

*The 'new' atheism? Or just the same 'old' atheism?*

Having been an atheist for most of my 40-odd years, I find myself wondering what exactly the 'new' atheism is. Much rhetoric has been flung back and forth on this topic in the press and elsewhere, but try as I might, I cannot find anything to distinguish the putative 'newness' from the old atheism on which I cut my free-thinking teeth.

It's not that there are new arguments to consider. A textbook in Philosophy of Religion from 1900 looks pretty much the same as one from 2000, though the recent one will have more of the whiz-bangs that publishers think help keep students interested. But the lack of new ideas is not the fault of atheism, new or old. The same old arguments keep getting trotted out by generation after generation of theist, with renewed avowals that this time they really prove something. Both sides 'disagree to disagree', and keep on much as ever.

Lately, there has been a fair bit of media attention given to the new atheism, but the media are notorious for latching onto any story-of-the-week and pumping it for all it's worth, until it is dropped for the Next Big Thing. (Sorry sheaf, but you know it's true.) In any case, the popularity of 'unbelief' has risen and fallen with the shift in political winds from relatively more liberal to relatively more conservative, while avowed atheists have remained a minority.

Critics of the new atheism, like Chris Hedges, have issued some strange charges: the new atheists are as guilty of dogmatism and fundamentalism as their religious opponents. Never mind, apparently, that if you don't have 'fundamentals', you can't be 'fundamentalist'. Rational or scientific dogmatism would be oxymoronic, or maybe just moronic. When you strip off the conceptual errors, the charge seems to be 'extremism', but basing one's beliefs in reasoned argument is extreme only in honest thoughtfulness. Really, the problem seems only to be that the new atheists are talking about it out loud -- they are 'out' as atheists, as Richard Dawkins puts it.

Perhaps what the new atheists have done is try to answer an old complaint against them: that life has no mystery or value in the absence of God. So, for example, Dawkins points out that an evolved universe contributes much more in sheer wonder than a hoi-presto! creation, the details of which are never open to scrutiny. Others have developed evolutionary accounts of morality, or have investigated what might have come before the Big Bang (and no, there is no *creatio ex nihilo* back there). By contrast, the sort of mystery and meaning that believers seem to have in mind is only available to those who carefully refrain from probing too deeply into God's creation.

But no atheist worth her salt ever bought the meaninglessness-without-God claim anyway. If this was true, the world of competing religions (the ones who don't have the God-without-which-meaninglessness) would be just as meaningless as the world of the atheist, but only atheism seems to provoke this peculiar animus, not Hinduism or Judaism. Sure, in an ecumenical spirit, one might insist that all religions share in something of God's blessing, but this never seems to come up when it comes time to worship Jesus or Allah.