

A Theologian Answers the Atheists

by Father Thomas D. Williams, LC

Unless you've spent the last few years in a mountain hermitage, you have almost certainly run into the latest rash of anti-God books. And a rash it is, since the very mention of a Supreme Being makes these professional atheists break out in hives. But they are scratching all the way to the bank, as several of these recent diatribes have become best-sellers, showing once again that religion-bashing never truly goes out of style.

In the wake of *The Da Vinci Code*, a series of books have jumped on the lucrative religion-debunking bandwagon. It started with *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, and has been followed by Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Daniel C. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and more recently by Christopher Hitchens' 2007 work *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. These best-sellers are accompanied by reams of lesser works, attesting to the power of atheism as the newest cottage industry.

Though varying slightly in tone and emphasis, these books bear a remarkable resemblance to one another. First, they all latch onto the worst historical errors of religious people and extrapolate them to apply to all believers everywhere. Thus, the meekest Buddhist monk off in Nepal is guilty by association of the crimes of the most fanatical Islamic suicide bomber, and Francis of Assisi and Billy Graham are tarred with the same brush as Osama Bin Laden and the Ayatollah Khomeini. All religions (and believers) are thrown together into the same pot as if they were interchangeable. No attempt is made to distinguish between religious fanaticism and religious belief. The authors jump to the conclusion that the root of any problem isn't the radical strain of religion in question, but belief in God itself. Second, all of these authors toss impartiality out the window in their passionate campaign against God.

One of the more irritating aspects of these books is the studious avoidance of arguments and examples that would contradict their preconceived thesis. The selection of data is so thoroughly biased that one often has the sensation of reading cheap propaganda. From their biblical citations to their historical examples, the neo-atheists pick and choose their information with barely a veneer of objective investigation. One example that illustrates this well is the authors' silence concerning the many marked benefits of religion to humanity. The atheists deliberately ignore the mountain of evidence available — empirical evidence — that ties charity to religious and specifically Christian belief. The founding of schools, hospitals, orphanages, universities, hospices and general aid to the poor has marked Christianity from the outset, yet finds no acknowledgement in these works. Whenever they are forced to acknowledge some good action of a religious person, they are quick to say that such benevolence was done in spite of their religion rather than because of it.

Third, despite the facade of novelty presented by these authors, there is really nothing new in the arguments they raise. They seem to be only now discovering Sigmund Freud or Friedrich Nietzsche or Charles Darwin and presenting their findings as if they had unearthed the Holy Grail, when, in fact, these arguments have been mulled over and often surpassed in the intervening 150-odd years since these thinkers had their heyday. The result is that they present their warmed-over criticisms with the flourish of a comic fencer confidently declaring touché at every turn, while never really striking his opponent. The fact is that, try as I might, I could not find in these books one pro-atheist argument that hadn't already been better expounded by Voltaire or Comte or Feuerbach or Marx or Russell or Freud himself — all of which had already received ample attention, and thoroughly compelling refutation.

This is especially important for those who wonder whether these new atheists have discovered a fatal flaw in Christianity and in religion in general that could topple religious belief. In reality, it's just the new, K-Mart version of the same old song and dance. In the following weeks, I will address some of the recurring criticisms against God and religion found in the neo-atheist tracts. This series bears the title *A Theologian Answers the Atheists About God*. Though I am answering the objections of atheists, these essays are not written especially for them. I am writing rather for Catholics who may feel threatened by these books, and who are looking for answers to share with their friends or others who may challenge them on these points.

Many Catholics instinctively know the criticisms raised in these books are specious but lack ready answers to reply to those who come at them with such protests. I hope to supply them with the answers they seek, and in this way to respond to the call of the great apostle Peter, who urged Christians: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15-16).

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