

The Damnable Paradox  
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Many of us here remember, and some of us knew personally, Charles McCabe. Recently, the *Chronicle* reprinted, in its Chronicle Classics feature, a column from 1968. McCabe wrote, “Atheism is the cheapest and least courageous of all philosophies. To simply nod one’s head and say no, no, no in the face of the world itself—the most extraordinary body of evidence for intelligent creation, called by whatever name—is to confess to a staggering stupidity.” (Aug.8, 1968). McCabe, as we know, might have been a curbstome philosopher but he was no Aristotle or Bertrand Russell. He probably did not know, in any detail, “the extraordinary body of evidence for intelligent creation” But he was quite right to affirm a broad consensus—“the face of the world itself”—in favor of belief in God and against atheism. Even today, 40 years later, the Pew Survey of Religion on America can hardly find a declared atheist—less than 1% of Americans will admit to this “staggering stupidity.”

I have just finished teaching a course at USF’s Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning entitled “The Damnable Paradox: the Social and Intellectual History of Atheism.” It attracted over 300 students to eight lectures. In that group, about 15% described themselves as atheists, probably consistent with a sample of better educated, largely professional San Franciscans. I taught the course because I had noted that what some have called “the new atheism” was attracting considerable attention. I bought the four *New York Times* bestsellers from 2007: Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the*

*Spell*, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Stan Harris' *The End of Faith*, and Christopher Hitchens' pungently titled, *God Is Not Great. How Religion Poisons Everything*. Reading those four books was an excruciating exercise, not because of their central theses—God does not exist and religion is a baneful influence on civilization—but because each of them is a snide, insulting, trivializing treatise, ignoring or distorting the long history of profound argument for and against the existence of god. Dennett and Dawkins are both respectable scholars in their fields of philosophy and evolutionary biology yet they produce a farrago of sloppy, uninformed arguments; Hitchens is a very smart journalist whose sarcasm submerges his reasoning. I must add the splendidly photographed television series, *A Short History of Disbelief*, hosted by the urbane Jonathan Miller, to this list of printed books. These productions undeniably make points but they are hardly estimable contributions to a literature that counts Pyrrho, David Hume, Denis Diderot, August Comte, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Jean Paul Sartre among its stellar contributors.

Although I am not a scholar in theology or intellectual history, I knew that the topic addressed by these new atheists had a long history of serious scholarship and that the atheist and theist positions were intricate. Above all, I was aware that every atheism expounded throughout that history had a particular theism as its target. As one contemporary theologian writes, “Behind every believer stands an atheist, and behind each atheist a believer.” I felt that it was possible to relate the story of atheism, and to criticize both atheism and theism, in a more comprehensive and coherent way than did the Four Best Sellers. My course made the attempt; it may or may not have succeeded. This essay consists of my own reflections on the effort, and consequently, on the “new atheism.”

The phrase “new atheism” is appearing everywhere. Peter Steinfels, religion editor of *The New York Times*, used it to headline two articles in February of this year. We must ask what is “new” about the new atheism. It may merely mean that the “unbelievers” who were listed in President Obama’s Inauguration catalogue of faithful Americans, have finally come out of the closet and can be mentioned in polite and political speech. They now have, as we say, a voice. It may be that these Four Best Sellers and other writers are reviving a discussion that has not been heard in America since Mark Twain and Ralph Ingersoll shocked entranced audiences with their blasphemies a century ago. Madeline O’Hare tried to emulate their efforts, winning more mockery than success. The novelty of the new atheism certainly does not come from their arguments, since they offer nothing uniquely fresh in the long history of the question.

In an important sense, every atheism is a new atheism. Throughout the history of thought, the claim “there is no god” is uttered against a god of a certain mythical or philosophical or popular shape. Socrates was denounced as an atheist because he ignored the titular deities of Athens, although he revered the *daimon*, that inspired him as divine spirit. Baruch Spinoza was expelled from the Synagogue of Amsterdam as an atheist; but was later described as a “mystic intoxicated by God.” The vigorous atheists of the Enlightenment repudiated the God who was Newton’s First Mover, for they discovered, they thought, that nature moved itself. Huxley and Spencer who articulated the atheism that Darwin himself could not utter, were rejecting William Paley’s Divine Watchmaker who fitted the intricate pieces of the eye as the craftsman of a fine Swiss watch fitted its tiny, exact wheels and

springs. Natural selection, they said, could do just as well as a First Designing Cause, itself no more than a dubious spectre.

Not only does every atheist fight the god of the times; he or she fights within a social setting that forms the passion and the concepts of the argument. The Enlightenment atheists emerged from a world of incessant, bloody wars over religious hegemony; the 19<sup>th</sup> century atheists lived in a violent revolutionary era in which the churches propped up repressive regimes. There is no universal argument for atheism (nor for theism). There are many arguments colored by the spirit and blood of the times, and shaped by the idols of the gods that must be pulled down.

Our Four Best Sellers are innocent of this specificity of atheistic argument. They muster arguments and evidences from every era and every school of thought as if they were collecting the ammunition that will kill divinity as such. The most famous declaration of atheism is the proclamation of Frederich Nietzsche, “The madman lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place and cried incessantly, ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ The people in the market convulsed with laughter and screamed mocking questions after the madman: ‘has he got lost?’ asked one. ‘Did he lose his way like a child?’ asks another. Is he hiding?’ Only the madman can answer this question. ‘I will tell you. We have killed Him—you and I...God is dead and we have killed him...’” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 3.125)

Who is this God once living and now dead? Is he the cadaver of Jahweh? The corpse of God Father Almighty? The remains of the Hegelian

Absolute Spirit? The spectral shade of Feurbach's projection of the idea of God from the distressed human psyche? One must scrutinize the coruscating text of Nietzsche's elegy and the social and philosophical world that formed his thinking. The god whom every atheism desires to kill is a different god, or at least a god who changes shapes as quickly as he is perceived.

Scholars generally acknowledge that atheism, as our culture knows it today, was unknown until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Certainly, men must always have harbored doubts that the God taught to them by their priests, rabbis and mullahs was a dream, a fiction. But it took Enlightenment France to form a club of brilliant minds who took it as their, shall we say, divinely appointed task to erase the idea of a Supreme Being. Baron Paul d'Holbach, who proudly called himself "the personal enemy of God" hosted a weekly dinner party for thirty years at which Diderot, LaMettrie, d'Alembert, Voltaire, and many others conversed learnedly and wittily about the improbability of the divine existence. D'Holbach was known as the *Maitre de l'Hotel de la Philosophie*. When one occasional visitor, the eminent Scotsman David Hume, told d'Holbach that he had never met an atheist; his host answered, "look around you, sir, and listen." It is noteworthy that the formidable atheism that emerged from this circle knew only one God, the Guarantor of True Mathematical Knowledge devised by their esteemed predecessor Rene Descartes, and God the First Mover of the Universal Mechanics of Issac Newton. These two thinkers so dominated the intellectual world of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that even great minds could not see behind them. The metaphysical theism of Aquinas and Maimonides was simply unknown to them. Even the theologians adopted the Cartesian and Newtonian demonstrations of

existence of God, based on mathematical and physical reasoning. Thus their refutations of theism were refutations of Descartes and Newton.

The new atheism of the Four Best Sellers is similar. It is a revolt against the God of what we now call religious fundamentalism. This denomination, however, does not dwell in a single tabernacle. It describes a style of religious belief and behavior, and it is applied, with very rough edges, to orthodox Jews and to orthodox Anglicans, to Missouri Synod Lutherans and Southern Baptists, and to the enthusiastic worshippers in the Megachurches that have replaced the rural tents and chapels of revival days. It is applied also to the very distinct world of Islam, the theology of which we Christian and Jewish westerners know almost know thing. The Islam they know murdered thousands in the Twin Towers, laid a lethal *fatwa* on Salmon Rushdie, dear friend of two of the new atheists, and stabbed Theo Van Gough. If anything is common to this diversity, it is the accusation of intolerance. These fundamentalists are so firm in their faith, that they cannot tolerate those who do not share it. The more gentle fundamentalists pray that the unsaved might be converted; the most vicious blow themselves up even in the mosques of fellow Muslims.

The new atheists hate fundamentalism, whether it attempts to influence democratic voters to outlaw abortion or burns down the schools where Afghani girls study, They enumerate innumerable evils that this intolerance brings into the world, and then reach back into history to apply the same explanation to the origins of anti-Semitism and the Crusades. They find in the holy books of fundamentalists words of the Lord Jesus, or Yahweh or Allah that seem to justify, indeed, stimulate these horrors. If God

be the one that inspires such hatred in the hearts of believers, there can be no God. Even if words of peace and love can be found in the same sacred pages, this purported God cannot convince, by reason or by grace, his followers to abide by them.

The new atheists despise religion. “Religion,” shouts Christopher Hitchens, “poisons everything.” However, they are hardly the first to notice that the great religious systems of our history are tainted with violence, hatred and irreligion itself. David Hume, a mildly deistic believer, expressed this cogently:

“The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at last a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark which the divine workman has set upon his work...But consult this image, as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the deity disfigured in our representations of him...The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery.” David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, xv.

The new atheists are actually anti-religionists. The death of God is merely collateral damage in an incessant bombardment on religion. None of the new atheists devises a rational demonstration of the non-existence of God. They take on one proposed proof, espoused by contemporary fundamentalists, the argument from Intelligent Design, remotely descended from Paley’s natural theology. They pound it incessantly, seemingly unaware that serious theology does not in fact take it seriously. One eminent

American scientist, Francisco Ayala, a theologically trained evolutionary biologist and member of the National Academy of Sciences, powerfully refutes the pseudoscience of Intelligent Design theory. He writes, “Proponents of ID would do well to acknowledge Darwin’s revolution and accept natural selection as the process that accounts for the design of organism, as well as for the dysfunctions, oddities, cruelties and sadism that pervade the world of life. Attributing these to specific agency by the Creator amounts to blasphemy. Proponents of ID are surely well-meaning people who do not intend such blasphemy, but this is how matters appear to a biologist concern that God not be slandered with the imputation of incompetent design.” He quotes Pope John Paul II, deploring the misinterpretation of the Bible texts as scientific statements rather than religious teachings. “New scientific knowledge has led us to realize that the theory of evolution is no longer a mere hypothesis...The convergence of discoveries in various fields of knowledge, is a significant argument in favor of this theory.’ Indeed, must last month, our former Archbishop Levada, now holding a high Vatican post, called it simply “stupid” to think that Darwinian evolution disproved the existence of God. So the new atheists disprove the existence of God by disproving a proof that is not in fact espoused by mainstream Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism. Their God lives even amidst the ruins of Intelligent Design.

The classical demonstrations of the existence of God, proposed by Rabbi Moses Maimonides, St. Thomas Aquinas and the Islamic Aristotelian, Ibn Sina or Avicenna, are unknown to the new atheists or, to the small extent that they are aware of them, are misinterpreted merely as antique forms of the argument from design. Those classic arguments are premised on the unknowability of God in himself, and knowability through inference, not

from the design of inorganic and organic creatures, but from the irrefutable fact of the contingency of all beings that fall within our ken. These great medieval scholars argued that evident contingency, the possibility that whatever exists can also not exist, moves the mind to the existence of a Uncaused Cause of all that exists. This is, as St. Thomas concludes his argument, “what men call God.” This is the answer to the most fundamental question, phrased by Leibniz as, “why is there something rather than nothing.” A new atheism worth its name should take on this profoundly metaphysical form of reasoning.

If they did so, they would be forced to frame an argument and pursue it with careful logic. My good friend, Father Michael Buckley, Jesuit of Santa Clara, whose two books, *Origins of Modern Atheism* and *Denying and Disclosing God* are models of impeccable research and logical argument, comments on the style of the new atheists: “(their) arguments wander across the pages and often lack simple coherence. Hitchens chapter on “the metaphysical claims of religion,” runs the gamut from naming scientists who happened to be religious to medieval arguments about the length of angel’s wings to quarrels between papacy and emperor, finishing with a grand finale on the notion of a leap of faith.” He adds, “Concern about well formulated questions and method in the discussion of the existence of God is not a pedantic nicety. It is required if one is to think carefully through the great issues raised by contemporary atheism.”

Notice that this fine theologian speaks of “the great issues raised by contemporary atheism.” He respects those issues and acknowledges their importance for our culture. He does not, in the style of the Best Sellers, ridicule and mock and sneer. He proposes that they be examined with the care due to momentous matters. The great issues, unfortunately, have not

been raised by the new atheists. Indeed, the vicious faith-based intolerance that they excoriate is a great issue, but they offer no way to open dialogue between faiths or to foster understanding and sympathy. They simply say, with Voltaire, a deist who also hated religion, “*écrasez l’infame.*” They turn their eyes away from any and all efforts made by great denominations and dedicated individuals to effect peace, bring healing, lift up the poor and comfort the dying. Wipe out religion, they say, and all such moral achievements will continue out of humanistic dedication. Of course, if these human creatures have generated the monstrosity of religion; can we guarantee that they will do better, when the monster they created has been slain?

Nietzsche, most articulate atheist of all time, was shaken to the core by his own perception and declaration that God is dead. He foresaw the consequences of a rigorous, total atheism: “I herald the coming of a tragic era. We must prepare for a long succession of demolitions, devastations and upheavals...there will be wars such as the world has never yet seen...Europe will soon be enveloped in darkness.” Tragically, this prophetic utterance was realized forty years after his death, in part due to Nietzsche’s own ideal of the Superman who would replace the image of the dead God. We cannot, of course, demonstrate that atheism inevitably leads to disaster. A recent Peter Steinfel’s essay in the *New York Times* describes the happy unbelief of the Norwegians, who are blithely unconcerned about godly things. But certainly, it is a great issue raised by contemporary atheism: what values about human life and dignity can be sustained in a non-religious world?

Atheism is worthy of respectful attention. “The non-believers in our patchwork heritage of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus” as President Obama remarked in his inaugural, should have a place in forum of

ideas, both in the intellectual and public life of the nation. But a place in that forum demands respect on both sides, and a willingness to see merit in the claims and beliefs on one's adversaries. The religious faiths must take atheism seriously: the Second Vatican Council, in its major document, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, stated that "believers have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism...(in part due) to a "faulty notion of God." The Council urged believers to understand the "motives that lead the atheistic mind to deny God."

Richard Dawkins and the British Humanist Association support and finance a very modern move to put atheism into the public forum: they sponsor an ad that appears on London double decker buses, proclaiming "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." The "probably" comes not from the absolute mind of Professor Dawkins, but from British advertising guidelines that prohibit definitive statements for which there is not sufficient evidence. But this entry into the public forum initiates the discussion with a conclusion rather than a question. The question of the existence of God is truly a question, the question, the question behind all questions. Father Michael Buckley comments, "the absence of probing questions may well warrant a sweeping indictment of the 'new atheism.' It is an astonishing world, one with clever moments but with none of the searching, troubled inquiry in which human beings must 'wrestle with the concept,' as Hegel put it. "

Of course, it may be that the new atheism will succeed far beyond the dreams of the Atheist Bus Campaign. It may be that our culture has passed beyond the "searching, troubled inquiry in which human beings must wrestle with the concept." We may have little use at all for such Hegelian probings. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American philosopher par excellence,

John Dewey, decided that the whole question of God was a waste of time and energy: best not to fuss over it, or best “to stop worrying,” as the London bus placards advise. Rather turn what has passed for religion zeal into energy for human betterment, social reconstruction and scientific progress. Perhaps an American atheism will be simple indifference to the question, rather than the angry rejection of the new atheists. Indeed, given the remarkable proportion of Americans who count themselves as believers—the 2008 Pew Poll on Religion and Public Life counts some 70%--both the new atheism of anger and the comfortable atheism of indifference may take time to take over from so called religious America. Indeed, perhaps even religious America may be, when probed more deeply, a little bit more atheist, or agnostic, than the polls can or ever will show.

Still, and this is my final word, the question is hard to quell, despite the happily unbelieving Norwegians that Steinfels describes. It seems to return eternally. One of the most imposing religious thinkers in American history was not a theologian but a novelist, Herman Melville. His friend Nathaniel Hawthorne describes a conversation as they were walking on the seashore of Cape Cod:

“Melville, as he always does, began to reason about Providence and the future life, and of everything lies lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had ‘pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated.’ But still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation, and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting.

He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.”(cited in Ch. Benfey, Melville’s Second Act.” New York Review of Books, 6/26/08, 50.

Herman Melville was caught in the “Damnable Paradoxe.” This phrase was the name of my Fromm course and is the title of this lecture. It comes from the sermon of an Elizabethan Divine, who wrote “There is no Sect now in England so scattered as Atheisme....How many followers this damnable paradoxe hath; how many high wits it hath bewicht.” ( Thomas Nashe, *Christs Teares over Jerusalem*. 1596). In Elizabethan usage, a Paradoxe was properly an un-orthodox or heretical doctrine, and “damable” was meant literally, not figuratively. Atheism, which meant not the wholesale denial of God’s existence but a denial of the God of Christian and Protestant faith, was damnable because to entertain it was to damn oneself to hell. Today, however, we can take the Divine’s remark differently: the questions raised by the existence or non existence of God are paradoxical—all of them generate contradictory affirmations, and they are damnably difficult to scan and resolve. The new atheists make it all too easy. Anyone facing this paradox should stand, intellectually, if not emotionally, with Melville: neither believing nor comfortable in unbelief.

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