

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The New Atheism

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1

In recent months, atheism has become big news, and has also demonstrated its tremendous market potential. Books by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris have proved very popular; Dawkins and Harris, at least, have proved to be best sellers. I have lost count of the number of times I have seen people sitting on the train or on a bench reading one of their works. As to Hitchens, he is surely one of the sharpest journalistic minds at work today, and nothing he writes is, in my experience, less than stimulating and thought provoking. And this readable atheism is no preserve of the nonfiction section of Waterstones or Borders. With Phillip Pullman's popular fantasy novels, such as *The Amber Spyglass*, atheism has found its very own C. S. Lewis: a gifted writer of exciting adventure stories, which might well be described as epics of anti-Narnianism.

Atheism is, of course, nothing new. Nor is the use of compelling and exciting prose to communicate such. Throughout the centuries, some of the greatest masters of prose have been committed to striking at the very foundations of orthodox Christian belief. Whether we think of the great literary genius of John Milton or the firebrand pamphlets of the amazing Tom Paine, Christianity has often been thumped by master wordsmiths. And, of course, there was Friedrich Nietzsche, the eccentric genius of late nineteenth-century German philosophy, whose aphorisms and spellbinding epic, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, can fail to fascinate only those with the dullest of literary and philosophical sensibilities. There is, however, an interesting shift taking place in the kinds of arguments which the new, trendy atheists are making.

Old-style agnosticism and atheism, as variously exemplified by the works of David Hume or A. J. Ayer or even Bertrand Russell, tended to focus on the alleged impossibility of certainty about God or, as in the case of Ayer and Russell, the impossibility of speaking about God in any meaningful way. The arguments reflected the philosophical paradigms of the day—rational, empirical, linguistic, and logical. In other words, religion in general, and Christianity in particular, was regarded as making far-reaching claims which simply could not be justified in terms of what can and cannot be known, and what can and cannot be said, given the frameworks of plausibility at work.

Now, there is certainly this element in the work of Dawkins and Hitchens. Both men regard religion as empirically unjustified. In other words, one cannot work from the way

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the world actually is to the notion of some all-powerful, intelligent creator. That the world possesses order and beauty does not require the existence of a supreme being, let alone the God of Christian revelation. So far, nothing new. If this was all the burden of their argument, we would have nothing but an updated rehash of tried and tested arguments from the past.

What makes Dawkins and Hitchens so fascinating, however, is not so much the tightness of their logical argumentation or their marshalling of empirical evidence, but the force and power with which they make their cases against religion. Why spend so much time proving the nonexistence of something? Why not do something more constructive with life? Why not build bridges or run marathons or even collect string? Devotion to the debunking of that which does not exist is a strange and parasitic activity. After all, I don't believe in unicorns or the tooth fairy, but I really do not have the time or the energy to write long books articulating my position and ridiculing those who hold such beliefs.

The clue to what really drives such atheists lies in the obvious answer that they would give to the question, Why do you bother? As Hitchens puts it in his subtitle, the answer is that religion spoils everything. In other words, what drives this new atheism is the same thing that drives the various philosophies collectively known as postmodernism, and also that which drives so much of modern Western culture: taste. This new atheism dislikes religion because it sees its results as being profoundly *distasteful*. It was Nietzsche who launched an attack on Christianity, not from the perspective of the limits of human knowledge, but from the perspective of taste. He regarded Christianity as false, not because it embodied a set of incoherent and unverifiable beliefs, but because it advocated a morality, a "slave morality," as he called it, which exalted everything that turned his stomach: forgiveness, meekness, mercy, obedience, long-suffering. It was all too distasteful to him. For Nietzsche, Christianity spoiled everything by introducing effeminate values which subverted that will to power wherein lay humanity's true greatness.

These new atheists are the heirs of Nietzsche, with one significant change. For them ironically, it is not some alleged effeminacy in religion that makes them nauseous, that spoils everything. In fact, it is the exact opposite: their atheist crusade is driven by fear of the violence and oppression which they see as an essential part of religious fundamentalism. Lumping together suicide bombers in the Gaza Strip with right-wing televangelists in America, they see religious devotion—indeed, religion as a whole—as leading to results that are profoundly distasteful. For them, you only have to look at what religion does to the world to see how disgusting it is.

They see themselves as engaged in a struggle over the nature of what exactly a civilized, or tastefully organized, society should look like. And religion, because of its distasteful

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

results, can play no part in that. Hence, these new atheists have called for the banning of parental instruction of children in religion. For them, such instruction is not wrong because it tells children a harmless myth, as per the existence of Santa Clause or the Giant Pumpkin, but because it cultivates a set of distasteful values that will undermine the fabric of society. For them, it is indeed a form of child abuse.

How should we respond to these sons and daughters of Nietzsche, these arbiters of taste and aesthetics? First, we need to realize that the battle is not simply, or even primarily, an intellectual one. It is a moral one. The long war against God is really one against his sovereignty over us and our accountability to him. Arguments only get us so far. When Dawkins and Hitchens argue against religion, they are really saying that they find God's claims on their lives to be distasteful. There is a battle over tastes, over aesthetics, going on here. And, in this context, I am persuaded that familiarity with Nietzsche as a philosopher is far more significant for understanding the current age than almost any other philosopher one could name. Taste is far more important than truth in contemporary society, and Nietzsche is the man who can help to explain this.

Second, we should be careful not to give further fuel to the opposition through intemperate reactions. Rather, by loving our neighbors and walking humbly before the Lord, we can put the lie to the claims they are making. It is interesting that the new atheist's knowledge of Christianity seems limited only to famous Christians, high-profile scandals, and the lunatic fringe. They never mention the small churches working to spread the gospel in the toughest parts of the cities, or the countless individual acts of love that anonymous Christians do every day as part of their daily walk. While the atheists and their arguments will always be with us, we should do our best not to provide them with material for future books.

Third, we should pray for their conversion. Something is surely going on in the heart of men so obsessed with a God in whom they claim not to believe. Are they simply out to make money by writing a best seller? There are easier ways for such talented men to do that. So why are they obsessed with God? Suppressing the truth in unrighteousness is hard work. Pray that sooner or later they will run out of energy for doing it and come to acknowledge that which, deep down inside, they have known to be true all along.

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