Hahn & Wiker: Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God

Reviewed by Mike Sullivan

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THE THREAT OF THE NEW ATHEISM

Scott Hahn & Benjamin Wiker: *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God*, Emmaus Road Publishing

Is it time to crack down on religion?

After all, religion is responsible for all the trouble in the world, isn't it? The September 11 attacks were in the name of religion. Galileo was silenced in the name of religion. Everywhere you look in the world, you see riots, and massacres, and wars—all in the name of religion. It's not just one religion, either—it's all religions.

Religion is at the root of every problem in the world. It's time we got rid of religion.

Now, if all that seems like a shallow argument to you, it's probably because you spent half a minute thinking about it. Many of the conflicts in the world today are religious, that's true. But it wasn't too long ago that the great danger facing the world was institutional atheism. Half the world was officially Communist and anti-religious. We can imagine that religion is the root of all evil only if we forget Stalin and Mao and Pol Pot.

Nevertheless, some of the brightest minds in the English-speaking world right now argue that religion is the problem. And we know they're the brightest minds because they keep

telling us they are.

Atheism is certainly nothing new. Long before the time of Christ, the ancient Athenians were charging inconvenient philosophers with “atheism.” So there was a word for people who didn’t believe in any gods—the same word we use today, in fact.

We hear charges of “atheism” at least as far back as the 6th century B.C. Plato talks about people who say that the universe arose “not through intelligence…nor through some god, nor through art, but…by nature and chance.” Plato’s own teacher Socrates was accused of atheism, although the Socrates who appears in Plato’s dialogues is far from an atheist.

Most of the ancient philosophers whose works have survived are not explicitly atheist, but some are close. Epicurus and Lucretius, for example, allowed for gods in their system, but not gods who cared at all about humanity. The universe was created by random collisions of atoms, not by an almighty Creator. Whatever gods there might be were indifferent to what we did.

These ancient atheists grew out of a pagan culture, so if they were rebels, they were naturally rebelling against the colorful stories of pagan mythology. The Middle Ages didn’t have time for atheist philosophy, so atheism died with the ancients.

Modern atheism arose about five hundred years ago in the midst of a Christian culture, and hence defined itself by an explicit rejection of Christianity. Some religious philosophers, like the Deists, rejected the Triune God of Christian doctrine, but accepted that there was a God. But there were others—pure atheists—who completely rejected belief in any deity at all. Both groups rejected and rebelled against Christianity.

The French Revolution showed what atheism is capable of when

it combined theory with unchecked power. Bishops and priests were executed, religious rounded up, churches desecrated, all in the name of liberating the people from tyranny. Never mind that the people themselves were tenaciously religious. The people must be liberated in spite of themselves.

In the 1800s, Karl Marx and other thinkers systematized this anti-religious hostility. When the followers of Marx gained power in Russia, they were even more ruthless than the French revolutionaries in their suppression of religion. Similar horrors followed dogmatic Communism wherever it came to power.

But most of the English-speaking world was spared this excessive institutional atheism. The United States, in particular, has always zealously guarded the freedom of anyone to practice any religion that does not seriously interfere with public order.

That's why we're so surprised and baffled by what we call the New Atheism. For the first time in our relatively tranquil history, we're facing a determined attempt not just to keep organized religion out of government (which most religious Americans agree is a good idea), but to suppress religion completely.

Led by the Four Horsemen, as they like to call themselves—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett—these New Atheists argue that religion, is simply delusion and at the root of all our problems. They have websites and well-orchestrated media events, and collectively they sell millions of books. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* has been on the bestseller list since its release in 2006.

The New Atheists are positively evangelical. They want to make a convert out of you, although if you're a "dyed-in-the-wool faith-head" they'll settle for peppering you with insults and sarcasm instead.

But if atheists have always been with us, why are we worrying

now? After all, the Church has engaged non-believers for over two thousand years.

What we call the “New Atheism” is a bit different than its predecessor. It’s more aggressive, and it has more power. The leaders of the sect are well placed in the academic world, and they have a strong determination to mold government policy.

And you wouldn’t like the government if the New Atheists molded its policy. Richard Dawkins has asserted that teaching your religion to your child is a form of child abuse and should be criminalized. Other New Atheists have argued that churches should have to post a sign reading “for entertainment purposes only,” since after all they’re no less a fraud than telephone psychics.

The New Atheists see religion as a disease to be exterminated. Their dream, in short, is not a government neutral to religion, but a government actively hostile to religion.

What is most worrying is that the New Atheists seem to gain the most followers precisely among the most ambitious and intelligent young people—the people who will be actively shaping government policy in the years to come. Attracted by the intellectual rebelliousness of the movement, young people fall for its insidious message: join us and you can be one of the *smart* people.

How do we counter the New Atheists where they’re doing the most damage?

First, we need to be polite. That’s all the more important when our opponents descend to the level of playground taunts. If a New Atheist joins our discussion, we need to be welcoming, not hostile. We need to act like Christians, which is all the harder when our opponents have no such limitations. But we must remember that, with truth there is strength. We Christians don’t need to resort to playground taunts, cheap shots, or to hostile defensiveness. We have the truth and we

are called to share it.

Once we've determined to be polite, we need to answer reasoned arguments with reason. There's a real need for good resources to counter the atheists' favorite arguments. Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker have blazed the trail in *Answering the New Atheism*, in which they counter Richard Dawkins' surprisingly feeble arguments in *The God Delusion*.

This is a good way to start. Hahn and Wiker are never afraid to meet Dawkins head-on. They take his favorite arguments and show us where the holes are, meeting reason with reason. The New Atheists thrive on the impression that religion and reason are antithetical; we should never give them that ground. We need to demonstrate to the undecided that reason is on religion's side.

We should also realize that, in many things, the aggressive atheists are on our side. We, the reasonable Christians who value freedom and stand up for the oppressed, should be their natural allies. They see the rabid fundamentalism that infects so much of the world with endless violence, and they deplore it. We deplore it, too. They see the poor oppressed by the rich, and they demand justice. We demand justice, too.

In many areas, our fight is not against the atheists, but against the mistaken perceptions of Christianity they promote. The evangelical atheists assume that religion must inevitably breed mindless fanaticism. Countering that image means not just answering the atheists' arguments against God, but also correcting their false impressions of religion.

People who are most attracted to the New Atheism are likely to be people who think of themselves as good and reasonable. They genuinely care about people as human beings. When they see suffering, they want to help. If they think religion is the cause of the suffering, they turn against religion. And, after all, if they see Christians beating up Muslims, Muslims

beating up Hindus, Hindus beating up Christians—well, what are they supposed to think? If they don't know anything about our religion, then that's what they think our religion is about.

But whose fault is it if they don't know anything about our religion? True, they haven't bothered to find out about it. But it's just as true that we too often haven't bothered to tell anyone about it.

Is the New Atheism a danger to the Church? Yes, it is. By substituting secularity with secularism—neutrality toward religion with hostility toward religion—New Atheists can make the world difficult for Christians to live in.

But the real danger is not from the fanatical atheists themselves, but from our own indifference. If we don't make the effort to reach out to the people who are most ambitious, who are most intelligent, who care most about the shape of the world around them, then we deserve the punishment in Christ's parable of the worthless servant (Matthew 25:14-30). What little we have should be taken away and given to someone who will make something of it.

We need to confront the New Atheism on its own turf, candidly admitting where we agree with the atheists, and explaining our differences patiently and reasonably. But beyond the argument of words, there is another, even better argument.

The Christian life has always been the most compelling argument for Christianity. Living like a Christian—loving our enemies and letting everyone see our joy in the truth—is the most convincing way of spreading the Gospel. When we face the New Atheists, we should look like Christians: not shouting, angry fanatics, but charitable, intelligent people who are willing to listen as well as to make pronouncements.

We have the power to guide what the people around us think about religion. What we say is important, but what we do is even more important. Even when right reason doesn't prevail,

living the Christian life will win the argument.

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