

THE “NEW” ATHEISM: ANOTHER SKIRMISH WITH A TWIST

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INTRODUCTION

The year was A.D. 17 and the Roman Empire was once again flexing its muscle along the vast European wilderness. A young Roman general by the name of Germanicus was swiftly becoming a favorite son of the Romans due to his bloodline and reports of his military victories in Germania. A great-nephew to Augustus, he had the inside track to the throne and imperial power. A last minute appeal by the wife of Augustus secured the throne for her son Tiberius. As a concession to naming Tiberius heir to the throne, Germanicus was formally adopted as a son by Tiberius and declared successor to him.

Tiberius would have been content to allow Germanicus to remain in the wilderness fighting the barbarians if not for the growing popularity of his general among the Roman citizens. Each new report of victory for the legions under his command brought about public discussion of his worthiness to rule Rome. In order to stop Germanicus’s popularity from eclipsing his own, Tiberius sent word to Germanicus to return to Rome at once to receive a hero’s welcome and the honor of a “triumph,” the victor’s parade reserved exclusively for Rome’s military heroes who demonstrated exceptional valor on the battlefield and who achieved devastating defeats of Rome’s enemies.

Not much has changed in relation to war heroes over the last two millennia. Successful warriors are still rewarded and admired. The battlefield that this paper will describe is not one of actual physical combat but instead is the battlefield of the mind. Ideas have become conquering heroes to many and the so-called new atheism is certainly engaged in a battle for the minds of the Western world. Some have accepted atheism as having vanquished its most formidable foe – Christian theism. This paper will make clear that assumption is false.

WHAT'S "NEW" ABOUT ATHEISM?

As recently as 2005 atheism was declared a dying philosophical belief system.¹ Reasons for this belief abound and include the fact that atheism at its core is derivative. That is to say that the atheistic belief system is viable so long as it has a host – religion in general and increasingly Christianity in particular - to draw its sustenance from and perform its parasitic work upon. Removed from its host and forced to stand on its own merits atheism has little to say by way of articulating a belief system that is livable. Additionally, atheism appears to be unaware of or unconcerned that its dependence on modernity for its philosophical foundation leaves it vulnerable and easily discarded as a failed relic in a postmodern culture.

The question “what is new about atheism” deserves investigation and the formulation of a robust answer. Some attribute the new atheist’s popularity to the backlash against a supposed evangelical White House under President Bush and the sometimes foolish, arrogant, and hypocritical statements and behaviors of American evangelicals.² Popular culture, although never an accurate barometer of actual movements given the fickleness and ease of manipulation, would suggest that atheism is not dead after all. The widespread acceptance of new forms of spiritual expression hiding atheistic roots including Wicca and Yoga, seem to suggest a still vibrant undertow of religious conviction albeit subjective and God denying. It seems appropriate to borrow a phrase from sports commentator Lee Corso, who would say, “Not so fast my friend” in response to the assertion that atheism has lost its impact on American culture.

¹Alister E. McGrath and Neil Brennan, “The Twilight of Atheism,” *Christianity Today*. 49 (March 2005):36-40.

²David Aikman, “Puncturing Atheism: Fourfold God Squad Brilliantly Takes on Dawkins, Hitchens, & Co.” *Christianity Today*. 51 (October 2007):110.

ATHEISM IS BEING REPACKAGED

Fox Television Network has a blockbuster hit in their evening programming lineup. Since 2004 the show *House* has gained popularity such that today it boasts of consistent Top 10 ratings among all shows and is the top rated Fox drama show.³ Some might say this is no big deal. Television has lots of shows that claim to be “top rated.” *House* is different from other shows and is a big deal to cultural observers because it features a lead actor who portrays an atheist medical doctor. Consider the following conversations from several shows between actor Hugh Laurie who plays Dr. House and various characters that portray believers in other faith systems:

Sister Eucharist: I need to talk with you, Dr. House. Sister Augustine believes in things that aren't real.

House: I thought that was a job requirement for you people.

Then there's this exchange with the orthodox Jewish husband of a sick woman.

House: You live according to God's six hundred commandments, right?

Husband: [folding his arms] Six hundred thirteen.

House: You understand them all?

Husband: Takes a lifetime of learning...

House: But you follow the ones you don't understand because the ones you do understand make sense, and you believe the guy who created them knows what he's doing.

Husband: Of course.

House: So you will trust my diagnosis and you'll let me treat her, because in this temple, [scarify] I am Dr. Yahweh.

Husband [with look of disbelief]: I want a new doctor.

As a Champion of Atheism, Gregory House has won the show some shout-outs from the secular side, happy to embrace any plausible primetime soul mate. A House video clip can be found on the website of Richard Dawkins, Oxford professor and author of the bestselling *The God Delusion*.

In it, the doctor tells a fellow physician that his patient's newly found religious faith is only a symptom of disease.

Physician: We can't just inject her with " 10cc of atheism and send her home.

House: Religion is a symptom of irrational belief based on groundless hope.⁴

³Neilson Ratings available at <http://tvlistings.zap2it.com/ratings/weekly.html> Accessed March 30, 2009.

⁴Christine McCarthy McMorris, “Playing Godless,” *Religion in the News*. 11 (Spring 2008):20-21.

This new softer gentler atheism is also appearing on the big screen. December 2007 witnessed the release of the critically acclaimed *The Golden Compass* in movie theaters across America. Billed as a delightful and adventurous children's story, *The Golden Compass* is the first book in a trilogy from author Philip Pullman entitled *His Dark Materials*. This trilogy presents Pullman's belief that the idea of God is nonsense and that only mankind can save itself. Although presenting a seemingly innocuous atheism Pullman takes pains to insure his point is made as evidenced by the following line in the movie spoken by a former nun to two children explaining why she no longer believed in God and left the Christian faith behind: (Christianity is) "a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all."⁵ Pullman includes in his movie such things as a magic knife named *Aeshaettr* which means god-destroyer, a reenactment of the Fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden, but with the effect of saving the universe not subjecting it to judgment, and perhaps most telling of all, a presentation of the biblical God not as Creator but as imposter, cheat, and liar who deceives mankind into believing that He is a supreme being. Observers given to a more investigative nature will notice Pullman's penchant for Platonism and Gnostic mythology especially as it relates to God as an Old Testament evil. His use of the term *daemon* for the spirit guides of children is an unmistakable reference to the demiurge of the Gnostics. *The Golden Compass* is nothing more than Pullman's atheistic belief system presented as a children's tale.

These examples show that atheism is making inroads into American culture and thought life even as the horse of Troy was accepted without discernment. Atheism appears to be merely another life choice to many Americans. Some have opined that atheism is

⁵Peter T. Chattaway, "The Chronicles of Atheism," *Christianity Today*. 51 (December 2007):36-39.

experiencing a rise in popularity not seen since the days of Nietzsche.⁶ The triumvirate of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Samuel Harris seem to have seized this opportunity and have written recent diatribes against Christianity. Hitchens says in his book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* that, “Many of the teachings of Christianity are, as well as being incredible and mythical, immoral.”⁷ Dawkins gives advice to Christians everywhere who speak out against atheism, encouraging them to “just shut up.”⁸ In an interview in 2004 Dawkins could not find a single thing of redeeming worth within religion. When pressed to cite even one minor thing that religion has done for the good Dawkins responded, “No, I really can’t think of anything.”⁹ Other new atheists have been equally vocal recently. Daniel Dennett for example hopes for a day when science will provide enough evidence to “break the spell” of religion.¹⁰

The media has not been as accepting as would be expected. This very same press that Christians and conservatives alike consider beyond rehabilitation has taken the new atheists to task through surprisingly tepid, critical reviews. Consider for instance the following responses by the media to the writings of these three authors:

(The) *Washington Post's* religion writer David Segal wrote on October 26, 2006, that Harris’s writings are “straight out of the stun grenade school of public rhetoric.”; So negative are the New Atheists that their impact will be merely to “elevate the rancor in our public discussion,” claimed *New York Sun* columnist John McWhorter on May 24, 2007; In addition, journalists found fault with the New Atheists' knowledge of theology and religion, the main subject matter of their books. Dawkins failed to “appreciate just how hard philosophical questions about religion can be,” freelancer Jim Holt wrote in the *New York Times* October 22, 2006, while Dennett missed “the actual substance of religious experience,” according to the *New York Sun's* Adam

⁶Stan Guthrie, “Answering the Atheists,” *Christianity Today* (November 2007), 74.

⁷*Ibid.*, 74.

⁸*Ibid.*, 74.

⁹Available at www.belief.net Cited in Stephen M. Barr, “The Devil’s Chaplain Confounded,” *First Things* (August-September 2004), 29.

¹⁰Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, NY: Viking, 2006), 39. Cited in Carlos R. Bovell, “If Scientists Can Naturalize God, Should Philosophers Re-Supernaturalize Him?” *Theology Today* vol. 64 (2007): 340-348.

Kirsch, on February 8, 2006. As for Harris, sniffed Steinfels of the *Times* on March 3, 2007, he failed to “engage religious thought in any serious way.” The *Miami Herald's* Alter thus described Dawkins as “the world's foremost evangelical atheist,” who denounced the evils of religion “in tones that resemble the giddy zeal of a tent revivalist.” In a January 7 (2007) article in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Huffington Post blogger R. J. Eskow called - Dennett and Dawkins “fundamentalist atheists” who “use scientific thought in much the same way religious fundamentalists use sacred text—as the source for unquestionable and rigid truths that can't be challenged.”¹¹

THE CURRENT PHILOSOPHICAL CLIMATE

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Immanuel Kant established what has been termed the “Enlightenment Fallacy.” Kant demonstrated that mankind can never acquire enough knowledge to comprehend completely the whole of reality. Reason is simply not capable of comprehending and articulating the entirety of what can and might be known. Instead of answering questions satisfactorily Kant suggested that human reason raises questions that it is incapable of answering. Kant pointed to the idea of reality and mankind’s existence within it and asked how we acquire knowledge of truth. This is one reason why the new atheists reject Kantian thought associated with this subject. Kant insisted that there was more to know than what our five senses alone could tell us. The idea that what we experience does not contain the whole of knowledge is antithetical to the atheist. Thus atheism rejects any concept of metaphysics, the very thing that Kantian thought placed beyond the realm of human reason to adequately grasp and articulate. This response from the new atheism is not unexpected. If there is something we cannot see, hear, smell, touch, or feel, and which is beyond our ability to study empirically then science is shown to be a fraud for claiming that it is the final authority in determining what can be known. Atheists understand that scientific naturalism is a system of absolute values just like Christian theism. Clearly, atheists prefer

¹¹Bernard Lightman, “Beating Up On the New Atheists,” *Religion in the News*. 10 (Sum-Fall 2007):2-4.

scientific naturalism and reject Christian theism and therefore the question of God. The possibility that God exists is nonsensical within their belief system.

Enlightenment Modernism characterized by its dependence on and faith in scientific naturalism and intellectual rationalism has been exposed much like the emperor in Andersen's fabled children's story. Postmodernism, in replacing modernism has taken a scorched earth approach to both intellectual and practical cultural engagement. Any and every field of inquiry is fair game to the deconstructionist's guillotine. While Christianity has certainly not escaped postmodernism's scathing critiques, it has fared far better than its secular counterparts. Christianity has always been forthright in its confession that faith operates by supposition and therefore Christian theism stares down postmodernism at this point. Christians believe certain things based on certain other things that are taken for granted. Of primary importance is the belief that God exists. Science on the other hand had, until postmodernism captured the academic fortresses, believed it was a system of empirically observable truths not based on presupposition.

Marxist-Atheist philosopher Richard Lewontin for example believes that the reason Americans reject the scientific explanation of the origin of life as embodied in Darwinian evolutionary theory is not due to ignorance of the facts but instead is located in "starting point" or worldview bias: "The primary problem is not to provide the public with the knowledge of how far it is to the nearest star and what genes are made of . . . rather, the problem is to get them to reject irrational and supernatural explanations of the world, the demons that exist only in their imaginations, and to accept a social and intellectual apparatus, Science, as the only begetter of truth."¹² Apparently lost on Lewontin is the fact that his own certitude related to scientific naturalism is itself a belief system based on presupposition and

¹²Phillip E. Johnson, "The Unraveling of Scientific Naturalism," *First Things* (November 1997): 22-25.

as such his assertions to the contrary make him appear naïve, deceived or both. Likewise, Daniel Dennett betrays the same presupposition in his recent book entitled, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, aimed at encouraging a study of human religion from an evolutionary standpoint. His goal is simply to “propose further scientific investigations of religion to be undertaken by competent researchers, and to suggest what forms of public policy we might wish, as a society, to adopt in regard to religion, once we have begun to acquire a proper understanding of its nature.”¹³ Postmodernism has brought an end to these unchallenged axioms of scientific naturalists and atheists alike. The skirmish has been engaged by postmodern philosophy and atheism is a victim in the assault.

This turn of events is fortunate for Christianity. Previously most scientists were unwilling to discuss ideas, theories, or research that suggested alternatives to existing scientific dogma involving a beginning of the universe. By challenging scientific naturalism postmodernism has opened the door for Christian scientists to discuss evidence of energy fields, the movements of galaxies, subatomic particles, and quantum physics within the context of a starting point for the universe.

One would think that in such a climate the new atheists would tread lightly or in the least demonstrate a degree of humility. Such is not the case. Instead of answering the challenge of postmodernism, atheists have retreated more deeply into the abyss of scientism. Perhaps this is so because Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and their peers cannot answer the charges of postmodernism. One is left to believe that the unwillingness of the new atheists to face the rigor of debate is in principle a declaration that they cannot with any sustainable intellectual power provide a framework of solutions that demonstrate atheism’s superiority. Perhaps the

¹³David B. Hart, “Daniel Dennett Hunts the Snark,” *First Things*, (January 2007): 30-38.

new atheists believe that because their pronouncements are made with sincerity and frequency they are somehow transformed into unquestionable fact.

Haught provides a strong argument that the new atheists are nothing more than weak-kneed, self-deluded, presuppositional idealists as compared to classical atheists such as Marx, Freud, Camus, and Sartre. He suggests that “scientism is . . . the self-subverting creed that provides the spongy cognitive foundation of the entire project we are dignifying with the label “new atheism.”¹⁴ When atheists proclaim that science alone is the final arbiter of truth, that science alone is the only methodology of understanding, they are in fact making a declaration of faith. In so doing they have offered a “do as I say and not as I do” approach because while telling people to take nothing on faith but always defer to empirical evidence, i.e. scientific methods, they have themselves succumbed to accepting the scientific method by faith. Christopher Hitchens is oblivious to his predicament and says, “If one must have faith in order to believe something, then the likelihood of that something having any truth or value is considerably diminished.”¹⁵ Of course this statement is self-refuting because there is no empirical evidence to prove this statement is true. Hitchens thus becomes victim to the very thing he roundly criticizes in Christian theists, namely presupposition. A more obvious atheistic presuppositional bias is provided by Lewontin who says, “We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment – a

¹⁴John F. Haught, “Amateur Atheists,” *Christian Century* (February 2008): 22-28.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 22.

commitment to materialism . . . Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.”¹⁶

Lewontin’s admission is clearly the crux of the matter for the new atheists. At issue is not that the new atheists won’t admit to the presence of adequate evidence and clear logical reasons for believing that God exists. The primary issue for them is that they do not want to believe that God exists. For the atheist the resultant implications of allowing the “Divine Foot” through the door are unsavory to say the least. What Lewontin as well as his peers refuse to understand is that evolutionary theory encroaches on metaphysical matters of importance to Christians and thus has opened wide the door for God to in the least enter the discussion. Some examples from evolutionary theory prove this point. Evolutionary theory offers a story of origins and therefore the concepts of creation are open to debate by the Christian theist; Evolution suggests an origin story for human life and thus it touches on the biblical teaching of original sin; Evolution also speaks of species and uniqueness and therefore touches on the biblical teaching of the image of God in man.¹⁷

Steven Weinberg, National Medal of Science award winner and Noble laureate in physics presented a clear picture of what is at stake. The issue for Weinberg and other atheist scientists is found in their quest for freedom from religion. Consider these comments presented in an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1999: “One of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them to not be religious. We should not retreat from this accomplishment . . . With or without religion, good people

¹⁶Dinesh D’Souza, “What’s So Great About Christianity” (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2007), 161.

¹⁷Gregory R. Peterson, “Whose evolution? Which theology?” *Zygon*. 35 (June 2000): 221-232.

can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion.”¹⁸ It is notable that Lewontin does not offer any examples to bolster this claim.

The unstated assumption by the new atheists is that life without God would continue just as it currently does. Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris believe that life as we know it with all the modern conveniences of law, order, justice, altruism, and civility would simply continue unfettered. This viewpoint is contradicted by the classical atheists. Sartre understood rightly that atheism accepted and lived out would be a cruel teacher. He surmised that the vast majority of mankind could never come to grips with atheism because they would be too weak to accept the consequences of the death of God. Nietzsche experienced the consequences of a world without God – a rabid nihilism well beyond skepticism that left him broken and hedonistic. Perhaps the new atheists have deliberated on the truths of Sartre, Nietzsche, and Camus and having seen the devastation that their belief system brings have chosen atheism “light.”

C.S. Lewis in “Men without Chests” provides a scathing critique of the new atheist’s position stated above. Lewis asserted that for people to be moral in the most basic sense, the head must rule the stomach. What Lewis meant was that reason must rule emotion. This is only accomplished when the head has been informed by the will – the chest in his essay. The problem in Lewis’s day is the same we experience today, namely that modern man and his dependence on rationalism has equated morality with knowledge but not action. Consequently the will is subjected to the passions and morality has become a bankrupt and vacuous term. Lewis famously summed up the quagmire by saying, “We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find

¹⁸Philip Hefner, “Modern and Postmodern Forms of Unbelief,” *The Christian Century* (January 2000), 89.

traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”¹⁹ What the new atheists denounce is the very thing that can save mankind – the possibility of the transformation of the human heart, Lewis’s “chest,” by the God who designed us.

SCIENCE CANNOT ANSWER THE GOD QUESTION

Is a system that is purposely designed to deny the existence of God the best platform from which to address the question of God? Is it even capable of answering metaphysical questions? Richard Dawkins believes that science can answer the question of God’s existence because science is the depository of all relevant evidence. When Dawkins speaks of relevant evidence he is referring to that evidence derived from empirical experimentation. In the least Dawkins and the other new atheists referred to in this paper are being disingenuous when they talk of answering the God question from within a system that does not allow for His existence. Consistency is not a feature of the new atheism apparently.

Science answers questions within the natural realm. God exists beyond the natural realm and is not subjected to the so-called observable laws of nature. Thus it bears repeating that a belief system, be it atheism or scientific naturalism that denies the possibility of God, indeed excludes any input from a metaphysical viewpoint is ill-suited to attempt to answer the metaphysical questions concerning God. Indeed the new atheist’s commentary on God is itself nonsensical by their own standard.

The New Atheists spend huge amounts of time and resources discussing issues that cannot be answered within their faith system. Reason has its limits despite Hume’s emphasis on empirical verifiability and the subsequent logical positivism that developed as a result. Thus

¹⁹C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1947), 35.

it requires asking the question of why the new atheists are so vehemently opposed to Christian theism. What is at stake for them?

CHRISTIAN THEISM ANSWERS WHAT ATHEISM CANNOT

The current debate between atheism and Christian theism is not deadlocked as some suppose. There is not an insurmountable mountain of evidence that bolsters the atheist's claim to have defeated Christianity. To the contrary, the evidence demonstrates movement in the ongoing academic debate. As Johnson points out, "both sides are near agreement on a redefinition of the conflict. Biblical literalism is not the issue. The issue is whether materialism and rationality are the same thing. Darwinism is based on an a priori commitment to materialism, not on a philosophically neutral assessment of the evidence. Separate the philosophy from the science, and the proud tower collapses."²⁰

Many others see the same thing emerging in the broader debates between scientific naturalists and Christian theists. The rhetoric of the new atheists "betrays panic, another sign of weakness. Atheism knows that it is losing both arguments and the global tide. Stories of the global vibrancy of religion are everywhere trumping the grand narrative of evolutionary progress. And the best philosophers are still taking the God-hypothesis seriously."²¹

Daniel Maguire suggests that atheists cannot escape God-talk because it is wired into their subconsciousness as a condition of their humanity.²² Indeed the *imago dei* is not easily suppressed and man is less able to escape the intellectual struggle entered into when denying God. To do so would require atheists to invent new moral foundations for ethics, morals,

²⁰Johnson, 25.

²¹"The New Intolerance: Fear-mongering Among Elite Atheists Is Not a Pretty Sight," *Christianity Today*. 51 (February 2007):24-25.

²²Daniel C. Maguire, "Atheists for Jesus: The Moral Core of Religious Experience," *Christian Century*. 110 (December 1993):1228-1230.

modern bills of rights, as well as due-process theories of justice. Dawkins believes this can be done. He states that “at the same time I support Darwinism as a scientist, I am a passionate anti-Darwinian when it comes to politics and how we should conduct our human affairs.”²³ What Dawkins means by that somewhat shocking statement is revealed in his book *The Selfish Gene*, in which he says “We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicator” . . . because mankind has been accidentally endowed with intelligence by a mindless nature and this “blessed gift of understanding” is for Dawkins responsible for human morality.²⁴

Against the intellectual dead-end and schizophrenia of the new atheism Christianity offers hope rooted in objective truth. The Christian theistic worldview offers a satisfying and consistent understanding of the universe because it is presented within a context of a God who loves it and created it with special purpose. Randomness and chance evaporate into a sea of meaning. The Christian theistic view speaks of time and space as having meaning. Time is viewed as a linear characteristic of the universe, meaning that not only was there a beginning to all that currently is but that time is also moving toward a climax or ending. The Christian worldview makes sense of the physical evidence even now being discovered and validated by scientists who are anything but Christian.

The Christian worldview also speaks of the rationality of the creation. Because God is a rational being His creation has rational characteristics. The Bible says that God created mankind in His image. This means that people have inherent worth and value in God’s eyes in spite of the sin that dominates so many. This is why Christianity upholds the sanctity of

²³Stephen M. Barr, “The Devil’s Chaplain Confounded,” *First Things* (August-September 2004): 25-30.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 26.

life and takes strong stands against policies and practices that seek to wantonly destroy human life.

The new atheism has not succeeded in escaping the transcendent nature of values. Christian theists have told them they will not be able to. Each will have to find out on their own. Their forerunners Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus stepped back from the abyss of radical atheism once the fullness of the evil it would unleash upon mankind was realized in their own souls. They understood albeit late in life, that mankind is a moral creature because there is a moral God. They stopped short of confessing this publically and clearly but their prescriptions for life without God betrayed what they knew to be true intellectually.

Nietzsche for example wrote that man without God should live lives of creativity and purpose, surely transcendent values; Sartre's existentialism morphed into humanism where he began to speak of basic human rights, a grudgingly and verbally unacknowledged salute toward transcendence; and even Camus' literary career betrayed his professed atheism as his preoccupation with moral guilt in *The Fall* attests.

CONCLUSION

Tiberius's honoring of Germanicus with a victory parade was a charade from start to finish. By calling Germanicus to Rome Tiberius hoped to appease the citizenry and eliminate Germanicus as a rival. The fact that the victories in the European wilderness were exaggerated was kept from the common Roman citizen. More surprising perhaps was Germanicus's willing participation. He of all people knew the truth. His legions had inflicted a measure of defeat upon the Germanic hordes under the command of Arminius but

they had in the end only achieved symbolic victory and had not advanced Rome's holdings beyond the traditional boundary of the Rhine and Elbe.

Tradition holds that the conquering hero would ride in a chariot dressed to appear as the Roman god Jupiter. With face painted red and attired in purple robes Germanicus would have rode through the city streets of Rome to the loud acclaim of its citizens. Accompanying Germanicus would have been a slave whose sole purpose was to whisper into the ear of the hero "remember that you are a man. You are not a god." As stated earlier the entire affair was a ruse and was soon perceived as such by an adoring city for only a collection of a few slaves, nearly dead soldiers, and the wife and son of Arminius were on parade. Neither Arminius nor his generals were seen.

One of the clearest distinguishing characteristics of the new atheism is its moral certitude. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Samuel Harris have declared that atheism has finally and convincingly won the war against Christian theism. So sure are they of this decisive victory that they have made loud proclamation of the fact and proudly published their summaries of the conflict. Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Hitchens's *God Is Not Great*, Harris's *The End of Faith*, and Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* all smack of a false triumph similar to that of Germanicus. They fancy themselves as riding in the victor's chariot waving to an adoring crowd.

The new atheists have announced to the world that atheism and science as demonstrated within scientific naturalism has won the day. To commemorate this atheistic victory the new atheists wish to be called "brights."²⁵ The logic behind the name change appears to be two-fold. The word atheist carries historically negative baggage that must be shed. The second reason is more nuanced. Brights as Dawkins and Daniel Dennett mean the term to be

²⁵D'Souza, 22.

understood represents the conquering of Christian theism and its attendant supernaturalism, mysticism, and metaphysical dimensions through the power of rationalism.

This begs the question of what atheists believed before their name change. Clearly nothing has changed since atheists rejected these Christian theistic categories prior to their evolution to become brights. But have they really rejected the notion of metaphysics? Something more must be afoot here.

Francis Schaeffer was not the first but he certainly was one of the most forceful and influential Christian apologists of the past century. Schaeffer's analysis of the atheistic dilemma speaks to the current situation of the new atheists.

Mankind exists within this universe with a rational knowledge of himself within the physical world and of the cosmos or supernatural realm. Schaeffer refers to this as the upstairs and downstairs of human experience. Atheism by its nature has rejected and thus destroyed the upstairs – cosmos/supernatural – because they believe it cannot be known. It has already been demonstrated that this is an a priori assumption of the atheist not based on evidence. The effect of this division destroys the unity within man and as Schaeffer points out, he becomes divided within himself.

Because man revolted against God and tried to stand autonomous, the great alienation is in the area of man's separation from God. When that happened, then everything else went too. This autonomy is carried over into the very basic area of epistemology, of knowing, so that man is not only divided from other men in the area of knowing, he is divided from himself He has no universals to cover the particulars in his own life. He is one thing inside and another thing outside. Then he begins to scream, "Who am I?" It is not just some psychological thing, as we usually think of psychology. It is basically epistemological. Man's attempted autonomy has robbed him of reality. He has nothing to be sure of when his imagination soars beyond the stars, if there is nothing to guarantee a distinction between reality and fantasy. But on the basis of the Christian epistemology, this confusion is ended, the alienation is healed. This is the heart of the problem of knowing, and it is not solved until our knowledge fits under the apex of the infinite-personal, triune God who is there and who is not silent.²⁶

²⁶Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 83, 341.

Schaeffer points out that only some form of a mystical “jump” can account for the atheist belief that personality comes from impersonality.²⁷ The same is true for values, morals, and ethics. Dawkins and his peers have attempted to attribute this to what they call the “selfish gene” that in spite of the evolutionary encoding of survival of the fittest operates in an altruistic manner. This twist or slight of hand is what gives Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris their bravado. They reject the Christian belief in metaphysical reality at the same time they affirm it with different words. The new atheists appeal to a softer, gentler, kinder form of atheism that cannot be reasoned from the tenets undergirding their belief system. They may parade around the book circuit receiving the accolades of the unsuspecting but the fact is they have smuggled Christian theistic transcendence into their atheism.

Dawkins and his peers believe that they can divert attention from the logical and observable devastation of their views by launching a media-blitz of what amounts to nothing more than so much hot air and verbose hubris. The force of Christian theism in relation to the new atheists is best demonstrated by continuing to hold them accountable for the logical outcomes of their views. Barr rightly states that “the inescapable conclusion is that Dawkins and materialists of his sort do not in fact stand up full-face into the keen wind of understanding. They don’t face the implications of their ideas. If they did, they would have to dismiss all talk of morality, rebellion against nature, and intellectual freedom as so much sentimentality.”²⁸

Three very distinct and troubling points emerge from the new atheism. First, when God is rejected atheistic humanism fills the void. If there is no infinite, objective reality

²⁷Ibid., 95.

²⁸Barr, 29.

then man is left with the material universe and its finiteness. Relativism and subjectivism ensue and overwhelm. Malcolm Muggeridge said it best, “If God is dead then someone will have to take his place.”²⁹ Man thus becomes the measure of all things and poetically the captain of his own soul. This is atheism in a nutshell. Second, if God is rejected then mankind must make their bodies their souls. When the eternal is dismissed then space and time is all that remains. Logic and reason are no longer guiding lights instead feelings and emotions ascend to the throne of man’s heart. Transcendent ethics that serve to bind man together in community are destroyed and individualism reigns. Into the abyss created by the rejection of the eternal fall such ideals as nobility, justice, law, and liberty, replaced by the arbitrary and iniquitous power of fallen man. Darwinian atheism is most ferocious at this point. Man becomes object and object becomes utilitarian and therefore expendable to the greater good as deemed so by those in positions of power. Third and finally, if God is rejected as He is in atheism mankind is left with space and time as eternity. If life is all there is to a man’s existence then he is naïve at best and deceived at worse to enjoin himself to a moral code other than one of his own making. Moral distinctions vanish into a sea of individual relativism culturally and totalitarianism politically. This has been the experience of mankind especially in the twentieth century. The madness and violence wrought by Hitler, Stalin, and Mao accounted for nearly twenty million deaths. They embraced atheism and rejected God as an illusion. This was exactly what Nietzsche saw as the logical conclusion to atheism and he recoiled at the sight.

²⁹This quote was attributed to Muggeridge by Ravi Zacharias in his teaching “What Happened After God’s Funeral” available at www.rzim.org Accessed January 21, 2009. The three points made in conclusion here are from the same teaching although expounded upon for the purposes of this paper.

Contrasting the dire predicament of twenty-first century man, Christian theism offers hope and clear, consistent answers. When God is acknowledged as Creator and Sustainer life becomes infused with meaning and purpose. Man is able to see the beauty and splendor of life and know that he is not alone. Because man has not been left alone he can know that his soul transcends space and time and he is not confused about the material part of existence. Indeed we have the opportunity to understand that the soul of every man is in need of salvation and reconciliation. Only Christian theism speaks of hope beyond the grave. Because God is we can know that salvation has been achieved for us through Jesus Christ.

Christian theism must be not the whisperer but the herald that the new atheism is not new at all and is just as bankrupt as classical atheism. Man is not now nor has he ever been god and it is Christian theism that must continue to remind Dawkins and his peers of this truth.

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