

# AlbertMohler.com

## The New Atheism?

2006 has been a big year for atheism. The release of several major books—all widely touted in the media—has put atheism on the front lines of current cultural conversation. Books such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation* are selling by the thousands and prompting hours of conversation on college campuses and in the media. Now, *WIRED* magazine comes out with a cover story on atheism for its November 2006 issue. In "The New Atheism," *WIRED* contributing editor Gary Wolf explains that this newly assertive form of atheism declares a very simple message: "No heaven. No hell. Just science."

Tuesday, November 21, 2006



2006 has been a big year for atheism. The release of several major books—all widely touted in the media—has put atheism on the front lines of current cultural conversation. Books such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation* are selling by the thousands and prompting hours of conversation on college campuses and in the media.

Now, *WIRED* magazine comes out with a cover story on atheism for its November 2006 issue. In "The New Atheism," *WIRED* contributing editor Gary Wolf explains that this newly assertive form of atheism declares a very simple message: "No heaven. No hell. Just science."

*WIRED* is itself a cultural symbol for the growing centrality of technology in our lives. On the other hand, the magazine is not simply a celebration of emerging technologies nor a catalogue of soon-to-be-released marvels. Instead, the magazine consistently offers significant intellectual content and it takes on many of the most controversial issues of the times. Considering the relatively young readership of the magazine, the decision to put atheism on the front cover indicates something of where they think the society is headed—at least in interest.

Wolf accomplishes a great deal in his article, thoughtfully introducing the work of militant atheists such as Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett. At the same time, he probes more deeply into the actual meaning of the New Atheism as a movement and a message.

At the beginning of his article, he gets right to the point: "The New Atheists will not let us off the hook simply because we are not doctrinaire believers. They condemn not just belief in God but *respect* for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking."

In order to understand the New Atheism, Wolf traveled to visit with Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett. His interviews with the three are illuminating and analytical.

He met Dawkins in Oxford, which Wolf describes as the "Jerusalem" of human reason. Accordingly, he labels Dawkins "the leading light of the New Atheism movement."

In one sense, this is hardly news. Richards Dawkins, Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, has been the most ardent and well-publicized intellectual opponent of Christianity for decades now. He was first famous for the evolutionary argument he presented in his best-selling book, *The Selfish Gene*, now decades old. In his more recent work, Dawkins appears to have left his scientific career something in the background as he attempts to write as something of a philosopher and (a)theologian.

Dawkins' new book, *The God Delusion*, reached the best-seller list in recent weeks, and he has made media appearances on everything from the mainstream media to Comedy Central. Unlike many journalists, Wolf understands

what makes Dawkins unique. It is not so much that Dawkins is attempting to convince believers that they should no longer believe in God. To the contrary, Dawkins is attempting a very different cultural and political move. He wants to make *respect for* belief in God socially unacceptable.

“Dawkins is perfectly aware that atheism is an ancient doctrine and that little of what he has to say is likely to change the terms of this stereotyped debate,” Wolf writes. “But he continues to go at it. His true interlocutors are not the Christians he confronts directly but the wavering nonbelievers or quasi believers among his listeners—people like me, potential New Atheists who might be inspired by his example.”

As Dawkins explains himself, “I’m quite keen on the politics of persuading people of the virtues of atheism.” The Oxford professor also understands that atheism is a political issue as well as a theological question. “The number of nonreligious people in the US is something nearer to 30 million than 20 million. That’s more than all the Jews in the world put together. I think we’re in the same position the gay movement was in a few decades ago. There was a need for people to come out. The more people who came out, the more people who had the courage to come out. I think that’s the case with atheists. They’re more numerous than anybody realizes.”

For a man who is supposedly an exemplar of the humble discipline of science, Dawkins is capable of breathtaking condescension. Consider these words: “Highly intelligent people are mostly atheists . . . . Not a single member of either house of Congress admits to being an atheist. It just doesn’t add up. Either they’re stupid, or they’re lying. And have they got a motive for lying? Of course they’ve got a motive! Everyone knows that an atheist can’t get elected.”

Note his argument carefully—highly intelligent people are most likely to be atheists.

The political dimensions of Dawkins’ thought become immediately apparent when he speaks of how children should be protected from parents who believe in God. “How much do we regard children as being the property of their parents?,” Dawkins asks. “It’s one thing to say people should be free to believe whatever they like, but should they be free to impose their beliefs on their children? Is there something to be said for society to be stepping in? What about bringing up children to believe manifest falsehoods?”

Wolf has successfully captured the essence of what animates Richard Dawkins. He is an evangelist for atheism.

“Evangelism is a moral imperative,” Wolf explains. “Dawkins does not merely disagree with religious myths. He disagrees with tolerating them, with cooperating in their colonization of the brains of innocent tykes.” As Dawkins sees it, belief in God is a dangerous “meme.” Dawkins is famous for arguing that memes serve as a major driving force in evolution. Memes, cultural replicators like ideas, can spread like a virus through society. Wolf understands that Dawkins claims to believe in democracy and freedom and thus accepts “that there are practical constraints on controlling the spread of bad memes.” Nevertheless, “Bad ideas foisted on children are moral wrongs. We should think harder about how to stop them.”

In a very real sense, Richard Dawkins grabs the headlines precisely because he is willing to say what many other atheists think. Indeed, he is willing to say what other atheists *must* think, but are unwilling to say for one political reason or another. Dawkins is spectacularly unconcerned about public relations.

On the link between evolution and atheism, for example, Dawkins is unrepentant and direct—evolutionary theory *must* logically lead to atheism. While other evolutionists argue before courts and in the media that this is not so, Dawkins states that he cannot worry about the public relations consequences.

As he told Wolf: “My answer is that the big war is not between evolution and creationism, but between naturalism and supernaturalism. The ‘sensible’ religious people are really on the side of the fundamentalists, because they believe in supernaturalism. That puts me on the other side.” As Wolf explains, Dawkins himself insisted that the word “sensible” should be in quotes. In other words, Dawkins seems to have less respect for theological liberalism than for those who are theologically orthodox. At least the true believers know what they truly believe.

This attack on religious moderates is what made *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris’ 2004 book, so interesting. Harris, whose second book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, was released just weeks ago, argues that religious moderates and theological liberals function as something like “enablers” of orthodoxy and fundamentalism. As Wolf keenly observes, the

New Atheists oppose agnostics and liberal believers as those who help orthodox believers build and retain a cultural powerbase. Agnostics and theological liberals may be fellow travelers with the atheists, these figures admit, but they actually serve to confuse rather than to clarify the issues at stake. On this, the New Atheists and orthodox believers are in agreement.

Sam Harris is even more apocalyptic than Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett. He argues that, unless belief in God is eradicated, civilization is likely to end in a murderous sea of religious warfare. As an alternative, Harris proposes a “religion of reason.” As he explains, “We would have realized the rational means to maximize human happiness. We may all agree that we want to have a Sabbath that we take really seriously—a lot more seriously than most religious people take it. But it would be a rational decision, and it would not be just because it’s in the Bible. We would be able to invoke the power of poetry and ritual and silent contemplation and all the variables of happiness so that we could exploit them. Call it prayer, but we would have prayer without [expletive deleted].”

Wolf helpfully offers his version of such a prayer: “that our reason will subjugate our superstition, that our intelligence will check our illusions, that we will be able to hold at bay the evil temptation of faith.”

Harris’ self-proclaimed religion of reason bears uncanny resemblances to the features of New Age thought—something that offends many of his fellow New Atheists. Still, Harris’ books have sold by the thousands and he has transformed himself into a poster child for militant atheism. Like Dawkins, Harris sees time on his side. “At some point, there’s going to be enough pressure that it is just going to be too *embarrassing* to believe in God.”

The third major figure in Wolf’s article, Daniel Dennett, teaches at Tufts University. As Wolf explains, “Among the New Atheists, Dennett holds an exalted but ambiguous place. Like Dawkins and Harris, he is an evangelizing nonbeliever.” Wolf describes Dennett as offering more humorous examples and thought experiments than Dawkins and Harris. “But like the other New Atheists, Dennett gives no quarter to believers who resist subjecting their faith to scientific evaluation. In fact, he argues that neutral, scientifically informed education about every religion in the world should be mandatory in school. After all, he argues, ‘if you have to hoodwink—or blindfold—your children to ensure that they confirm their faith when they are adults, your faith *ought* to go extinct.’” Like Harris, Dennett believes that something like a religion of reason might be possible. But, in some contrast to Dawkins and Harris, Dennett does not see faith as something that can be intellectualized away. To the contrary, he sees belief in God to have served an evolutionary purpose. Even as he now believes that evolutionary purpose is no longer helpful, he argues that such an evolutionary feature is not likely to be eradicated quickly. Therefore, Dennett suggests replacing belief in God with something of a secular substitute.

In his wide-ranging article, Wolf considers the emergence of the New Atheism from multiple perspectives. He deals not only with Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett, but with a host of others, including some who believe in God. He understands that the New Atheists stand in contrast with the older atheism more in terms of mood and mode of public engagement. He also understands that those who attempt to rebut the New Atheism on scientific grounds can find themselves facing considerable complexity. As Wolf explains, when defenders of faith accept science as the arbiter of reality, atheists are left “with the upper hand.”

Throughout the article, Wolf also admits his own doubts. He seems to identify himself more with agnosticism than atheism, and he reveals some discomfort with the stridency of the New Atheism.

In his words: “The New Atheists have castigated fundamentalism and branded even the mildest religious liberals as enablers of a vengeful mob. Everybody who does not join them is an ally of the Taliban. But, so far, their provocation has failed to take hold. Given all the religious trauma in the world, I take this as good news. Even those of us who sympathize intellectually have good reasons to wish that the New Atheists continue to seem absurd. If we reject their polemics, if we continue to have respectful conversations even about things we find ridiculous, this doesn’t necessarily mean we’ve lost our convictions or our sanity. It simply reflects our deepest, democratic values. Or, you might say, our bedrock faith: the faith that no matter how confident we are in our beliefs, there’s always a chance that we could turn out to be wrong.”

The very fact that Wolf remains unconvinced by the arguments promoted by the New Atheists is itself significant. What Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett—along with the other New Atheists—really demand is that society must place itself in the hands of a new and militant atheistic priesthood. Science as defined by these new priests, would serve as the new sacrament and as the means of salvation.

What this article reveals is that those arguing that human beings need to be saved *from* belief in God are facing a tough sell—even in *WIRED* magazine.

---

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.