

## The Case Against God

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*The Sea of Faith*  
*Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore*  
*Lay like the fold of a bright girdle furl'd*  
*But now I only hear*  
*Its melancholy long, withdrawing roar,*  
*Retreating . . .*  
—from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1851)

**Well, the tide has turned.** The "Sea of Faith" is roaring back to shore, threatening a tsunami. Or so it seems to the authors of a spate of recent books intended not merely to build levees to hold off the rushing waters of religion, but to repel their power and speed their evaporation with the heat of atheist polemics.

That these "new atheist" authors have to fight this fight at all comes as something of an historical surprise. The retreat of religion has been, at least from an elite Eurocentric perspective, a trend for four hundred years, and no reversal was expected. By the mid-19th century, when Matthew Arnold heard only faith's melancholy withdrawal, God looked to be a terminal case, and by century's end, Nietzsche had memorably issued the death certificate.

**As Mark Lilla tells the story in *The Stillborn God*,** the deity's demise began when 'He' was replaced by social rationality as the basis of legitimate political authority. In the 16th and 17th centuries, much blood and treasure were lost in the contest to decide which God would be sovereign. In response to the havoc, Thomas Hobbes made the decisive, radical breakthrough in political theory by asserting that political legitimacy can be based on meeting human needs. Government is grounded in its worldly effectiveness, with no heavenly mandate required for legitimate political authority.

Simultaneous with the Lord's dismissal from a role in running politics was a shrinking role for God in running the natural world. Enlightenment science uncovered a natural world of mechanical cause and effect, pulled not in accordance with God's far-seeing will but by matter and energy, which are blind and have no wills. Charles Darwin's achievement seemed the last nail in the coffin for theism. Before Darwin, life's exquisitely functional complexity strongly suggested a designing mind as its fabricator. Darwin replaced The Mind with the marvelous but mindless 'designing' power, over the eons, of natural selection.

Already by the late 18th century, astronomer and mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace “had no need of this [God] hypothesis,” and the U.S. Constitution spoke of “We the People,” not God, as the foundation of the state. Politically and epistemologically, God was marginalized. Scientists and statesmen were all going godless.

As God pined away, with little sympathy and even a ‘good riddance’ attitude from some intellectuals, another section of the intelligentsia fretted over God’s demise. They thought religious belief brought something valuable to our social and emotional lives. While they neither could nor wanted to revive the traditional concept of God, which fomented civil strife and impeded science, they sought a refurbished God concept, one that managed to inspire morality, stimulate creativity, stay despair, and provide solace, yet without being culturally specific, irrationally demanding, or empirically meddling (except, perhaps in the initial set-up). Lilla traces the career of this refurbished God and judges that it hardly ever came to significant life — hence the “stillborn” God.

**Whether or not that refurbished God really did die at its nativity** is a question we shall return to later; but the one thing today’s new atheists hold in common with traditional believers is the opinion that this refurbished God — the God of sophisticated, liberal theologians (Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Kaplan) and abstruse philosophers (Spinoza, Hegel, Whitehead) — doesn’t deserve to live. ‘He’ is not God enough. According to Christopher Hitchens’ *God Is Not Great*, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a founding member of the anti-Nazi Confessing Church, believes only in a “nebulous humanism.” Hitchens has no beef with this humanism, apart from its being mislabeled ‘God.’ In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, as he usually does, puts the new atheists’ case most clearly: “[I]f the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is ‘appropriate for us to worship.’ ”

Sam Harris similarly begins his book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, in solidarity with traditional Christians’ rejection of modern, liberal theology. Harris assures Christians that he, unlike liberal theologians, takes Christian belief in God to mean what most Christians think it means: that Jesus really did perform miracles, really was resurrected, really will return. Real Christians, Harris says, don’t take these as symbolic or metaphorical propositions, and neither will he. Harris respects their beliefs too much to misinterpret them as tropes — he just thinks, along with Dawkins and Hitchens, that these beliefs, honestly and straightforwardly interpreted, are false and pernicious. It is these beliefs in the traditional God that the new atheists want to put in the docket (although they also charge liberal theology as an accessory).

The urgency of their indictment is fueled by the sense that old-time religion, assumed to be withering away by the European bourgeoisie and their spiritual fellow travelers, is now virulently vibrant. We had thought, say the new atheists, that our Enlightenment forebears, the old atheists, had triumphed in the decisive struggle against oppressive superstition. But Hindu fanaticism, messianic settler Judaism, New Age mysticism, and most especially, reactionary, murderous Islamic jihadiism and reactionary, moralistic American Christian fundamentalism, have

convinced the new atheists that the battle for rationality and humanism still rages, is as important as ever, and may well be lost. *Aux armes!*

**Here, in sum, is the new atheists' anti-God brief:** Belief in God, as traditionally conceived, lies somewhere between very probably false and manifestly absurd. In addition to being untrue, it is a pernicious belief that has caused horrific suffering and continues to cause serious harm. Whatever good has been motivated by theistic belief would likely have occurred without it, and no future good is dependent upon it. More sophisticated, liberal conceptions of God may be innocuous in and of themselves, but they are devoid of much content and useless. Moreover, they provide cover and respectability to the noxious beliefs of traditional theism.

The new atheist case is powerful, and all of its advocates under review make it with good writing and more or less venomous humor. These are often angry, as well as rollickingly funny, indictments. Sam Harris reads like hard-hitting journalism — concise, occasionally unfair, but always pointed and punchy. Hitchens, more often unfair, is also more literary, digressive, and wrathful in his delectable skewering of religious absurdities and abominations. The most thorough, well-wrought presentation of the prosecution, however, witty and pointed but not at the expense of the argument, is Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, which is the best comprehensive survey for the general reader of the current case against theism.

Dawkins walks the reader through the venerable philosophical arguments meant to prove God's existence, and their equally venerable refutations. The cosmological argument — that we need God to get things going — is shown to be question-begging. The ontological argument — that God, correctly understood, must be conceived of as existing — is shown to be either outright fallacious or, if it proves something, that something is not necessarily anything God-like. The ever-popular 'argument from design' — the claim that the world is too delicately, beautifully, purpose-embodily wrought to have emerged by accident — is dismantled by Dawkins, as an evolutionary biologist, who is as impressed with the beauty and fabulously ingenious workings of the natural world as the most pious believer, but is also capable of explaining it without resort to God.

At least for the biological world, he explains, we already possess a non-mysterious explanation of apparent design: natural selection. It is an explanation confirmed by the empirical evidence and compelling on purely logical grounds. In a world of limited resources and of reproducers (even the simplest life forms, barely more than molecules) who make highly reliable but not always exact copies of themselves, one's kind has got to be relatively good at reproducing to stick around. To be a good reproducer, you've got to be good at getting food, good at avoiding becoming food, and good at the reproductive process itself. If you don't make the grade in one of these areas because you don't have the requisite skills or the competition is too fierce, your descendants are no-shows. 'Fit' with the environment determines who's best suited for reproductive success. Some variations in the copies being made will fit the conditions at hand better than others, and the reproducers possessing these variations will reproduce most

successfully. Keep repeating the game and the surviving types become incredibly well suited. No God, but lots of ‘design.’ Biology doesn’t need God.

**Nor does any other science. Science, however, has become too prestigious to be denied,** so apologists for theism have resorted to one of two strategies. One liberal religious strategy is to claim that all scientific discoveries, actual or potential, are simply irrelevant to religion — that God is not about what science is about. A second argues that scientific findings are compatible with God’s existence or even confirm it. While all of the new atheists deny that science and religion make friendly bedfellows, it is Victor Stenger, in *God, The Failed Hypothesis*, who makes the most sustained and general case that science actually disproves traditional theism.

Stenger, a physicist at the University of Colorado, argues that any scientific hypothesis positing an entity’s existence is tested by looking for evidence of its existence. God’s existence, given how ‘He’ is described in world scriptures and by traditional theists as good, caring, powerful, wise, influential, miracle-making, the world’s creator, etc., should leave lots of scientifically discoverable traces. Yet there is no reliable evidence of miracles, no inexplicable calibration of natural laws, no perfection of natural design, no natural justice. Science — and not for want of trying — has simply not found any such effects. Stenger argues convincingly that science not only does perfectly well without supposing God but actually takes us a long way towards refuting divine existence. The “God hypothesis” of traditional theism has been scientifically falsified, and the liberal God, who is unfalsifiable *because it doesn’t do anything*, is of no interest to Stenger — *because it doesn’t do anything*.

**At this juncture we might ask, “Who cares?”** Why are the new atheists in such high dudgeon over the persistence of rationally baseless beliefs?

Theism, they contend, is an anti-human ideology. It has a shameful history and poses a continuing threat. This part of the indictment is long, colorful and vivid: the genocidal, vengeful Yahweh, the cruel biblical punishments for minor transgressions, the misogynist Pauline letters, the body- and sex-hating doctrines, the Augustinian self-loathing — just this small sampling from the Western canon attests to the morally repugnant nature of religious thought. It isn’t just thought, however, but deeds that appall the new atheists: Aztecs offering still-beating human hearts, Christians burning still-living humans, Muslims putting infidels to the sword, Hindus throwing widows on the pyre. The new atheists see religion as a source of endless wars and massacres. These rivers of blood are accompanied by the deep hatred for other creeds that religion instills. They grant that humans may be inclined to clannishness and demonizing outsiders, and that the hatreds and wars motivated by religion might have found other rationales. Yet they are convinced that without religion, we would have been spared much suffering.

But is that so? Daniel Dennett, the eminent philosopher of mind and leading intellectual advocate of materialist, scientifically grounded philosophy, is clearly in sympathy with the new atheists. However, his *Breaking the Spell* has a subtle and importantly different focus. Dennett doesn’t

want to prove there is no God, or that the traditional God-concept is a morally defective ideal, or that religion is harmful — all of which he no doubt strongly suspects. Rather, he wants us to study religion and religious belief using all of the rational, scientific tools at our disposal. What causes religion, how does it function, who does it serve, and what are its personal and social consequences?

*Breaking the Spell* usefully outlines current knowledge on these matters and interestingly speculates on other possible answers, but primarily Dennett wants more data and better theories based on all of our human sciences, the biological as well as the social. The goal of his book is to dismantle the barriers to such a research program. He is less concerned with breaking the ‘spell’ of theism than with breaking the “taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.”

Dennett acknowledges the risk that religious belief may turn out to be a good thing after all, while being undermined by our investigations of its nature. That is the implicit fear of those who, Dennett says, “believe in belief.” However, looking at the contemporary world, he sees a greater danger in our continuing blind faith in the benignity of blind faith.

**Lawrence Bush’s *Waiting for God* is a Dennettian inquiry in the form of a personal memoir.** Bush seeks to understand the appeal of religion and ‘spirituality’ to those baby-boomers who had been immersed in what earlier commentators called “the counter-culture,” and whom Bush terms “Woodstockers.” The lives of his friends, comrades, family, and especially of Bush himself, constitute his primary raw data. He follows their spiritual journey, speculating on motives, social dynamics, political currents, and historical forces to explain his and their religious twists and turns. Although Bush’s reflections are well-informed by the relevant scholarship, the book’s greatest strengths are his literary sensibility and strong personal sympathy for both the appeal of religion and the value of hard-nosed skeptical rationality.

The pull of religion, at least as far as Bush himself is concerned, comes not from the traditional God that the new atheists attack; he is almost as impatient as Dawkins with that God, and believes that it is rarely that God who vies for the devotions of Woodstockers. Instead, it is the God that Mark Lilla thought stillborn that Bush finds attractive: the God that the new atheists mock as atheism-that-dare-not-speak-its-name, the God they dismiss as weak tea whose main function is to provide drinking with the respectability that allows fundamentalists to get drunk on stronger stuff — the less definable, more human-friendly but less human-like, more immanent God of liberal, sophisticated religion. Bush is entranced by its siren song and inspired by its possibilities. However, in the end, at least on a personal level, he buys the new atheists’ case. He wouldn’t put it as harshly as Hitchens, his moral judgment of religion is more mixed than Dawkins’, his feelings more nuanced than Harris’ — but Bush agrees that there is no God.

**Michael Benedikt is a theologian who is attempting to come to Lawrence Bush’s spiritual rescue** with a God acceptable to a rationalist. Continuing the tradition that Lilla finds moribund,

Benedikt promises a God that will feed the spirit without offending the mind. In *God Is the Good We Do*, he offers a theism that concedes all of the scientific and logical claims of the new atheists, but challenges the meaning and moral they put on the facts. The new atheists treat God as a mistaken idea that, at best, may have had some use for mankind but no longer does. Benedikt, by contrast, views God as an evolving idea, best interpreted as humanity's attempt to discover and describe what is of ultimate value, what makes life worthwhile, what should guide our actions, what we should serve.

Benedikt thinks it unsurprising that primitive theology was, well, primitive; the God idea was misshapen by local prejudices, distorted by fears, corrupted by greed, deformed by vanity. It reflected our ignorance. However, our moral and intellectual growth has provided an increasingly adequate concept of God, and we now should arrive at the notion forthrightly declared in his title, *God Is the Good We Do*, nothing more, nothing less. Where we do no good, there is no God. Whenever we do good, there is God. God is not us, or *in* our good deeds, or the *inspirer* of our good deeds — God and our good deeds are one and the same. “Whether or not God exists,” Benedikt writes, “is entirely up to us.”

Benedikt knows full well that that is not what the overwhelming majority of people mean or have meant when they speak of God. Yet he argues that there is great overlap between his God-as-Good-Deeds and the theism of the world's religious traditions — indeed, that his theism is born from their better parts. Most significantly, his God acts in important ways like the God of tradition. Good deeds inspire us, humanize us, and our survival depends on them; they are unconditionally good, accessible, and of enormous power; we can access them when we want, they are most praiseworthy, they are beautiful.

Benedikt makes a comprehensive case for his theology, which he calls theopraxy. He does so with deep learning, intellectual honesty, and humane wisdom, and his may be about the best God a full commitment to rationality will allow. It's not nothing, but is it enough? I think not, for Benedikt's God-as-good-deeds is all inspiration and no consolation. In an odd way, he shares a problem with the new atheists who are cavalier in their dismissal of those needs to which religion ministers. Are you afraid of annihilation, bereft at the death of a child, anguished by unjustified, massive suffering, terrified by your vulnerability to blind, uncaring chance? Well, say the atheists, buck up — those are the facts, do the best you can, be an adult, stiff upper lip and all that.

Of course it makes a certain sense that we ought not fool ourselves, that we should face reality squarely, the better to effectively enact whatever good we can. Benedikt wants to call that enactment ‘God,’ the new atheists want to call it ‘doing good.’ Either way, it's no sweet Jesus. As a remedy for the absence of a powerful, caring, benevolent protector, “do the good you can” — even if it is the only treatment that has any material therapeutic value at all — is so overmatched by the disease, the human condition and all of the evils that flesh is heir to, that I hesitate to rail against the metaphysical snake-oil industry. Placebos have their place. Most people would rather feel good than be rational — or perhaps it may, indeed, be highly rational to keep God, the loving parent, the mother of all placebos, ensconced in heaven.

Even if one has, as Philip Roth once said of himself, “no taste for delusion,” and agrees with Richard Dawkins that God is a delusion, and a harmful one at that (although this judgment involves ungrounded speculation that I doubt any Dennettian-inspired research can ground), there is still a part of the new atheists’ brief against religion that is troubling: What do they want? If it is to persuade the religious that they are deluded and would be better off without delusion, the mocking tone and disdain that some of these writers show for the needs religion meets and the joys it provides are ill-suited for the task. If it is to persuade their fellow atheists, like myself, to do public battle for their ideology, then their project is reactionary, for a cornerstone of political liberalism is public religious toleration.

Yes, I believe atheism is the correct ‘religious’ view, but I learned from Locke that fighting for the truth in religion leads to bloody and oppressive politics. There is a fight we must have with jihadists, settler messianic Jews, the Christian right and other religious fundamentalists — but it is not with their notions of God, flawed as those might be; it is with the idea that their theologies should have any political power.