

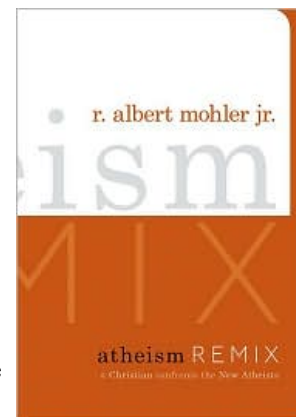
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“Atheism Remix” — Understanding and Answering the New Atheism

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Atheism is not a new concept. Even the Bible speaks of the one who tells himself in his heart, “There is no God.” Atheism became an organized and publicly recognized worldview in the wake of the Enlightenment and has maintained a foothold in Western culture ever since. Disbelief in God became part of the cultural landscape in the 1960s when TIME magazine published a cover story—“Is God Dead?”—that seemed to herald the arrival of a new secular age.

Nevertheless, atheists have represented only a small (if vocal) minority of Americans. Surveys estimate that atheists represent less than two percent of the population, even as the larger group of “unaffiliated” includes over fifteen percent. Atheists have published books, held seminars, presented their views in the media, and honed their points in public debates. As a worldview, atheism is over-represented among the intellectual elites, and atheists have largely, though not exclusively, talked to their own.



Until now. Get on an airplane, settle in for a flight, and observe what other passengers are reading. You are likely to see books representing a new wave of atheism as you look around the cabin. The so-called “New Atheists” have written best-sellers that have reached far beyond the traditional audience for such books. Books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have spent weeks and months on the best-seller list published by The New York Times. Clearly, something is happening.

The New Atheism is not just a reassertion of atheism. It is a movement that represents a far greater public challenge to Christianity than that posed by the atheistic movements of previous times. Furthermore, the New Atheism is not just another example of marketing an idea in the postmodern age. The New Atheists are, in their own way, evangelistic in intent and ambitious in hope. They see atheism as the only plausible worldview for our times, and they see belief in God as downright dangerous – an artifact of the past that we can no longer afford to tolerate, much less encourage.

They see science as on their side, and argue that scientific knowledge is our only true knowledge. They argue that belief in God is organized ignorance, that theistic beliefs lead to violence and that atheism is liberation. They are shocked and appalled that Americans refuse to follow the predictions of the secularization theorists, who had assured the elites that belief in God would be dissolved by the acids of modernity. They have added new (and very important) arguments to the atheistic arsenal. They write from positions of privilege, and they know how to package their ideas. They know that the most important audience is the young, and they are in a position to reach young people with their arguments.

It becomes clear that the New Atheism has exploited an opening presented by significant and seismic changes in prevailing patterns of thought. In this light, the contributions of philosopher Charles Taylor become especially helpful. We must acknowledge that most educated persons living in Western societies now inhabit a cultural space in which the conditions of belief have been radically changed. Whereas it was once impossible not to believe and later possible not to believe, for millions of people today, the default position is that it is impossible to believe. The belief system referenced in this formula is that of biblical theism—the larger superstructure of the Christian faith.

In terms of our own evangelistic and apologetic mandate, it is helpful to acknowledge that only a minority of those we seek to reach with the Gospel are truly and self-consciously identified with atheism in any form. Nevertheless, the rise of the New Atheism presents a seductive alternative for those inclined now to identify more publicly and self-consciously with organized nonbelief. The far larger challenge for most of us is to communicate the Gospel to persons whose minds are more indirectly shaped by these changed conditions of belief.

The greater seduction is towards the only vaguely theistic forms of “spirituality” that have become the belief systems (however temporarily) of millions. These are people who, as Daniel Dennett suggests, are more likely to believe in belief than to believe in God.

The Christian church must respond to the challenge of the New Atheism with the full measure of conviction and not with mere curiosity. We are reminded that the church has faced a constellation of theological challenges throughout its history. Then, as now, the task is to articulate, communicate, and defend the Christian faith with intellectual integrity and evangelistic urgency. We should not assume that this task will be easy, and we must also refuse to withdraw from public debate and private conversation in light of this challenge.

In the final analysis, the New Atheism presents the Christian church with a great moment of clarification. The New Atheists do, in the end, understand what they are rejecting. When Sam Harris defines true religion as that “where participants’ avowed belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought,” he understands what many mired in confusion do not. In the end, the existence of the supernatural, self-existent, and self-revealing God is the only starting point for Christian theology. God possesses all of the perfections revealed in Scripture, or there is no coherent theology presented in the Bible. The New Atheists are certainly right about one very important thing—it’s atheism or biblical theism. There is nothing in between.

This is adapted from my new book, *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists* (Crossway Books), which has just been released and is available through your local bookstore or by clicking on the link or cover image above.

We discussed the New Atheism on Thursday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)].

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