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Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheism

A Quick Focus

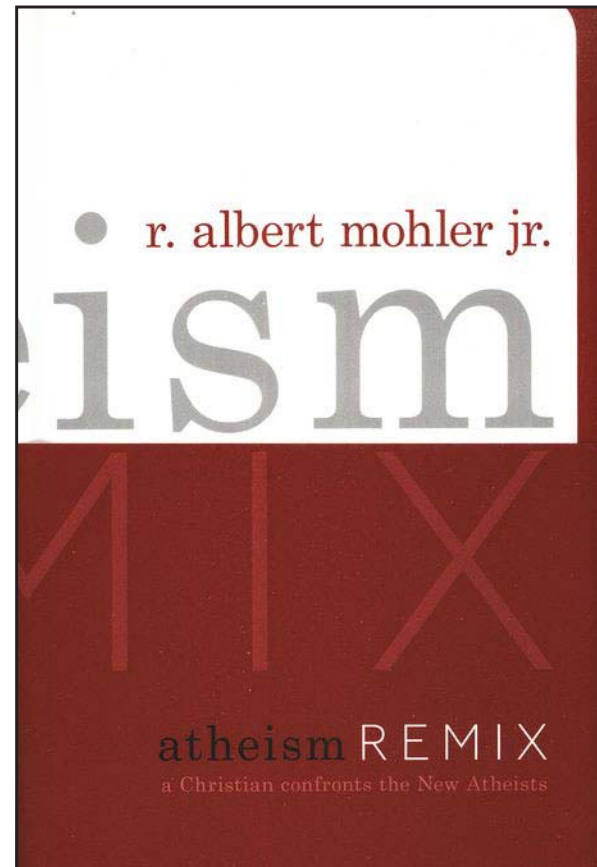
The Book's Purpose

- Present the differences between the foundations of modern atheism and the New Atheism seen in the 21st century
- Summarize the various contributions of modern minds to the idea of a New Atheism
- Discuss the extreme polarization between modern theists and atheists
- Place a demand on the Christian to recognize the importance of belief in a biblical God over the now increasingly organized beliefs of New Atheists

The Book's Message

Atheism used to be characterized by a sense of mourning due to a loss of hope and purpose for life on this earth. However, the New Atheism of the 21st century is not characterized by grief, but a sense of superiority and enlightenment. Scientific theories and social movements have combined to create a new type of atheism hostile toward any sort of higher being, especially the God of the Bible.

Followers of Christ need to be acutely aware of these changes and prepared to stand confidently against the vigorous efforts of this new atheism.



by R. Albert Mohler Jr.
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Five Main Points

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Introduction

In Psalm 14:1 we learn about the fool who says in his heart that there is no God. Clearly, atheism has been around for a long time. Following the Enlightenment, a worldview espousing the position that deities do not exist ***“became an organized and publicly recognized worldview ... and has maintained a foothold in Western culture ever since.”***

On April 6, 1966, the cover of *Time* magazine was emblazoned with bold, red letters asking “Is God Dead?” This query seemed to announce the beginning of a new era.

Since then, atheism has penetrated our culture in a variety of ways. Atheists have published books, trumpeted their views in the media, led seminars, and participated in public debates.

“Atheists have represented only a small (if vocal) minority of Americans. Surveys estimate that atheists represent less than 2 percent of the population, even as the larger group of ‘unaffiliated’ includes over 15 percent.”

The intellectual elites comprise the largest single group of atheists. ***“Atheists have largely, though not exclusively, talked to their own.”***

But in recent years, a new surge of atheism has emerged. Books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, two of the “New Atheists,” have been highly acclaimed, even landing on *New York Times* bestseller lists for months.

The most significant difference between “traditional” atheism and this New Atheism is that it publicly opposes Christianity.

“The New Atheists are, in their own way, evangelistic in intent and ambitious in hope. They see atheism as the only plausible worldview for our times, and they see belief in God as downright dangerous—an artifact of the past that we can no longer afford to tolerate, much less encourage.”

These New Atheists believe science is on their side. They hold that belief in God is simply organized ignorance. ***“Many even argue that theistic beliefs lead to violence, and that atheism is liberation.”***

New Atheists tend to target young people, realizing that reaching youth with their arguments is foundational to their success.

“These New Atheists represent a major challenge to the Christian church and to Christian theology.”

CBS

The Endgame of Secularization

Something has changed in our culture, ***“and that change can be easily measured by the sales of books.”*** Until now, books about atheism have not sold on a large scale. Today books by Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens are selling in the millions.

“Atheism has long had a niche audience, but it has now become a mass phenomenon in terms of publishing and media attention.”

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What makes the New Atheism new?

Unlike traditional atheism, which did not grapple with whether or not there *is* a god, but focused on discerning *which* god is God, the New Atheism has veered away from the notion of a personal God. Modern-day atheists, in the wake of the ideas of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, now place faith in scientific and psychological theories above a supernatural God. There is now a *“sense of celebration that theism is finally left behind.”*

“Freud put it this way: ‘The more the fruits of knowledge become accessible to men, the more widespread is the decline of religious belief.’ ”

Secularization became common in the Western world in the 16th century when Henry VIII decided land should not be owned by the church. This decision resulted in a society full of vocations, arts, and language not linked to the church. People no longer pursued these for the glory of God.

As John Sommerville predicted, differentiation between common society and the church created an environment in which a person no longer went to spiritual leaders for guidance.

“Whereas the church once defined reality across an entire range of intellectual fields, it does so no longer~even for most Christians.”

Prior to secularization, people would typically ask the pastor about all kinds of issues~vocational ones, legal ones, intellectual ones, and so forth. Following secularization, differentiation took place, so lawyers became available for legal consultation. Psychologists were trained to counsel. And *“the secularization of colleges and universities has shaped the minds and world-view of millions.”*

Today the church has become an institution of choice instead of a cultural center where answers can be found.

In the past, many cultures worshipped supernatural beings because they had no other explanations for the meaning or the source of life. Modern man, however, recognizes scientific theory and secularization as alternative sources of meaning.

“Having moved from a time in which it was impossible not to believe, through a time in which it became possible not to believe, we have now arrived at a situation in which, for the elites especially, it has become impossible to *believe*.”

The New Atheist views himself as superior to the theist, and he has waged a war against the very foundation of what theists believe.

The Assault on Theism

Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens have become *“The Four Horsemen of the New Atheist Apocalypse.”* These four embody the core message of their movement.

Richard Dawkins

Dawkins, the author of *A Devil's Chaplain*, views himself as a sort of evangelist for evolutionary theories. He introduced the idea of a *“meme~which refers to an intellectual unity similar to a gene that helps to explain the replication of thought.”*

Dawkins writes against believing any sort of authority and also dismisses any possibility of supernatural revelation. His 2006 book, *The God Delusion*, made him the most popular of the New Atheists by keeping him on the *New York Times* bestseller list for months.

Daniel Dennett

The second of the “Four Horsemen” is Daniel Dennett, a philosophy and cognitive studies professor at Tufts University. His 1996 book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, discussed evolution as a *“universal acid.”* In other words, evolution is the one and only element that can destroy every philosophy and foundational belief system of all cultures.

Dennett agrees with creationists on one idea. He states, *“Darwin's dangerous idea cuts much deeper into the fabric of our most fundamental beliefs than many of its sophisticated apologists have admitted, even to themselves.”*

Dennett's book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, became a key piece of the New Atheist's literature in 2006. He argues the purely naturalistic reasons for religion to exist. His ideas, though creative, are erroneous.

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THE ASSAULT ON THEISM

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Dennett's ideas are flawed; time and again groups of religious people, such as the Jews, continue to exist even though it would appear that natural selection had chosen them for extinction. Those who believed in God survived; those who did not believe in God died.

“If the mind is nothing more than a chemical machine, a neurological machine developed for the process of evolution, then where did this (false) belief in a supernatural deity come from?”

Dennett's other idea is *“belief in belief.”* In short, man's belief in God has now switched into belief in that belief, and soon will become unnecessary to believe in anything.

Sam Harris

The third and youngest of the “Horsemen” is Sam Harris, born in 1967 to a Jewish mother and a Quaker father. Unlike Dawkins and Dennett, he does not solely rely on evolution as the foundation of atheist thought. Instead he relies on his belief that Christianity is inherently evil.

“God himself is an ogre, Harris says~especially the God of the Bible, who is not a god that any sane or morally sensitive person would believe in, much less love. Belief in God, Harris declares, corrupts human beings.”

In his top-ranked book published in 2004, *The End of Faith*, Harris discusses the selfishness of a faith that considers a personal God to be real. His idea is *“the fact that you believe that God cares about you ... says everything about you and nothing at all about God.”*

Harris also wrote a book in 2006 to the atheistic elite, and he cleverly entitled it *Letter to a Christian Nation*. However, this is anything but a letter to Christians. It is intended to be a sort of battle cry to the cultural elite to rise up.

Christopher Hitchens

Christopher Hitchens, previous to September 11, 2001, held left wing Marxist political views. While his political views became more conservative after the attacks on American soil, his anti-religious views were strengthened by the Muslim terrorism's proving that religion produces violence.

In Hitchens' book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, he explains his reasons for his anti-religious views. According to Hitchens, religion feigns to know the origins of the earth, while it presents false beliefs. He also claims religion forces humans to be self-absorbed, sexually repressed, and full of false hope.

“Hitchens attempts to shame persons into acknowledging their unbelief. Like the others, he is not necessarily trying to convince believers that they ought to abandon belief. He is seeking to create cultural momentum, to encourage others to be more vocal in their unbelief.”

While all four of these men present slightly different reasons for their belief in non-belief, some characteristics are present throughout all of their writing.

The New Atheist has a new-found sense of valiance in their beliefs. No longer is it simply ignorant to believe in the Christian God of the Bible, but according to the New Atheist, *“it is now evil to believe in God.”* The New Atheist vehemently rejects Jesus by presenting Him as exclusive and evil.

While the atheism of a couple hundred years ago was considered illogical, the New Atheist can now claim a scientific basis for his unbelief.

“The argument of the New Atheists is that science is the way of liberation, the way of freedom, and the way of enlightenment.”

The last few distinctions between previous atheism and the New Atheism are perhaps the most revolutionary. They are rooted in the idea that teaching religion to children is *“a form of child abuse.”* The New Atheists disagree with the idea of tolerance, saying that tolerance and teaching children religion is a way to restrict humanity's freedom.

With these beliefs, the New Atheists have begun a freedom-based moral mission to convert others to their way of thinking.

The Defense of Theism

The New Atheism requires Christians to be knowledgeable intellectually, morally, socially, and politically.

Alister McGrath, a theologian from Oxford University, had aligned himself with the atheistic beliefs of Richard Dawkins—until he became a Christian. Since his conversion, McGrath has publicly opposed Dawkins' ideas. McGrath claims Dawkins' answers to the difficult questions are interesting but that they are not necessarily reliable and based in facts.

In his book, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*, McGrath explains Dawkins' portrayal of religious people as infantile. Ironically, McGrath's degrees and arguments alone defy that notion of ignorant faith.

Dawkins himself admitted that the existence of humanity, according to evolution, is extremely improbable. McGrath suggests that these **“great questions of life”** cannot always be answered by science.

In his book, *The Dawkins Delusion*, McGrath states that **“either we cannot answer them [the great questions of life] or we must answer them on grounds other than the sciences.”**

McGrath also argues against the scientific idea of Dawkins' memes, claiming that memes are simply non-scientific.

While acknowledging the validity of statements made about violence done by those who believe in God, McGrath clearly states that Jesus Himself was not a promoter of violence.

“Jesus of Nazareth did no violence to anyone. He was the object, not the agent, of violence.”

Alvin Plantinga is another critic of Dawkins' atheistic writings. He focuses on the rhetoric of Dawkins' work, saying that the atheist could have a future in smear campaigns for politicians.

Plantinga reviewed *The God Delusion* in 2007 and discussed how Dawkins' view of naturalism is implausible. Plantinga claims that the **“conflict is between science and naturalism, not between science and belief in God.”**

While McGrath and Plantinga make many valid points refuting the New Atheism, they both consent to the idea of scientific evolution. But the evangelical Christians should focus more on epistemology than metaphysics as they grapple with the New Atheists, since **“the self-authenticating character of divine revelation is the only ground upon which a distinctively Christian theism can be established.”**

“The Defense of biblical theism reveals the great divide in intellectual thought to be not merely over the existence of God but over the question of whether He has spoken.”

The Future of Christianity

It is important for the Christian to remember that only a small minority of people claim to be atheists, even though they are over-represented in the literary and philosophical cultures.

Theologian Tina Beattie wrote a book called *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion*. She is well aware of the threats the New Atheists pose, but she claims that the intellectual level is not where the battle is going to be won.

“Beattie urges, ‘So let the men fight about God if they want to. My concern is not with the debates about God but with creation and nature, with language and meaning, with people, and with kindness.’”

According to Beattie, the fundamental creationist is to blame for the rise of the New Atheism. She suggests that the Bible should be read, but not taken too seriously due to the obvious contradictions and **“cultural anachronisms”**

A more appealing discussion of the New Atheism is presented

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THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY
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by John F. Haught's *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*. Haught claims that there is no conflict between Darwin's evolutionary theory and Christian theology. He says that while theology consists of a personal God who gives humanity faith and hope, that same hope can be placed into searching for scientific reasoning for life.

"Haught, with Beattie, is particularly appalled by those who would defend the historicity of the Genesis accounts of creation and, more broadly, those who would argue that evolutionary theory and biblical theism are fundamentally incompatible."

"The God who would be rendered acceptable to the secular age is a God who would bear no resemblance to the God of the Bible. This new God would be a God who cannot save."

The New Atheists are completely right about at least one thing. The only God who is a danger to their beliefs is a God that is personal, all-powerful, and intolerant of injustice.

People must choose whether to believe in the non-belief of the New Atheism or in the full belief in biblical theism. ***"There is nothing in between."***



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The author: R. Albert Mohler Jr. serves as the ninth president of Southern Seminary and as the Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology. Considered a leader among American evangelicals by *Time* and *Christianity Today* magazines, Dr. Mohler hosts a daily radio program for the Salem Radio Network and also writes a daily commentary on moral, cultural, and theological issues.

Summarized by: Angela Chiapperino, a freelance writer living in Florida, is a street outreach and recovery specialist.