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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