

Thank God for the New Atheists

A Sermon by the Reverend Michael Dowd

SINCE APRIL 2002, MY SCIENCE WRITER WIFE CONNIE Barlow and I have lived entirely on the road. We've addressed more than a thousand groups across North America, teaching and preaching the epic of evolution as our common creation story. In September 2009, the day I learned I had an especially aggressive form of cancer, I pondered, "If I have only one message left to communicate, what would it be?" The answer that came: "Show Christians how the New Atheists are God's prophets." A few hours later, I recorded a 30-minute podcast with that title. More than a year later, with cancer in remission, this is still the core message I'm preaching in Christian churches across the country.

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My first encounter with the New Atheists came in the summer of 2004. A man who heard me speak in Colorado Springs gave me an audiocassette program by Michael Earl. Listening to *Bible Stories Your Parents Never Taught You* was a painful experience. I did not want to hear what Earl was saying, yet I couldn't deny the truth of his commentary. I could no longer ignore scriptural passages—from Genesis to Revelation—that portray God as brutal, cruel, vindictive, and genocidal. For example:

Exodus 21:17: "Anyone who curses his mother or father must be put to death."

Psalms 137:8-9: "Oh daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the man who seizes your babies and smashes their heads against the rocks."

This was my God speaking, and these were passages read verbatim from the supposedly *Good Book*.

Since that summer in Colorado, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens have all produced bestselling and highly controversial books—and I have read them all. It took several years for my initial discomfort to grow into gratitude for the New Atheists, as I had to make a huge shift in my views of God, guidance, and good news. So please know, as I offer this sermon, that I do not expect most of you to come to the place where I now am.

Religion Is About Right Relationship with Reality, Not the Supernatural

What could be more important than coming into right relationship with reality? As philosopher of evolution and religion Loyal Rue writes in his book, *Religion Is Not About God*:

The most profound insight in the history of humankind is that we should seek to live in accord with reality. Indeed, living in harmony with reality may be accepted as a formal definition of wisdom. If we live at odds with reality (foolishly), then we will be doomed, but if we live in proper relationship with reality (wisely), then we shall be saved. Humans everywhere, and at all times, have had at least a tacit understanding of this fundamental principle. What we are less in agreement about is how we should think about reality and what we should do to bring ourselves into harmony with it.

How reality impinges on the human adventure (and vice versa) today is, of course, radically different from how it showed up for our ancestors hundreds or thousands of years ago. Yes, there are still terrifying floods and storms, but now individual actions amplified by sheer numbers and technological prowess have ramped up the power of elemental forces, leaving multitudes even more vulnerable than in days of yore.

And there are altogether new catastrophes on the horizon—the specter of cascading financial and economic chaos, the possibility that human rage festering in a small group of people anywhere in the world might access weapons of mass destruction, or the storm of information meltdown if solar upheaval, space trash, or our own psychotic tendencies wreak havoc with satellite communications. What this means is that the wisdom of antiquity—in all its forms and drawn from all regions of the world—could not possibly be up to the task of serving us now. Ancient, unchanged scriptural stories and doctrinal declarations are inadequate guidance

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for meeting modern challenges. To restrict the real-world relevance of our religious traditions to what could be known and communicated millennia ago makes no more sense than to consult a first-century text on dental care when you need a root canal.

In a way, the New Atheists have come to our rescue. They are shouting at us to collectively awaken to the dangers of revering texts and doctrines on no sounder basis than tradition and authority. Because the New Atheists put their confidence (not faith) in an evidentially formed and continuously tested view of the world, these critics of religion are well positioned to see what's real and what's important today. It is thus time for religious people to listen to the New Atheists—and to listen as if they were speaking with God's voice, because in my view they are!

Supernatural Is Unnatural and Uninspiring

Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, wrote an important essay in 1931 titled, "The Crisis of Faith." In it, he moves discussion of God beyond beliefs to universal experience. Moreover, he claims that such a seemingly modern and liberal view of God was actually the norm for peoples everywhere in pre-modern times. The essence of Bultmann's argument is that *faith has virtually nothing to do with beliefs*. Beliefs are, in fact, the antithesis of faith. Beliefs tend to be attachments of the mind to something being a certain way. Faith is synonymous with trust—trusting what is beyond my comprehension or control. One great benefit of this shift from belief to trust is that the compulsion to argue about doctrinal issues and interpretations melts away. When this happens, one's sense of God's powers expands exponentially. One's experience of God's presence, God's presence right here and now, has an opportunity to blossom. Indeed, it may blossom—as it has for me—to the point where one senses God's work even in those who are speaking most boldly against religion.

Everything shifts when we move from a worldview given by tradition and authority to one based on facts and empirical evidence. For example, evidence suggests that the only place that the so-called supernatural realm has ever existed has been in the minds and hearts (and speech) of human beings—and only quite recently. As Benson Salem showed in a 1977 issue of the American Anthropological Association journal *Ethos*, the notion of supernatural—in opposition to natural—is a Western invention. The "supernatural realm" only came into being as a thought form after we began to understand

things in a natural, scientific way. Only when the concept of "the natural" emerged was it deemed necessary by some to speak of "the supernatural": that which was imagined to be above or outside of nature.

As we have collectively learned ever more about the natural, the supernatural has become ever less. After all, supernatural and unnatural are synonyms. Anything supposedly supernatural is, by definition, unnatural. And most people find unnatural relatively uninspiring when they really stop and think about it. It should not surprise us that young people en masse are turning their backs on religion and that the New Atheists are riding bestseller lists when "the gospel", God's Great News for all of humanity, is imagined as this...

An unnatural king who occasionally engages in unnatural acts sends his unnatural son to Earth in an unnatural way. He's born an unnatural birth, lives an unnatural life, performs unnatural deeds, and is killed and unnaturally rises from the dead in order to redeem humanity from an unnatural curse brought about by an unnaturally talking snake. After 40 days of unnatural appearances he unnaturally zooms off to heaven to return to his unnatural father, sit on an unnatural throne, and unnaturally judge the living and the dead. If you profess to believe in all this unnatural activity, you and your fellow believers get to spend an unnaturally long time in an unnaturally boring paradise while everyone else suffers an unnatural, torturous hell forever.

God Is a Personification, Not a Person

Rudolf Bultmann, Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, Paul Tillich, and other 20th century scholars of mythology and world religions remind us that *we cannot understand religion and religious differences if we don't understand how the human mind instinctually relationalizes—that is, personifies—reality*. Recall the film *Cast Away* with Tom Hanks. The personified soccer ball, Wilson, was the only thing that kept Hank's isolated character relatively sane.

God is not a person; God is a personification of one or more deeply significant dimensions of reality. For the theologically liberally minded, this should be neither difficult to grasp nor disagreeable. But until religious people themselves speak it fully and unabashedly into existence, the New Atheists will be all too happy to continue mocking biblical and other mythic portrayals of God. For ex-

ample, Poseidon was not the god of the oceans, as if some supernatural entity separate from water was looking down from on high or rising from the deep. Poseidon was the personification of the incomprehensibly powerful and capricious seas!

Sol was not the spirit of the sun, as if there were a separation between the two. Sol was a sacred name for that seemingly eternal, life-giving source of heat and light—and occasionally life-taking source in times of desperate drought. By saying “Sol,” “Helios,” or some other proper name, our ancestors experienced that reality as a “Thou” to which they could be related.

Today most of us have a starkly different subjective experience. We look up and say “the sun” and think of “it” in a depersonalized way: not as the God “Helios” but as the generator of elemental helium through stellar nucleosynthesis.

Darwin and God

Darwin didn’t kill God. To the contrary, he and Alfred Russel Wallace offered the first glimpse of the *real* creator behind and beyond the world’s myriad mythic portrayals of the divine. Evidence from a wide range of disciplines—from cognitive neuroscience to anthropology to cross-cultural study of the world’s myths and religions—all support the claim that *God is a personification, not a person, and that we instinctually forget this*. Moreover, there is no counter-evidence! This fact alone makes sense of the hundreds of competing stories around the world as to what God supposedly said or did. “God” is a mythic name for reality in all its sublime fullness. Any so-called God that is imagined as less than this is unworthy of our devotion and deserves to be mocked, as the New Atheists so readily do.

The bottom line is this: whenever we Christians slip into interpreting scripture literally, we belittle the Bible and dishonor God. Our best moral guidance comes from what God is revealing today through evidence, not from tradition or authority or old mythic stories.

Whenever any story or any scriptural passage claims, “God said this” or “God did that,” what follows is always, necessarily, an interpretation. It’s an interpretation of what some person or group of people thought or felt or sensed or wished reality was saying or doing, and almost always as justification after the fact or to make a theological point. Such subjectively meaningful claims are never objective, measurable truth. In other words, had CNN been there to record the moment of “divine revelation,” there would have been nothing out of the ordinary

(nothing miraculous) to report on the evening news—nothing other than what was coming out of someone’s mouth, or pen, or whatever folks wrote with back then. If we fail to grasp this, not only will we trivialize the divine but, more tragically still, we will miss what Reality is saying and doing today.

From supernovas to plate tectonics to brain scans, science has given us revelations about how we got here and why we are the way we are. Ours is a time of space telescopes, electron microscopes, supercomputers, and the worldwide web. It is also a time of smart bombs, collapsing economies, and exploding oil platforms. This is not a time for parsing the lessons given to a few goatherds, tentmakers, and camel drivers.

We must take seriously scientists’ prophetic warnings about issues such as climate change and the overall health of our world and life on Earth. Like everything else under the sun, religions will either evolve or go extinct. “Getting right with God,” means coming into right relationship with our planet and all its gloriously diverse species and cultures.

Getting Real About Divine Guidance

The New Atheists, by speaking boldly on behalf of our best collective intelligence about the nature of reality, and in condemning superstitious, otherworldly religiosity, are, paradoxically, fulfilling the traditional role of prophets. Historically, religious prophets were those on the leading edge—those who saw what was real, sensed what was emerging, and then spoke their truth—usually a word of warning. Their message typically went something like this: “Align with reality—or perish.” Prophets in this way facilitate cultural evolution. To use religious language, they do God’s work.

Thus my central point: Few things are more important than for religious peoples of all backgrounds and orientations to heed what the New Atheists are saying. To be clear: I thank God for the New Atheists *not* because I want everyone to be like them or think like them, *nor* because I consider them perfect vessels of divine wisdom. Rather, I am grateful because of how they are prodding religion and humanity to mature and because of how they are encouraging religious people (like me!) to come out of the closet as naturalists.

I foresee a time when religious leaders get their guidance and inspiration from humanity’s common creation story and teach and preach the discoveries of science as God’s word. When that day comes, our faith traditions will thrive and many of us will look back and exclaim, “Thank God for the New Atheists.” ■