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# Equip.

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EA does not necessarily endorse all views printed in Equip. Instead articles are included to encourage discernment and debate on key issues for Australian Christians.

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*An evangelical is someone who passionately believes the central claims of the Bible and traditional Christian faith: such as that Jesus is both God and man; that he announced the arrival of God's kingdom, that he died for our sins; that he was raised from the dead. Evangelicals emphasise personal commitment to Jesus Christ and a desire to live out that faith together and in the community in words and works of justice and love, anticipating God's promised future.*



# Editorial

Comedian Dane Cook tells a story of a young man standing next to him who suddenly sneezed somewhat violently. Taking the 'high road', as he calls it, he uttered the phrase, 'God bless you'. The

man looked at him and, in a condescending tone, said, 'Uh, yeah. I'm an atheist'. Cook, bemused, wondered, 'What am I supposed to say when an atheist sneezes? 'When you die, nothing happens?'

We have moved from a world in which a few centuries ago, as Charles Taylor puts it in his magisterial *A Secular Age*, "it was virtually impossible not to believe in God" to one in which belief has become merely one option among many. And now there is a popular movement aggressively challenging whether we should allow such 'options' to continue any longer in public in the light of 'Reason' and 'Science'. Sure, atheism is not new and at times Christians have made good use of atheist criticisms of religion and particular god-concepts. (Even the early Christians were accused of being atheistic.) But we now have 'the New Atheism', a fascinating 'media event', fuelled undoubtedly by blogs and YouTube clips, and now with its second Global Atheist Conference happening in Melbourne, the 'Celebration of Reason'.

A number of Christian organisations are working together to respond to this conference, including EA's Ethos Centre for Christianity & Society. This is not because Christians are frightened or feel threatened in any respect by this new movement, but because we're genuinely interested in substantive conversations on issues of public interest, particularly those surrounding 'religion'. But let's face it: public discussion of 'religion', and the Christian faith in particular, is not especially healthy or well-informed. This issue of *Equip* is one small contribution to helping you engage with your friends and neighbours about the upcoming conference and even the burgeoning commenting of New Atheist fans on-line.

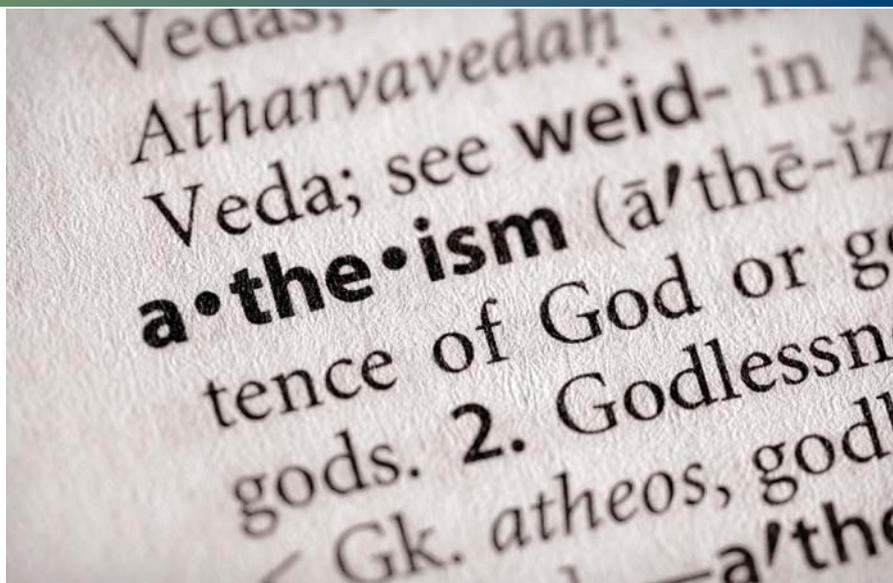
Greg Clarke, formerly with the Centre for Public Christianity and now The Bible Society in Australia asks about the resurgence of public atheism in 'The New Atheism – Why?'. Greg Restall, a philosopher at the University of Melbourne, looks at a common criticism of Christians and others in 'Is Religion Dangerous?'. Denise Cooper-Clarke of Ethos looks at 'The Global Atheist Convention and the Hard Questions' and I reflect a little on God and morality in 'Can We Be Good without God?' Philosopher Kristi Giselssohn looks at the New Atheists and the Arts, focusing on the underappreciated problem of beauty and meaning for atheism; and finally Gordon Preece looks at New Atheist Sam Harris's latest book, *The Moral Landscape*.

It is our hope you find these articles useful in your own thinking and reflection and helpful for conversation with others. Please keep an eye on the Ethos website ([www.ethos.org.au](http://www.ethos.org.au)) for more news and resources on the New Atheism over the coming months.

**Ian Packer**  
Assistant Director  
Ethos – EA Centre for Christianity & Society

# The New Atheism: Why?

Greg Clarke



**D**oes it strike anyone else as strange that atheism is such big news? After all, most people in most cultures at most times in history have believed that there is a God, or at least gods. Atheism has never been a majority position. Furthermore, I rarely hear discussion of atheism outside of university circles or their media equivalents (that is, late night radio programmes for 'thinkers'). So why are there now at least four bestselling books about atheism?

Has atheism acquired the fascination that often accompanies 'marginal' views? Or are there broader reasons for its current appeal? Before offering my 10 theses on the flurry of interest in atheism, it will be worthwhile reviewing some of the key players in recent public discussions.

Most prominent is Professor Richard Dawkins, Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford. Dawkins is a well-known science writer and academic biologist whose doctoral research was on the pecking behaviour of chickens! He rose to prominence following the publication of his book *The Selfish Gene* where he argued that we need to oppose our remorseless genes in order for the human race to flourish. His recent book is *The God Delusion*, in which he presents a spray of arguments, anecdotes and opinions regarding the malevolence and foolishness of 'religion'. These are, in brief: none of the traditional philosophical arguments for God's existence seems to work; there is an argument

against God's existence that does work (called the argument from improbability); Darwin's theory of evolution really can explain the entire universe; religions are simply cultural clusters of information ('memes') that evolve in the same way as genes, and; morality has no basis in theism and the Bible in particular leads to great immorality, oppression and unhappiness. Dawkins's book has missionary aims: "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down" (p.5).

Daniel C. Dennett, a cognitive scientist, is responsible for a more specialised but no less aggressive book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. His argument is that evolutionary biology will eventually show us that human religiosity arose because of a cognitive adaptation that saw advantage in explaining things that were mysterious to us by appeal to an 'agent' of some sort, leading us to the belief in a God. Dennett admits that this hypothesis has no scientific foundation, but seems to think that by naming it as a possibility he has debunked religion.

The journalist Christopher Hitchens, who died recently, added his personal condemnation of religion in *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. This book explores religion at its worst, railing further against everything on Dawkins's hate-list, but also condemning Eastern religions (for their irrationality). Like Dawkins, Hitchens is most interested in

circumscribing what the 'Good Life' looks like *sans* God; unlike Dawkins, Hitchens does appreciate some of what religion has given to culture.

Sam Harris is the youngest of these writers, penning *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* while an American graduate student in neuroscience. We might summarise his approach as a call to replace religion with a common-sense kind of reason (which has no place for revealed truths) and the sort of love found in Eastern spirituality. He considers theology to be "a branch of human ignorance", while reason is "nothing less than the guardian of love". In his most recent book *The Moral Landscape*, he attempts to present a purely naturalistic account of human morality.

Finally, there is Michel Onfray, a French intellectual whose first book was about the eating habits of philosophers. His current book is *The Atheist Manifesto: The Case against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*. By far the most philosophically expansive of these books, Onfray nevertheless offers a standard nihilistic critique of religion, one that would do Nietzsche and Bataille proud. Religion is allegedly pleasureless, violent, controlling and repressive. Furthermore, most beliefs held in most religions are false, says Onfray, as he states that Jesus probably never existed. Onfray is adamant that atheism is the new faith, and should have its own traditions, too. A reviewer in *The Age* found all of

this hard to take, summarising his review of the book with the words, “its covers were too far apart”.

As promised, I have 10 brief thoughts on the subject, some of them reasons for the phenomenon of new atheism and some simply Christian reflections on it:

1. *Post-September 11, there is a critique of religion taking place that is quite healthy and ought to be encouraged.* Some of the attacks on fundamentalism in these books are entirely justified. There are versions of religious belief that are not defensible in doctrine or practice, and we should admit it unblinkingly. And the issue of the public influence of religion in secular, pluralist societies is very important to Christians.
2. *There are plenty of behaviours of which Christians are not proud.* Many of the actions attributed to religious people in these books (such as child abuse) would or should never be considered acceptable behaviour by Christians. Let’s repent of such things.
3. *It is incredibly naïve to think that atheism would cause people to lead better lives.* These books insist that removing religion will leave a residual goodness in people’s attitudes and actions. The track record of atheism in the last 200 years suggests otherwise.
4. *Many of the values and ethics espoused by the new atheism are in fact parasitic on Judaism and Christianity.* Values such as humility, love of strangers and kindness do not just emerge universally—they have a history connected with the God of Israel.
5. *These writers are unwilling to engage with the best of Christian thinking, instead preferring dismissal by anecdote and appeal to the ‘worst case’.* I look forward to seeing Dawkins v. Plantinga; Dennett v. Pannenberg; Onfray v. Swinburne (but I’m not holding my breath).
6. *If Christians adopted the same rhetoric towards atheists, they would be sued.* But we need not fight for the right to deride others! Rather, we must express our objections in love, patience, gentleness and self-control — 1 Corinthians 13 gives us the better way.
7. *The rise of atheism is not due to new evidence or new arguments against God or for unbelief.* We haven’t discovered the ‘God gene’, or settled the problem of suffering against God, or anything like that. Dawkins does present one new argument for God’s non-existence, based on the idea that a creator of an incredibly improbable universe would himself have to be even more improbable. But this fails when we consider that God is viewed in most orthodox theology as ontologically separate from and prior to the universe.
8. *We need to oppose the new atheist’s idea that people ‘grow out’ of theism by making sure our understanding of Christianity grows at least at the same rate as the rest of our understanding of the world.* Too often, Christians leave their theological minds back in Sunday School while their scientific, economic, ethical and historical minds continue to grow and expand. We need to attend to this!
9. *Despite these books, it will remain rare to meet an atheist. The default human position seems to be that there is a divine being.* This is quite often a reasonable starting point for discussion: not “is there a God?” but “what is God like?”
10. *As with The Da Vinci Code, the current celebrity of atheism should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat.* Christians need to equip themselves to make the most of this arousal of people’s interest in ‘the God question’, and be ready to give a reason for the hope we have.

This is a lightly edited article that first appeared in Macquarie Christian Studies *Thinkpiece*.

**Greg Clarke** is Director of the Bible Society in Australia

## Calendar of Events

### March 15

The Word for Work: Bridging the Gap between Sunday and Monday – Will Messenger

Breakfast & Seminar, Melbourne

[www.cma.net.au/events](http://www.cma.net.au/events)

### March 23

Annual Ethos Dinner, ‘Is Nothing Private? Living with Social Media’ – David Lyon

Ridley Melbourne

<http://www.ea.org.au/Events.aspx>

### May 21-24

4 day workshop, ‘Biblical Social Engagement: Time for a New Paradigm?’ – Jonathan Tame

Melbourne, contact Andre van Eymeren on 0400 002 172 or

[andre.van@iinet.net.au](mailto:andre.van@iinet.net.au).

### June 4-6

CMA National Conference, ‘Courageous Leadership’

Melbourne, VIC

[www.cma.net.au/events](http://www.cma.net.au/events)

### June 29-30

Ethos Conference, ‘Romans Remixed: Re-reading Romans on the Way Home’ – Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat

Ridley Melbourne

<http://www.ea.org.au/Events.aspx>

# The Global Atheist Convention and the hard questions

Denise Cooper-Clarke



**D**id you know that the Global Atheist Convention, which had its inaugural Conference two years ago in Melbourne, is meeting again in 2012 and chose Melbourne as the venue... *again*? Is Melbourne now the world centre of atheism? Are Melbournians more godless than anywhere else in the world? Do you dread all the media articles and interviews attacking religion in general and Christian faith in particular, the contempt and ridicule meted out by some (though not all) of the main conference speakers?

One of the selling points for the conference was that it would bring together the so called 'four horsemen of the apocalypse'. Now you might think that would be some conference! You might be thinking of Revelation Chapter 6, and the four horsemen who appear on a white horse, a red horse, a black horse and a pale horse, ushering in war, slaughter, starvation and death. But actually the four horsemen of the apocalypse is the name that has been coined for themselves by four leading New Atheists: biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, journalist Christopher Hitchens and philosopher Sam Harris. And I suppose in their

way they might seem rather scary—they certainly see themselves as waging war on religion.

**RICHARD DAWKINS**, probably best known for his book *The God Delusion*: 'Only the wilfully blind could fail to implicate the divisive force of religion in most, if not all, of the violent enmities in the world today. Those of us who have for years politely concealed our contempt for the dangerous collective delusion of religion need to stand up and speak out.' Dawkins raises good questions, including, Are faith and reason somehow opposed or incompatible? (He certainly thinks so.) And what about the violence in the Bible? Does religion make people intolerant and violent?

**DANIEL DENNETT'S** most recent research is into preachers who don't believe what they preach, but continue in their work as clergy. Some of them came to their atheism by way of reading books by Spong, Harris and Hitchens. These are uncomfortable questions. How can believers lose their faith? Are they likely to if they read certain literature? And if they're ministers, should they leave the church or perhaps stay and pretend they still believe, or stay and preach unbelief?

**SAM HARRIS**, a neuroscientist, when asked what he thought was the role of religion in determining human morality, replied, 'I think it is generally an unhelpful one... The problem with religious morality is that it often causes people to care about the wrong things, leading them to make choices that needlessly perpetuate human suffering. Consider the Catholic Church: This is an institution that excommunicates women who want to become priests, but it does not excommunicate male priests who rape children. The Church is more concerned about stopping contraception than stopping genocide. It is more worried about gay marriage than about nuclear proliferation'. So, what about the times when the church seems to get it wrong? And why do some Christians behave so badly?

Finally, **CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS**, who sadly, won't be making it to the convention because he died late last year. 'One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody.... had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our



# a celebration Of reason



13-15 April 2012

2012 Global Atheist Convention ▶ Melbourne, AUSTRALIA

inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion, and one would like to think-though the connection is not a fully demonstrable one-that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell.' — Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

How can we continue to believe in a way of looking at the world which is so ancient and primitive? Can the Bible still be relevant today when our understanding of things is so much more advanced and so different to that of the biblical writers?

All these are good questions and not easily answered, certainly not in a simple, snappy 'soundbite'. So, do you think this convention will be bad for the church and set the cause of the gospel back in Melbourne, even Australia, perhaps even unsettle the faith of people in our own church or small group?

Instead of being discouraged or intimidated by this event, it's possible to think of it in a much more positive and hopeful way. As a great opportunity, in fact. First, because atheism is a derivative movement. Atheists need to have things not to believe in. Where people really don't care about faith and religion, they don't care about atheism either. So the Global Atheism Convention being held in Melbourne shows us that our city is a place where people are passionately interested in these matters. And what will all the talk generated by this convention be about? It will be about God, about the Bible, about Jesus Christ. It will get

faith matters into the public square. We couldn't pay for that level of media coverage.

The second reason we should regard this Convention as an opportunity is because the New Atheists (unlike Postmodernists), do believe in truth. They believe in reason and the possibility of a rational argument about God and matters of history and science and what is true. They really believe it matters what we believe about God and that we ought to try to find out whether the idea that God exists is true or not. It's not a case of well, you believe in this God, or that, or none.... 'whatever'.

In this sense, the New Atheists are Moderns, who believe that one can establish truth by examining empirical data- the scientific method. They also seem to believe that the only things that are real in the world are things that can be sensed, observed or measured scientifically. The New Atheists are asking important questions. Questions that Christians have been thinking about for many years. Questions we should be eager to engage in dialogue about with them, such as:

Hasn't science disproved the Bible? Isn't faith irrational?

How can you believe that Jesus really raised from the dead?

What evidence is there that the Bible is true? Isn't it hopelessly out of date?

Isn't faith just wish fulfilment?

How can a good God allow so much suffering?

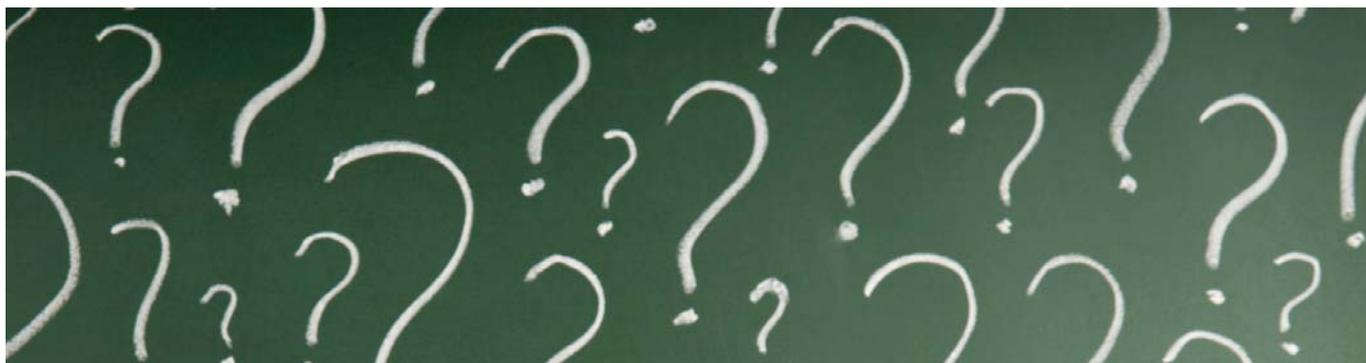
What about all the violence in the Bible? And that perpetrated in the name of religion?

Don't people lose their faith when they're better educated?

Despite the powerful influence of postmodernism, the popularity and influence of New Atheists like Richard Dawkins shows us that modernism is also alive and well in our culture- we are actually dealing with a strange mix of the two, though theoretically they are incompatible. And although Dawkins is a Modern in many ways, and claims to base his ideas on reason alone, his book and his agenda are also postmodern in that they appeal more to emotion than to reason. His claims about what Christians believe and even about history are poorly researched and not evidence based. He is long on assertions but short on reasons. His 'argument' seems to boil down to 'Christians are stupid at best and evil at worst'. But actually, he knows this is not true, having personally debated many fine Christian scholars, including Alister McGrath.

The works of many of the New Atheists are supremely exercises in rhetoric, designed not to explore the issues in a balanced and reasonable way, but to convince their readers of the ridiculous nature of religion and the more intelligent, reasonable and compassionate nature of atheism. According to Aristotle (384-322BC), rhetoric is 'the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion.' He described three main forms of rhetoric: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. *Ethos* is appeal based on the character of the speaker. *Logos* is appeal based on logic or reason. *Pathos* is appeal based on emotion.

The power of a book like *The God Delusion* lies as much if not more in its appeal to *ethos* and *pathos* as to *logos*. Hence, even when dealing with the 'Modern' New Atheists, if we restrict our responses to those based on *logos* we certainly won't address some of the most powerful forces which work against faith today, which are based on *ethos* (For example, sexual abuse and paedophilia in the church, the life styles of televangelists, right wing evangelicals in the US who rail against abortion but support the death penalty, involvement in war and the right to carry a gun) and *pathos* (for example,



the claim that homosexual people denied the right to love each other and raise children by the church, and perhaps even more powerfully, the violence, genocide, torture and pain which God is said to instigate in the scriptures).

So let's admit that some of the things they say and the questions they ask are pretty difficult. There are some questions about our world and about the things Christians believe that are difficult for us to understand, let alone explain to people who are either indifferent or hostile to our beliefs. But a good place to start thinking about this is to remember that the Scriptures themselves are full of hard questions, many of which are left unresolved. A small sample:

'Why O lord do you stand far off?  
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?' (Psalm 10:1).

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:3) 'What happens to the fool will happen to me also, why then have I been so very wise?' (Ecclesiastes 2:14)

'Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?  
Why were there knees to receive me or breasts for me to suck?' (Job 3:11-12)

'Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it does not come?' (Job 3:20-21)

What makes a question a difficult question? Difficult in what way? Difficult to understand, difficult to work out? Or hard to bear? Some hard questions are hard in both senses: hard to get your head around and hard to get your heart around.

Perhaps we find it hard to even admit that some questions are difficult. Is it because sometimes these questions shake our own faith? Maybe, when we are in conversation with an unbeliever, we'd like to make it all sound simple and straightforward. We don't want to seem to be putting barriers in the way of their understanding, we want to clearly and unambiguously commend the gospel. But do we really have everything sorted out? Does anyone? Is giving the impression that the things of God are simple and any intelligent person must believe them if they seriously look into it really truthful? Is it true that believers themselves don't have doubts or questions?

Well, you might say, yes they do but in an ideal world they wouldn't, they would just have a confident faith. Tim Keller disagrees: 'People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do, will find themselves defenceless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection'. We saw this after the Boxing Day tsunami, and in the number of Christians whose faith was shaken or even abandoned after reading Dawkins *The God Delusion*.

So let's confront the hard questions, but let's also admit that there are some questions which are just too hard to answer, or where the answer may be simply, 'I don't know and I'm so sorry':

Why was my child born with spina bifida?

Why did God let my father abuse me?

Why did my son commit suicide?

At one level, you might think you actually have a kind of theological answer to these questions – but that might not be the best answer. At least not in the first instance. Because the person asking these questions is probably not asking for a logical explanation – what are they asking for?

**Denise Cooper-Clarke** is Researcher for Ethos – EA Centre for Christianity & Society, specialising in bio-ethics.

# Is Religion Dangerous?

## Taking Seriously a New Atheist Critique

Greg Restall

**T**here are atheists, and there are the *new* atheists. In the marketplace of ideas and ideologies, some atheists are content to hold their views to themselves while others share their atheism with the fervour of the keenest evangelist. We shouldn't expect it to be any other way: after all, there are quiet religious believers, and there are religious believers who are keen to share their enthusiasms with others. But the fervour of the new atheism of Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens carries a distinctive edge. Their passion is not just that atheism is a good thing, to be shared and promulgated. It's that belief in God is positively and actively bad. Not just wrong-headed or incorrect; it's dangerous.

I am interested in this phenomenon. What does this mean for those of us who believe? What can we learn from the reactions of these smart men? (These new atheists in the popular sphere are, by and large, men.) It is often when we take a sympathetic eye to others' perspective, to listen and to attempt to understand their views and concerns, that we can learn things. In the case of the new atheists, I think that we can see something new about ourselves, about what belief in God actually means, what it could mean for us, and perhaps a little more about what it *should* mean for us, too. I hope that the upshot will be increased understanding all around: not just increased understanding of what others believe and why, but also increased understanding of ourselves, and of our place in God's world.

So, what can we learn about the intensity of the opposition of the New Atheists? Whatever it signifies, it's not just that theists are wrong. It's that we're dangerously wrong. It would be an advance for the world to be rid of theism in all its forms. This shouldn't be a big surprise: after all, many believers think that it would be better for the world to be rid of

atheism, or incorrect religious belief in all its forms, and many supporters of sporting teams flirt with the idea that it would be better if there were fewer or no supporters of rival teams.

This opposition can take positive and negative forms: the positive one is the generous sharing of a gift. I have learned something about the world and our place in it and I want to share it with you. Learning that there is no God has liberated me from false consciousness, and I would like for you to experience the same joy, satisfaction and insight that it brings! We see this in some of the evangelistic fervour of Dawkins' introduction to science for kids: *The Magic of Reality* (Bantam Press, 2011). It's not just a neutral introduction to the wonders of science. It's also a positive, and largely winsome exposition of science as the comprehensive way that we come to know anything and everything. Dawkins has found truth and he is keen to share it.

That is the positive form of the opposition, and in a world where people take different perspectives on issues of importance, it is to be expected, and frankly, to be celebrated. Imagine a world where we all attempted to share what was good in our perspectives, our views, and our traditions! It would be impossible—at least in a world anything like the one we're in here and now. People aren't like that.

The opposition from the New Atheists takes a harder edge. It isn't just the enthusiasm of someone with good news to share. The wrongness the New Atheists perceive in believers is not just the wrongness of simple matters of fact (it's not like we're just missing some fact that others can see). It's not the kind of regrettable blindness in those who cannot perceive what is good in some genre of art. Instead, the opposition in the

atheism of Hitchens' *God is not Great*, for example, is the opposition that takes theism to be genuinely and worryingly dangerous.

For the New Atheists, theism (whatever its form) is dangerous because it is a totalising, all-encompassing view. Theism takes in all of life. It has implications for everything, for how we are to view the world, for how we are to understand what is right and wrong, and for how we are to run our society. According to the atheists, we theists are wrong—deeply, importantly, and dangerously wrong.

So, the opposition between theists and atheists is more like the kind of opposition between proponents of radically different political views such as between fascists and communists. In its starkest form, each takes the other to be not just wrong, but illegitimate and dangerous—a force to be opposed on all fronts and at all times. We can never have common cause and never even find a comfortable middle ground.

For the New Atheists, the illegitimacy of theism takes a number of forms. Our illegitimacy can be a matter of truth and knowledge and reason—it can be an epistemic failing. Many of us hold beliefs without good reason, we let our ideas outrun our evidence. That may be dangerous enough, but in the early 21st Century, the worry is not just at the clash of ideas. It's political. For the New Atheists, we believers are dangerous when it comes to politics, to organising our life together. Many theists not only propose dangerous social changes but have the power to enact them. Religionists are dangerous to have around in the body politic. From the repressive religious regimes of history, present-day Islamic fundamentalism of the Middle East, to the restrictions on personal liberties in some states of the USA, religious believers have put their mark on political life in many

unacceptable ways. For the New Atheists, this isn't just an accident. It reveals our true nature, and it shows why religious belief is dangerous and should be stopped.

The natural response is to be defensive and to immediately deny, backpedal, point to positive examples of religious believers who have been a force for good in the world, and this is easy enough to do. But let's not do this. Pause for a moment and sit with the critique. Isn't there something in the nature of belief in God that has this tendency to dominate and control? Isn't there something in the religious narrative that is totalising in just this way? Calling for submission in all of life, in the whole world? This is easier to see when we look at religious believers from other traditions instead of our own. Do we ever see the committed believer from another tradition as dangerous? That is how all believers can be seen.

So, what can we take away and learn from this critique? Is it a case where we should simply wear the badge with pride and accept that the unbeliever (or a believer from another tradition) will find us dangerous, and simply celebrate it, or take it as a mark of genuine belief? Or does this view of belief in God from the outside point to a deeper underlying issues?

I think it does point to something important, and I think that the critique of the atheists of religious believers actually points to a sense in which religious believers are, in fact, not radical enough in our religious belief. The theist thinks that there is a God—the Christian, that this God is revealed in Jesus Christ—the evangelical Christian, that this story of Jesus is revealed to us in Scripture. This seems at face value to be a very immodest belief with implications for all of life, demanding total allegiance. Yet, there is a sense in which this view is dangerously modest and de-centring for the believer. If I have learned anything in believing in God, it is that I am not at the centre of the universe. I am not even at the centre of my world. To believe in God—and this is something that is common to many traditions and expressions of belief in God—we submit to something Other. This means that we do not know everything. Our view is not God's view. We see only in part.

And since everyone else is also in God's world—since God truly exists and is at the centre and the ground of the whole world, and is not just a private affair for me—and since God's Spirit is active in the whole world and not just here and with me or my people, I have something, at least potentially, to learn from everyone. To genuinely believe that this is God's universe and not mine is to be open to God's work and God's truth from anywhere and everywhere. We are to 'test the spirits', of course, and we are to hold fast what is good from wherever it comes.

So, what does this mean for the New Atheist critique and for our response?

On the plane of our knowledge about the world and whether or not religious belief is reasonable, we can admit that some believers have better reasons for their beliefs than others. Some come to belief through being convinced with an argument; others through a direct encounter with Jesus; yet others absorb belief through the faith being handed down through the generations. If there really is a God, then it is not at all unreasonable to accept that belief will be acquired in many different ways, in the same way that people come to know some or other aspect of the world through a mix of direct experience, hearsay, research, and so on. The quality of that information is not just a matter for the individual, but for the community at large. In the case of belief in God, it is up to us, the believing community, to get things as right as we can make it, to understand God and our relationship to God as best we can, and to share that understanding in as clear a way as we can. This will always be tempered with the knowledge that it's not that we have privileged access to God, which cannot be shared by everyone else. If God is the God of the entire universe, then God can speak to all, reveal himself to all. Wherever we go, God's Spirit was there first. If we think that God is specially revealed to us in Jesus, then we must be very careful to remember that it is not our own idea of God that we are to worship—that would be idolatry—it is the God who is revealed in Jesus, and who created the entire world. Again, there is an external authority to which we submit. It follows that we must be careful of our own views, to learn to listen as well as to

speak, and be a good conversation partner. This will mean that we will not only help others, but we will also learn new things for ourselves.

What of the political danger of belief in God? If we were to genuinely believe in God, how are believers to act in the political sphere? Are we a danger to those who disagree with us? At the very least, we should remember that if there is a God, he values each person as his own, and that however I treat another human being, whether one of my tradition who agrees with me or one whose views are radically opposed to mine, this is a person who God loves and cares for. All that I do to another being is answerable to God. So, however we are to arrange ourselves in our life together in the community, it cannot be just by imposing our will without regard for the interests or views of others. It is one thing to think that understanding who God is and what God wants gives us some insight into what is good and bad for human society, it is another to say that any of those views are to be imposed without due consideration. In all things we are to treat others as we would be treated ourselves. Christian faith started out in a minority community, where the proponents acted by persuasion, by living a life of example, by service to the poor and needy. It would do us well to act in that way in the future, for then we would not only be doing good for those around us, but the way we acted in the political sphere would show the same care and concern as we believe God has shown us.

The New Atheists worry that religious belief is radical and dangerous. This is true, but their worry points to the degree to which our belief is not radical enough. If we take seriously the idea that God is at the centre of our world and not us, then we will not attempt to use God as a mark of some partisan perspective, but we will show the true humility and service we have seen shown to us in Jesus. This is the real implication of the belief that there is a God—it is not ever true to say that God is our God, as if we could possess him and impose him on others. It is much more true to say that we are his. If we were to think and act in this way, perhaps the reaction of our atheist brothers and sisters would look very different.

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# Can We Be Good without God?

Ian Packer

“Can we be good without God?” This is a question that exercises the minds of ‘apologists’ of all sorts, both theists and atheists. In my experience, it is always bound to draw the ire of the on-line blogging and commenting cohorts of the so-called ‘new atheists’. Sadly, it is a topic fraught with tension that lends itself to combative to-and-fro. Making and taking critique of morality can very quickly become very personal. If substantive morality without God is called into question, some atheists can’t help but imagine that their own moral life is being rubbished.

The proper distinction failing to be made in such matters is between the actual moral performance of people on the one hand and a reasonable justification for ethics on the other. There is no doubt that there are people who identify themselves as atheists who live morally exemplary lives, just as there are staunch believers in God whose behaviour is morally questionable... or worse. Still, unpopular though it may be, it is a live philosophical question (with much practical and political import!) whether the higher moral ideals of the so-called Western world – *and the atheism with which we deal is pretty much a peculiarly Western and post-Christian phenomenon* – are adequately justifiable in purely non-theistic or non-religious terms. Whether or not particular people are morally laudable is not the final answer to the question of the justification of morality. We can reasonably ask, What are the sources of our particular moral outlooks? What kind of moral behaviour can we reasonably expect from our fellow human beings in a culture that seems to have bought into the ‘death of God’? What vision of goodness can be sustained in a post-Christian society?

In such a society, the two main sources for ethics are either *nature* (a contested term if ever there was one) or *society*. ‘Nature’ is certainly not straightforward. We might be appealing to something called reason or to other ‘natural’ human capacities. If ‘reason’, then which ethical theory wins the day? Kantian duty-based ethics or perhaps utilitarianism? The philosophers continue to debate theories just as long and hard as any contentious religious argument over the proper interpretation of Scripture. Furthermore, the reduction of ethics to rationalistic maxims fails to grapple adequately with the complexity of ‘the moral landscape’. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments:

“How bright were the hopes of the rationalists in the 18th and 19th centuries that the good life could be reduced to a simple formula. Treat persons as ends, not means, said Kant. Act so as to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number, said Bentham. Forbid only the things that harm others, argued John Stuart Mill. These beautiful oversimplifications remind me of the snatch of dialogue from Woody Allen. “I’ve learned to speed-read. I read the whole of War and Peace in one hour.” “What’s it about?” “Russia!”

What aspect of human nature can be our guide? Is ethics some kind of realisation of human potential; a kind of commitment to excellence or particular virtues? But if so, which qualities are to be preferred above or instead of others? We have many different drives and desires, aspirations and appetites, cravings and compulsions. Outside of our permissive society, the wisdom of most philosophies and religions has urged discernment and discipline in resisting, delaying or even denying certain urges. Human nature, as we actually experience it, does not merely



generate altruistic feelings. Honest self-knowledge recognises darker tendencies within.

In that case, the affirmations of some that ethics is largely explained by some benign biological impulses that give us an evolutionary advantage seems vague, inadequate, and even a little out of touch with history. But such affirmations are designed not so much to give genuine explanations as to merely to serve anti-religious polemics. They tend to give us stark (but false) alternatives: either we recognise the intrinsic biological roots of ethics or we rely upon the extrinsic pronouncements of God or the gods to tell us what to think and do: biological science versus a divine command caricature. ‘Religious ethics’ becomes, in this simplistic picture, an exercise in consulting some exhaustive index of arbitrary divine directives (or odd human rules masquerading as divine commands).

However, Christian ethics does not require a denial of the biological grounding of many of our moral impulses—Why would there be a problem with recognising that we feel deeply stirred in our bodies with compassion, empathy or love? Christian ethics does not deny that following the will of God—or pursuing any human cooperation for that matter—is in a deep sense congruent with who we are as physical beings. It does question—along with most other philosophies and religions—naïve accounts of human nature as simply an unfolding of the good, or the idea that simply reflecting on our desires will reveal to us which way to live.

Grappling with the complexities of human nature is a task we undertake with others. Human existence is social existence and so our co-existence with others requires much give-and-take in life; a recognition that we must curb ourselves at times—perhaps much of the time—to make space for others. We are shaped and in a sense ruled by social custom and conventions. Some new atheist apologists seem to think that pointing to this basic social need for reciprocity provides an adequate answer to the big philosophical question of morality. We need to live together as a matter of proper functioning, so what need to speak further of divine or religious contributions to morality? But what does reciprocity significantly tell us beyond the need for social cooperation? Does an appeal to reciprocity actually tell us what we ought to do? Does it provide serious guidance to the questions of bioethics, new technologies, questions of war and international competition?

We cannot appeal to the mere fact of sociality to provide a substantive account of moral life; but neither can we simply appeal to the particularities of our community and culture as a sufficient ground for ethics. To make our particular social arrangements and inherited judgements, embodied in tradition, the final standard for moral norms is to surrender the aspirations of morality to an acceptance of the status quo or acquiescence to moral relativism. Is slavery ‘moral’ in a certain place simply because it is widely practiced there? While the particular history of judgement, deliberation, and discernment of our community is important, it cannot be the final justification for action—there needs to be a higher court of appeal, higher aspirations or purposes to call us forward, and a higher authority to hold us to account. As important as community and tradition is, if it becomes the basis for ethics, we risk trading ethics for mere politics, and therefore morality for the exercise of power.

In his *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, James McClendon describes a fully-fledged Christian ethic as incorporating three strands: the *body* strand, the *social* strand, and the *resurrection* strand. Just as a

rope is made up of several strands and no strand alone can do the work of a rope, so Christian ethics requires all three strands to function properly. Rather than being denied, the biological or organic aspect of humanity is affirmed but deemed insufficient as a final guide. Our desires are shaped in recognition of shared wisdom, social arrangements, and deliberations along the way of a shared journey in life together are all affirmed as legitimate and indeed necessary aspects of ethical life. But again, they are not the final word.

The story of each and all is itself hungry for a greater story that overcomes our persistent self-deceit, redeems our common life, and provides a way for us to be a people among all earth’s peoples without subtracting from the significance of others’ peoplehood, their own stories, their lives... Christian morality involves us, *necessarily* involves us, in the story of God.

God acts and speaks, creates and redeems, calls and commands in order to shape new life along the way of history. This *resurrection strand* of ethics is God’s revelatory and redemptive activity to do “a new thing” among us, to create new possibilities in response to the gospel of God’s saving action in Jesus Christ. Ethics is the shape of shared human life under the vocation of God in Christ. It also includes an openness to creativity and imagination in practical judgements about ethical cases.

If there is security and confidence to be had in recognising this third strand of ethics, there is also a need for us not to be triumphalistic apologists regarding Christian ethics. We must acknowledge the failure of Christians past and present to live in accordance with their own pronouncements. (The message of forgiveness is a great comfort but ought not be used as a pious veil over wilful wrongdoing.) But perhaps more importantly in questions of justification of morality, we cannot trumpet the good news of a deep divine source for ethics without also recognising the problems of living Christian morality. Grounding ethics in the character and purposes of God does not automatically lead to clear and discrete answers to complex moral problems. We still

have many disagreements about the shape of our lives. Hermeneutical disagreements arise not only from poor use of Scripture, but also from the legitimate pluralism of moral judgements that arises from many people seeking faithful ways forward. Christian ethics draws upon a wide variety of resources: a compilation of wisdom, prophecy, testimony, parables and stories of divine and human interaction that provide an imaginative world in which to confront both persistent and new challenges in our lives together: but that rich variegated resource also lends itself to many possibilities.

Moral life is complex; moral problems are complex; and the resources we need to deal with them are also complex. We must resist the oversimplification of the apologists of atheism and Christianity to score easy wins in the argument over God and morality. Christians must remember that it is in the patient and gracious exemplification of moral reflection that Christian ethics gains a hearing in the wider world rather than an abstract appeal to a divine authority.

Can we be good without God? We are all troubled by others’ and our own behaviour, relieved at other times, and on occasion delighted. But we expect or at least hope for more from others and ourselves. Do we have good reason to do so reflecting upon the ambiguities of human nature within an ultimately impersonal universe or are we merely provided with excuses? Do we have good reason to expect more from our fellows if our society drifts in less charitable directions, with no higher authority than itself? There is ultimately only good reason to hope for more if there is Good News: a Higher Authority who not only exemplifies goodness, but surprises us with his call, care and companionship, to save us from ourselves and increasingly close the moral gap between who we have become and the ‘much more’ that we were intended to be. That indeed flows from the good news of Jesus Christ and in the end can only be the work of God.

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# The New Atheists and the Arts: Beauty, Meaning and Religion

Kristi Giselsson

**B**oth Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* attempt to explain not only religion, but also morality and our appreciation of art, music and beauty in terms of evolution by natural selection. I hope to offer something of an assessment of their claims more in relation to the arts—and the relation of the arts to religion—in general.

Dennett and Dawkins are careful to avoid saying that we actually have an inherent, evolutionary drive or 'need' for religion, morality, music and art in themselves—despite the fact that Dennett himself admits that 'life without music isn't worth living.' Rather, all such things are merely the accidental 'by-products,' 'misfirings' and even 'mistakes' of the evolutionary process, coming about as the result of something our ancestors in the past found advantageous in the fight for survival. Dennett suggests, for example, that we may love music simply because our ancestors found that it increased their chances of wooing female mates. But this is of course purely guesswork; speculative evolutionary psychology rather than scientific 'facts' regarding our origins, despite Dennett's repeated insistence that he is indeed basing his arguments on empirically verifiable evidence. He admits that the answer to the question as to why we ultimately love music, 'why it is beautiful to us' is a 'perfectly good biological question, but it does not yet have a good answer.'

I have to confess that I found it difficult to find any 'good' or conclusive answers from either Dawkins or Dennett, but was particularly disappointed in Dennett, given that he is a professional philosopher. For

example, in his discussion on how 'runaway sexual selection process (might) shape the extravagances of religion,' Dennett claims that music and extravagant displays might have been culturally (as opposed to genetically) transmitted, finally concluding that 'this is a highly speculative and controversial claim, but it is not yet disproven.' Defending a highly speculative and controversial claim on the premise that it has not yet been disproven is committing the error that Dawkins himself so scathingly associates with arguments for God's existence; namely that it can neither be proved nor disproved. Dawkins likens such an argument to Bertrand Russell's suggestion that it is equivalent to stating that a small, china teapot is orbiting the sun; it is something that cannot be disproved, therefore it might conceivably exist. However, the difference here of course is that arguments for the existence of God are not based on scientific claims (for it is impossible to prove the existence of an immaterial Spirit in material terms), while Dennett, by contrast, is claiming that his argument that religion is merely a by-product of natural selection is actually scientifically based, and therefore verifiable.

What both Dennett and Dawkins are at pains to avoid is any suggestion that the need for religion is somehow inherent to all humans—that it is not actually, as Tim Keller puts it, 'hard wired into our physiology;' for if it was, we would then be incapable of throwing off our belief in the supernatural—which would of course completely undermine Dawkins' and Dennett's entire project. Instead, both want to suggest that religion is an example of what we might call 'soft' programming; brought about by the

existence of 'cultural replicators' or 'memes' (a controversial concept as Dennett himself admits) that Dennett borrows from Dawkins. Memes are cultural ideas or items which are replicated in the same fashion that genetic material is replicated—that is, via some form of natural selection, with the strongest winning over and surviving 'weaker' ideas. What makes this concept so controversial is the suggestion that the forces of natural selection could somehow influence and sustain immaterial ideas—such as the concept of God—and indeed that such memes could be sustained over millennia; particularly given that they are supposed to not only be delusional but also pernicious, to boot. Moreover, Dennett's explanations as to how these particular religious memes came about are also unconvincingly speculative; for example, our ancestors are surmised as having repeatedly seen agents in non-animate subjects or phenomena; 'the memorable nymphs and fairies and goblins and demons that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us.' Additionally, our apparent disposition for preferring 'counterintuitive ideas'—simply because they are unusual and grab our attention—are posited as the cause for our coming up for such apparently weird concepts as supernatural beings in the first place. Similarly, our penchant for music and art supposedly grew out of our desire for 'supernormal' stimulation. Dennett further suggests that other species do not have art because they do not have language; but why we have language, 'supernormal' proclivities for liking music and art and a desire for 'counterintuitive ideas' in the first

place is never sufficiently explained; Dennett seems to be simply twisting himself into complicated mental knots in his effort to avoid identifying a belief in the supernatural (along with our love for music and art) as *intuitive*. Dennett claims that he is simply expanding upon Darwin's original idea.

However, why on earth did wonder, curiosity and imagination—and even reasoning, for that matter—arise in humans? Dawkins speaks often of the wonder he feels for the beauty of the natural world, but does not give any explanation as to why he finds it *beautiful*—as opposed simply *functionally* useful for his needs as an organism designed solely by the processes of natural selection to survive. Indeed, as Dawkins himself admits, he cannot explain *how* consciousness arose (along with how life itself actually began, nor how the change from a bacterial to a eukaryotic cell took place; that is, how the emergence of a complex life form like humans actually came about). In fact, none of that which ultimately differentiates human life from animal life—language, music, art, religion, rationality, the search for meaning, consciousness itself—is given any adequate explanation by either author, despite the fact that both confidently assert that science can provide all answers. Such an answer would indeed seem central to their project, in that evolution needs to somehow account for the development from animals to humans. Dennett is fond of portraying 'Mother Nature' as 'stingy' and ruthless, producing nothing that is not strictly functional; 'blind, mechanical, foresightless... harsh, austere, and unimaginative... a philistine accountant who cares only about the immediate payoff in terms of differential replication.' What then can explain the universal human appreciation for (within the terms of natural selection), completely 'useless' beauty, 'useless' music, and 'useless' art? Why do we, as Timothy Keller so poignantly asks, not only have a need for meaning, but a love of beauty? And not simply an appreciation of or love for beauty and meaning, but also a need to *create* beauty and meaning through art, music, stories and literature? For, if all that gives human life its significance is reduced to a mere accident or by-product, one may well wonder why we 'needed' to

evolve into humans in the first place. For not only does our need for religion become merely a delusion, but our need for beauty, art, love, meaning and truth become similarly delusional enjoyments and pursuits as well. As C. S. Lewis suggests;

You can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of physis phosphorescence arising from the behaviour of your genes. You can't go on getting very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it.

Moreover, not only does this bring into doubt our (ultimately delusional) enjoyment of that which ultimately makes our lives worth living (remembering Dennett's own passionate declaration in relation to music, above), but it calls into question our ability to trust our own rational faculties; that which actually serves to underwrite the objective truth-claims of science and evolution.

Philosophers and scientists are very fond of citing (when it suits them) the principle of Occam's Razor (also known as the Principle of Parsimony)—which is basically the principle that in the face of two different opposing theories, choose the simplest explanation. And in this case the best and simplest explanation for our need for love, beauty, meaning, religion and morality, is that God actually exists. As Keller suggests, the 'theory that there is a God who made the world accounts for the evidence we see better than the theory that there is no God.'

The universal existence of myths, legends, and stories (and, I would add, art and music) within human cultures reveal our deep need of and appreciation for meaning, beauty and truth. Our creative stories—whether expressed through art, music or literature—are an expression of our innate desire to make sense of our world, our existence, our experiences.

Soren Kierkegaard explicitly links meaning to the existence of the eternal:

If there were no eternal consciousness in man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in wild passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches—how empty and devoid of comfort life would be! But for that reason it is not so, and as God created man and woman, so too he shaped the hero and the poet or speech-maker.

In the evocative picture Kierkegaard draws above it is not difficult to see the consequences of adopting a view of the world as shaped only by a 'thoughtless and fruitless whim;' that is, by the 'blind, mechanical, foresightless' workings of evolution by natural selection. Human life becomes as empty and as devoid of meaning as the wind over a desert—as of no more significance than a leaf on a tree. But, thankfully, God has not only given us a consciousness of eternity, meaning and beauty within our hearts, but He has also provided us with our heroes and poets – those who shape the content and form of our stories and songs – to constantly remind us of such truths.

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# Sam Harris' Moral Landscape



Sam Harris is the youngest of the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse', a group also comprising Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and the late Christopher Hitchens. All except Hitchens, obviously, will soon descend upon Melbourne for April's Global Atheist Convention. Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, was soon followed by Harris' bestsellers *The End of Faith: Religion, Violence and the Future of Civilization* and *Letter to a Christian Nation (LCN)* and Hitchens' *God is Not Great*. Harris writes with similar clarity, verve, arrogance and anger to Dawkins. He is co-founder and CEO of Project Reason, 'devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values' everywhere.

Harris has a philosophy degree and a PhD in neuroscience which fuels the more muted fury of *The Moral Landscape*. His themes are the counterfeit ethical credentials of religion, popular misunderstandings of free will, and how science, especially neuroscience, can 'determine human values' to use his subtitle. Those with Reformed theological roots and awareness of Alvin Plantinga's brilliant Free Will Defence, will not succumb to this neurological determinism. On the first, as Greg Restall's article encourages us, we should listen well to his critiques, admit moral culpability where the hat of hatred fits, while refuting his arrogant rejection of any culpability for 20th century atheist totalitarianism's 200 million murders.

Harris is an accessible author and many sections sound convincing. For instance, chapter 1 argues that there is 'Moral Truth'. Amen to that. Chapter

2 argues that there is 'Good and Evil'. Amen to that too. But chapters 3 to 5 on 'Belief', 'Religion' and 'The Future of Happiness' respectively leave me with many reservations. The flip side of Harris', Dawkins' and Hitchens' enviable clarity is massive oversimplification of others' views. Straw men abound. For instance, Francis Collins, former head of the Human Genome Project, now head of the US National Institute of Health, is given 14 pages of the chapter on Religion to show that the common critique of New Atheists ignorance of sophisticated believers and caricaturing believers is unfair. But while Collins is a sophisticated scientist, he is hardly a theologian. The New Atheists refuse to read or take on the big guns: Alister McGrath, Tom Wright, David Bentley Hart or Keith Ward. If they did, Harris could hardly critique more moderate scientists more respectful of religion for cowardice – 'watch what you say or the Christian mob will burn down the Library of Alexandria all over again'. But Bentley Hart shows that the famous bonfire of classical works was probably started by accident by Julius Caesar's ships hundreds of years before. So much for Harris' high view of facts.

Furthermore, Harris delights in lambasting Christian opposition to embryonic stem cell experimentation in *Letter to a Christian Nation* (p. 32) and *Moral Landscape* (pp. 171-3) as delusional opposition to 'one of the most promising contexts for medical research' due to 'terrible failures of compassion' when the first alleged practical application of such research, to blindness, has only just occurred (after he wrote), and adult stem cell research has a record of hundreds of therapeutic breakthroughs. His ideological blindness and unwillingness to acknowledge the empirical evidence shows bad faith. Could it have anything to do with the fact that funding was denied by President Bush? Nor does Harris mention that liberal Christian

President Obama has reversed that decision. Harris' taking the higher ground of realism over against Christians shows a lack of self-critical awareness or more sophisticated critical realism, aware of the biases of our social situation while not denying the objective reality of truth.

For Harris, ordinary factual claims are just true or false, as are scientific theories and moral judgments. In fact, moral judgments are 'simply claims about the well-being of conscious creatures' (Blackford), claims that can be empirically determined. Yes, morality should share some sense of objectivity with science. But to reduce morality to science is to forget that morality is not only about correspondence to empirical reality, but also an art, about what is coherent, fitting, contextually appropriate, comprehensive.

Harris' goal as a utilitarian—utility being largely measured in terms of pleasure over pain—is, laudably, to reduce suffering. He sees science as a utopian solution to all suffering. But he fails to see that a major anthropological value assumption is built into this. As the founder of utilitarianism Jeremy Bentham said, the basic question is 'does it suffer?' Humans are seen as machines, or in Harris' terms, largely brains or computers, for processing pleasure or pain. Science is very handy for measuring this, so as in all disciplines, we see what we measure. The tool becomes determinative of the content. To the man (and the New Atheists are largely men) with a hammer, everything is a nail, and everything can be nailed down: there are no ultimate mysteries.

As Russell Blackford (ABC Religion and Ethics Online, 28 Jan 2011) notes, Harris' scientific determination of values overreaches. 'In particular, it cannot determine our most fundamental values or the *totality* of our values. If we presuppose the well-being of conscious creatures as a fundamental value, much else

may fall into place, but that initial presupposition does not come from science ... eventually, empirical investigation runs out'.

'As a result, Harris is no more successful than anyone else in deriving "ought" statements from pure "is" statements that make no reference to anyone's actual desires or values. The whole intellectual system of *The Moral Landscape* depends on an "ought" being built into its foundations'.

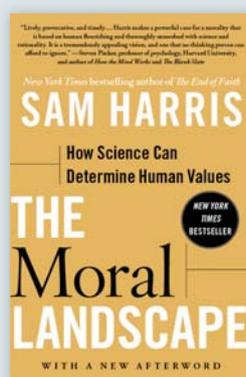
Further, 'the key value from which everything else supposedly follows is "well-being"; however, it's difficult to know just what is meant by this'. Does Bhutan have more happiness or well-being as is often alleged or does the Republic of Geelong after last year's AFL Grand Final win? The great utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill even realised this, criticising Bentham's pseudo-scientific happiness sums by saying, 'One man's pushpin [a simple game] is another man's poetry'. Which gives the most happiness? Are there higher forms of happiness? If well-being or happiness is not easily measured or reducible to certain brain states, it leaves more space for intellectually defensible disagreements than Harris allows. His harassment of those he disagrees with is frankly bigoted bullying.

Harris' reductionism of all reality to cognitive reality or scannable brainwaves also succumbs to what Donald Mackay's *Clockwork Image* calls the fallacy of 'nothing-buttery', as if the Mona Lisa is nothing but five litres of brown paint, three of blue, a touch of red, etc. Philosophically, though not necessarily personally, he and other New Atheists Dawkins and Singer, are what C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* calls 'Men without chests': all head, lacking heart.

But even on the head or brain side, Harris critiques immortality of the soul utterly unaware that it wouldn't be accepted by most contemporary

biblical scholars. Similarly he hasn't read any of the newer Christian approaches to the mind-brain problem that do not see the soul as the 'ghost in the machine' but rather the whole, embodied person, including the embodied brain. My old teacher Nancey Murphy from Fuller recently spoke for ISCAST Melbourne on a Christian perspective of the wholistic complex system of the brain. Harris reminds me of those who at the height of the euphoria of the Genome Project thought we're just genes. Similarly, some researchers prematurely thought they'd found 'the gay brain'. Unfortunately, Harris *Moral Landscape* with its hills of happiness and little valleys of ill-being, though necessary, is insufficient to explain the ethical Everests of human ethical experience and encounter with God nor the deep canyons and dark forces of sin and alienation.

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## CHURCH AFFILIATE

Attendance

<100  1 year \$70  3 years \$155

100-250  1 year \$100  3 years \$225

250+  1 year \$150  3 years \$330

## ORGANISATION AFFILIATE

Annual Turnover

<\$10k  1 year \$70  3 years \$155

\$10k-\$100k  1 year \$100  3 years \$225

\$100k-\$500k  1 year \$150  3 years \$330

\$500k +  1 year \$250  3 years \$560

## DONATE TO EA

I would like to make a **once-off** donation to the work of EA:

\$34  \$100  \$200  \$500

Other \$

I would like to contribute **monthly** to the work of EA:

\$

**Payment Details:**  Cheque/Money Order OR

Please debit my:  Visa  MasterCard  AMEX

Card No

Protection Code

(last 3 digits in number above signature)

Expiry Date

Name on Card

Cardholder's Signature

## Please complete response slip and return to:

Australian Evangelical Alliance Inc. ABN 54 056 007 820  
 PO Box 175, 44 Rutland Rd Box Hill Victoria 3128  
 Tel 03 9890 0633 Fax 03 9890 0700  
 Email enquiries@ea.org.au



# The Word for Work

## Bridging the Gap between Sunday and Monday

**Speaker:** Pastor/Businessman Will Messenger, Executive Editor, International Theology of Work Project, [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org), former Director of the Mockler Centre for Faith and Ethics in the Workplace at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary from 1999 to 2008



### Thursday 15 March 2012

Breakfast 7:00am for 7:15am start to 8:45am

Venue: Clarion on Canterbury, 326 Canterbury Road, Forest Hill, Vic.

Seminar 9.00am for 9.15am start. concluding at 12:15pm

Costs: CMA Member and Pastors Breakfast \$45 per person; Seminar \$45 per person  
CMA Non Member Breakfast \$55 per person; Seminar \$55 per person

Jointly hosted by  
**Christian Management Australia and Ethos—EA Centre for Christianity and Society**



**The Breakfast address** will outline the problem of relating the Bible and the Work world and provide well-proven practical strategies for re-connecting the two worlds. Workers, bring your pastor. Pastors, bring a worker or two or a few.

**Seminar** (following breakfast) This will fill in the breakfast outline providing detailed strategies and hands-on demonstrations for pastors and marketplace ministers to equip their people for the work world particularly using the biblical materials developed by the Theology of Work project. These will include biblical and topical approaches to preaching, bible studies, devotional reading and ethical dilemmas in work and business.



**Register securely online by 12 March at [www.cma.net.au](http://www.cma.net.au) or phone (07) 5545 2004**

[www.ethos.org.au](http://www.ethos.org.au)

# Is Nothing Private?

## Living with Social Media



**Annual Ethos Dinner,**  
Friday March 23, 2012  
6:30pm for 7:00pm start

**Speaker: David Lyon,**  
a world leader on social media  
and surveillance

**Zadok AGM at 5:00pm**

**Venue: Ridley Melbourne**  
**170 The Avenue**  
**Parkville VIC**

**David Lyon** is Director, Surveillance Studies Centre, Queen's Research Chair in Surveillance Studies, Professor of Sociology and Professor of Law at Queen's University, Ontario. In 2007 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Sociological Association, Communication and Information Technology Section and in 2008 was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He has authored or edited 26 books and published many articles. *Liquid Surveillance: Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon in Conversation* will appear in 2012. *The Culture of Surveillance* should be published in 2013.

**Cost: \$50 for 3 course meal (BYO Wine)**

**Booking through EA at (03) 9005 6240**  
**or [www.ea.org.au/events.aspx](http://www.ea.org.au/events.aspx)**  
**RSVP and payment by 19 March**

