

Thank God for the New Atheists!

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Scripture Readings

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.”

Sam Harris: “We must begin speaking freely about what is really in these holy books of ours. A close study of these books, and of history, demonstrates that there is no act of cruelty so appalling that it cannot be justified, or even mandated, by recourse to their pages. It is only by the most acrobatic avoidance of passages whose canonicity has never been in doubt that we can escape murdering one another outright for the glory of God.”

My Testimonial

Since April 2002, my science writer wife [Connie Barlow](#) and I have lived entirely on the road. We've addressed more than thousand groups across North America, teaching and preaching the epic of evolution as our common creation story. Last September, the day I learned I had an especially aggressive form of cancer, I pondered, “If I have only one message left to communicate to the world, what would it be?” The answer that came: “Preach the New Atheists as God’s prophets.” A few hours later, I recorded a 30-minute podcast with that title. Ten months later, with cancer in remission, this is still my core message. To my delight, it resonates on both sides of the science and religion divide—at least for many who are willing to hear me through.

My first encounter with the New Atheists came in the summer of 2004. A man who heard me speak in Colorado Springs gave me his copy of 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. Passage after passage quoted by Earl brought images of Hitler, Pol Pot, and Stalin to mind. And yet this was supposedly *my* God, 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 Loyl 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 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 and 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 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 faith, their confidence, 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!

Beyond Belief

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. More, 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. It just melts away. And 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.

St. Thomas Aquinas, one of Christianity’s most celebrated theologians, warned 750 years ago, “A mistake about Creation will necessarily result in a mistake about God.” The more we learn about the nature of the Universe, if we’re not also updating what we mean when we use the word “God”, we may have understandings of the divine that are so out of touch with reality as to no longer be life-giving.

Specifically, we’ve been thinking of God in unnatural and therefore trivial ways for far too long. In a few thousand year old Universe, where heaven was just a few hundred miles skyward, the God portrayed in much of the Bible made sense. None of us, not even the most fundamentalist here in America, lives in that kind of Universe any longer. The Hubble Space Telescope makes the distance scales and configurations used in the Bible metaphorical at best. Rather, we now can celebrate a God that is no less majestic, ancient, and powerful than the Cosmos itself, and no more inclined than the Cosmos to take sides in matters of war, weather, or geological upheaval. Given the vastness and age and

mysteries of the Universe as we now know it, to insist that the Creator is divorced from, and less real than, Creation is to not only dishonor God but to relegate the divine to the ever-contracting realm of that which is not yet known.

Moreover, 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.

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 after 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 I say in the preface of my book, *Thank God for Evolution*:

How was the world made? Why do earthquakes, tornados, and other bad things happen? Why must we die? And why do different peoples answer these questions in different ways? The big questions that children have always asked and will continue to ask cannot be answered by the powers of human perception alone. Ancient cultures gave so-called supernatural answers to these questions, but those answers were not truly supernatural—they were pre-natural. Prior to advances in technology and scientific ways of testing truth claims, factual answers were simply unavailable. It was not just difficult to understand infection before microscopes brought bacteria into focus; it was impossible. Without an evolutionary worldview, it is similarly impossible to understand ourselves, our world, and what is required for humanity to survive. For religious leaders today to rely on pre-natural answers puts them at odds not only with science but with one another—dangerously so. Their resistance, however, does make sense. Until scientific discoveries are fleshed into the life-giving forms of beauty and goodness (as well as truth and utility), scriptural literalism will command power and influence.

As we have 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. I mean, does this sound like Good News to you? ...

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 a torturous hell forever.

God Is a Personification, Not a Person

Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, Paul Tillich, and other 21st 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 movie "Cast Away" with Tom Hanks. The personified soccer ball, Wilson, was the only thing that kept Hank's isolated character sane—well, mostly.

God is not a person; God is a personification of one or more deeply significant dimensions of reality. For the 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 example, 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 be related to.

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 perhaps as the generator of elemental helium through the scientifically defined process of stellar nucleosynthesis.

Darwin Didn't Kill God, He REALized 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 divine personification, not a person. More, 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 or ABC News 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 God is saying and doing today.

From supernovas to plate tectonics to brain scans, science has given us belief-busting (but trust-building) 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.

God is still speaking, and facts are God's native tongue—not Hebrew or Greek or King James English. Valuing what was revealed millennia ago to people who assumed the world was flat, over what God is revealing today, to people who know it's not, is a prescription for disaster.

In the 21st century, our most dependable sources of guidance are facts interpreted meaningfully. Historical, scientific, and cross-cultural evidence are the main ways that Reality speaks today. Recognizing and celebrating these forms of guidance will transform religion and culture.

The information generation requires a real God—and real inspiration. We live in an era when the Hubble Space Telescope lets us see the farthest reaches of the early Universe on an iPhone. In this kind of world, a cosmic warlord imagined by shepherds who wrote their insights on animal skins is hardly a compelling source of guidance and good news.

And speaking of good news, no one *really* believes that an eternity with no challenges or difficulties yet with conscious awareness of the everlasting torment of others, including some we knew and loved, would be heavenly. We all know that would be hell. “Good news” cannot be the promise of fire insurance that comes with a balcony seat to witness the torture of those outside our in-group. The only gospel worthy of the name must be good news for the entire body of life. Thankfully, that’s what now seems to be emerging. Humanity is growing up.

Getting Real About God, Guidance, and Good News

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 at this time in history 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 goading religious people (like me!) to [get real about God, guidance, and good news](#).

So let today’s collective wisdom revitalize our faith traditions! Let us rejoice in the discovery that the atoms of our bodies were forged inside supernovas, and let us celebrate this natural process as divine. Let the story of evolution be told in ways that engender familial love and gratitude that we are related to everything—not just monkeys, but jellyfish and flatworms too. Let us marvel at how rapidly our species has learned to care and cooperate in ever-widening circles: from family groups and tribes all the way to nation-states, and now globally.

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!](#)”

Michael Dowd is the author of *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* (2009: Plume), which has been endorsed by [6 Nobel Prize-winning scientists](#), noted [skeptics](#), and by [religious leaders](#) across the theological spectrum.

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