

The Four Horsemen: A Retrospective Assessment

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Abstract: The Four Horsemen of New Atheism are commonly dismissed as an object of serious study within the field of religious studies due to their perceived negativity, lack of expertise, and popular appeal outside of academia. This paper attempts to explore the work of each one of them in-depth, comparatively analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each. In so doing, it will hopefully become apparent that, while each thinker has his shortcomings, they are all ultimately worthy of serious intellectual engagement for those who are interested in exploring serious contemporary arguments against religious belief.

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In recent years, a number of books have been written claiming that religion is nothing more than a remnant of our earlier days as a species, when our lack of scientific knowledge allowed us to fall prey to crude and primitive superstitions, and that despite the fact that the major religions seem to be able to change and adapt to modernity, this is in fact an illusion. Many of the books espousing this perspective came out in a relatively short period of time, and the movement came to be known as New Atheism. These books and their authors received a lot of media attention, and there were four books that achieved a particular level of notoriety: Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*. Because of this nice round number, these four men came to be referred to with the evocative and apocalyptic label of "The Four Horsemen of New Atheism." While this was going on, those of us in academic programs in religious studies viewed it all with little more than

bemused curiosity. They didn't seem to be contributing anything of real intellectual substance to the age-old philosophical question of whether or not God exists. "There's nothing 'new' about the New Atheists," we would say.¹ "They just seem to be really bitter and angry. Quite honestly, one has to feel sorry for them." But the only way to ascertain whether or not such an assessment is accurate is to perform a comparative analysis of the four books in question. That is what I intend to do in this paper, and in so doing it will hopefully become apparent that the actual content of these books oftentimes challenges the common preconceptions concerning the movement with which they are associated. Although a number of years have passed and much of the initial controversy and excitement over New Atheism has died down, the issues brought up in these books continue to be relevant.²

Sam Harris: He Who Fired the First Shot

It is hard to believe that almost a decade has passed since the publication of Sam Harris' first book in August of 2004. And yet, a closer look at the full title, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, makes it easy to see how much it is a product of that particular moment in time. The word "terror" reminds us that in 2004 we were still living in a post-9/11 world. The tragic and unforgettable events of September 11, 2001 were still a fresh wound, and although the subsequent foreign policy decisions of the Bush administration were heavily

¹ I have heard this statement so many times from so many different people that I am fairly confident that no one person can claim credit to have first stated it. However, see Tom Flynn's column "Why I Don't Believe in the New Atheism" on the website for the Council for Secular Humanism (www.secularhumanism.org) where this point is stated quite emphatically.

² I acknowledge that by considering only the works of "the Four Horsemen," I am thereby excluding many other important figures in the New Atheist movement. Just to name a few, these include Victor Stenger, Michael Shermer, Lawrence M. Krauss, Michel Onfray, Dan Barker, and A.C. Grayling, who is sometimes referred to as "the Fifth Horseman."

criticized, what continued to linger regardless of one's political affiliations was a vague and inescapable sense that we could be attacked again, and that our potential attackers would very likely have strong religious beliefs. It is this sort of collective feeling that Harris draws upon in his opening anecdote, where he describes a young man getting on a crowded public bus with a bomb strapped to his chest and then setting the bomb off, killing himself and everyone around him. Harris gives very minimal details about this young man's background and closes by posing a question to the reader: "Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy – you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy – to guess the young man's religion?"³ The point that Harris is trying to illustrate is clear enough, but the question he raises is problematic. Why is it so easy for us to guess that the young man is a Muslim? Because the most recent attacks against our country were by Muslims, and we as human beings have a natural tendency to generalize based on what is freshest in our memory? And is Harris suggesting that this is a good thing? This is a rather strange and disturbing way in which to begin a book that purports to be a critique of religion in general. So far, it sounds like it's going to be a critique of one religion in particular. However, after this misguided opening flourish Harris immediately broadens the discussion and takes it in a more promising direction. He frames his basic treatment of religion in terms of what one believes, and the ways in which the contents of these beliefs can and must manifest as actions in the real world. If this is the case, then it actually doesn't make sense for someone to claim that his or her religious beliefs are no one else's business: "It is time we recognized that belief is not a private matter; it has

³ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 12

never been merely private. In fact, beliefs are scarcely more private than actions are, for every belief is a fount of action *in potentia*.”⁴

It is worth pausing here to briefly consider possible objections to Harris’ definition of religion solely in terms of belief. It may seem inaccurate and skewed, since for many people religion is about a lot more than simply belief in a given set of propositions. This objection is valid on a certain level, and is based upon an ongoing debate within the field of the philosophy of religion over the difficulties involved in defining the term “religion.” However, Harris does not seem to want to involve himself in that debate. Instead, he establishes a certain definition for his purposes, and he makes it very clear that he is doing so: “Throughout this book, I am criticizing faith in its ordinary, scriptural sense – as belief in, and life orientation toward, certain historical and metaphysical propositions.”⁵ Harris is perfectly entitled to do this as long as he is explicit about it, and he even goes a step further by offering a reason for why he is framing the discussion in this way: “Of course, anyone is free to redefine the term ‘faith’ however he sees fit and thereby bring it into conformity with some rational or mystical ideal. But this is not the ‘faith’ that has animated the faithful for millennia.”⁶ So, while one can quibble with Harris’ initial definition of religion, he does provide sufficient justification for it at the outset. It is not his

⁴ Ibid, 44

⁵ Ibid, 64-65

⁶ Ibid, 65

responsibility to come up with a completely uncontroversial definition of religion when this task has eluded the finest philosophers of religion for centuries.⁷

Once we accept Harris' belief-centric account of religion, he has some interesting things to say about what belief really means and the way in which this term is oftentimes distorted in discussions of religion. He points out that we do not really have control over what it is that we believe. Atheists are oftentimes viewed by the religious as people who refuse to believe in God out of sheer stubbornness and arrogance. Pascal famously argued that to believe in God was a kind of wager: you might as well bet that he exists because the reward for being right is infinitely great, and if you bet that he does not exist and you are wrong the punishment is infinitely bad. However, Harris points out that believing something "just in case" or because it makes you feel good is to rob the word "believe" of the actual meaning that it has when we use it about other facts of the world. For someone to really believe something there must be some form of evidence that can be appealed to as a justification for the belief: "To believe that God exists is to believe that I stand in some relation to his existence *such that his existence is itself the reason for my belief*. There must be some causal connection, or an appearance thereof, between the fact in question and my acceptance of it."⁸ That last sentence in particular is a clear and succinct statement of the issue, effectively delineating the difference between religious beliefs and mundane beliefs about the natural world. The latter are beliefs in which there is a clear causal connection between a fact and one's acceptance of it,

⁷ For a clear and brief summary of the philosophical problems involved in defining religion, see the section "Definitions of Religion" in Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 100-103.

⁸ Harris, 63

whereas with religious beliefs there is merely the appearance of such a connection. The same standards of proof apply in both cases, but in one case people are simply mistaken when they think that the standards have been met. If one were able to clearly demonstrate to these people that they are mistaken, then they would have no choice but to abandon their religious beliefs. However, the problem is that if this happens they have another option as well – to claim that their beliefs are actually a matter of faith. So what is really most offensive about religious belief is that it engenders epistemological hypocrisy: “People of faith naturally recognize the primacy of reasons and resort to reasoning whenever they possibly can. Faith is simply the license they give themselves to *keep believing when reasons fail*.”⁹ By isolating the belief aspect of religion, Harris is able to effectively articulate what in particular is so disquieting and irritating about it for those who lack religious conviction.

However, things once again become uncomfortable when Harris moves away from a critique of religion to a critique of one specific religion. The longest chapter of the book is entitled “The Problem with Islam,” and it involves not just a condemnation of that religion but also of weak-willed advocates of religious tolerance. Harris contends that, if we really understood what the message of Islam is, we would realize that it is completely irreconcilable with our Western ideals of liberal democracy. Early in the book Harris points out that our modern obsession with political correctness has blinded us to the most obvious explanation for the recent terrorist attacks, which is “...that men like bin Laden *actually* believe what

⁹ Ibid, 232

they say they believe. They believe in the literal truth of the Koran.”¹⁰ Harris further elaborates upon that point in this chapter:

We are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguously so. It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been “hijacked” by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran, and further elaborated in the literature of the hadith, which recounts the sayings and actions of the Prophet. A future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam.¹¹

Harris drives home his point by providing a number of statistics about the frequency of violence in Muslim countries. He also presents a compilation of quotations from the Koran that portray non-Muslims in a negative light. This list goes on for a little over five pages. Harris’ strategy is clear - he knows he is making strong and controversial claims, and the only way to make them plausible is to present a mountain of data to support them. And yet, confronted with all of this data, at some point one cannot help but say, “Okay, we get it already.” After presenting the list of passages from the Koran, Harris himself even admits, “This is all desperately tedious, of course.”¹² The arguments of this chapter are oftentimes effective at urging the reader to see that it is naïve to think that Islam is, at its core, a religion of peace. However, there is a problem here beyond the specific content of these arguments. It is perfectly fine to want to point out some huge problem that

¹⁰ Ibid, 29

¹¹ Ibid, 109-110

¹² Ibid, 123

threatens all of humanity, but unless one is also proposing some kind of feasible solution to said problem, then what's the point? Harris presents a compelling case for why we should regard Islam as essentially a militant religion, but he provides no real ways in which we can constructively deal with the situation, other than to suggest that "...we need a world government."¹³ Harris immediately adds that he acknowledges that such a possibility is still a long way off in the future (no kidding!), and closes the chapter by talking again about how Islam needs to transform itself and how the West might be able to provide some vague encouragement in that direction. Despite his effective diagnosis of the problem, his inability to come up with a solution causes this chapter to come off as mere fear-mongering.

Nevertheless, Harris' book as a whole is thoughtful and contains many interesting ideas that deserve further exploration. Throughout the book, he is critical of religious moderates as essentially quislings who make it possible for more extreme adherents of religion to exist at all: "Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed."¹⁴ Many readers may be upset by this kind of viewpoint that lumps together reasonable religious people with hardline fundamentalists, but Harris later on makes it clear why he feels this way when he proposes a more scientific way of ascertaining how we make moral judgments. He is against moral relativism, saying that good and evil do exist - we just haven't discovered them yet in a completely scientific manner, and until we do, the various religious traditions are clouding the

¹³ Ibid, 151

¹⁴ Ibid, 45

issue: “Respect for *diversity* in our ethical views is, at best, an intellectual holding pattern until more of the facts are in.”¹⁵ Harris also has some intriguing things to say about mysticism and other kinds of spiritual experiences that have traditionally been associated with religion. He says that these kinds of experiences can actually be very positive and conducive to one’s physical and mental health, and that what must be done is to separate these experiences from the religious dogma with which they have been arbitrarily grouped:

The history of human spirituality is the history of our attempts to explore and modify the deliverances of consciousness through methods like fasting, chanting, sensory deprivation, prayer, meditation, and the use of psychotropic plants. There is no question that experiments of this sort can be conducted in a rational manner. Indeed, they are some of our only means of determining to what extent the human condition can be deliberately transformed. Such an enterprise becomes irrational only when people begin making claims about the world that cannot be supported by empirical evidence.¹⁶

Harris’ openness to this kind of spirituality is refreshing, and indicates that his critique does not apply across the board to all religious traditions. His basic point is that religion is not all bad, but the good parts can be safely extracted from it and utilized within a secular context. This sort of claim is a recurring theme among the work of many associated with the New Atheist movement and demonstrates that they are more than simply anti-religious crusaders.

Daniel Dennett: The Sober-Minded Researcher

A lot of the criticism of New Atheism in general and “the Four Horsemen” in particular comes from a general feeling that these guys somehow lack the proper

¹⁵ Ibid, 182

¹⁶ Ibid, 210

credentials to launch such brazen attacks against religion. Although Sam Harris went on to receive a PhD in neuroscience, when his book was first published he seemed to come out of nowhere with nothing more than an undergraduate degree in philosophy. However, no one can accuse Daniel Dennett of being unqualified to participate in the conversation. Of “the Four Horsemen,” he is the only one who is a bona fide professional philosopher, having been the Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University for many years. He has made major contributions to the fields of philosophy of mind and philosophy of science with his earlier books, *Consciousness Explained* and *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. But his involvement with New Atheism has generally been much more low profile than that of his fellow “Horsemen.” In fact, he seems somewhat uncomfortable being associated with the movement. I had the opportunity to see this first-hand when Dennett came to Claremont Graduate University a couple of years ago in response to a challenge to a debate from Philip Clayton. What ensued was really more of a discussion than a debate. However, if there was a winner, it was definitely Dennett if only because Clayton made the tactical error of assuming that his opponent’s position was more extreme than it actually was. Clayton accused Dennett of being anti-religion, and Dennett responded, “I am not anti-religion. I am critical of religion, and I think we should all be critical of religion.”¹⁷ At the time, I wondered if this kind of distinction was just semantic hair-splitting on Dennett’s part, but after reading his book it is clear that his views do significantly diverge from those of the other “Horsemen.” He is definitely the outlier of the quartet.

¹⁷ “Daniel Dennett vs Philip Clayton – philosophy, science, and religion,” YouTube video, posted by “ObjectiveBob,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-l_9e5qxnc

The full title of Dennett's book is *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, which indicates Dennett's general perspective towards religion and how he sees the project which he advocates in this book within the broader historical tradition of the philosophy of religion. The idea of viewing religion purely in naturalistic terms hearkens back to the many natural histories of religion that have been put forth by major philosophers, most notably the work of David Hume and William James. Indeed, Dennett refers to these two as his heroes and quotes them frequently throughout the book. The idea of religion as a spell that might be broken if one attends to the details of it too closely is an interesting and evocative one. This idea also serves as an effective counterbalance to Dennett's initial advocacy of the need to study religion in a more rigorous and scientific way. Such a proposal would seem to be perfectly reasonable to people regardless of their religious affiliations or lack thereof, but Dennett anticipates initial pushback to this idea by making an analogy between religion and music: "I recognize that many people feel about religion the way I feel about music. They may be right. Let's find out. That is, let's subject religion to the same sort of scientific inquiry that we have done with tobacco and alcohol and, for that matter, music."¹⁸ Music is such an unequivocally positive aspect of human culture that it would be unthinkable that research into it might demonstrate that it possesses any seriously negative qualities. Many people think of religion in the same way, but they also tend to be skeptical when a scientific researcher comes along and suggests that there is some kind of impartial viewpoint from which one can clearly measure the benefits and

¹⁸ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 42

drawbacks of the religious mindset. Why exactly is this? Dennett succinctly sums up the general problem: “It is just about impossible to be neutral in your approach to religion, because many people view neutrality in itself as hostile. If you’re not for us, you’re against us.”¹⁹ He recognizes that his posture of scientific objectivity could be perceived as disingenuous, masking some deeper, far more nefarious agenda.

It is to Dennett’s credit that he spends a significant amount of time patiently refuting these kinds of *prima facie* objections to the appropriateness of a scientific study of religion. One is even tempted to wonder whether these objections deserve the careful consideration that he gives them, but it is clearly important that he does dispose of them because they constitute a fundamental obstacle to his project getting off the ground at all. His main response is that those who oppose a thorough examination of their most cherished beliefs are disqualifying themselves from the discussion altogether: “If you decline to put your beliefs on the line, then your beliefs, whatever they are, really cannot be given any *consideration* in the ongoing investigation, which has no use for one-sided declarations that will not be subjected to rigorous scrutiny and cross-examination.”²⁰ The people who view religious beliefs in this way are really just illustrating Richard Rorty’s point that the topic of religion often functions as a “conversation-stopper.”²¹ Therefore, those of us who want the conversation to continue are just going to have to ask the others to leave. This may seem a somewhat rude way in which to deal with these people, but Dennett offers some trenchant observations on the way in which so-called

¹⁹ Ibid, 32

²⁰ Ibid, 359

²¹ See “Religion as Conversation-Stopper” in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 168-174.

politeness can operate as an insidious force when a highly sensitive topic like religion is at issue:

Politeness...overwhelms the skeptical instincts of many a target of deliberate con men who know that just a touch of "hurt feelings" can deflect most if not all questions any reasonable person would want to have answered. A tactic that works *can* be used deliberately and viciously, but it can also work – sometimes better – in the hands of an innocent enthusiast who would never dream of doing anything duplicitous.²²

Dennett is saying, in the politest possible way, that if we are ever going to hope to arrive at some kind of useful scientific findings about religion, we need to stop worrying about being polite and about whether or not we are offending people. The scientific method involves setting aside our own personal preconceptions in order to follow the truth down whatever paths it may take us.

Proposing to study religion in a scientific way is not an inherently anti-religious or irreligious perspective. In fact, showing this much interest in religion could actually be seen as a pro-religious stance. So why is Dennett considered a New Atheist? He only explicitly identifies himself as an atheist once in the book, and places this statement in parentheses.²³ It all seems to be a matter of how he is positioned within his stance. Dennett has made it clear that he is going to consider religion as a natural outgrowth of human society, as opposed to a phenomenon with supernatural origins. But in his working definition of religion, he defines it "...as *social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose*

²² Dennett, 365

²³ Ibid, 21

approval is to be sought."²⁴ One may object to such a God-centric definition and the way in which it excludes certain religions like Buddhism, but Dennett does grant that this definition is tentative and, as in the case of Harris, this sort of quibbling over conceptual definitions prevents us from moving on to actually consider the argument in question. What is of most interest in this definition is that, although religion is a natural phenomenon, its content is treated as supernatural. It may nevertheless appear that the deck is already stacked against it, but what Dennett is doing here is framing the discussion in such a way that the question of the actual truth of religion is bracketed. From a naturalistic perspective, all one can do with supernatural claims is examine their function and utility. The issue of whether they correspond with reality is by definition outside the purview of the investigation.

If this is the case, then Dennett is actually trying to be as respectful of religion as he can. Regardless of his own personal views, he is not out to definitively disprove the existence of God or invalidate peoples' religious beliefs. He is only concerned with tangible evidence, in the form of demonstrable consequences of such beliefs. In the brief section where Dennett considers the proofs for God's existence, he seems bored with them, giving them only a cursory examination before dismissing them.²⁵ Elsewhere, he gives an eloquent summation of the fundamental problem with the claim that God exists: "That assertion is so prodigiously ambiguous that it expresses, at best, an unorganized set of dozens or hundreds—or billions—of quite *different* possible theories, most of them disqualified as theories in any case, because they are systematically immune to confirmation or

²⁴ Ibid, 9

²⁵ Ibid, 240-245

disconfirmation.”²⁶ This identification of the incoherence of the content of religious belief calls into question whether one can accurately be said to really believe it, and leads to Dennett’s most helpful contribution to the wider discussion: his consideration of “belief in belief.” This phrase refers to a second-order belief that it is good to believe in the supernatural claims of a religious tradition, and it can be held even by one who is unable to accept the truth of the claims themselves. Dennett’s proposal of a more in-depth examination of religion is not meant to test religious beliefs, since these are supernatural and therefore by definition beyond such tests, but is rather meant to test the heretofore unquestioned assumption that it must be a good thing to have religious beliefs. His book is therefore valuable for its redefinition of the terms of the debate. Rather than seeking to attack or defend religion, Dennett says that people on both sides of the debate need to better educate themselves in the subject matter. The only real criticism one could make of this thesis is that it is so uncontroversial as to be painfully obvious.

Richard Dawkins: The Evangelical Naturalist

If there is one among “the Four Horsemen” who might be considered the unofficial leader, Richard Dawkins seems the likeliest candidate. Long before the New Atheist movement, Dawkins was already a renowned expert in the field of evolutionary biology and was known as one of those rare scientists, like Carl Sagan and Stephen W. Hawking, who was adept at eloquently writing about the complex ideas of his field, which he did in popular bestsellers like *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*. This is appropriate considering that one of his positions at

²⁶ Ibid, 311

Oxford was the Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science. He was also never shy about pointing out the implications of his scientific work for the validity of religious claims, so in a way *The God Delusion* seems like the culmination of an ongoing strand within his work—a *Summa Atheologica*, if you will. Dawkins is on a mission to convince people to be atheists and, just as important, to convince them that they need not be ashamed of their lack of belief. In the preface he tells us that he wants to “...raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one.”²⁷ His enthusiasm is charming if also a little overly effusive, and it is supplemented with an interesting kind of self-conscious naïveté exemplified by the following juxtaposition of sentences: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. What presumptuous optimism!”²⁸ I suppose it all depends upon exactly how religious said readers are, but the book really seems to be aimed at those who are on the fence but leaning towards atheism. And for that audience, it is quite effective at presenting a comprehensive case for why it is in one’s best interest to abandon the supernatural religious beliefs of our ancestors.

But let’s begin with the main weaknesses of the book. The most noticeable is Dawkins’ habit of interspersing his arguments with snarky asides. Some of these are relatively harmless and amusing enough, such as his reference to “[t]he aptly named Oral Roberts.”²⁹ However, some are so caustic as to be distracting. Consider the following: “What impresses me about Catholic mythology is partly its tasteless

²⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008), 23

²⁸ *Ibid*, 28

²⁹ *Ibid*, 53

kitsch but mostly the airy nonchalance with which these people make up the details as they go along. It is just shamelessly invented.”³⁰ This kind of bald-faced assertion seems more at home in a pamphlet or screed than an ostensibly serious book about religion, and it does not help Dawkins in relation to the aforementioned problem of a perceived lack of credentials on the part of “the Horsemen” to deal with this subject matter. Dawkins is the main target of this line of criticism because, although he is a respected scholar, he has made his name in a field completely separate from philosophy or religious studies. His book reflects the fact that he has definitely done his homework in terms of educating himself in these areas, yet he still makes moves that betray his outsider status. For instance, while Dennett more or less brushes aside the classical arguments for the existence of God as irrelevant, Dawkins devotes an entire chapter to refuting them. Perhaps he feels he has to do as complete a job as possible of disproving God’s existence by attacking the problem from every angle, but his handling of these proofs often feels like he is beating a dead horse. At one point, he puts the ontological argument into the mouth of a child on a playground, translating the exposition of the argument into childish language.³¹ Dawkins doesn’t realize that engaging in such tactics makes him come off as just as childish.

It is also worth pointing out that this is a long book, the longest of the four, and certain parts probably could have been trimmed down or cut out completely. Aside from the aforementioned chapter refuting the arguments for God’s existence, Dawkins devotes much space to reclaiming prominent intellectuals and historical figures to the side of atheism. He goes to great lengths to show that, while Albert

³⁰ Ibid, 56

³¹ Ibid, 104

Einstein and Thomas Jefferson may have made vague references to God or a Creator in their writings, if one looks carefully at what they actually said about religion, their beliefs would be unrecognizable to those within traditional Western religions: “A quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief.”³² This sort of exercise seems to have as its unspoken premise the deeply problematic notion that many if not most of the truly brilliant people throughout history, while perhaps paying lip-service to religion, were actually atheists. Dawkins also has a chapter where he discusses the morally bankrupt nature of many of the stories and events of the Bible, all of which is fairly old news to those who have even a passing familiarity with the subject area. However, when Dawkins gets to the issue of two of the most notorious atheists of the twentieth century, Hitler and Stalin, he makes a very insightful remark: “The interesting question is not whether evil (or good) individual human beings were religious or were atheists. We are not in the business of counting evil heads and compiling two rival roll calls of iniquity.”³³ Unfortunately, this remark is at odds with the fact that he immediately proceeds to make the argument that Hitler and Stalin being atheists had nothing to do with the atrocities that they committed. This sort of tension is indicative of a larger tension throughout the book between two kinds of claims – the claim that it is okay to be an atheist, and the claim that being an atheist somehow makes you an inherently better person than a religious believer. The second claim is much more controversial, but Dawkins often seems to be simply assuming it without argument.

³² Ibid, 32

³³ Ibid, 309

Despite all of this, once Dawkins actually deals with his area of scientific expertise, his argument is quite compelling. This is most apparent in his extended disproof of the God hypothesis and the pseudo-scientific theory of Intelligent Design. The advocates of this theory claim that our world and the life within it are far too complex to explain by the seemingly random and chaotic processes of evolution and natural selection. Dawkins' response is that a designer is not a solution to the problem of complexity, but merely a deferral of it: "However statistically improbable the entity you seek to explain by invoking a designer, the designer himself has got to be at least as improbable."³⁴ Dawkins seeks to clarify the numerous misconceptions about what is really involved in evolutionary theory and thereby raise our consciousness:

The greater the statistical improbability, the less plausible is chance as a solution: that is what improbable means. But the candidate solutions to the riddle of improbability are not, as is falsely implied, design and chance. They are design and natural selection. Chance is not a solution, given the high levels of improbability we see in living organisms, and no sane biologist ever suggested that it was.

It is difficult for most people to wrap their minds around the fact that natural selection is an incredibly gradual process that took place over an extremely long period of time. Most people simply see it as a process where abrupt leaps in development took place, and that kind of misunderstanding leads many to conclude that a theistic perspective is a more convincing explanation of how life came about. Dawkins urges us to become better educated in biological evolution so that we will be able to see that, the more one knows about this area of science, the less

³⁴ Ibid, 138

convincing the God hypothesis becomes. In spite of its flaws, *The God Delusion* manages to give a more extensive account than any of the other books of the “Horsemen” for why we can do without God, and it is an impressive achievement regardless of whether or not one is ultimately convinced.

Christopher Hitchens: The Polemical Firebrand

If the title of Dawkins’ book is a mild dig at religion, implying that people with religious beliefs have some kind of mental disorder that needs to be cured, then the title of the late Christopher Hitchens’ book is an all-out declaration of war - *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. However, such a bombastic title will come as no surprise to those already familiar with Hitchens’ reputation. To cite just one example, the day after Jerry Falwell died, Hitchens appeared on Fox News and was asked about whether he was sorry about his harsh criticism of Falwell in light of the pastor’s recent passing. Hitchens replied that he was not sorry at all. “We have been rid of an extremely dangerous demagogue who lived by hatred of others,” he said. Clearly, Hitchens was not the type to mince words, making him the most outspoken of this already outspoken quartet. I have less to say about his book because it covers a lot of the same territory as the other three and is more of a series of essays on different aspects of religion rather than a unified argument. I do not necessarily mean these observations to be critical. Rather, they are consequences of the fact that Hitchens is a much different writer than the other three stylistically. Having made his name as a journalist and essayist, his writing has a more literary flourish to it, making his book probably the most readable of the four. However, it is also the thinnest in terms of substantive intellectual content.

Despite his apparent hostility, Hitchens grants that many positive aspects of human culture have been produced under religious auspices. But he lays out his general feelings on the ultimate value of religion early on in the book:

There still remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.³⁵

So, the basic problem with religion is that it presents a false picture of the way things are, and once people are convinced to believe such a picture, all sorts of negative consequences will ensue. These claims are not particularly original, but when Hitchens discusses the horrific content of the Bible, he suggests that the proper response to such stories is not just atheism but antitheism, which he describes as "...the view that we ought to be glad that none of the religious myths has any truth to it, or in it."³⁶ Hitchens goes further here than his fellow "Horsemen," although one could argue that he is making explicit what was only implicit in their writings. It is interesting to consider the idea that not only does God not exist, but that this is actually a good and comforting fact considering that he supposedly commanded a man to sacrifice his own son and actively participated in numerous instances of genocide.

Although Hitchens does cover much of the same ground as the other three, his completely original contributions to the discussion are truly fascinating. One of

³⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007),

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³⁶ *Ibid*, 102

the most bizarre and idiosyncratic is a brief chapter entitled “A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham” in which he focuses on the fact that not only do many religions have dietary restrictions, but they seem to focus inordinately on prohibiting the consumption of pork. Hitchens embarks upon a pseudo-Freudian analysis of how pigs may resemble human beings a little too much, leading to our simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from them:

Porcophobia—and porcophilia—thus probably originate in a nighttime of human sacrifice and even cannibalism at which the “holy texts” often do more than hint. Nothing optional – from homosexuality to adultery – is ever made punishable unless those who do the prohibiting (and exact the fierce punishments) have a repressed desire to participate.³⁷

One has to wonder if this is all some kind of elaborate joke, but Hitchens explains his rationale at the end of the discussion: “In microcosm, this apparently trivial fetish shows how religion and faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world.”³⁸ Still, this kind of theorizing is highly amusing, whether Hitchens intends it to be or not. He also is not shy about criticizing the Eastern traditions. Many of these religions, especially Buddhism, more or less get a free pass from the other “Horsemen” for not being based on a belief in God, but Hitchens claims that even a non-theistic religion can be against the general principles of rationality: “A faith that despises the mind and the free individual, that preaches submission and resignation, and that regards life as a poor and transient thing, is ill-equipped for self-criticism.”³⁹ After reading this I think it is safe to say that, in addition to his other

³⁷ Ibid, 40

³⁸ Ibid, 41

³⁹ Ibid, 204

superlatives, Hitchens is the most uncompromising of the four in his critique of religion.

What's New About the New Atheists?

There may be nothing new about atheism as a philosophical position, but there is plenty new about the New Atheists. Occasionally, their rhetoric can become hostile to the point of alienating those who are deeply committed religious believers, but that is no reason to avoid these authors if one is seriously interested in exposing oneself to what the most powerful arguments against religion really are. Although they have been lumped together as though their positions were interchangeable, each of “the Horsemen” offers his own thoughtful and unique perspective on why religion should come under closer scrutiny and perhaps be abandoned, and they all draw upon recent scientific and cultural factors that were unavailable to earlier thinkers who dealt with the same subject matter. It is difficult to assess whether their work will still be read one hundred years from now, but it is definitely relevant to our contemporary situation where religion and its real or perceived lack continue to play an important role both in American politics and in the larger international landscape.

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