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ATHEISM'S  
NEW  
CLOTHES

EXPLORING AND EXPOSING THE  
CLAIMS OF THE NEW ATHEISTS

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## 1. A NEW KIND OF ATHEISM

### **A new Enlightenment**

‘We are in need of a renewed Enlightenment’ writes Christopher Hitchens in the final chapter of his bestselling book *God Is Not Great*.<sup>1</sup> In his closing sentence he states, ‘To clear the mind for this project, it has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it.’<sup>2</sup> The enemy is religion, which, he tells us, ‘poisons everything’.<sup>3</sup> We can be grateful that he is not calling on his fellow atheists to take up arms, but to participate in an intellectual and cultural project to marginalize religious belief. Why the antagonism towards religion? The rest of his final chapter identifies at least two main answers to this question. First, religion is dangerous. While discussing the aspirations of President Ahmadinejad for Iran to become a nuclear power, Hitchens comments, ‘This puts the confrontation between faith and civilization on a whole new footing,’<sup>4</sup> and he then goes on to discuss the role of religion in the terrible atrocities of 9/11. The second answer is that religious belief is no longer tenable in the light of modern science. He expresses this point as follows: ‘Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important.’<sup>5</sup> How exactly this is supposed to follow from the existence of the telescope and microscope is not immediately obvious, but throughout the closing chapter and in the rest of his book Hitchens is adamant that there is a conflict

between science and religion, a conflict with only one winner. Indeed, science has such a central role to play in the new Enlightenment that it almost seems to take the place of religion since it 'offers the promise of near-miraculous advances in healing, in energy, and in the peaceful exchange between different cultures'.<sup>6</sup>

Hitchens's closing chapter provides a summary not only of his own book, which was published in 2007, but also a fairly accurate summary of books published by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris in the preceding few years.<sup>7</sup> In addition to their content, other factors linking these books are their enormous success in terms of sales and their impact in promoting debate about the existence of God and the place of religion in the modern world. As well as formal debates, there have been many reviews in magazines and journals, a substantial number of book-length responses, numerous TV and radio interviews, and seemingly endless online discussions about their ideas. Their provocative claims about belief in God are such that readers tend to fall into one of two categories, enthusiastic supporters or ardent opponents, with very few lying anywhere in between. In fact, the distinctive nature of the atheism on offer is such that it has become known as the 'New Atheism'.<sup>8</sup> Although other atheistic writers such as Victor Stenger and Michel Onfray could also be described as New Atheists, there is little doubt that Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens are the leading figures in this movement and so the focus here will be on their recent books on religion.<sup>9</sup>

But what exactly is so distinctive about the New Atheism? And why has it been so successful? What are its goals, tactics and main arguments? What have the critics had to say? And, given that there have been so many responses to the New Atheists, what is the aim of this particular book? These questions provide the focus for the rest of this chapter.

### **What is the New Atheism?**

There are a number of prominent themes in the writings of the New Atheists. Of course, there are differences as well as similarities between them and so not every point mentioned here will be found in all of their books, but there are certainly common ideas that are characteristic of the New Atheism in general. One of the most important aspects of the New Atheism is that it promotes a rejection of belief in God on scientific grounds with particular prominence given to Darwinism. This is despite the fact that arguments for and against God's existence lie within the domain of philosophy rather than science. So although scientists are quite entitled to offer arguments for or

against God's existence, it must be recognized that when they do so they are engaging in philosophy, not science.

It must also be emphasized that many leading atheistic thinkers, both past and present, have seen the need to scrutinize the arguments for God's existence in great detail. Not so the New Atheists. They seem to think that this is unnecessary and that by appealing to science they can circumvent this process. There is very little attempt to engage seriously with any recent philosophical work on the topic of God's existence. In fact, they do not even draw on the best arguments by atheistic philosophers, never mind coming to terms with detailed arguments by theistic philosophers. The most detailed discussion of traditional arguments for God's existence is found in chapter 3 of Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, but it is arguably the weakest part of his book, as some of his critics have pointed out.<sup>10</sup>

Daniel Dennett is a philosopher, but even he does not wish to engage in the traditional kinds of debates about God's existence. He writes, 'I decided some time ago that diminishing returns had set in on the arguments about God's existence, and I doubt that any breakthroughs are in the offing, from either side.'<sup>11</sup> Despite this moderate statement, his discussion of the arguments for God's existence is even briefer than Dawkins's and just as dismissive. Admittedly, the focus of Dennett's book lies elsewhere, but it highlights a shortcoming in the New Atheist books, especially in the light of their confident rejection of God's existence. For reasons that will become clear in due course, it seems to me that this is a deliberate strategy on their part.

The problem with their approach of basing their atheism on science rather than philosophy is that whether science leads to atheism, as they claim, is a philosophical question, not a scientific one. And this means that whether their atheism should be taken seriously depends on how good their arguments are. As we shall see in later chapters, there are plenty of reasons to doubt their assertion that science removes the need for God. In fairness to Dawkins, he has gone well beyond the other New Atheists in proposing a new argument against the existence of God. Ironically, it turns out to be essentially an updated version of an argument proposed by the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, and so does not depend on modern science in a significant way. This argument will be considered in detail in chapter 6.

A further way in which the New Atheism is based on science is that it offers a scientific explanation for religious belief. Just as Darwinism is supposed to play a key role in removing the need for God, so it provides the context in which a naturalistic explanation of religious belief is proposed. Both Dawkins and Hitchens include a chapter on the origins of religion, but the main contribution comes from Dennett, whose entire book concentrates on this topic. In

fact, Dennett's book is quite different both in content and style from the other New Atheist books being considered here. Nevertheless, his argument plays an important role in the New Atheism. Dennett does not claim that a scientific explanation of religion disproves the existence of God, but it seems clear that its contribution to the New Atheism is to provide a means of explaining away the need for God to account for religious belief and practice. This topic will be explored in chapter 7.

Another important dimension of the New Atheism is that belief in God is viewed not merely as mistaken, but as irrational and delusional. The reason for such a negative assessment is linked to their rejection of God on scientific grounds. There is no evidence, we are told, for God's existence, and so belief that he exists must be irrational. In fact, they claim that faith, by definition, is irrational since it is belief without evidence. Harris opines:

We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them 'religious'; otherwise, they are likely to be called 'mad', 'psychotic', or 'delusional'.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Dawkins claims that 'God, in the sense defined, is a delusion; and, as later chapters will show, a pernicious delusion.'<sup>13</sup> Given this conviction, it is not too surprising that the New Atheists frequently adopt the tactic of ridiculing religious belief. After all, if no rational person could believe in God, what is the point in engaging in serious debate? Wouldn't ridicule be more appropriate and perhaps more effective?

One of the most obvious examples of the use of ridicule is found in Dawkins's discussion of agnosticism, where he states, 'I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden.'<sup>14</sup> He then approvingly quotes other authors who put God in the same category as the Tooth Fairy, Mother Goose, an invisible, intangible, inaudible unicorn, and the now famous Flying Spaghetti Monster.<sup>15</sup> There are two aspects to this. One is the argument Dawkins is making. The argument is that there is no way of disproving the existence of any of these entities because you cannot prove a negative. But, of course, that does not mean we should be neutral about them; since there is no reason at all for believing that they exist, we should assume that they do not. As an argument against the existence of God this is completely hopeless. Why? Because it simply *assumes* that there is no reason for believing in God, which is precisely what is in dispute in the first place. Of course, Dawkins is entitled to *argue* that there is no reason for believing in God and later in the book he tries to do just that, but in linking God with these other entities he seems to be claiming that it is *obvious* that there is no

reason for believing in God. And this just isn't obvious at all. In fact, it is not obvious to many atheists who take the arguments for believing in God's existence much more seriously than does Dawkins. They reach the conclusion that there is no God, but they don't think this conclusion is obvious.

So much for the argument, but what about the second aspect to this comparison with the Tooth Fairy, and so on? As a way of ridiculing belief in God it is very effective. Once the comparison has been made, especially by intelligent people such as the New Atheists, it tends to stick in the mind. As an argument it might be hopeless, but if it is repeated often enough an association is made that influences how people view the debate. How ridiculous it would be for someone to offer sophisticated reasons for believing in the Tooth Fairy? For anyone who makes the mental association offered by Dawkins, however ill-founded it is, it becomes very easy to dismiss, without consideration, any reasons offered for belief in God. Of course, this applies not just to belief in God, but any kind of belief. If I can get an association between your favoured political party and the Taliban, for example, into your mind, arguments become unnecessary.

Of the points mentioned so far, there is nothing completely new in the writings of the New Atheists. Many atheists such as Bertrand Russell and Jacques Monod have drawn on science to defend their atheism, others such as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx have offered naturalistic explanations for religious belief, and many such as H. L. Mencken have ridiculed religion. So what is new about the New Atheism? And why has it been so successful? No doubt its success is due in part to the readability of their books and perhaps also the extent to which they include the various elements noted, but the political and cultural climate in which they write is almost certainly a key factor.

Consider one of their central themes: that religion is dangerous. As we have already seen, Hitchens draws attention to the events of 9/11 and he has much more to say about the evils of religion, not least in a chapter entitled 'Religion Kills'. On the first page of his book *The God Delusion* Dawkins asks us to imagine a world with no religion, a world with 'no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts',<sup>16</sup> just to mention the first five on his list. He also devotes several chapters to the evils of religion. Harris commences his book *The End of Faith* with a story about a suicide bomber and includes considerable discussion about the dangers of religion, particularly in the form of terrorism. In Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* a key motivation for studying religion scientifically is that such an approach is necessary if we are to make informed political decisions about how to deal with religion in the twenty-first century, especially given the threat from religious terrorism.

The New Atheists are certainly right that religion can play a role in heinous

acts of terrorism and other evils. And, of course, many atheists in the past have pointed to such evils so as to undermine religious belief, but although this approach is certainly present in the New Atheist writings there is a clear political dimension to their books. How are we to deal with terrorism in the early twenty-first century? Given the events since 2001 this is an extremely important question, and the New Atheists provide us with an analysis of the problem as well as a solution: religion is the problem and marginalizing religion is the solution, or at least an important part of it. Harris states the problem as he sees it in the starkest of terms: 'We will see that the greatest problem facing civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself.'<sup>17</sup> He also refers to 'the threat that even "moderate" religious faith, however inadvertently, now poses to our survival'.<sup>18</sup> Dawkins bemoans the fact that in the United States Jews and evangelical Christians exert much more political clout than atheists and agnostics. One of his stated aims in his book is to bolster atheist pride and he hopes that it will help atheists to 'come out', which he thinks would be a good first step towards political influence.<sup>19</sup> This attitude towards religion leads to an intolerance of it. This is especially prevalent in Harris, who states that 'we can no more tolerate a diversity of religious beliefs than a diversity of beliefs about epidemiology and basic hygiene'.<sup>20</sup>

If the cultural and political backdrop is really the key to the success of the New Atheism, then their tactics make sense. A careful and detailed evaluation of reasons for and against belief in God would not help to further this agenda since it would require taking religious belief too seriously and might risk giving it credibility. Pitting science against religion, ridiculing belief in God and emphasizing the most extreme forms of religion, particularly with respect to religious violence, would suit such an agenda much better. If the goal is to bring about the new Enlightenment envisaged by Hitchens, where the influence of religious belief diminishes, it seems that the approach of more moderate atheists is not working. As Harris notes, 'the prospects for eradicating religion in our time do not seem good'.<sup>21</sup>

A more robust form of atheism is called for and that is precisely what is offered by the New Atheism. Nowhere is the contrast between the New Atheism and more moderate atheism seen more clearly than in Dennett and Dawkins's heated dispute with their fellow atheist Michael Ruse on the topic of evolution and Intelligent Design.<sup>22</sup> Ruse is just as opposed to intelligent design as Dennett and Dawkins, but he thinks they make a tactical mistake by linking evolution with atheism and so alienating Christians. Castigating Ruse as an appeaser like Neville Chamberlain, Dawkins makes it clear that the real war is not against Intelligent Design but against religion.



None of this should be taken to imply that the New Atheists do not offer any arguments for their position; they certainly do. Nor can we simply assume that just because they employ ridicule so effectively that their arguments are therefore invalid. We can easily dismiss, for example, the idea that belief in God is obviously mistaken just like belief in the Tooth Fairy, but this still leaves the question as to whether there are good reasons for believing in God or whether the New Atheists have managed to show that there are no such reasons. The goal in this book is to attempt to get behind their rhetoric and assess their underlying claims, but before doing this it is worth looking at some of the criticisms levelled against the New Atheists.

### **The emperor's new clothes**

Given the nature of the New Atheists' attack on religious belief, it is not surprising that they have come in for a lot of criticism. In one of the more irenic books that discusses the New Atheism, professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh David Fergusson writes, 'the rhetoric employed by the new atheists is often as hostile and shrill as those of the most vehement religionists . . . the recent criticism of religion is at times too rabid and disabling of patient and constructive debate'.<sup>23</sup> One of the key criticisms of the New Atheists by John Haught, a professor of theology at Georgetown University, is expressed as follows: 'Their understanding of religious faith remains consistently at the same unscholarly level as the unreflective, superstitious, and literalist religiosity of those they criticize.'<sup>24</sup> In his scathing review of Dawkins's *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books*, Terry Eagleton, professor of English literature at Manchester University, asks us to 'Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the Book of British Birds, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.'<sup>25</sup> Eagleton later describes Dawkins as 'theologically illiterate'. Philosophy professor Michael Ruse from Florida State University, who as we have seen is an atheist, condemns the New Atheists in the strongest of terms:

But I think first that these people do a disservice to scholarship. Their treatment of the religious viewpoint is pathetic to the point of non-being. Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* would fail any introductory philosophy or religion course. Proudly he criticizes that whereof he knows nothing. As I have said elsewhere, for the first time in my life, I felt sorry for the ontological argument. If we criticized gene theory with as little knowledge as Dawkins has of religion and philosophy, he would be rightly indignant. . . . Conversely, I am indignant at the poor quality of the argumentation in

Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, and all of the others in that group. . . . I have written elsewhere that *The God Delusion* makes me ashamed to be an atheist. Let me say that again. Let me say also that I am proud to be the focus of the invective of the new atheists. They are a bloody disaster and I want to be on the front line of those who say so.<sup>26</sup>

Mathematician John Lennox, who like Dawkins is a professor at Oxford University and has debated him on several occasions, is particularly critical of Dawkins's view of faith as belief without evidence:

Dawkins' idiosyncratic definition of faith thus provides a striking example of the very kind of thinking he claims to abhor – thinking that is not evidence based. For, in an exhibition of breathtaking inconsistency, evidence is the very thing he fails to supply for his claim that independence of evidence is faith's joy.<sup>27</sup>

As we shall see in chapter 2, Dawkins is not the only New Atheist who holds this definition of faith.

It is worth noting that the authors quoted above are not merely drawing attention to the ridicule and mockery in the writings of the New Atheists, but to their lack of understanding of the very subject they are criticizing and their poor scholarship in general. Perhaps worst of all is the charge that their approach is just like the extreme forms of religion of which they are so critical.

One response made by Dawkins is that you do not need to study up on leprechology in order to disbelieve in leprechauns.<sup>28</sup> A similar response, which has gained a lot of popularity in New Atheist circles, is due to P. Z. Myers, a professor of biology at the University of Minnesota and author of the popular atheist blog Pharyngula. It is known as the Courtier's Reply and is intended to follow on at the end of the fable of the emperor's new clothes. Theology is the emperor, Dawkins the little boy and theologians the courtiers. It is quoted in part below:

I have considered the impudent accusations of Mr Dawkins with exasperation at his lack of serious scholarship. He has apparently not read the detailed discourses of Count Roderigo of Seville on the exquisite and exotic leathers of the Emperor's boots, nor does he give a moment's consideration to Bellini's masterwork, *On the Luminescence of the Emperor's Feathered Hat*. We have entire schools dedicated to writing learned treatises on the beauty of the Emperor's raiment, and every major newspaper runs a section dedicated to imperial fashion; Dawkins cavalierly dismisses them all. . . . Dawkins arrogantly ignores all these deep philosophical ponderings to crudely

accuse the Emperor of nudity. . . . Until Dawkins has trained in the shops of Paris and Milan, until he has learned to tell the difference between a ruffled flounce and a puffy pantaloons, we should all pretend he has not spoken out against the Emperor's taste.<sup>29</sup>

This is wonderful as a piece of rhetoric, but will it really do as a response? Can it be used to excuse the New Atheists' lack of knowledge of theology and their inadequate engagement with arguments for the existence of God? In an article that criticizes Dawkins's argument that God almost certainly does not exist, but defends an atheistic position, philosopher Erik Wielenberg states why he is not impressed with the Courtier's Reply. He writes:

I do not know exactly how much theology one needs to know to disprove the existence of God, but one needs to know at least enough theology to understand the various widely-held conceptions of God. In general, in order to argue effectively against a given hypothesis, one needs to know enough to characterize that hypothesis accurately. Furthermore, if one intends to disprove God's existence, it is hardly reasonable to dismiss criticisms of one's putative disproof on the grounds that God doesn't exist anyway.<sup>30</sup>

Essentially, the idea behind the Courtier's Reply is that it is *obvious* (or should be to any rational person) that there is no basis for belief in God, just as it is obvious that the emperor has no clothes. But as we saw earlier in the context of Dawkins's references to the Tooth Fairy, it is not at all obvious that there is no basis for belief in God. And even if the New Atheists think otherwise, they cannot sensibly base their arguments on such an idea on pain of circularity.

As the title of this book suggests, my contention is that the situation is almost precisely the opposite of that which Myers describes. It is the New Atheism that is the emperor. The various critics, both theists and atheists, represent the little boy who points out that the emperor has no clothes. But what is the emperor to do? The ending of the original version provides the answer: 'But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.'<sup>31</sup> Despite numerous criticisms of their arguments, there does not seem to be any recognition among the New Atheists or their followers that their arguments do not work. Admitting this would not necessarily mean conceding that atheism is false – there are plenty of atheists who do not subscribe to the New Atheism – but it isn't just about winning arguments. The New Atheism is a programme to marginalize religion and so the procession must continue, with the New Atheists walking 'more proudly than ever'.

There are a couple of key differences between Myers's version and mine. Unlike Myers I am not claiming that it is *obvious* the New Atheists' arguments are unsuccessful. It is necessary to understand their arguments properly and the objections to them before it becomes clear that this is the case. And since the New Atheism continues to find much support, those of us who think it is unsuccessful need to keep trying to show just where it goes wrong. Another difference is that Myers's view seems to presuppose that *all* versions of theism are obviously without rational basis, whereas my focus is primarily on the New Atheism rather than atheism in general.

### The New Theism

When reading the New Atheists it would be easy to get the impression that there is no rational basis for belief in God's existence. They seem to think that science, particularly Darwinism, made God unnecessary a long time ago. And as science has progressed, belief in God has become increasingly untenable. According to Hitchens, belief in God belongs to a long past era when people lived in 'abysmal ignorance and fear'.<sup>32</sup> He claims that we shall 'never again have to confront the impressive faith of an Aquinas or a Maimonides' because 'Faith of that sort – the sort that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason – is now plainly impossible.'<sup>33</sup> If anyone is to believe in God these days, it could only be on the basis of a blind faith because we should be able to see the traditional reasons for believing in God 'as the feeble-minded inventions that they are'.<sup>34</sup>

Had the New Atheists been writing in the 1950s or 1960s, this mindset would have been understandable because at that time atheism was dominant in academia, especially in philosophical circles. But then in the late 1960s and 1970s things began to change. Christian philosophers showed that many of the reasons given for rejecting belief in God weren't nearly as persuasive as many atheists had assumed. Some, such as Alvin Plantinga, argued that just because God's existence could not be proved logically to the satisfaction of atheists, this did not mean it was irrational to believe in God. He also presented detailed arguments to show that the problem of evil did not disprove God's existence as many had thought.

Around the same time many arguments for God's existence started to make a comeback through the work of people like Richard Swinburne, who has written extensively on the subject. Swinburne's approach has not been to try to prove with certainty that God exists, but instead to show that on the basis of a whole range of features of the universe the cumulative case for

God's existence is strong. William Lane Craig is another leading figure who has presented various reasons for belief in God, most notably, an argument based on the universe having had a beginning. Many other philosophers have also been involved in making a case for the rationality of belief in God and Christian belief as well. These include William Alston, Robin Collins, Stephen Evans, John Hare, J. P. Moreland and Nicholas Wolterstorff, to name just a few.<sup>35</sup>

Developments in science also helped the case for theism. The evidence that the universe is expanding, which in turn provided evidence that the universe had a beginning in the big bang, presented a real problem for many atheistic scientists. Scientists also discovered that there are many features of the universe having just the right values for life to exist and such that, if any of them were slightly different, life would be impossible. This *fine-tuning* of the universe has given great impetus to design arguments.

This does not mean that theism has become dominant either amongst philosophers or scientists. It has not. But these developments have given rise to an environment where belief in God is a viewpoint that is taken very seriously and this is because there is a strong rational and evidential basis for belief in God. The New Atheists completely ignore these developments in philosophy and fail to do justice to the scientific issues. Of the philosophers mentioned above only two even get a mention in the books by the New Atheists: Plantinga in two footnotes by Dennett, and Swinburne is discussed briefly by Dawkins, who completely fails to do justice to Swinburne's arguments.

One important aspect of this book will be to draw on some of the developments in what might be called the New Theism in order to respond to the New Atheism.

## **A look ahead**

The goal of this book is to defend Christian theism and not religious belief in general. It would obviously be utter folly to defend any and every kind of religious belief and practice, just as it would be utter folly to defend any and every kind of political party. Even if the details of the New Atheists' analysis are questionable, there is no doubt that religion is involved in many of the conflicts in the world today. Who could possibly deny such a thing? It would be very difficult in view of this fact to respond by arguing that religion in general is good and beneficial. But it is also too simplistic to say that all religion is bad and dangerous. Of course, many terrible things have been done in

the name of Christianity, but again it would be too simplistic to conclude that Christianity should therefore be rejected.

Defending Christian theism will involve defending two things: Christianity in particular and theism in general. Let's start with theism. One area of strong agreement with the New Atheists is on their claim that the existence of God is a factual question. Like them, I shall not use the word 'God' as a metaphor for referring to something else such as having a sense of awe at the beauty of the universe. In fact, Dawkins's definition of the God Hypothesis – 'there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us'<sup>36</sup> – seems like a reasonable starting point. But I shall also claim that God is good and that he is the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. My approach will be to argue for theism first and then for the truth of the central claims of Christianity. And I shall assume that these central claims are to be understood in their orthodox sense. For example, I shall take it as axiomatic that if Jesus did not rise from the dead physically, then Christianity is false. The New Atheists view such a position as both honest and indefensible. On the latter point I beg to differ. Indeed, the case for orthodox Christianity is much stronger as the result of developments in the field of biblical studies in the last few decades, as we shall see in chapter 10.

As noted in the preface, in presenting a positive case for Christian theism, one limitation is that it will not be possible to address objections raised by prominent atheist philosophers (such as Richard Gale, Michael Martin, Graham Oppy, William Rowe, J. Howard Sobel, Michael Tooley and others). The focus here is to present criticisms of the New Atheism and to show that there is a case to be made. For a more exhaustive treatment, the reader would need to look into these authors' objections and responses to them from prominent Christian philosophers such as those mentioned in the last section.<sup>37</sup>

Many of those who have criticized the New Atheists have objected to considering God as a hypothesis. At times the New Atheists give the impression that God is to be considered in the same way as a *scientific* hypothesis and if that is what they mean, then the objection seems completely reasonable. But it seems to me that what the New Atheists have in mind is that evidence could count either in favour or against God's existence and if this is what they mean, I fail to see any problem. Of course, Christians could not and should not view God as *merely* a hypothesis, but it does not follow that evidence is irrelevant to the question of God's existence. As we shall see, however, arguably the New Atheists adopt too narrow a view as to what should count as evidence and adopt strategies to rule out the possibility that evidence could count in favour

of God's existence, but I shall assume that the general principle that evidence is relevant to the question is correct.

Before exploring evidence for Christian theism, however, a more fundamental question needs to be considered. Is *faith* incompatible with reason and evidence? The New Atheists claim that faith is one of the key problems with religious belief precisely because it involves believing things for which there is no evidence. We shall explore this topic in the next chapter.

## Notes

1. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion* (London: Atlantic, 2007). This book will be referred to as *GNG*.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (London: Free Press, 2006). These books will be referred to as *BTS*, *TGD* and *TEF* respectively. See also Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation: A Challenge to Faith* (London: Bantam, 2007).
8. It seems the expression 'New Atheism' was coined in *WIRED* magazine. See Gary Wolf, 'The Church of the Non-Believers', *WIRED* (Nov. 2006), available at [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism_pr.html) (accessed 30 Oct. 2010).
9. For a discussion between the 'four horsemen' see <http://richarddawkins.net/videos/2025-the-four-horsemen-available-now-on-dvd> (accessed 30 Oct. 2010).
10. According to the philosopher Thomas Nagel, who is himself an atheist, 'Dawkins dismisses, with contemptuous flippancy the traditional a priori arguments for the existence of God offered by Aquinas and Anselm. I found these attempts at philosophy, along with those in a later chapter on religion and ethics, particularly weak . . .' (Thomas Nagel, 'The Fear of Religion', *The New Republic* [Oct. 2006], available at <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-fear-religion> [accessed 30 Oct. 2010]).
11. *BTS*, p. 27.
12. *TEF*, p. 72.
13. *TGD*, p. 31.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
17. *TEF*, p. 45.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.
19. *TGD*, pp. 4–5.
20. *TEF*, p. 46. This intolerance is ironic, however, given that one of his criticisms of religion is that intolerance is intrinsic to religion (*TEF*, p. 13). On the other hand, he also takes what he calls ‘moderates’ to task for taking tolerance to be sacred (*TEF*, p. 22). So it is not entirely clear whether he thinks the biggest problem with religion is its intolerance or tolerance, but in either case the appropriate response from atheists is one of intolerance.
21. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, p. 87.
22. *TGD*, pp. 67–69.
23. David Fergusson, *Faith and its Critics: a Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 11–12.
24. John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. xiii.
25. Terry Eagleton, ‘Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching’, *London Review of Books*, 19 Oct. 2006, pp. 32–34.
26. From the blog Science and the Sacred, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/scienceandthesacred/2009/08/why-i-think-the-new-atheists-are-a-bloody-disaster.html> (accessed 30 Oct. 2010).
27. John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2007), p. 16.
28. See Dawkins's website, <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/1647?page=27> (accessed 30 Oct. 2010).
29. From Myers's blog, Pharyngula, [http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the\\_courtiers\\_reply.php](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/12/the_courtiers_reply.php) (accessed 30 Oct. 2010).
30. Erik Wielenberg, ‘Dawkins's Gambit, Hume's Aroma, and God's Simplicity’, *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009), pp. 113–128.
31. Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (first published 1837), available at [http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes\\_e.html?oph=1](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html?oph=1) (accessed 17 Nov. 2011).
32. *GNG*, p. 64.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
34. *Ibid.*, 71.
35. For an introductory overview of these developments see William Lane Craig, ‘God Is Not Dead Yet: How Current Philosophers Argue for his Existence’, available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/13.22.html> (accessed 10 Nov. 2011).
36. *TGD*, p. 31.



37. For a recent collection of articles from an atheistic perspective see Michael Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and from a theistic perspective see William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).