



The New Atheism: Its Virtues and its Vices

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Abstract

What follows is the text of the 2010 Aquinas Lecture delivered at the church of St Vincent Ferrer, New York. The lecture indicates what makes the so-called new atheism new. It then offers some defense and critique of three authors: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. The chief criticism leveled against them is that their dismissal of theism is based on an ignorance of classical theistic thinking and the mistaken impression that 'theism' and 'creationism' are equivalent.

Keywords

Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, creation, science, theism, Aquinas

One may wonder how there could be anything rightly called 'New Atheism'. An atheist, one might naturally think, is someone who claims to know that there is no God. And people have been making that claim for centuries. It is as old as the hills.¹ The words 'atheist' and 'atheism' derive from the words 'theist' and 'theism', and since theism has taken different forms the same can be said of atheism. So Christians in their earliest days were sometimes described as atheists because they did not believe in the gods venerated by the Romans. Still, we might say, atheism is, and has always been, the denial of the existence of something supposed to be divine.² So how can there be any such thing as New Atheism?

Yet there clearly is such a thing, and it amounts to what we can read in the writings of some famous recent authors. None of them use the phrase 'New Atheism' when talking of what they take themselves

¹ For background on this, see Michael Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² One might take the 'a' in 'atheist' to signify that an atheist is just someone who has no belief in God, not someone who declares that he or she claims to know that God does not exist. Cf. Martin, *op. cit.* who distinguishes between 'negative' and 'positive' atheism. The authors I am discussing here, the 'New Atheists', are, by Martin's criteria, 'positive atheists'. They tend to claim that God definitely does not exist.

to be defending.³ But it seems to have stuck as a label for what they offer. So New Atheism is alive and well and seems to be having a considerable influence — insofar, at least, as we take influence to be signified by book sales and by what you can find on the Internet. The phrase ‘New Atheism’ may initially seem to be a curious one, but it refers to something that certainly exists, which, I presume, is why I have, for my sins, been invited to talk about it this evening.

But what, you may ask, do I take ‘it’ to be? For present purposes I am going to take it to be what we find in the work of three authors who are commonly regarded as what we might call its ‘founding fathers’. These are Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. These people are to New Atheism somewhat as we might think of St Paul and the evangelists in relation to Christianity. They kicked a movement off and, therefore, deserve to be taken as providing us with its basic creed. I should add that the creed in question can be found in three seminal books. These are *The God Delusion* by Dawkins (published in 2006), *Breaking the Spell* by Dennett (published in 2007), and *God is Not Great* by Hitchens (published in 2009).

II

I should say straight away that these three authors are not all singing the same song. They differ on a number of counts. But, these differences notwithstanding, you must surely be wondering what makes them ‘new’ atheists as opposed to the good ‘old’ atheists who simply wanted to say that they knew that there is no God. And here, I think, the following points can be made.

1. First, unlike many old atheists, the new ones tend to lay stress on science as positively disproving what theists believe. Your typical old atheist (Bertrand Russell, for example) said ‘Arguments in defense of belief in God are just bad ones; so we have

³ The term ‘New Atheism’ seems to have gained popular currency following a cover article in the November 2006 issue of the technology-focused monthly periodical, *WIRED magazine*. In it, contributing editor Gary Wolf discusses the now familiar trend of activist anti-theism among intellectuals, including Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. Notwithstanding the influence of this article—both for drawing attention to the phenomenon and applying to it such a ready-made name—Gary Wolf was not the first to use this coinage. A year earlier in a review for the literary magazine *Bookforum*, Ronald Aronson adopted the term ‘New Atheists’ as his handle for the recent cadre of authors voicing opposition to traditional religious beliefs. Since it is not clear that Wolf borrowed his usage directly from Aronson, it would be somewhat unfitting to credit Aronson as the sole creator of the auspicious title of ‘New Atheism’. Still, it is quite reasonable to surmise that the term evolved from Aronson’s original mention of ‘New Atheists’ in 2005, though the cover article in *WIRED magazine* exposed it to a wider audience.

no reason to believe in God'. New atheists, by contrast, tend to suggest that those who believe in God can be absolutely refuted by scientific arguments — ones based on the notion of evolution.⁴

2. Then again, New Atheism seems to have a political dimension lacking in the writings of old atheists. The old atheists were all basically what we might think of as 'armchair philosophers'. They tended to be happy to argue that there is no God and to leave matters at that. By contrast, new atheists appear to have a strong political agenda. They want us to leave our armchairs and change the ways in which we think and behave. Typically, they want us to rid ourselves of religious belief (belief in God in particular) and to become active members of what we might call an 'atheist liberation movement' devoted to the extermination of religion, one which can be compared with movements active in promoting causes such as racial equality, feminism, and gay rights. 'Religion', says Hitchens, 'poisons everything' and should therefore be campaigned against actively.
3. When it comes to what makes New Atheism new, the third point I want to note is that its exponents largely seem to write with little reference to the history of theology. They often talk about something called 'religion' and (especially in the case of Dawkins and Hitchens), they focus on what they call 'belief in God'. But, we might ask, 'Which religion?' and 'Whose God?' My impression is that the fathers of New Atheism have not much studied the fathers of Old Atheism or the fathers of theism in its classical Christian form. New atheists (Dawkins and Hitchens anyway) seem to identify belief in God with what is commonly called 'creationism'. I shall have things to say about this matter soon; so, for now, I shall just content myself with having noted a point about the newness of New Atheism and simply leave it at that.

III

In the time I have available to me for this lecture (which is not a lot, and certainly not enough to allow me to do justice to my topic), I am going to offer you the best, brief (and I emphasize 'brief') defense I

⁴ I am not, of course, denying that there have long been critics of religious belief coming from a scientific perspective. Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), for example, attacked various religious beliefs while supporting the writings of Charles Darwin (he has been often referred to as 'Darwin's bulldog'). Note, though, that Huxley described himself as an agnostic (indeed, he seems to have invented the term) while the authors I am concerned with take a much stronger anti-theistic line.

can of the New Atheism. Then I am going briefly (and I emphasize ‘briefly’) to try to indicate why I think that it is open to challenge in various ways. As I have noted, I am identifying New Atheism with what we find in Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett.

IV

Perhaps the strongest point to be made in favor of New Atheism is the damage that has been done in the name of religion. Dawkins, Dennett, and (especially) Hitchens all draw attention to this, and it seems hard to deny what they report, or much of it, anyway. Let me descend to some details here.

While appealing to Allah, there have been Muslims prepared to carry out acts which many people (both secular and religious) would think of as atrocious, and which almost all moral philosophers would find plainly incompatible with what can be argued to be good moral thinking. The events of 9/11 are obvious examples here, though there are others which can be mentioned.

Then again, what about Judaism? Abstracting from recent history, and confining ourselves simply to the Old Testament, we find some very discouraging stories to which to draw attention if we read them as history or as placed before us for our edification. As, for example, Dawkins points out, in Judges 11 we are told of how Jephthah, in accordance with an arrangement with God, murdered his daughter to pay God back for his victory over the Ammonites (this being something approved of by the Old Testament author reporting it). Referring to yet other Old Testament texts, Dawkins observes: ‘The Bible story of Joshua’s destruction of Jericho, and the invasion of the Promised Land in general, is morally indistinguishable from Hitler’s invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein’s massacre of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs’.⁵ I find it hard to disagree with Dawkins here. The Old Testament God and many of his followers often do not seem to be what most moral philosophers today would call ‘perfectly good moral agents’. Speaking only of the Old Testament, Dawkins asks: “Do those people who hold up the Bible as an inspiration to moral rectitude have the slightest notion of what is actually written in it?”⁶ Dawkins’s question seems to me to be a reasonable one.

As for Christianity: the moral track record of some of its adherents has not been a good one. Even forgetting about all that we have recently learned about priests and child abuse, I am sure that you are well aware of this. Nevertheless, let me just briefly remind you that,

⁵ Cf. Dawkins, p. 280.

⁶ Cf. Dawkins, p. 281. Cf. also Dawkins, p. 289.

for example, St Paul (in his letter to Philemon) seems comfortable with the notion of slavery, and that there have been many Christians since his time who have positively defended it (the American Jesuits had slaves and only started selling them off in 1837). Again, Christians have tortured and executed people for the maddest of reasons (for being a witch or a sorcerer, for example, for heresy in general, or for simply not believing in one version of Christianity or another). The literary critic Terry Eagleton has bluntly written: ‘Apart from the signal instance of Stalinism, it is hard to think of a historical movement that has more squalidly betrayed its own revolutionary origins . . . The Christian church has tortured and disemboweled in the name of Jesus, gagging dissent and burning its critics alive. It has been oily, sanctimonious, brutally oppressive, and vilely bigoted’.⁷ Eagleton’s remark here strikes me as indiscriminating, un-nuanced, and exaggerated. But it is not entirely lacking in truth.

I could continue along these lines. Suffice it now simply to say that, as New Atheists have stressed at some length, belief in God has led to regrettable damage.

V

It has also, alas, in some cases led people to some really questionable views. Take, for example, the Christian doctrine of the Atonement as expounded and ridiculed by Dawkins. According to this doctrine, we should believe all of the following propositions:

1. Everyone, from Adam onwards, has sinned.
2. God has arranged for some to be saved from the punitive consequences of their sin.
3. He has done so by sending his son, Jesus of Nazareth, to undergo fantastic suffering.
4. He acted in this way since he required that someone should pay the penalty due to people’s sin, and since he was happy for Jesus to do this by way of great suffering.

Now I am not for a moment suggesting that this line of thinking represents New Testament Christianity or the teachings of a majority of contemporary theologians. But many Christians have found it compelling and have viewed it as the core of Christian thinking, which is why Dawkins goes to town on it, describing it as ‘vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent’.⁸ And Dawkins is, I think, right here.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 55f.

⁸ Cf. Dawkins, p. 287.

As the late Fr Herbert McCabe OP once put it: ‘If God will not forgive us until his son has been tortured to death for us, then God is a lot less forgiving than we are sometimes’.⁹ Yet the view of God to which I have just referred has been embraced by many Christians, and the fact should be admitted.

Also to be admitted is the curiously anthropomorphic way in which many theists have spoken of God. In its various ways, New Atheism ridicules belief in God as a celestial Top Person or, in the words of the poet Matthew Arnold, as ‘a magnified and non-natural man’.¹⁰ The new atheists seem to think of God as an extremely powerful extra-terrestrial, and, considered as such, they find no reason to believe in his existence. And on this point they are all, I think, completely right — though not for the reasons that they think they are.

Let me start to develop my ideas here by noting how a large number of theists have spoken about God. Perhaps the best thing for me to do is simply to give you a list of three propositions which theists have often provided when saying what they take God to be. Here it goes:

1. God is a person without a body.
2. God is an invisible agent with a succession of thoughts, beliefs, hopes, desires, and memories.
3. God differs from us since he lacks a body. He also differs from us since his knowledge and power are much greater than ours and since he can intervene in the world so as to produce miracles.

Now the new atheists seem mostly to disbelieve in such a God largely on scientific grounds. They find no empirical evidence for such an entity. So they end up defending atheism. And, if belief in God is taken to amount to belief in the three propositions I have just listed, then, I think, they are right in what they say. But not *because* of what they say. As seems appropriate to note on his feast day, they are right because of some basic points noted by Thomas Aquinas. His view of God is surely a yardstick when it comes to determining what belief in God amounts to for Roman Catholics at least (and even if many who call themselves Catholics would be surprised by some of the things that he has to say about God). So let me now note what Aquinas would say about the three propositions about God that I have just listed.

To start with, he would not say that God is a person without a body. He would say that God is three persons in one substance while

⁹ Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), p. 92.

¹⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 162.

adding that ‘person’ in this context does not mean what it does when we speak of human beings. Aquinas’s Trinity is not a collection of three individual people. It is God, and God, for Aquinas, is not a member of any class or kind since he is the maker of all classes and kinds. More on this in a moment.

With respect to the notion of successive divine thoughts, beliefs, hopes, desires, and memories, Aquinas would simply deny that there are any such things. For him, God is eternal, which means that he transcends space and time and, therefore, has nothing that we can think of as a biography. For Aquinas God is immutable, from which it would seem to follow that such thoroughly mutable things as thoughts, beliefs, hopes, desires, and memories can have no place in what God is essentially.

As for the third of the propositions I just noted, Aquinas would both agree and disagree with it. Abstracting from the doctrine of the Incarnation, he says that God is immaterial (as, indeed, have all Christians). He also agrees that God’s knowledge and power far exceed ours. But he does not think of them as greater than ours when it comes to *degree* since he does not think that we and God belong to the same kind in any sense. He also thinks that there is no distinction to be made between God’s knowledge and power and between these and God himself.¹¹ As for divine intervention, this is a notion that (taken literally) makes no sense to Aquinas, not even when he is writing about miracles (in which, of course, he believes). In the ordinary sense of the verb ‘to intervene’, intervention involves *moving into* a context in which one is *absent* to start with. Thus, for example, I might be said to intervene if I note the occurrence of a mugging and then wade in to try to protect the one being mugged. For Aquinas, though, God is always wholly and entirely present to every aspect of every created thing (as making it to be). So he is never absent and able *literally* to intervene in the created order. For Aquinas, a miracle is not a case of God *entering* into a situation from which he is first of all *absent* or with respect to which he is an *observer*. For Aquinas, a miracle is an act of the ever present God bringing something about which cannot be brought about by any created agent. For Aquinas, miracles consist not in the *additional* (intervening) presence of God but rather in the *absence* of certain created causes.¹² And Aquinas thinks this because of the way in which he approaches the notion of God as Creator.

In short, much of the ridicule poured on belief in God by the new atheists is one that can be taken on board by someone who believes in God. Unaware of it though they seem to be, in some of their

¹¹ This is not to say that Aquinas thinks that different adjectives used when talking about God are synonymous, as you can see from *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 13, 4.

¹² Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3, Chapters 101 and 102.

critiques of belief in God (or on forms that this has taken), the new atheists can actually claim support from some serious theologians (Aquinas being a notable example).

VI

And that, I think, is about the best brief defense I can offer when it comes to authors like Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett. From now on my comments on them shall, I am sorry to say, be negative. First, I shall argue that the fact that religious believers can be rightly accused of acting or teaching badly does nothing to show that God does not exist. Second, I shall argue that the New Atheist's reliance on evolution does nothing to show that God does not exist. Generally, I shall be arguing that the New Atheists are attacking belief in God while paying no serious attention to the history of Christian thinking. From this point on I shall have little to say about Islam and Judaism.

VII

To start with, then, that religious people have acted in ways that we might take to be morally wrong is evidently true. An obvious response to this point would be to note how much good has been done by religious believers, since it seems hard to deny that religious believers, acting precisely on their religious beliefs, have often, and very often, done a great deal of good. Even if we set aside this important fact, however, why should it be thought that the bad behavior of religious believers casts doubt on God's existence?

The bad behavior of religious believers surely does nothing to disprove the existence of God any more than the bad behavior of children disproves the existence of good teachers who have tried to teach them well. And, so I might add, New Atheism has here forgotten the fact that Christians (like Jews and Muslims) have a notion called 'sin'. I mean that the acknowledgment of bad religious people is part of the Christian creed and, therefore, not an argument against it.

One might think that, given the disappearance of religion, everyone shall be good and blameless. Obviously, though, that is hardly likely. Whether or not you want you use the word 'sin', you can hardly deny that most of us are pretty bad on the moral front. I would wager that even Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett have much to regret about themselves morally speaking. I would also wager that none of them take their moral failures to disprove the existence of anything (let alone God). So I see no reason to suppose that their allusions to awful things done, said, or accepted by Christians, Jews, or Muslims do anything to prove the non-existence of God.

I have already agreed that both the Old and the New Testaments contain passages which might give us reason for concern. Here, though, I would suggest that we should read them in their historical context and should not jump on them as immediately proving the non-existence of God. There are, of course, fundamentalist Christians who have wanted to stick literally to, and to approve of, everything that they take themselves to read in what they take to be their inspired texts. This, however, has not been the case with many other Christians. Aquinas, for example, did not think that God ever walked in the Garden of Eden (as we read in Genesis 3). Catholics, of course, speak of the Bible and Tradition as sources of revelation, and they are typically happy to agree that right theistic thinking is something that has developed over time. So they do not, for example, ask us to take the nasty behavior of God as recorded in some Old Testament texts as something which represents the last word on what God is all about.

The New Atheists do not seem to understand this point. They seem to equate belief in God with an extreme form of Biblical fundamentalism, which, I think, they should not. Here I am reminded of what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has to say, specifically this remark: 'In Sacred Scripture, God speaks to man in a human way . . . In order to discover *the sacred author's intention*, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current'.¹³ The *Catechism* even goes on to accept that the Old Testament 'contains matters imperfect and provisional'.¹⁴ All of this is a far cry from the way in which various New Atheists seem to think that Christians approach the Bible. I do not deny that what I have just quoted from the *Catechism* raises questions. But it is, at least, subtle in a way that New Atheists do not seem to be when it comes to the Bible. New Atheists seem to write as though they are completely unaware of the latest conclusions that biblical scholars have to offer us when it comes to reading the Bible, not, perhaps, surprisingly since their target is Biblical fundamentalism rather than a reasoned reflection on biblical texts given recent biblical scholarship and some serious consideration of this.

VIII

What, now, of evolution? As I have said, New Atheism typically takes the theory of evolution to demolish belief in God. But does it? Well, of course, it all depends on what you take belief in God to be.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), p. 32.

¹⁴ P. 32.

If, like the chief theistic targets of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett, you equate belief in God with creationism, then belief in God does seem ruled out given the notion of evolution (and assuming that evolution is a fact, which, along, for example, with the late Pope John Paul II, I am perfectly happy to do).¹⁵ In other words, I accept the following argument: (i) If creationism holds that we all derive from a pair of people created some thousands of years ago, people from whom we are descended and whom we resemble exactly, then it conflicts with modern theories of evolution; (ii) If belief in God and creationism in the sense just mentioned go together, then belief in God conflicts with modern theories of evolution; So, (iii) given the truth of modern theories of evolution, and given the equation of belief in God and creationism, we have good reason to deny the existence of God.¹⁶

But why equate belief in God with belief in creationism? Or, to put the matter slightly differently, why suppose that the non-existence of God is something provable or refutable *scientifically*? New Atheism typically takes belief in God to be a theory refuted by science. But why suppose anything of the kind?

Whatever creationists might say, the fact is that most Jews, Christians, and Muslims have never thought of belief in God as a scientific hypothesis, whether verifiable or falsifiable. ‘The existence of God’, says Dawkins, ‘is a scientific hypothesis like any other’.¹⁷ Again, though, why consider belief in God to be a scientific hypothesis? My answer to this question is a very traditional one, one that you can find spelled out in great detail by writers like Aquinas,

¹⁵ Here I would note that the Catholic Church has never formally denigrated belief in evolution. I would also note that in an address to the Pontifical Academy of sciences, the late John Paul II said: ‘Today, more than a half-century after the appearance of the encyclical *Humani Generis*, some new findings lead us toward the recognition of evolution as more than a hypothesis. In fact it is remarkable that this theory has had progressively greater influence on the spirit of researchers, following a series of discoveries in different scholarly disciplines. The convergence in the results of these independent studies—which was neither planned nor sought—constitutes in itself a significant argument in favor of the theory.’ Here is the text of these comments in the original French in which they were delivered: ‘Aujourd’hui, près d’un demi-siècle après la parution de l’encyclique, de nouvelles connaissances conduisent à reconnaître dans la théorie de l’évolution plus qu’une hypothèse. Il est en effet remarquable que cette théorie se soit progressivement imposée à l’esprit des chercheurs, à la suite d’une série de découvertes faites dans diverses disciplines du savoir. La convergence, nullement recherchée ou provoquée, des résultats de travaux menés indépendamment les uns des autres, constitue par elle-même un argument significatif en faveur de cette théorie’.

¹⁶ This I take to be a central point made by Michael Ruse in his *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000). Ruse’s book, I should add, is one that anyone interested in the New Atheism discussions should read since it is both scientifically informed and well aware of the history of Christian theology.

¹⁷ Cf. Dawkins, p. 72. Cf. Dawkins, p. 82: ‘A universe with a supernaturally intelligent creator is a very different universe from one without... The presence or absence of a creative-super intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question’.

though it can be expressed in a single sentence: Belief in God is not a scientific hypothesis because God is what accounts for the universe as a whole and for that with respect to which we devise scientific hypotheses.¹⁸

Mesmerized, it seems, by creationism and various forms of religious fundamentalism, New Atheism seems not to have paid attention to what has traditionally been meant by the notion of God as Creator. By ‘traditionally’ here I mean what you can find in writers like St Augustine of Hippo, St Anselm of Canterbury, St Thomas Aquinas, and many other authors.¹⁹ It is also what you can find in the texts of numerous councils of the Church and (to bring things right up to date), the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. With authors and texts like these in mind, let me simply list what belief in God as Creator has traditionally amounted to. Thus:

1. To say that God is the Creator is first and foremost to say that he makes everything non-divine to exist for as long as it exists.
2. God creates by making things to be *ex nihilo* (‘from nothing’). This does not mean that there is some peculiar stuff called ‘nothing’ out of which God fashions things. It means that while cooks, for example, have to use pastry in order to make pies, God makes things to be (and continue to be) without working on any pre-existing material. His ‘characteristic effect’, as we might call it, is existence, *period* (not a particular way in which some things happen to be).
3. God’s act of creating is not simply to be identified with an event in the past (the coming into being of the universe when it began, and if it began). It is something going on as long as creatures exist. Traditionally speaking, therefore, you and I are now *being created* by God. We owe our being to him from second to second.
4. Considered as Creator, God is not an item in the universe. He is what makes all items in the universe to exist for as long as

¹⁸ Here I entirely agree with Eagleton, who observes: ‘Dawkins falsely considers that Christianity offers a rival view of the universe to science. Like the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett in *Breaking the Spell*, he thinks it is a kind of bogus theory or pseudo-explanation of the world. In this sense, he is rather like someone who thinks that a novel is a botched piece of sociology, and who therefore can’t see the point of it at all. Why bother with Robert Musil when you can read Max Weber... Christianity was never meant to be an *explanation* of anything in the first place. It is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov... God for Christian theology is not a mega-manufacturer. He is rather what sustains all things in being by his love, and would still be this even if the world had no beginning’ (*Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, pp. 6–7).

¹⁹ On p. 68 of *God is Not Great* Hitchens declares: ‘The scholastic obsessives of the Middle Ages were doing the best they could on the basis of hopelessly limited information, ever present fear of death and judgement, very low life expectancy, and an audience of illiterates’. I cannot think of any contemporary expert on medieval thinking who would regard this remark with anything but well-deserved scorn.

they exist. So he is not, and cannot possibly be, an object of scientific investigation. He is what allows or empowers scientific investigation to take place. So science can neither prove nor disprove God's existence. The existence of God is not a scientific hypothesis.

As we have seen, Dawkins thinks that it must be. And Hitchens says that 'thanks to the telescope and the microscope, [religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important'.²⁰ Yet for people like Aquinas, for centuries of theologians comparable to him, and for most serious theologians today, theism does not claim to offer anything like what Hitchens seems to mean by 'an explanation'. I take an explanation to be something that we understand better than what we invoke it to explain. Yet traditional belief in God takes God to be radically incomprehensible. According to Aquinas, we do not know what God is.²¹ According to St Anselm, God is not only that than which nothing greater can be conceived. He is also greater than anything we can conceive. 'I would', says Anselm, 'be surprised if we could find anything from among the nouns and verbs which we apply to things created from nothing that could worthily be said of the substance that created all'.²²

Bearing in mind teachings like these, it is obviously the case that people like Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett are simply not engaging with what I am now calling traditional belief in God. They are talking past it. I do not want to deny that they make some very good hits on some of the targets at which they aim. What I do suggest, however, is that they have seriously failed to engage with what belief in God has meant for many people for many centuries and that they, therefore, have no right to declare as polemically as they do that there is no God, or that we should strive to produce a society in which God is deemed to be on the level of the tooth fairy or Santa Clause. I have already said that the New Atheists typically make little reference to the history of theology. What I have just been observing is intended to back up that remark while stressing the point that there cannot be any quarrel between science and belief in the existence of God. 'Science and theology are for the most part not talking about the same kind of things, any more than orthodontics and literary criticism are'.²³ Science, we might say, is not concerned with the question 'Why is

²⁰ Cf. Hitchens, p. 282. Hitchens's comment here strikes as comparable to that of Nikita Khrushchev when saying that God does not exist since cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin flew into space but did not see God.

²¹ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 3.

²² *Monologion*, 15. I quote from p. 26 of Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (ed.), *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²³ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, p. 10.

there something rather than nothing?’ Yet traditional theology (and not only in its Christian form) takes this question very seriously, which is why people like Aquinas insist on the fact that God creates *ex nihilo* (from nothing).²⁴

IX

At this point, of course, you may be asking yourselves whether (and abstracting from matters of revelation or the teaching of the Catholic Church) there is any good reason to believe in the existence of God in what I am calling the traditional sense.

Dawkins and Dennett refer to what they claim to be some standard arguments for believing that God exists, and they rightly reject them.

Here is one argument ascribed to Aquinas by Dawkins: ‘Nothing is caused by itself. Every effect has a prior cause . . . [so] . . . we are pushed back into regress. This has to be terminated by a first cause, which we call God’. And here is another argument cited by Dawkins: ‘There must have been a time when no physical things existed. But, since physical things exist now, there must have been something non-physical to bring them into existence, and that something we call God’.²⁵

Dawkins rejects these arguments since they ‘rely upon the idea of a regress and invoke God to terminate it’.²⁶ He goes on to observe: ‘They make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress’. And what Dawkins says here seems to me to be correct. Given a series of causes in the world (and Dawkins is clearly thinking of such a series), we have, so far as I can see, no compelling philosophical reason to suppose that it has to terminate in a first cause. But, let me note, Aquinas, for one, never assumed otherwise. He was perfectly prepared to suppose that a presently existing cause in the world might have derived from a series of past causes with no first member in the world. In arguing philosophically for God’s existence, Aquinas is never concerned with a series of causes in the past, one of which is uncaused. In the sense in which Dawkins objects to God being immune to regress, Aquinas would agree with him. Though, I might add, Aquinas never says that ‘there must have

²⁴ This point is well stressed by Denys Turner in ‘How to be an Atheist’, *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 83, No. 977/978, July/August 2002. See especially p. 327: ‘When you ask of the world “How come that anything at all exists?” you are not asking an as yet unsolved question of empirical fact, because you are not asking any sort of empirical question . . . When you ask that question you are merely giving expression to something you know about the world: it is a state of affairs which might not have been, that’s the sort of world we have: that it exists at all has been *brought about*’.

²⁵ Cf. Dawkins, pp. 100–101.

²⁶ Cf. Dawkins, p. 101.

been a time when no physical things existed'. Aquinas thinks that time exists only insofar as physical things exist. He (rightly in my view) takes time to be what we measure by clocks (the changes of physical objects), just as he takes space to be what we measure by tape measures (the dimensions of physical objects). So, for Aquinas, as Dawkins seems unaware, the notion of time without physical objects is a nonsensical one (this being one of his reasons for denying that God, being incorporeal, is an inhabitant of time and space, a part of the universe, so to speak).²⁷

In Chapter 8 of *Breaking the Spell* Daniel Dennett also turns to arguments for God's existence and finds none of them convincing. One of the arguments noted by Dennett closely resembles what I have just quoted from Dawkins. It goes: 'Since everything must have a cause the universe must have a cause'.²⁸ Dennett calls this 'The Cosmological Argument'. Then he briefly notes how people have challenged it and quickly concludes by saying: 'Unless you have a taste for mathematics and theoretical physics on the one hand, or the niceties of scholastic logic on the other, you are not apt to find any of this compelling'.²⁹ Why Dennett thinks that he has done some useful philosophy in passing from his statement of his 'Cosmological Argument' to his concluding remarks on it baffles me. However, though, let me agree with him in rejecting the claim that 'Since everything that exists must have a cause, the universe must have a cause'. As an argument for the existence of God this is obviously misguided since no traditional theists think that God has a cause and, therefore, do not believe that everything that exists must have a cause. Unless, of course, what they mean is that the universe as a whole (and not any-thing in it) has a cause which makes it to be. For this conclusion there is a good argument, though not one ever mentioned by Dawkins, Hitchens or Dennett. You can find it in the writings of (among others) Aquinas, whom I am now, in my own way, going to summarize on the matter.

I have a cat called Smokey. You can, course, assume that Aquinas knew nothing of Smokey, but we can forget about that for now.

Is it reasonable to ask 'How come Smokey exists?' Surely it is. And I can give you one answer to this question. Smokey exists because of his parent cats. And these cats came to exist because of their parent cats. And so on.

Now let us broaden our question and ask 'How come that there are any cats at all?' Is that a reasonable question? Surely it is. But

²⁷ In Chapter 3 of *The God Delusion* Dawkins lists and rejects other arguments for belief in God. I agree with much that he says about them, but, for my present purposes, I can pass over them in silence at this point.

²⁸ Cf. Dennett, p. 242.

²⁹ Cf. Dennett, p. 242.

its answer will not refer us to any particular cats. I take it that cats exist because of conditions giving rise to them and sustaining them in being: the world as favoring the coming to be and continuing to be of cats.

So let us now consider this world (the planet earth). Is it reasonable to ask how this came to be and continues to be? Surely it is. As I think no scientist would deny, our planet came to be and continues to be because of what we might broadly call its favoring by what exists in the universe as a whole, and by the laws which govern its workings.

So we can move from Smokey to the universe as a whole. Some people think that the universe is finite (that it has limits of some kind); others do not (they would call it infinite and deny that it is limited, in size, say). For present purposes, though, let us forget about that disagreement (which may never be resolved). Instead, let us ask 'How come the universe at all?' Is that a reasonable question? I think that it is. The universe, after all, is nothing but the sum of its parts, each of them being individual entities, just like Smokey. So if we can reasonably ask 'How come Smokey?', which is clearly a causal question, why should we not ask 'How come the universe?', which is another causal question, though a peculiar one, to be sure.

Bertrand Russell once said 'The universe is just there, and that's all'.³⁰ What we might call the 'sheer existence of the universe' raised no question in Russell's mind. A somewhat more famous philosopher than Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, seemed to take a different line. In his words: 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists'.³¹ Unlike Russell, Wittgenstein seems to have thought that the mere existence of the universe is something about which to wonder.

This is exactly Aquinas's line, and I think that he is right in pressing it. For him, the universe (whether limited or unlimited spatially or temporally) consists of individuals which do not have to exist (otherwise they would always have existed). In his view, therefore, there is nothing necessary about the existence of the universe (considered as the sum of its parts). Or, as Aquinas would more technically put it, it does not belong to the essence of the universe, or of anything in it at any time, that it should exist. So he argues that the existence of the universe, and of everything in it at all times, calls for a cause the essence of which is to exist. This cause he calls 'God' (because he is aware of this word as the biblical one used to refer to the 'Maker of Heaven and Earth').

³⁰ Cf. 'A Debate on the Existence of God', reprinted in John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 167–91.

³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 73.

Unlike New Atheism, Aquinas, with whom I am obviously agreeing, does not think of belief in God as belief in a scientific hypothesis.³² For Aquinas, God is why the universe, science, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett exist from second to second. Unlike Smokey, whose causal range is limited, God's causal range extends to the making to be of everything other than himself (everything the existence of which does not involve a logical contradiction, anyway). To repeat a phrase I used earlier, God is the cause of the sheer existence of everything that we can think of as part of the universe, as what makes it to be for as long as it exists. Naturally, therefore, Aquinas thinks that God is deeply mysterious to us. Not being part of the world in which we classify things and start to research on them scientifically, God, says Aquinas, transcends the world of space and time and cannot be classified scientifically. Dennett at one point complains that some theologians try to make God as unlike a human person as possible. He says: 'The fundamental incomprehensibility of God is insisted upon [by some] as a central tenet of faith'.³³ He then goes on to criticize this insistence while, elsewhere in his book, saying that belief in God must be judged by a fundamentalist and literal reading of the Old Testament in which God is depicted in human terms.³⁴ On this front, Dennett seems to me to betray a deep ignorance of the history of Christian theology while setting up a straw man the existence of which to deny. Dawkins is comparable with Dennett on this front. In *God is not Great* Hitchens does not even bother with traditional arguments for the existence of God. Instead, he seems to content himself mostly by abusing religion in the amusing way in which the famous American comedian George Carlin did.

There is a lot more to be said about the New Atheism. In short, however, my chief impression, which I have tried to convey to you, is that the New Atheists are not much interested in debating issues in the philosophy of religion with detailed interaction with what many theistic philosophers and theologians have argued through the centuries (Aquinas being a key example). The New Atheists might reply that they need not worry about this point since they are targeting what belief in God means to a majority of people today who claim to profess it. And here I have sympathy with them since I suspect that a huge number of people who claim to believe in God today believe things about God that Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett condemn with good reason. This admission, however, does not commit me to thinking that theism is dead in the water. It does not commit anyone to that conclusion since, I have suggested, there is more to theism than

³² I am not, of course, denying that some theists think of belief in God in these terms.

³³ Cf Dennett, p. 220.

³⁴ Cf Dennett, pp. 206–207.

one might think from a reading of authors such as Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens. This verdict needs much more argument in its defense than I have had time to offer in this lecture. But I now need to draw to a close.

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