

No Reason to Fear: Examining the Logic of a Critic

Rick Wade uses the faulty arguments in Sam Harris' book Letter to a Christian Nation to show why Christians don't have to be afraid of the new atheists' assault on our faith.

Getting Started

Sometimes we Christians shy away from books which attack our beliefs because we're afraid we can't answer the objections. That's understandable. Often the authors of such books carry impressive credentials. It's easy to feel intimidated.

Another response which is the opposite of fearful avoidance is haughty dismissal. Sometimes we act as if our position is so obviously true that others can be dismissed as downright stupid and hardly worth bothering with. Even if the opponents' arguments *are* bad, that's no reason to adopt an arrogant attitude. It's especially bad when the dismissive Christian hasn't even bothered to read the book!



A better response, I think, is to use such occasions to grow in understanding and to exercise one's apologetic "muscles" by working at answering the challenges posed. So, for example, when a doctrine is challenged, by studying the subject, we grow in our knowledge of Christian beliefs and (here's the uncomfortable part) we are sometimes corrected in our understanding. Another advantage is preparation for real face-to-face encounters with critics. Responding to arguments in a book means there isn't the pressure of a person staring at you, waiting for an answer (and fully expecting one; critics do have such a high view of us!).

In this article I'm going to use Sam Harris's book *Letter to a*

Christian Nation to give some suggestions about what to look for in such books.[\[1\]](#) I won't try to address every challenge. Others have given more extensive responses.[\[2\]](#)

I titled this essay "No Reason to Fear" for a good reason. The challenges of critics throughout the ages have not been able to prove Christianity false, and those of modern day critics won't either. Most of their arguments have already been answered. When we brace ourselves and start reading a critic's book, we often find that the arguments don't pack that great a punch after all, much like the neighborhood bully who the other boys are afraid of but really have no reason to be.

Of course, we can't always answer seemingly good objections, and certainly can't answer them all to the atheist's satisfaction. I'll go further than that. I don't think we *have* to answer every objection. There will always be objections. But it's as intellectually wrong to drop one's convictions because of a few unanswered criticisms as it is to hold to such convictions for no reason at all. Atheists obviously don't abandon their beliefs so easily, and they shouldn't expect us to either.

Fallacious Arguments

If we're going to engage books like *Letter to a Christian Nation* responsibly, we have to be ready to hear some good criticisms of our beliefs or actions. We have to accept the fact that there are some hard things to deal with in our beliefs, especially the problem of evil. We need to admit our inability to give satisfying answers to all objections if we're going to expect that kind of openness from critics. Also, it is often Christians who come under attack rather than Christianity. Harris spends a lot of time here. Christians have done some bad things, and they need to be acknowledged.

More to the point for this article, Christians can sometimes

give bad arguments for what they believe. I'm not suggesting that we have to bow to all the demands of skeptics; there are several theories of the proper use of evidences and logical arguments and personal experience, and some formulations are unreasonable. It *is* to say, however, that we must use good reasoning when we make a case.

The problem with using poor reasoning is that it undermines one's case. That's what we find in Harris's book, and that will be our focus here. When we read a case for a particular belief, we should keep a lookout for such things as questionable assumptions, logical fallacies, and incorrect facts. Harris's book is plagued with fallacious arguments, a surprising turn since he presents his side as being that of reason. So I'm going to spend most of my time on those and mention the other things when appropriate.

Don't let the term "logical fallacies" put you off, like they're things only specialists can understand. It's just another name for poor reasoning. So, for example, if you make the claim that Christianity is the only true religion, and someone responds that you only believe that because you grew up in a Christian nation, you could cry "Foul!" You're making a universal claim; where you're from is irrelevant. If it's true, it's true in India and China and the US and everywhere else, too. This is a kind of fallacy of false cause. No one is a Christian because he lives in a Christian nation. We are Christians because we have believed Jesus' claims that are universal. It also reflects the current mood according to which religions are human constructs, and Christianity is just one such religion among many.

Although fallacious arguments can have *psychological* force (when we don't spot them and they seem correct), they have no *logical* force. Their conclusions should not be believed.

Are We Really So Evil?

Harris's favorite target in his attack on religion is its supposed immorality. He tells us that "Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible."[\[3\]](#) Well, *that's* a surprise! Not that Christians have done bad things, but that such acts are *theologically defensible*! Such things are sanctioned by God because He, too, does such things. Harris accuses Christians of picking and choosing sections of Scripture that present a more loving God while ignoring the truly telling ones which reveal a God who condones slavery and the beating and killing of rebellious children.

But Harris is guilty of this picking and choosing himself. He commits the fallacy which is called the *neglect of relevant evidence*. To be fair, he does note that "it is undeniable that many people of faith make heroic sacrifices to relieve the suffering of other human beings."[\[4\]](#) But he doesn't bother listing them. He gives no space to the great work done by Christians in the fields of medicine, literacy, agriculture, famine relief, etc. He ignores the good work of organizations like Mercy Ships which takes life-changing medical help to people in third world nations in the name of Christ.

Well, he doesn't completely ignore missionary efforts. One of his favorite rants is against the evils perpetrated by missionaries. They waste time preaching about such things as the virgin birth when there is important work to be done. The most memorable accusation is when he charges missionaries who preach against the use of condoms with "genocidal" piety![\[5\]](#) "Genocidal!" Maybe a little exaggeration there? (And, by the way, while it's true that Christian medical missionaries do present the gospel to people—which they should, since one's eternal life is more important than one's temporal life—I've never heard of any who withhold medical help from people in

need until they first preach a sermon on the virgin birth.)

In another place Harris commits the fallacy called *causal oversimplification*. As he sees it, religion is the cause of conflicts in Palestine, the Balkans, Sudan, Nigeria, and other countries. Religion is so unnatural and wrong-headed to atheists, that it becomes an easy target for casting blame.

I'm going to give a bit more space to this charge since it's a very popular one these days.

In 2004, the BBC published what it called a "War Audit" which was conducted to determine how significant religion has been in war, at least in the last century.[\[6\]](#) In the article "God and War: An Audit and an Exploration," authors Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen report that

at a philosophical level, the main religious traditions have little truck with war or violence. All advocate peace as the norm and see genuine spirituality as involving a disavowal of violence. It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions or when a political opposition is trying to take power that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

They continue:

After reviewing historical analyses by a diverse array of specialists, we concluded that there have been few genuinely religious wars in the last 100 years. The Israel/Arab wars from 1948 to now, often painted in the media and other places as wars over religion, or wars arising from religious differences, have in fact been wars of nationalism, liberation of territory or self-defense.

Regarding Islamic terrorism, the authors write:

The Islamist fundamentalist terror war is largely about political order in the Arab countries, and the presence of

US forces in Saudi Arabia. It is not about religious conversion or a clash of religions. Nevertheless, bin Laden claims a religious duty in executing the war. . . .

It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

We need to go back to the wars of Arab expansion, the Crusades and the Reformation Wars for genuine wars over religion.

The authors—or as they call themselves, compilers—of this article include tables which give death tolls in different categories of wars. The writers say that the tables

show that the overwhelming majority of wars and the overwhelming majority of the victims of such wars cannot be classified primarily according to religious causes or religious beliefs. There have been horrific examples though where particular communities have been *targeted because of their religious faith* [italics mine], and these atrocities have been perpetrated by the three most 17 vicious and blood-thirsty regimes ever to hold power: Stalin's Russia, Mao's China and Hitler's Germany.

It's interesting that Harris tries so hard to make religion a source of violence when, as this report indicates, it is often the religious who are targeted by violence.[\[7\]](#)

A Few More

Sam Harris's book is titled *Letter to a Christian Nation*, not simply because he's against Christianity. He wants all religion to come to an end. It just happens that Christianity is the most prominent religion in America. Because he lumps all religions together, he can smear Christianity with the evils of Islam by implication.

This is a fallacy. It's called the fallacy of *over-generalization* (or *converse accident*). If evil is done in the name of Islam, and Islam is a religion, then every religion is prone to evil. Thus, what counts against Islam counts against Christianity, too. (If one is reluctant to group Christianity with other religions, then one might see here the fallacy of *faulty comparison*, or what is more commonly called "comparing apples to oranges.")

Another argument Harris presents employs a fallacy we've already discussed, the fallacy of *causal oversimplification*. Harris commits this fallacy when he tells us that "the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi death camps was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity." {8}

The reality of Christian anti-Semitism through the ages cannot be denied. However, Harris's evaluation is simplistic. It is very easy to narrowly focus on the very real anti-Semitism of Christians and ignore other very significant factors. For example, Harris fails to tell us that the Jews were persecuted quite apart from Christianity and even before Christianity came into existence. For example, serious tensions between the Jews and the Greeks of Alexandria in the first century B.C. spilled over into the next century. Things got so bad that Jews were forced to live in one section of the city. Their houses were broken into and looted. Synagogues were burned, and women were dragged to the theater and forced to eat pork. Historian H. I. Bell reports that "men, women, and even children [were] beaten to death, dragged living through the streets, or flung on to improvised bonfires." {9} He also ignores the shift from religious persecution to racial persecution which occurred in the nineteenth century, notably in Russia.

Of course, this doesn't prove that Hitler *didn't* get his anti-Semitism from Christians; but it *does* mean that one should not immediately assume that Christian prejudice is at the root of anti-Semitism. There have been other causes as well. A

significant factor in Hitler's hatred of the Jews was the strong influence of *Darwinism* that led him to think that people who were racially or eugenically inferior needed to be eliminated from the evolving human race.[{10}](#)

Although some people already believed in the inferiority of some races, and although Darwinism wasn't Hitler's sole inspiration, Historian Richard Weikart writes, "Darwinism was a central, guiding principle of Nazi ideology, especially of Hitler's own world view." Weikart quotes Richard Evans, a historian at Cambridge University: "The real core of Nazi beliefs lay in the faith Hitler proclaimed in his speech of September 1938 in science—a Nazi view of science—as the basis for action. Science demanded the furtherance of the interests not of God but of the human race, and above all the German race and its future in a world ruled by ineluctable laws of Darwinian competition between races and between individuals." Weikart continues: "This is not a controversial claim by anti-evolutionists, but it is commonly recognized by scholars who study Nazism."[{11}](#)

A Fundamental Commitment to Atheism

One of the questionable assumptions in *Letter to a Christian Nation* is Sam Harris's assertion that "there is no question that human beings evolved from nonhuman ancestors."[{12}](#) Of course, there is indeed a question about this, a question raised by highly educated scientists easily as qualified as Mr. Harris.

It's no wonder, really, that Harris makes such bold statements. He is prevented from allowing the possibility of divine creation by his basic worldview commitments. He admits that he doesn't know why the universe exists, but he's confident there's no God behind it. That sounds like a philosophical presupposition. What evidence or reasons does he give for it? Harris might like to pretend that his beliefs are

based solely on the “trinity” of science, reason, and nature, but his naturalism cannot be established by these. Rather, it informs his use of them.

One of the (potentially!) maddening things about the arguments of atheists these days is their frequent silence with respect to any justification of their own basic worldview commitments. Harris goes so far as to claim that atheism isn't really a belief; that there shouldn't even *be* the word “atheism.”[\[13\]](#) Although “atheism” has long been understood to mean the belief that there is no God, many atheists today deny that. It isn't the belief that there is no God; it's simply an absence of belief in God.[\[14\]](#) It's a kind of “default” position, a “zero” belief, where everyone should be until given sufficient reasons to believe in God. Thus, the atheist has nothing to defend or prove.

But really, folks. Who's going to believe that atheists are belief-less about God, that they don't actually believe that there is no God? It's astonishing the effort they put forth in arguing against religious belief if indeed they have no belief at all.

However, we can go back and forth with atheists about whether they truly deny the existence of God, or we can let that stand and simply ask what they *do* believe about ultimate reality, for surely they believe *something*. It's simply false to assume that atheism is some kind of zero belief, that it involves no metaphysical commitments. If one denies God, one must have some other view about ultimate reality. Naturalism is a metaphysical position, and it has serious problems of its own.[\[15\]](#) If Christians are responsible to give good reasons for their belief in Christian theism, naturalistic atheists must give reasons for their naturalism.

Sam Harris speaks as a voice on high, shouting down to us poor, ignorant people who are stuck in our absurd religious beliefs. It's hard to imagine anyone with thoughtful

convictions changing his or her beliefs based on this book. He's preaching to the choir. Now that you have a few tips on what to look for, you might want to take a look at the book, and hear the rest of the "sermon."

Notes

1. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
2. Douglas Wilson addresses many of Harris's arguments in his *Letter from a Christian Citizen* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007) and Ravi Zacharias does the same in *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
3. Ibid., 22.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. Ibid., 33-34.
6. Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, "God And War: An Audit & An Exploration," <http://tinyurl.com/a2tpb>.
7. For more on this subject, see also Don Closson, "The Causes of War," Probe Ministries, 2008, www.probe.org/the-causes-of-war/.
8. Harris, *Letter*, 41.
9. H. I. Bell, "Anti-Semitism in Alexandria," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 31. (1941), pp. 1-18.
10. Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
11. Richard Weikart, "Re-examining the Darwin-Hitler Link," The Discovery Institute, http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/02/reexamining_the_darwinhitler_1.html.
12. Harris, *Letter*, 71.
13. Ibid., 51.
14. See Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, (Temple University Press, 1990), 463.
15. See Norman Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of*

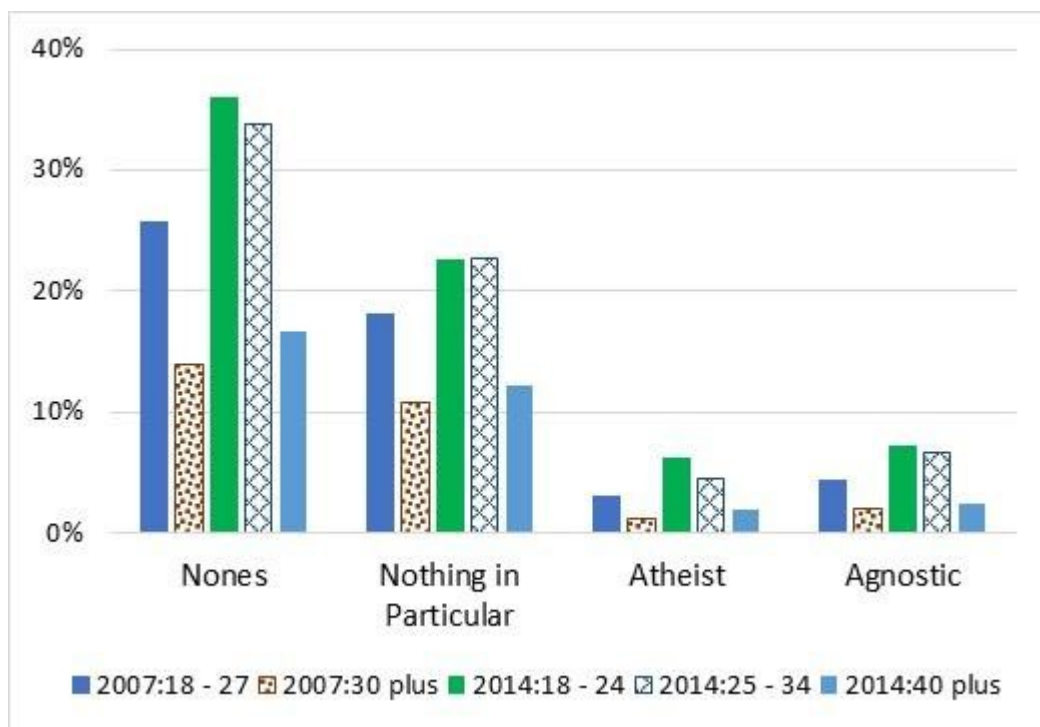
Update on Nones: Continuing to Dominate the Developing American Religious Scene

Steve Cable provides an update on those with no affiliation with religious traditions. It appears that soon, the majority of American emerging adults will identify as something other than a Christian.

Pew Research has done a great service to those who want to understand the current trends of religious beliefs in America. In 2007, they interviewed about 35,000 Americans to create the 2007 American Religious Landscape Study [{1}](#). Then in 2014, they interviewed a similar size group of Americans using many of the same questions (along with a few new or different questions) to create the 2014 American Religious Landscape Study [{2}](#). Most surveys of this nature include 1,000 to 3,000 respondents which limits their accuracy when considering subsets of the data by age, religious preference, education, ethnicity, etc. By collecting responses from such a large number of people, we can look at these subsets with a much greater level of confidence.

I want to begin by updating our understanding of the dominant religious trend in America this century: the so-called rise of the Nones [{3}](#). The Nones are those people who choose not to affiliate with any religious tradition. In the Pew survey, Nones include atheists, agnostics, and “nothing in particular”

respondents. We can understand how this phenomenon is growing by examining the results shown in Figure 1. People were asked “What is your present religion, if any?”



In Figure 1, the first group of bars reflects the percentage of Nones at different times (i.e. 2007 and 2014) and for different age segments. The first two bars show the percentage of Nones in 2007 for those between 18 and 27, and for those 30 years and older. As shown, over 25% of Americans under the age of 28 selected a None category. For those 30 and older, only 14% selected a None category. This was a tremendous growth over the levels up to the early 1990’s when the GSS survey^{4} reported 11% of those under 30 and 7% of those 30 and over.

But this amazing growth in Nones is far from over, as shown in the last three bars in the first group summarizing the response in 2014. As shown, the youngest group (ages 18 – 24) showed 36% selecting a None category. The group from 25 to 34 selected None at almost the same rate, 34%. This age group would have been 18 to 27 in 2007 when about 25% of them selected None. Over this seven-year period almost 10% of that age group switched from some other religion to None.

Some people suggest that these young adults will return to church as they begin raising children. What does the data say? Looking at a slightly older group, I compared those 23 to 32 in 2007 with those 30 to 39 in 2014. What I found follows the same trend: 23% of those in 2007 were Nones while 27% of those in 2014 were Nones. Even those over forty increased to 17% from 14%, a significant growth over the level only seven years earlier for those age 30 plus at the time. Thus, we see no trend of emerging adult Nones turning into church attending, Christians as they age in fact just the opposite. More of them are becoming Nones as they move towards middle age

The next three sets of bars break the Nones up into the three constituencies: Nothing in Particular, Atheist and Agnostic. About two thirds of Nones identify as Nothing in Particular with the remainder about evenly split between Atheist and Agnostic.

In my next post, we will see what these Nones believe about basic Christian doctrine and if they have a somewhat active spiritual life. And in later post, we will also look to see what religions these Nones identified with as children.

For now, our bottom line takeaway is that more than 46% of emerging adults (ages 18 through 29) identify with either another religion (10%) or None (36%), meaning that in a few short years **the majority of American emerging adults will identify as something other than a Christian**. If this trend concerns you, please take a look at our church-wide and small group study called Periscope. Periscope is targeted to address issues taking today's believer captive and blunting their witness to the world around them. For more information, go to www.upPeriscope.com.

1. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here.

The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

2. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

3. Stephen Cable, *The Rise of the Nones*, November 6, 2016, probe.org/the-rise-of-the-nones-reaching-the-lost-in-todays-america/

4. General Social Survey 1990, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the James Davis, Tom Smith and Peter Marsden.

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The New Atheists – Kerby Anderson Blog

Kerby Anderson writes that unlike the old-style atheists who were content to merely argue that Christianity is not true, the new atheists now argue that Christianity is dangerous.

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For centuries there has been conflict and debate between

atheists and Christianity. But the rise of what journalists are calling "The New Atheists" represents a significant change in the nature of the debate. "The New Atheists" is part reality and part journalistic catch phrase. It identifies the new players in the ongoing battle between science and religion.

Unlike the atheists who came before them who were content to merely argue that Christianity is not true, these new atheists now argue that Christianity is dangerous. It is one thing to argue about the *error* of Christianity, it is quite another to argue about the *evil* of Christianity.

Many of these authors have books in the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris is one of those books in the top ten. He goes beyond the traditional argument that suffering in the world proves there is no God. He argues that belief in God actually *causes* suffering in the world. He says, "That so much of this suffering can be directly attributed to religion—to religious hatreds, religious wars, religious delusions and religious diversions of scarce resources—is what makes atheism a moral and intellectual necessity." He argues that unless we renounce religious faith, religious violence will soon bring civilization to an end.

Response to his book has been glowing. One reader found the book to be "a wonderful source of ammunition for those who, like me, hold to no religious doctrine." Others enjoyed the pounding he gives Christianity. For them it "was like sitting ring side, cheering the champion, yelling 'Yes!' at every jab."

But Christians are not the only target of his criticism. Harris also argues that religious moderates and even theological liberals function as "enablers" of orthodox Christianity. His book is not only a criticism of Christians, but it is a call for tolerant people in the middle to get off

the fence and join these new atheists.

Another popular book is *The God Delusion* by Oxford professor Richard Dawkins. He says that religious belief is psychotic and arguments for the existence of God are nonsense. He wants to make respect for belief in God socially unacceptable.

He calls for atheists to identify themselves as such and join together to fight against the delusions of religious faith. He says, "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 are in the same position the gay movement was in a few decades ago. There was a need for people to come out."

Like Harris, Dawkins does not merely disagree with religious faith, but he disagrees with tolerating religious faith. He argues that religious people should not be allowed to teach these religious "myths" to their children, which Dawkins calls the "colonization of the brains of innocent tykes."

Dawkins hammers home the link between evolution and atheism. He believes that evolutionary theory must logically lead to atheism. And he states that he is not going to worry about the public relations consequences of tying evolution to atheism.

Daniel Dennett is another important figure and author of the book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. He does not use the harsh and critical rhetoric of the others, but still is able to argue his case that religion must be subjected to scientific evaluation. He believes that "neutral, scientifically informed education about every religion in the world should be mandatory in school" since "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."

In addition to the books by "The New Atheists" have been a number of others that have targeted Christian conservatives.

David Kuo wrote *Tempting Faith* to tell conservative Christians that they were taken for a ride by the administration that derided them behind closed doors. Add to this Michael Goldberg's *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* and Randall Balmer's *Thy Kingdom Come* and Kevin Phillips' *American Theocracy*. Each put the religious right in their crosshairs and pulled the trigger.

Many of these books border on paranoia. Consider James Rudin's book, *The Baptizing of America*. His opening paragraph says, "A specter is haunting America, and it is not socialism and certainly not communism. It is the specter of Americans kneeling in submission to a particular interpretation of a religion that has become an ideology, an all-encompassing way of life. It is the specter of our nation ruled by the extreme Christian right, who would make the United States a 'Christian nation' where their version of God's law supersedes all human law—including the Constitution. That, more than any other force in the world today, is the immediate and profound threat to our republic."

These comments move from anti-Christian bigotry to anti-Christian paranoia. Please, tell me who these dangerous Christian conservatives are so we can correct them. I interview many of the leaders and do not even hear a hint of this. If anything, these leaders want the judges to *follow* the Constitution not supercede it with another version (either secular or Christian).

Rudin goes on to argue that these Christian leaders would issue everyone a national ID card giving everyone's religious beliefs. Again, who are these people he is talking about? Frankly, I have not found anyone that wants a national ID card (either secular or Christian).

Nevertheless, Rudin maintains that "such cards would provide Christocrats with preferential treatment in many areas of life, including home ownership, student loans, employment and

education.” And the appointed religious censors would control all speech and outlaw dissent. Do you know we wanted to do that?

Clearly we are moving into a time in which atheists see religion as full of error and evil. And Christian conservatives are especially being singled out because of their belief in the truth of the Bible.

Christians should respond in three ways. First, we must always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15) and do it with gentleness and reverence. Second, we should trust in the power of the Gospel: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for all those who believe (Romans 1:16). Third, we should live godly lives before the world so that we may (by our good behavior) silence the ignorant talk of foolish men (1 Peter 2:15).

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Atheists and Their Fathers

How does one become an atheist? Does a person's relationship with his earthly father affect his relationship with his heavenly Father? These are some of the questions we will explore in this article as we talk about the book Faith of the Fatherless by Paul Vitz.

Vitz is a psychologist who was an atheist himself until his late thirties. He began to wonder if psychology played a role in one's belief about God. After all, secular psychologists have been saying that a belief in God is really nothing more than infantile wish fulfillment. Dr. Vitz wondered if the shoe was on the other foot. Could it be that atheists are engaged

in unconscious wish fulfillment?

After studying the lives of more than a dozen of the world's most influential atheists, Dr. Vitz discovered that they all had one thing in common: defective relationships with their fathers. The relationship was defective because the father was either dead, abusive, weak, or had abandoned the children. When he studied the lives of influential theists during those same historical time periods, he found they enjoyed a strong, loving relationship with a father (or a father substitute if the father was dead).

For example, Friedrich Nietzsche lost his father (who was a pastor) before his fifth birthday. One biographer wrote that Nietzsche was "passionately attached to his father, and the shock of losing him was profound." Dr. Vitz writes that Nietzsche had a "strong, intellectually macho reaction against a dead, very Christian father." Friedrich Nietzsche is best known as the philosopher who said, "God is dead." It certainly seems possible that his rejection of God and Christianity was a "rejection of the weakness of his father."

Contrast Nietzsche with the life of Blaise Pascal. This famous mathematician and religious writer lived at a time in Paris when there was considerable skepticism about religion. He nevertheless wrote *Les pensées* (Thoughts), a powerful and imaginative defense of Christianity, which also attacked skepticism. Pascal's father, Etienne, was a wealthy judge and also an able mathematician. He was known as a good man with religious convictions. Pascal's mother died when he was three, so his father gave up his law practice and home-schooled Blaise and his sisters.

Here we are going to look at the correlation between our relationship with our earthly father and our heavenly Father. No matter what our family background, we are still responsible for the choices we make. Growing up in an unloving home does not excuse us from rejecting God, but it does explain why some

people reject God. There may be a psychological component to their commitment to atheism.

Nietzsche and Freud

Friedrich Nietzsche is a philosopher who has influenced everyone from Adolph Hitler to the Columbine killers. His father was a Lutheran pastor who died of a brain disease before Nietzsche's fifth birthday. He often spoke positively of his father and said his death was a great loss, which he never forgot. One biographer wrote that Nietzsche was "passionately attached to his father, and the shock of losing him was profound."

It seems he associated the general weakness and sickness of his father with his father's Christianity. Nietzsche's major criticism of Christianity was that it suffers from an absence, even a rejection, of "life force." The God Nietzsche chose was Dionysius, a strong pagan expression of life force. It certainly seems possible that his rejection of God and Christianity was a "rejection of the weakness of his father."

Nietzsche's own philosophy placed an emphasis on the "superman" along with a denigration of women. Yet his own search for masculinity was undermined by the domination of his childhood by his mother and female relatives in a Christian household. Dr. Vitz says, "It is not surprising, then, that for Nietzsche Christian morality was something for women." He concludes that Nietzsche had a "strong, intellectually macho reaction against a dead, very Christian father who was loved and admired but perceived as sickly and weak."

Sigmund Freud despised his Jewish father, who was a weak man unable to support his family. Freud later wrote in two letters that his father was a sexual pervert, and that the children suffered as a result. Dr. Vitz believes that Freud's Oedipus Complex (which placed hatred of the father at the center of his psychology) was an expression of "his strong unconscious

hostility to and rejection of his own father.” His father was involved in a form of reformed Judaism but was also a weak, passive man with sexual perversions. Freud’s rejection of God and Judaism seems connected to his rejection of his father.

Both Nietzsche and Freud demonstrate the relationship between our attitudes toward our earthly father and our heavenly Father. In both cases, there seems to be a psychological component to their commitment to atheism.

Russell and Hume

Bertrand Russell was one of the most famous atheists of the last century. Both of Russell’s parents lived on the margin of radical politics. His father died when Bertrand Russell was four years old, and his mother died two years earlier. He was subsequently cared for by his rigidly puritanical grandmother, who was known as “Deadly Nightshade.” She was by birth a Scottish Presbyterian, and by temperament a puritan.

Russell’s daughter Katherine noted that his grandmother’s joyless faith was “the only form of Christianity my father knew well.” This ascetic faith taught that “the life of this world was no more than a gloomy testing ground for future bliss.” She concluded, “My father threw this morbid belief out the window.”

Dr. Vitz points out that Russell’s only other parent figures were a string of nannies to whom he often grew quite attached. When one of the nannies left, the eleven-year-old Bertrand was “inconsolable.” He soon discovered that the way out of his sadness was to retreat into the world of books.

After his early years of lost loves and later years of solitary living at home with tutors, Russell described himself in this way: “My most profound feelings have remained always solitary and have found in human things no companionship The sea, the stars, the night wind in waste places, mean

more to me than even the human beings I love best, and I am conscious that human affection is to me at bottom an attempt to escape from the vain search for God."

Another famous atheist was David Hume. He was born into a prominent and affluent family. He seems to have been on good terms with his mother as well as his brother and sister. He was raised as a Scottish Presbyterian but gave up his faith and devoted most of his writing to the topic of religion.

Like the other atheists we have discussed, David Hume fits the pattern. His father died when he was two years old. Biographies of his life mention no relatives or family friends who could serve as father-figures. And David Hume is known as a man who had no religious beliefs and spent his life raising skeptical arguments against religion in any form.

Both Russell and Hume demonstrate the relationship between our attitudes toward our earthly father and our heavenly Father. In each case, there is a psychological component to their commitment to atheism.

Sartre, Voltaire, and Feuerbach

Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the most famous atheists of the last century. His father died when he was fifteen months old. He and his mother lived with his maternal grandparents as his mother cultivated a very intimate relationship with him. She concentrated her emotional energy on her son until she remarried when Sartre was twelve. This idyllic and Oedipal involvement came to an end, and Sartre strongly rejected his stepfather.

In those formative years, Sartre's real father died, his grandfather was cool and distant, and his stepfather took his beloved mother away from him. The adolescent Sartre concluded to himself, "You know what? God doesn't exist." Commentators note that Sartre obsessed with fatherhood all his life and

never got over his fatherlessness. Dr. Vitz concludes that “his father’s absence was such a painful reality that Jean-Paul spent a lifetime trying to deny the loss and build a philosophy in which the absence of a father and of God is the very starting place for the good or authentic life.”

Another philosopher during the French Enlightenment disliked his father so much that he changed his name from Arouet to Voltaire. The two fought constantly. At one point Voltaire’s father was so angry with his son for his interest in the world of letters rather than taking up a career in law that he “authorized having his son sent to prison or into exile in the West Indies.” Voltaire was not a true atheist, but rather a deist who believed in an impersonal God. He was a strident critic of religion, especially Christianity with its understanding of a personal God.

Ludwig Feuerbach was a prominent German atheist who was born into a distinguished and gifted German family. His father was a prominent jurist who was difficult and undiplomatic with colleagues and family. The dramatic event in young Ludwig’s life must have been his father’s affair with the wife of one of his father’s friends. They lived together openly in another town, and she bore him a son. The affair began when Feuerbach was nine and lasted for nine years. His father publicly rejected his family, and years later Feuerbach rejected Christianity. One famous critic of religion said that Feuerbach was so hostile to Christianity that he would have been called the Antichrist if the world had ended then.

Each of these men once again illustrates the relationship between atheism and their fathers.

Burke and Wilberforce

British statesman Edmund Burke is considered by many as the founder of modern conservative political thought. He was partly raised by his grandfather and three affectionate

uncles. He later wrote of his Uncle Garret, that he was "one of the very best men, I believe that ever lived, of the clearest integrity, the most genuine principles of religion and virtue."

His writings are in direct opposition to the radical principles of the French Revolution. One of his major criticisms of the French Revolution was its hostility to religion: "We are not converts of Rousseau; we are not the disciples of Voltaire; Helevetius has made no progress amongst us. Atheists are not our preachers." For Burke, God and religion were important pillars of a just and civil society.

William Wilberforce was an English statesman and abolitionist. His father died when he was nine years old, and he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle. He was extremely close to his uncle and to John Newton who was a frequent visitor to their home. Newton was a former slave trader who converted to Christ and wrote the famous hymn "Amazing Grace." Wilberforce first heard of the evils of slavery from Newton's stories and sermons, "even reverencing him as a parent when [he] was a child." Wilberforce was an evangelical Christian who went on to serve in parliament and was instrumental in abolishing the British slave trade.

As mentioned earlier, Blaise Pascal was a famous mathematician and religious writer. Pascal's father was a wealthy judge and also an able mathematician, known as a good man with religious convictions. Pascal's mother died when he was three, so his father gave up his law practice and home-schooled Blaise and his sisters. Pascal went on to powerfully present a Christian perspective at a time when there was considerable skepticism about religion in France.

I believe Paul Vitz provides an important look at atheists and theists in his book *Faith of the Fatherless*. The prominent atheists of the last few centuries all had defective relationships with their fathers while the theists enjoyed a

strong, loving relationship with a father or a father substitute. This might be something to compassionately consider the next time you witness to an atheist.

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