

# Answering the New Atheists – A Christian Addresses Their Arguments

*Kerby Anderson counters the claim by popular new atheists that Christianity (along with other religions) is blind, irrational and without any evidence. Kerby demonstrates that contrary to the atheists' claims God is not an invention of mankind, that faith is not dangerous, and that science and Christianity support one another. From a Christian point of view, the new atheists are bringing out tired old arguments that don't stand up to rational scrutiny.*

## Is Faith Irrational?

Many of the best selling books over the last few years have been written by the New Atheists. I'd like to consider some of the criticisms brought by these individuals and provide brief answers. You may never meet one of these authors, but you are quite likely to encounter these arguments as you talk with people who are skeptical about Christianity.

✖ For our discussion, we will be using the general outline of the book *Is God Just a Human Invention?* written by Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow.[\[1\]](#) I would encourage you to read the book for a fuller discussion not only of the topics considered here but of many others as well.

You cannot read a book by the New Atheists without encountering their claim that religion is blind, irrational, and without any evidence. Richard Dawkins makes his feelings known by the title of one of his books: *The God Delusion*.

Why does he say that? He says religions are not evidentially based: "In all areas except religion, we believe what we

believe as a result of evidence.”{2} In other words, religious faith is a blind faith not based upon evidence like other academic disciplines. So he concludes that religion is a “nonsensical enterprise” that “poisons everything.”{3}

Each of the New Atheists makes a similar statement. Dawkins states that faith is a delusion, a “persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence.”{4} Daniel Dennett claims Christians are addicted to blind faith.{5} And Sam Harris argues that “Faith is generally nothing more than the permission religious people give one another to believe things without evidence.”{6}

Is this true? Do religious people have a blind faith? Certainly some religious people exercise blind faith. But is this true of all religions, including Christianity? Of course not. The enormous number of Christian books on topics ranging from apologetics to theology demonstrate that the Christian faith is based upon evidence.

But we might turn the question around on the New Atheists. You say that religious faith is not based upon evidence. What is your evidence for that broad, sweeping statement? Where is the evidence for your belief that faith is blind?

Orthodox Christianity has always emphasized that faith and reason go together. Biblical faith is based upon historical evidence. It is not belief in spite of the evidence, but it is belief because of the evidence.

The Bible, for example, says that Jesus appeared to the disciples and provided “many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

Peter appealed to evidence and to eyewitnesses when he preached about Jesus as “a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22).

The Christian faith is not a blind faith. It is a faith based upon evidence. In fact, some authors contend that it takes more faith to be an atheist than to believe in God.[\[7\]](#)

## Is God a Human Invention?

Human beings are religious. We are not only talking about people in the past who believe in God. Billions of people today believe in God. Why? The New Atheists have a few explanations for why people believe in God even though they say God does not exist.

One explanation that goes all the way back to Sigmund Freud is projection. He wrote that religious beliefs are “illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind.”[\[8\]](#) In other words, we project the existence of God based on a human need. It is wish fulfillment. We wish there would be a God, so we assume that he exists.

As Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow point out in their book, there are five good reasons to reject this idea. One objection is that Freud’s argument begs the question. In other words, it assumes that there is no God and then merely tries to find an explanation for why someone would believe in God anyway.

The projection theory can also cut both ways. If you argue that humans created God out of a need for security, then you could also just as easily argue that atheists believe there is no God because they want to be free and unencumbered by a Creator who might make moral demands on them.

Perhaps the reasons humans have a desire for the divine is because that is the only thing that will satisfy their spiritual hunger. C.S. Lewis argued that “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desires: well, there is such a thing as

sex. If I find in myself a desire, which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. Probably earthly pleasures were never made to satisfy it, but only arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”[{9}](#)

Some atheists suggest that perhaps we are genetically wired to believe in God. One example would be the book by Dean Hamer entitled *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*. It is worth noting that even the author thought the title was overstated and at least admitted that there “probably is no single gene.”[{10}](#) Since the publication of the book, its conclusions have been shown to be exaggerated. Francis Collins served as the director of the Human Genome Project and has plainly stated that there is no gene for spirituality.

Richard Dawkins believes that religious ideas might have survived natural selection as “units of cultural inheritance.”[{11}](#) He calls these genetic replicators *memes*. Although he has coined the term, he is also quick to acknowledge that we don’t know what memes are or where they might reside.

One critic said that “Memetics is no more than a cumbersome terminology for saying what everybody knows and that can be more usefully said in the dull terminology of information transfer.”[{12}](#) Alister McGrath perceives a flaw: “Since the meme is not warranted scientifically, we are to conclude that there is a meme for belief in memes? The meme concept then dies the slow death of self-referentiality, in that, if taken seriously, the idea explains itself as much as anything else.”[{13}](#)

There is another explanation that we can find in the Bible. Why do most people believe in a God? The writer of Ecclesiastes (3:11) observes that it is God who has “set eternity in the hearts of men.”

# Is Religion Dangerous?

The New Atheists contend that religion is not just false; it's also dangerous. Sam Harris believes it should be treated like slavery and eradicated.[\[14\]](#) Christopher Hitchens wants to rally his fellow atheists against religion: "It has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it."[\[15\]](#) Richard Dawkins is even more specific: "I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been invented."[\[16\]](#)

Much of the criticism against religion revolves around violence. We do live in a violent world, and religion has often been the reason (or at least the justification) for violent acts. But the New Atheists are kidding themselves if they think that a world without religion would usher in a utopia where there is no longer violence, oppression, or injustice.

Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow point out in their book on the New Atheists that details matter when you are examining religion. Injustices by the Taliban in Afghanistan ought not to be used as part of the cumulative cases against religion in general or Christianity in particular. The fact that there are Muslim terrorists in the world today does not mean that all Muslims are dangerous. And it certainly doesn't mean that Christianity is dangerous.

Alister McGrath reminds us that "all ideals—divine, transcendent, human or invented—are capable of being abused. That's just the way human nature is. And that happens to religion as well. Belief in God can be abused, and we need to be very clear, in the first place, that abuse happens, and in the second, that we need to confront and oppose this. But abuse of an ideal does not negate its validity."[\[17\]](#)

Religion is not the problem. People are the problem because they are sinful and live in a fallen world. Keith Ward puts

this in perspective:

*No one would deny that there have been religious wars in human history. Catholics have fought Protestants, Sunni Muslims have fought Shi'a Muslims, and Hindus have fought Muslims. However, no one who has studied history could deny that most wars in human history have not been religious. And in the case of those that have been religious, the religious component has usually been associated with some non-religious, social, ethnic, or political component that has exerted a powerful influence on the conflicts.*[\*{18}\*](#)

The New Atheists, however, still want to contend that religion is dangerous while refusing to accept that atheism has been a major reason for death and destruction. If you were to merely look at body count, the three atheistic regimes of the twentieth century (Hitler in Nazi Germany, Stalin in Russia, and Mao in China) are responsible for more than 100 million deaths.

Dinesh D'Souza explains that "Religion-inspired killing simply cannot compete with the murders perpetrated by atheist regimes." Even when you take into account the differences in the world's population, he concludes that "death caused by Christian rulers over a five-hundred-year period amounts to only 1 percent of the deaths caused by Stalin, Hitler, and Mao in the space of a few decades."[\*{19}\*](#)

Religion is not the problem; people are the problem. And removing religion and God from a society doesn't make it less dangerous. The greatest death toll in history took place in the last century in atheistic societies.

## **Is the Universe Just Right for Life?**

The New Atheists argue that even though the universe looks like it was designed, the laws of science can explain

everything in the universe without God. Richard Dawkins, for example, says that "A universe with a creative superintendent would be a very different kind of universe from one without."[{20}](#)

Scientists have been struck by how the laws that govern the universe are delicately balanced. One scientist used the analogy of a room full of dials (each representing a different physical constant). All of the dials are set perfectly. Move any dial to the left or to the right and you no longer have the universe. Some scientists have even called the universe a "Goldilocks universe" because all of the physical constants are "just right."

British astronomer Fred Hoyle remarked, "A commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature."[{21}](#)

McDowell and Morrow provide a number of examples of the fine tuning of the universe. First is the expansion rate of the universe. "If the balance between gravity and the expansion rate were altered by one part in one million, billion, billion, billion, billion, billion, there would be no galaxies, stars, planets, or life."[{22}](#) Second is the fine tuning of ratio of the electromagnetic force to the gravitational force. That must be balanced to one part in 10 to the 40<sup>th</sup> power. That is 1 with 40 zeroes following it.

Scientists also realize that planet Earth has extremely rare conditions that allow it to support life at a time when most of the universe is uninhabitable. Consider just these six conditions: (1) Life must be in the right type of galaxy, (2) life must be in the right location in the galaxy, (3) life must have the right type of star, (4) life must have the right relationship to the host star, (5) life needs surrounding planets for protection, and (6) life requires the right type

of moon.[{23}](#)

Scientists (including the New Atheists) are aware of the many fine tuned aspects of the universe. They respond by pointing out that since we could only exist in a fine-tuned universe, we shouldn't be surprised that it is fine tuned. But merely claiming that we could not observe ourselves except in such a universe doesn't really answer the question why we are in one in the first place.

Richard Dawkins admits that there is presently no naturalistic explanation for the fine-tuning of the universe.[{24}](#) But he is quick to add that doesn't argue for the existence of God. And that is certainly true. We know about God and His character from revelation, not from scientific observation and experimentation. But we do see the evidence that the design of the universe implies a Designer.

## **Are Science and Christianity in Conflict?**

The New Atheists believe that science and Christianity are in conflict with one another. They trust science and the scientific method, and therefore reject religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Sam Harris says, "The conflict between religion and science is unavoidable. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science."[{25}](#)

Richard Dawkins believes religion is anti-intellectual. He says: "I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise . . . . It subverts science and saps the intellect."[{26}](#)

Are science and Christianity at odds with one another? Certainly there have been times in the past when that has been the case. But to only focus on those conflicts is to miss the

larger point that modern science grew out of a Christian world view. In a [previous radio program](#) based upon the book *Origin Science* by Dr. Norman Geisler and me, I explain Christianity's contribution to the rise of modern science.{27}

Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow also point out in their book that most scientific pioneers were theists. This includes such notable as Nicolas Copernicus, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, Johannes Kepler, Louis Pasteur, Francis Bacon, and Max Planck. Many of these men actually pursued science because of their belief in the Christian God.

Alister McGrath challenges this idea that science and religion are in conflict with one another. He says, "Once upon a time, back in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was certainly possible to believe that science and religion were permanently at war. . . . This is now seen as a hopelessly outmoded historical stereotype that scholarship has totally discredited." {28}

The New Atheists believe they have an answer to this argument. Christopher Hitchens discounts the religious convictions of their scientific pioneers. He argues that belief in God was the only option for a scientist at the time.{29} But if religious believers get no credit for the positive contributions to science (e.g., developing modern science) because "everyone was religious," then why should their negative actions (e.g., atrocities done in the name of religion) discredit them? It is a double standard. The argument actually ignores how a biblical worldview shaped the scientific enterprise.{30}

The arguments of the New Atheists may sound convincing, but once you strip away the hyperbole and false charges, there isn't much left.

If you would like to know how to answer the arguments of the New Atheists, I suggest you visit the Probe Web page at

[www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org) and also consider getting a copy of the book by Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow. You will be able to answer the objections of atheists and be better equipped to defend your faith.

## Notes

Is God Just a Human Invention? (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010).

2. Richard Dawkins, "The Faith Trap," 20 March 2010, [bit.ly/fFvLLJ](http://bit.ly/fFvLLJ).

3. Ibid.

4. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 28.

5. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 230-231.

6. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 110.

7. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

8. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1989), 38.

9. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 119-122).

10. Quote of Dean Hamer in Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 263.

11. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 316.

12. Victor Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007), 257.

13. David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretension* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 26-27.

14. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 87.

15. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 283.

16. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 36.

17. Alister McGrath, "Challenges from Atheism," in *Beyond*

- Opinion*, ed. Ravi Zacharias (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 31.
18. Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 73.
19. Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2007), 215.
20. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 78.
21. Quoted in Paul Davies, *The Accidental Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 118.
22. Mark Whorton and Hill Roberts, *Holman QuickSource Guide to Understanding Creation* ((Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2008), 308.
23. Sean McDowell, "Is There Any Evidence for God? Physics and Astronomy," *The Apologetics Study Bible for Students*, gen. ed. Sean McDowell (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010).
24. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 188.
25. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 63.
26. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 321.
27. "Origin Science," [www.probe.org/origin-science/](http://www.probe.org/origin-science/).
28. Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 46.
29. "The Jewish God, the Christian God, or No God?" Debate between Christopher Hitchens, Dennis Prager, and Dinesh D'Souza, 1 May 2008.
30. Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton, *The Soul of Science* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

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# Welcome to College: Great

# Worldview Gift for Graduates

The world is changing so quickly it's hard to keep up. Christians who take the Scriptures seriously as a guide for life and knowing God usually agree that we're sliding down a very slippery slope morally and spiritually. Non-biblical worldviews not only abound but gain star status. Christ-followers can easily feel overwhelmed, wondering how to make a difference. Nowhere is this cultural decay more manifest than on college campuses.

For years, my wife and I have seized the small window of opportunity of choosing a gift for a college-bound graduate. We realize this represents one good chance to help shape a still-moldable life and, by extension, potentially touch the culture for Christ. 'Tis the season of graduation right now and I invite you to consider following suit.

Our habit is to give college-bound graduates J. Budiszewski's excellent *How to Stay Christian in College: An Interactive Guide to Keeping the Faith*. I recently discovered a book by a new graduate that I'm adding to our graduation gift bag. It's a helpful-older-brother styled "guide for the journey" by a young man who has obviously been trained by some of the sharpest minds in contemporary Christian worldview thinking and apologetics.

If Probe ever hired someone to write an organizational brochure, it might be Jonathan Morrow. His book, *Welcome to College: A Christ-Follower's Guide for the Journey*, contains one of the most succinct rationales for what we do—*Christian apologetics*, that is, a defense of the faith—of anything I've read. Morrow's gift for profound insight coupled with brevity is keen. He shows a sweeping knowledge, yet he includes just enough material for busy students. "I have tried to keep the chapters short and sweet since this won't be the only thing you'll be reading this semester," Morrow writes.

Morrow's experience as a recent college graduate and his unself-conscious approach should resonate with younger readers. I would have wanted to write this book when my street credibility with young readers was potentially higher, but I was nowhere near his level of maturity, awareness or comprehension in my 20s!

Of course, some would say Morrow's work is simply a *Cliff's Notes* version of all he's been taught at Biola University, Talbot School of Theology, and through apparent involvement with Campus Crusade for Christ. There is little or no truly original thinking here, perhaps. So be it.

Sure, this material is generally sprinkled throughout any well-read Christians' bookshelves, expounded profusely by the authors Morrow draws upon. But that's the genius of his book for today's graduate: a young yet well-schooled voice covering the gamut of worldview *and* personal life issues in brief, accessible terms.

The young man or woman being pummeled by secular professors—many of whose worldviews and intentions are in direct opposition to their Christian faith—need help *now*. This book makes that possible.

*Welcome to College* isn't filled with abstractions about controversial Bible passages or archaeological discoveries, interesting as that might be. Again, one strength of *Welcome to College* is its scope. Mixed in with the basic faith-defending ammunition like the problem of evil and suffering, Christology, ethics and so on, students will find a broad collection of pragmatic topics: health, sex and dating, finances, Internet use, alcohol, even a chapter on dealing with the death of a loved one. This provides unique and much-needed help for navigating the head-spinning new freedoms of college life.

Not content to simply write a how-to-get-by manual, Morrow

challenges students to consider the privilege of a college education and “spend it ‘Christianly’.” He discusses questions like:

- *How can you discover what you are supposed to do with your life?*
- *How do you share your faith in a hostile environment?*
- *How do you manage your time so that you can study and have fun?*
- *Is all truth relative?*
- *Are there good reasons to be a Christian?*
- *How should you think about dating and sex as a Christian?*[{1}](#)

Since the book offers in its beginning chapters a treatment of three major worldviews, I could have been reading one of our [Probe Student Mind Games](#) graduates. One of the first sessions in Probe’s basic student curriculum contains a session on *theism*, *naturalism* (with a sub-section on *postmodernism*), and *pantheism*. Morrow uses a nearly identical breakdown of worldviews: *scientific naturalism*, *postmodernism* and *Christian theism*.

As Morrow directly points out, these three systems of thought predominate at the root level for people of all cultures. You base your beliefs on one or more of these, knowingly or not. Great similarity between a new book and a worldview apologetics curriculum like Probe’s may be unsurprising. How many variations on basic themes could there be? Yet it is striking as a compact manifesto for what Morrow, his alma mater, Probe, and a growing host of authors and organizations are seeking to do, which is to *help people think biblically*.

The fundamental importance of another theme appears, as it should, in the book’s opening pages as well. College kids need to enter post-secondary classrooms with eyes wide open, being aware that the world at large (and academia in particular)

scoffs at the idea of religion as possessing absolute, universal truth. Nancy Pearcey's treatment of what she calls the *fact / value split* in contemporary culture has become a go-to concept of culturally aware apologetics.[\[2\]](#) It also informs Morrow's book. This "two-realm theory of truth" places religious claims into an upper story of noncognitive, nonrational values. They supposedly offer the individual some personal meaning but hold no truth-telling power over anything or for anyone else. "True for you but not for me" is the slogan. This "upstairs" portion of life is just opinions—private, personal preferences not fit for the public sphere.

In contrast, the supposed lower story is made up of rational, verifiable, scientific claims that are binding on everyone. This is not opinion; it's truth by gosh. On this view, the only possible source of real knowledge is verifiable science. One professor in New York told his class that anyone who believed in the supernatural was "an idiot." That's why such war stories involving unwitting Christian students getting broadsided by scoffing professors abound. Academic authorities simply pronounce knowledge unattainable outside of the scientific method.

But understanding the anatomy of this view and its faulty presuppositions equips believing students to challenge prevailing campus biases. Though Morrow offers only a passing understanding, any student interested in pursuing further help will find direction here.

One example of Morrow's agility with big, tough ideas is this statement rounding out his brief discussion of one major worldview: "Postmodernism is a fundamental redefinition of truth, language and reality." Elsewhere he writes:

*If the Christian worldview best answers the most profound of human questions (e.g., where we came from, who we are, how we should live, why the world is such a mess, and what our*

*ultimate destiny is, to name a few) then it is true for more than just two hours on a Sunday morning.*[{3}](#)

That's just good writing!

Given its forty-two chapters, I only sampled the book. But that's in keeping with the reality of any busy, overwhelmed new (or not so new) college reader. Its usefulness lies partially in its accessibility as a reference. If questions arise in class or due to new life experiences, undergrads (others, too) can crack the book and get a quick, cogent, biblical viewpoint on it.

Chapter titles like "Ladies: Pursue the Real Beauty" may pull readers in before felt needs drive them there. Many others like "Discovering the Will of God," "Ethics in a Brave New World" or "Science Rules!" lend themselves to future thumbing on an as-needed basis. The *Big Ideas* chapter summations will serve as a useful preview, refresher, and set of talking points for young faith-defenders.

One surprising thought I had while reading the chapter entitled "Getting Theological: Knowing and Loving God" was its value as an evangelistic tool. If I met an average inquirer or skeptic who is unaware of the unified biblical *metanarrative* (big story) of Christianity—asking, *What is it you Christians really believe?*—I'd hand them *Welcome to College* bookmarked here. Morrow gives the doctrinal summary of the story, anyway. Here once again, clarity and brevity meets with completeness and orthodoxy.

Kudos to Morrow and his editors, not to mention all the fine teachers whose wisdom permeates the pages: Dallas Willard and William Lane Craig, Craig Hazen and Nancy Pearcey and many others. Simply refer to the endnotes and Further Reading sections at each chapters' end for a collection of apologetics resources for the ages.

And don't forget to consider adding this book to your gift list for graduates and students at all levels. You may help a young person to understand Morrow's charge that:

*God has already defined reality; it is our job to respond thoughtfully and engage it appropriately. Don't buy into the lie that you need to keep your Christian faith to yourself. It is personal, but not private. As a college student you have the opportunity to establish the biblical habit of living an integrated life for God's glory. In other words, think Christianly!*[\[4\]](#)

## Notes

1. Jonathan Morrow, *Welcome to College: A Christ-Followers Guide for the Journey* (Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008), Amazon Kindle version locations 97-103.
2. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (1995 Wheaton, IL: Crossway) p. 20ff.
3. Morrow, Amazon Kindle version locations 197-201.
4. Ibid, 222-226.

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