

## Introduction

My topic this morning is "The New Atheism". It is not my intention to discuss the merits or demerits of Atheism as a theological position, but rather to look at the phenomenon that has been labelled "New Atheism" which has emerged in the last decade. Atheism is of course not new in itself. For example the Greek philosopher known as Theodorus the Atheist lived around 300BCE and it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Frederick Nietzsche reliably informed us that, "God is dead." So who then are these New Atheists? While there are many writers in this field, by far the most notable are those referred to by Richard Dawkins as "The Four Horsemen", alluding to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. These are;

**Richard Dawkins**, the British evolutionary biologist, author and emeritus fellow of New College, Oxford. His most notable work in this field is the 2006 publication *The God Delusion*.

**Sam Harris**, the American author, philosopher, neuroscientist, and co-founder and CEO of Project Reason. He is the author of *The End of Faith: Religion Terror and The Future of Reason*, which was published in 2004.

**Daniel Dennett**, the American philosopher, writer, cognitive scientist and Professor at Tufts University. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2007) is his most famous work on this subject.

Finally the late **Christopher Hitchens**. Hitchens was an English American author, essayist and journalist most notable in this field for his 2007 book, *God Is Not Great; How Religion Spoils Everything*.

While some atheists may regard themselves as Religious, like Rabbi Sherwin Wine, or spiritual like French Philosopher Alain De Botton, or indeed some of you here today may regard yourself as religious or spiritual atheists, it is not just god, but religion itself, that gets both barrels from the New Atheists. Sometimes this assault can be quite humorous, like the now legendary website, The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster [1] (have you been touched by his noodly appendage?) or The Invisible Pink Unicorn [2] (blessed be her holy hooves), but more often it is serious and in your face. Christopher Hitchens wrote, *I'm not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist; I not only maintain that all religions are versions of the same untruth, but I hold that the influence of churches, and the effect of religious belief, is positively harmful.* [Hitchens,C. 2001]

Such assertions naturally attract opposition from the religious community. Professor of Biblical Studies, Jim West, sees it as a fad,

*For a while (back in the 90's) it was considered chic by the 'in crowd' to 'be gay'. Consequently, there was a raft of Hollywood types who 'became' gay for fame and notoriety. Now, though, being an atheist is the path to fame, the new chic. Be atheist enough (and young enough of course) and you'll be feted and rewarded. Soon, a whole lot of celebrities will become atheists or come out as atheists, because it's chic. But alas, like all fads, the atheist fad will run its course. And then all the folk wanting to be chic will have to turn in another direction, their feigned 'atheism' melted away, and their quest to be 'different' will take on a new mask and cause- probably vegetarianism.* [3]

However even "Old Atheists" have voiced suspicion. Director of The American Council For Secular Humanism, Tom Flynn, argues that what has been called "New Atheism" is neither a movement nor new, and that what was new was the publication of atheist material by big-name publishers, read by millions, and appearing on best-seller lists. [4]

Whether or not they are but a fleeting fashion, or a product of publishing companies, what cannot be denied is the impact they have had on the literate public in the West and the serious contribution they have had on the religious debate. It is the merits and demerits of this phenomenon that I wish to discuss today.

## Reading1. The New Atheists as God's prophets: Michael Dowd [5]

Let us time travel to the advent of the mechanistic worldview in Europe, some 500 years ago. The most amazing new tool of the time would have been the timekeeper, the clock in all its permutations. Soon, the entire universe (the "world") was envisioned as a very complex clock, with God having served as clockmaker. From this point forward, God, for the intelligentsia, was divorced from reality. There was the Creator and there was the Creation. Thanks to the invention of the printing press, and exacerbated by widespread idolatry of the written word, the pattern was set for an expanding mismatch between humanity's most accurate picture of our inner and outer world and where we should seek guidance and inspiration.

What this means for us today is that it is time to acknowledge that Charles Darwin did not

threaten our view of God. To the contrary, he and Alfred Russel Wallace gave us the first glimpse of the real creator behind and beyond all the world's mythic portrayals of the divine. Darwin and the lineage of contributing naturalists and scientists before and after him have made it possible for us today to finally redeem the notion of God—a God that otherwise will remain trivialized as an occasional tinkerer in otherwise natural processes. This is a God who has been slacking off of late, no longer blessing and punishing people with one unnatural act after another. Truly, the God of the Hebrew and early Christian Bible has been reduced in the 21st century to a *god of the gaps*, lurking only in the chinks of causation that are not yet fully understood scientifically.

By mocking traditional understandings of God and by attacking religious dogma and theology, the New Atheists are thus calling religious people back to reality. In so doing, they are paradoxically functioning as prophets, those who boldly warn the people, "Get right with reality, or else." In a strange but very real way, the New Atheists are prophets of God—not prophets as predictors of the future, and not God as a trivial clockmaker or intervener occasionally moved by petitionary prayer—but prophets who speak boldly and unflinchingly on behalf of reality. These are prophets who speak on behalf of a God no less grand than our most awesome and expanding view of the Universe and its astonishing big history of achievement and transcendence.

### **Reading 2. Why Confront Religion: Christopher Hitchens [6]**

It has been a mission of mine especially since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, to try and help generate an opposition to theocracy and its depredations internationally. To help people in Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel resist those who sincerely want to encompass the destruction of civilisation and who sincerely believe they have God on their side in wanting to do so. I will take some time to say something I find repulsive about Messianic monotheistic religion. With a large part of itself it quite clearly wants us all to die. It wants this world to come to an end. You can tell the yearning for things to be over, whenever you read any of its real texts or listen to any of its real authentic spokesmen. Until recently there was a famous spokesman in Virginia who spoke about the rapture. Those of us who have chosen rightly will be gathered in the arms of Jesus leaving all the rest of you behind. The eschatological element which is inseparable from Christianity, if you don't believe there's going to be an apocalypse if you don't believe there is going to be an end, a separation of the sheep and the goats, a final condemnation, then your not really a believer. Their contempt for the things of the world shows through all of them. You can tell it when you hear the extreme Muslims talk. They cannot wait for death and destruction to overtake the world. They cannot wait for I would call, without ambiguity, a final solution.

Look at the Israeli settlers. If they can steal enough land from other people and get all the Jews into the promised land and all the non Jews out then finally the Jewish people will be worthy of the coming of the messiah. So that Armageddon can occur. So that the painful business of living as humans, of studying civilisation of trying to acquire learning, and knowledge and health and medicine can all be scrapped and the cult of death can take over. That to me is a hideous thing. A hateful idea. So when I say in the title of my book "religion poisons everything," I mean to say that it infects us in our most basic integrity. It says we can't be moral without big brother, without totalitarian permission. It says we can't be good to one another without this. We must be afraid. We must be forced to love someone we fear, the very essence of sadomasochism. The essence of abjection. The essence of a master slave-relationship and I say that this is evil. It is ultimate wickedness and ultimate stupidity.

### **Reading 3. Causing Offence: Dawkins, Dennet, Harris [7]**

One of the accusations we have all met is the accusation that we are strident or arrogant or vitriolic or shrill. This is a no win situation.

Religions have contrived to make it impossible to disagree with them critically without being rude. They play the hurt feelings card at every opportunity and you are faced with the choice. Am I going to be rude and articulate this criticism or am I just gonna button my lip. That's what it is to trespass a taboo. That religion is held off the table of rational criticism. There is this spell and we've got to break it. There is no polite way to say to somebody have you ever even considered the possibility that maybe you have wasted your life on this. There is no inoffensive way of saying that, but we do have to say it as they should jolly well consider it same as we do with our lives.

What is particularly amusing to me, at first it infuriated me but now it amuses me is that they've managed to enlist legions of non religious people to take offence on their behalf. In fact the most vicious reviews of my book have been by people who are not themselves

religious but they are terribly afraid of hurting the feelings of those who are.

I am curious how religion acquired this charmed status that it has because somehow we've all bought into it whether we religious or not. What historical processes led to this immunisation of religion. This hyper offence taking that religion is allowed to take.

We are offending people but we are also telling them they are wrong to be offended.

Physicists are not offended when their view of physics is disproved or challenged. This is not they way rational minds operate when they are really trying to get at what's true in the world and religions purport to be representing reality and yet there's this peevish, tribal and ultimately dangerous reflexive response to having these ideas challenged.

#### **Address**

*If we go back to the beginning, we shall find that ignorance and fear created the gods; that fancy, enthusiasm and deceit adorned them; that weakness worships them; that credulity preserves them; and that custom, respect and tyranny support them in order to make the blindness of men serve their own interests. If the ignorance of nature gave birth to gods; then knowledge of nature is calculated to destroy them."*

So said Paul-Henri, Baron D'Holbach in his work the System of Nature in 1770, no doubt considered a new atheist of his day. However the New Atheism of today as a modern phenomenon has its roots very much in the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, which sparked a reaction against fundamentalism and called into question the whole issue of religious belief in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is this phenomenon which I wish to discuss today.

My first reading this morning was from Michael Dowd. Dowd is a Christian albeit a radically heretical one, who describes the New Atheists as "God's prophets." Now of course Dowd does not entertain a traditional view of God. He regards God as a metaphor, a personification of reality. In his writings he gives a wonderful example of the Greek god Poseidon. Poseidon is a personification of the sea. It is what humans do, to personify things, he claims. There is no old guy with a trident and a fish's tale living in the sea. Poseidon is the sea and in that sense Poseidon is real because the sea is real. In that sense, if God is a personification of reality, God is real and by calling people to "get real" the New atheists are acting as God's prophets. All right, his argument is a bit tenuous but I see where he is coming from.

Certainly the New Atheists share one of the characteristics of the prophets of old. They railed against the religious authorities of their day. From the gospels, for example, we find Jesus of Nazareth taking on the Pharisees and Sadducees of his day with the words,

*You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? [NIV1984]*

We can compare this, for example, to Christopher Hitchen's verbal assault made on American television on the announcement of the death of the evangelist, Gerry Falwell.

*Falwell was a vulgar fraud and crook. He established a business, a racket in my opinion, taking money from credulous people on huckster like radio stations. We have been rid of an extremely dangerous demagogue who lived by hatred of others. The empty life of this ugly little charlatan proves only one thing. That you can get away with the most extraordinary offences to morality and truth if you just get yourself called Reverend. [8]*

Or take the words of author and broadcaster Stephen Fry from the Intelligence Squared debate in 2009,

*I genuinely believe that the Catholic Church, to put it at its mildest, is not a force for good in the world. I have my own beliefs. They are a belief in the enlightenment. They are a belief in the eternal adventure of trying to discover moral truth in the world and there is nothing, sadly, that the Catholic Church and its higher works likes to do more than to attack the enlightenment. [9]*

So I suppose Dowd has a point about the New Atheists calling on people to get real but I don't think the four horsemen themselves would appreciate the title God's prophets.

In my introduction I mentioned Jim West's assessment that "atheism" was the new "gay". I actually find that a very good analogy. In the 90's it was very common for those in the public eye to come out as being gay. Whether these claims were genuine or not, it has gone a long way to making it acceptable in western society to be gay. I notice it amongst the young people at my school or of my daughters friends. It is a non-issue. The same is true today of atheism. We find all sorts appearing in public who are openly atheist. Nick Glegg, our Depute Prime Minister, magicians Penn and Teller and just about every stand up comedian here and in the United States. While I am in no doubt that most of them are sincere, I am also in no doubt that some of them will be opportunists out to make a fast buck. But to be honest I don't care. Like being gay, for too long in society, being atheist was by and large something that was hidden, or in the view of George W. Bush, unpatriotic. If nothing else is if achieved by the New

atheists than to make atheism a non contentious issue, that would be enough for me. I also mentioned in my introduction the criticism levelled at the New Atheists from the old Atheists, whereby it is suggested that the New Atheism is largely a media creation by major book companies. Indeed an article entitled *The Unbelievers: New Atheism and the old boys club*, by Victoria Bekeimpis, published in "Bitch" magazine in 2011, highlights that while there are many noted and respected female atheist writers, publishing companies have chosen to ignore them and instead focus on belligerent, white, alpha-males. She writes, *So, let's reframe. For every mention of Hitchens, counter with a mention of Hecht. For every theory that male atheists are purer or more confrontational, let's ask why we gender the philosophy of non-belief to begin with. The ranks of atheists who don't fit the popular profile are increasing, and with more attention paid to who isn't a white male author with a fancy-pants book contract, the public face of non-belief may begin to look as diverse as atheism's adherents actually are. And if the work of women like Hecht, Jacoby, McCreight and Gaylor indicates anything, it's that there's a need for atheist voices from all genders and sexes to – very rationally – make themselves heard.* [10]

The use of the word "rationally" here I find quite revealing. There is a view that the New Atheists are becoming as fundamentalist in their views as the fundamentalist views of some religious people whom they are trying to oppose. This is the opening statement of the New Atheism website,

*Tolerance of pervasive myth and superstition in modern society is not a virtue. Religious fundamentalism has gone main stream and its toll on education, science, and social progress is disheartening.*

*Wake up people!! We are smart enough now to kill our invisible gods and oppressive beliefs. It is the responsibility of the educated to educate the uneducated, lest we fall prey to the tyranny of ignorance.* [11]

While I may agree with them in their opposition to religious fundamentalism, I am somewhat alarmed with the idea that tolerance in a modern society is not a virtue. Surely it must be an essential virtue, for history shows us only too well what intolerant societies are like.

There does seem to me an arrogance about some new atheists which I think weakens, rather than strengthens their cause. A good example of this is the Brights Movement, co-founded by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell in 2003.

The Brights Movement, for those of you unfamiliar with it, is a social movement that aims to promote public understanding of and acknowledgment of, the naturalistic worldview and would include atheists, agnostics, humanists, sceptics, and members of religious traditions who observe the cultural practices without believing literally in a deity.

I have no problem with that, indeed many of you here today would fit into that category of person. Where the problem lies is in the use of the word "Bright." Although the movement itself justifies the word "bright" as a positive word like "gay" is as opposed to "queer" for example, the implication is, quite clearly, that anyone who is not a bright must be dim. This smacks of arrogance. The Committee for Sceptical Inquiry published an article by Chris Mooney titled "Not Too 'Bright'" in which he stated that, although he agreed with the movement, Richard Dawkins' and Daniel Dennett's "campaign to rename religious unbelievers 'brights' could use some rethinking" because of the possibility that the term would be misinterpreted. Indeed even Hitchens distanced himself from it all. He found it a "*cringe-making proposal that atheists should conceitedly nominate themselves to be called "bright"*". [12] However this is what happens when you lift the lid off Pandora's Box.

I also find an arrogance that a lot of what they are saying is actually new. Listen to Sam Harris,

*We must begin speaking freely about what is really in these holy books of ours. A close study of these books, and of history, demonstrates that there is no act of cruelty so appalling that it cannot be justified, or even mandated, by recourse to their pages. It is only by the most acrobatic avoidance of passages whose canonicity has never been in doubt that we can escape murdering one another outright for the glory of God.* [13]

What I am sure of, is an intelligent man like Sam Harris knows, but chooses to ignore, is that people have been speaking freely about what is in these holy books of ours for centuries, often at great personal cost. Or that liberal religious people have undertaken literary criticism of the bible for centuries both in Judaism and in Christianity. Perhaps he is unwilling to recognise the work of religious people in this, only fellow New atheists.

There is also an arrogance of deliberately focussing on the extreme or fundamentalist branches of religion as being representative of all religious people. We heard it in the second

reading today from Hitchens when he referred to the fundamentalists as the real spokesmen, as if any religious person who is not a fundamentalist can't possibly be a real member of that faith tradition. This to me seems as banal as taking The British National Party and using it as an excuse to damn the whole democratic process. Indeed, there is a danger of the New Atheist movement becoming as fundamentalist as those they are trying to oppose. James Wood writing in the Guardian,

*The New Atheism is locked into a similar kind of literalism. It parasitically lives off its enemy. Just as evangelical Christianity is characterised by scriptural literalism and an uncomplicated belief in a "personal God", so the New Atheism often seems engaged only in doing battle with scriptural literalism; but the only way to combat such literalism is with rival literalism. The God of the New Atheism and the God of religious fundamentalism turn out to be remarkably similar entities. I can't be the only reader who finds himself in broad agreement with the conclusions of the New Atheists, while disliking some of the ways they reach them. [14]*

Some of the ways they reach them is by causing offence. However here I must rise to their defence. There is a very good discussion on this matter amongst the four horsemen which raises this issue, an excerpt from this formed my third reading this morning. It runs for two hours but it is worth watching. This for me is an extremely important point. I do not believe that any religion or any religious view should be protected from criticism. As Unitarians freedom of conscience and freedom of speech are traditional values that we hold. As a society we must defend the rights of everyone to express their opinion on any subject, including religion, whether we agree with them or not.

I'll give you an example. My friend Jack is an RE teacher at my school. The head teacher received a letter of complaint about him from a parent virtually calling for his dismissal, because he referred to god as "it" during a lesson and as a Christian this had caused her and her daughter offence. The head teacher replied that Jack was merely following the course and quoted the learning outcome which called for a discussion of god as he, she or it. Personally I would have told her where to get off. Perhaps that is why I am not a head teacher.

If extremist Muslims take offence at a cartoon in a Danish newspaper or people questioning, with extensive research, the historicity of Mohammed, or people raising objections to their religious justification of the ill treatment of women or homosexuals. If they are offended by this, I say too bad. If Christians are offended, that I do not believe that Jesus is a God, or that the bible is God's holy word, or that I believe the Church's contribution to the spread of AIDS in Africa by calling the use of condoms "sinful" is a disgrace. If they are offended by this, that is their problem. I'll say it anyway. If the Zionists are offended when it is suggested that they do not have God's holy mandate to drive their fellow human beings off their own land, tough. It needs to be said.

And of course, from our third reading today the phenomenon of non-religious people rallying to the defence of religions. "You can't possibly say that. People might take offence." Do you remember the recent case of the British Airways stewardess who was not allowed to wear a small cross in case it caused offence? Carol Vorderman, a presenter on TV. series countdown recalls an incident when her co-presenter Richard Whiteley died. She wore a cross that he had given her as a present as a reminder of him, and was duly showered with complaints that this was offensive to non-Christians.

What nonsense. Is that what society is being reduced to? There is clearly a difference between people going out of their way to being offensive and those who take the slightest offence had having their beliefs challenged by those who take another view. In our society if we do not have freedom of conscience nor freedom of speech what do we have? If the men on the fundamentalist extremes or even well meaning do-gooders ask us not to speak in case we cause offence, then we will send our society back hundreds of years to the dark ages.

O.K. Time to sum up. What do I make of this New Atheism?

I do not count myself amongst their number for many reasons.

For their attitude of superiority, for their inability to recognise the good that religion can do in society, for their propensity towards fundamentalism, for their unwillingness to differentiate between religious extremists and the vast majority of reasonable religious people, I have to mark them "must do better".

As Unitarians we are an open faith community celebrating diverse beliefs. We gather for worship and fellowship, to create a caring community where all feel supported in our search for meaning and value, something that for the New Atheists would have little point. We are

more tolerant of those who think differently from us.

However I do see a lot in common with our Unitarian cause. We are both children of the Enlightenment. We value science and reason over religious dogma. We stand together against those who would seek to use religion to abuse their fellow humans because of their gender, colour, creed or sexual orientation and against those who would seek to impose their views upon us. Finally, I respect their willingness to maintain their right to freedom of speech regardless of the offence taken.

God's New Prophets? No. Sometimes incredibly right, sometimes dogmatic and stubborn. But I welcome their contribution to the religious debate. It would be an awful lot duller without them.

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