: in this respect, science requires a certain asceticism and denial of self, and the scientist who allows personal feelings or beliefs to influence his scientific findings is not doing science. It is this model of radical disengagement that the Enlightenment philosophers sought to enshrine. Such disengagement has its uses, clearly. As the only or primary way of relating to reality, however, its consequences would be catastrophic" (see Bellah, "The Rules of Engagement: Communion in a Scientific Age," in *Commonweal*, September 12, 2008, p. 15).

speaking now quite explicitly as a Christian believer. If the new atheists deny God's existence and distort the meaning of freedom, it is because, it seems to me, that they assume that being religious and being fully human are incompatible. I cannot but now turn to my understanding and experience of Jesus as the most striking example of how humanity and divinity not only are not opposed, but are joined in a marvelous and saving way for all who believe and search for the Truth.

But, first, several things need to be said about revelation itself. I would suggest that, when thinking about revelation, we remember that revelation is paradoxical; it both reveals and conceals. Were revelation only to reveal, no one would be able to freely refuse to believe. The Jews knew that to see God meant death; seeing God fully is too much for a human being to absorb. As T. S. Eliot once wrote, "mankind cannot stand too much reality." If so confronted by God, we'd have no freedom to reject that revelation. With respect for our human (nature) and freedom, then, God reveals but still conceals his fullness from us.

Jesus preached to his contemporaries, a majority of whom did not believe in Him or choose to follow him. Unless we are to assume that those who did not receive Jesus were all wicked and blind, an assumption I am unwilling to make, then the revelation that Jesus embodies, and I struggle to find adequate words here—that revelation does not overwhelm those to whom he makes Himself known. Some Christian apologists have believed that the miracles reported in the New Testament, and especially that of the resurrection, prove that Jesus is God. But again, to believe that, one must trust the in the claims of those who said that they were first-hand witnesses, that the New Testament gives a reliable account of the ministry of Jesus, and that the resurrection of Jesus bodily actually happened. Some very good and thoughtful people do not find these claims credible.

I am in the final stages of editing a book of essays written by an international group of Jewish, Catholic and Muslim scholars. We met last year in Jerusalem for a week to debate papers that we had written the previous year on the theme of "learned ignorance." My contribution to the book is a chapter entitled "Humble Infallibility." I stress, as do my

colleagues from the other two religions, that even though we believe that a revelation has been made—the Torah, Jesus Christ, the Qur’an—our ability to understand and to live that revelation is inescapably limited. As a Christian, I can and do affirm that Jesus is Lord, the Savior of the world. But ask me how well I understand Jesus, and how faithfully I have been His disciple, and I would have to answer that my words and my deeds are sadly lacking.

Nor should Christians skip over the scandal of the crucifixion, of a crucified Christ, of a criminal who on the cross in apparent despair cries out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Christians would do well, Dennis O’Brien reminds us, not to rush past Jesus’ cry of dereliction on the Cross. Even if our faith is strong, St. Paul, the transformed persecutor of the first Christians, says that believers still, in this life, see only through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).²⁶ And before being tempted to give an answer to Ivan Karamazov as to why innocent children suffer, we might do better to dedicate ourselves to do whatever we can to alleviate all suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent.²⁷ What we can say is that the Word became flesh, according to Pope Benedict XIV, “in order to *suffer with*” us: “The capacity to suffer for the sake of the truth,” says the Pope, “is the measure of humanity.”²⁸

Some Christians, including Catholic Christians, have made the mistake of using their belief in Jesus as a club to beat up people who did not profess that belief. A club, after all, is something you possess, something you think you can wield and know how to use. There have been Church pronouncements to the effect that those who were told

²⁶ Dennis O’Brien, “Good Faith,” p. 23.

²⁷ In his encyclical *Spe salvi*, Benedict XVI states: “Certainly we must do whatever we can to reduce suffering: to avoid as far as possible the suffering of the innocent; to soothe pain, to give assistance in overcoming mental suffering. These are obligations both in justice and in love, and they are included among the fundamental requirements of the Christian life and every truly human life” (par. 36). And then he continues: “We can try to limit suffering, to fight against it, but we cannot eliminate it. It is when we attempt to avoid suffering by withdrawing from anything that might involve hurt, when we try to spare ourselves the effort of pain and pursuing truth, love and goodness that we drift into a life of emptiness, in which there may be almost no pain, but the dark sensation of meaninglessness and abandonment is all the greater. It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love” (Par. 37). Notice, the pope does not try to give an explanation for why the innocent suffer; rather, he calls on Christians to alleviate suffering, in union with the Christ who also suffered.

²⁸ *Spe salvi*, Par. 39.

about but did not accept Jesus as the savior of the world—for example, Jews and Muslims who had heard Christian sermons—would go to hell. Some of these non-believers were turned over to the State for execution. These Christians mistakenly presumed that they “had it all down pat.” They thought that they knew fully the truth and felt compelled to force others to believe.

There are other reasons for Christian repentance and humility. If we understood Jesus and his teaching so well, why did it take Christians so long to understand that they ought not to persecute non-believers? It is also sobering to recall that it took Christians, the first of whom were mainly evangelical Protestants, a very long time to oppose slavery and to affirm religious freedom. Christians have persecuted others, including other Christians, despite the fact that Jesus said clearly that He came that believers might be friends with God and one another, and be so in all freedom. All this suggests that we should think again about who Jesus is and how he wants his followers to behave.

Christians and religious believers aren't the only ones who have blood on their hands. In defense of Christianity, some apologists have pointed out that secular rulers of the 20th century are responsible for killing millions and millions of people—as many as 60 million in the 20th century alone.²⁹ Hitchens counters such charges by arguing that at least in the case of Europe the Church was complicit in these killings. In other words, the secular rulers would never have been as efficient in their designs to eliminate the Jews if it were not for the atmosphere of anti-semitism created by the Christian Churches. While the jury is, in my opinion, still out on the role Pius XII may have played in the fate of the Jews during World War II, it cannot be denied that there have been various forms of anti-Semitism traceable to interpretations of the New Testament.³⁰ That said, why is it that when the new atheists give their version of history, the state and various political leaders never share responsibility for evil things that Christians themselves have undeniably thought and done. Both Hitchens and Dawkins relish quoting Edward Gibbons, the famous English historian and unbeliever: “The various modes of worship...were all

²⁹ Consider alone the 20 million who died under Stalin, nearly one third of all the Jews of the world under the Nazis and the two million Cambodians under the brutal regime of Pol Pot.

³⁰ Only at Vatican II did the Catholic Church make explicit that the revelation of Christ did not replace the validity of the covenant that God had made with the Jews, and that the Jews as a people at the time of Christ could not then nor now be held responsible for the death of Jesus (see *Nostra aetate*, Par. 4).

considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosophers, as equally false; by the magistrates, as equally useful.”³¹ When these authors quote Gibbons, they use it to emphasize the ignorant credulity of the people, to extol the wisdom of the unbelieving philosophers, but fail to note how many magistrates, including purely secular political leaders, have not hesitated to use religion for their own purposes. In other words, political leaders without any religious commitment have slaughtered people, often sounding as though they are religious and sometimes using the dark side of religion to accomplish their deadly agendas.³² It is not unheard of that even today politicians sometimes wrap the Bible around the flag. Both the secular and religious powers have blood on their hands.

Conclusion

To bring this lecture to a close, I turn to the novelist Marilynne Robinson. She wrote that the Christian doctrine of original sin is “a great help in arriving at a reasonable set of expectations, thus avoiding the kind of scorched-earth judgmentalism that has gone so far toward emptying the landscape of institutions, ideals, and individuals who can make some claim on our respect.”³³ Surely it is a reasonable set of expectations that graduates of universities that take seriously the study of science, history, philosophy and theology—a university like the University of Dayton—should be able to populate our landscape with thoughtful and articulate believers, humble in their claims, faithful in their witness, and open to learning from whoever speaks the truth. Had the new atheists kept such believers in mind when they wrote their books, they would, I believe, had written better books than they did.

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³¹ Edward Gibbons, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* 6 volumes (London, 1853), vol. 1, chapter 2, p. 36, cited by Lash, p. 40.

³² Over the last ten years, there have been extensive studies done on the medieval inquisitions. The estimates of the number of people executed for heresy range from 2,000 to 4,000. That anyone should have been executed for heresy is a tragedy; but proportionate numbers help put things in perspective.

³³ Robinson, “Credo,” in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Spring 2008, p. 28.

Annual Lecture

October 3rd, 2008

University of Dayton