

# CONVERSING WITH CRITICS

## How Do Jesus People Respond to the New Atheism?

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### Today's New Atheism

It seems to me that we are facing a new form of atheism in our time. Maybe it's because atheists are now looking at a world recently ravaged by Islamic fundamentalism and other forms of religious sectarianism and feeling, "At last, other people will *have* to see how dangerous belief in God is." Perhaps they feel they now have such a preponderance of scientific data on their side (not to mention a world enamored with all things scientific) that they sense this is a particularly ripe moment to put an end to the superstition of religion. Maybe they are clued in to the "faith fatigue" many people feel in the face of the appalling hypocrisy, scandals, and arrogant remarks that have characterized too many Catholic and Evangelical leaders.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it's a backlash after years of famously faith-based politicians ensconced in the White House or at #10 Downing Street. Perhaps it's because atheists are seeing the explosive growth of Christianity and other traditional religions worldwide and feel they must punch back with all they've got.

Whatever the motivation, there can be no doubt that we are living through one of the most energetic, eloquent, and extensive assaults on Christian belief since the start of the Church. In the January-February edition of *Relevant*, a magazine targeted at young adults, author Phil White observes that: "What sets the New Atheists apart from their predecessors is the combination of zeal, academic credibility, and the worldwide platform of the internet"<sup>2</sup> – a platform only getting wider.

More than 500,000 people have picked up the hardcover edition of *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, holder of an Oxford University chair established by Microsoft billionaire, Charles Simonyi, an acknowledged atheist himself. Fellow Englishman, Christopher Hitchens, came out with a book gently entitled, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. It has sold some 300,000 copies and was, at last reference, the twelfth most borrowed non-fiction work from U.S. public libraries. Following his widely-discussed book, *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation* sold 185,000 copies. Throw in the 65,000 copies sold of Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion As A Natural Phenomenon*, and the 60,000 copies of Victor Stenger's *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, and you'll see why even the *Wall Street Journal* has noted that we are in the midst of a very significant resurgence of assertive atheism. Expect further books, blogs, television programs, and more to come.

What are these new evangelists of atheism saying? Well, at the risk of over-simplifying, it boils down to several principle contentions:

1. You can't be truly bright and believe that God exists. Science shows that there's no need for God and no evidence for God, so grow up and give up the crazy superstition.

2. Religious faith is the enemy of reason, and therefore, is the dangerous disease that is preventing us from making further progress as a race.
3. It turns out that religion is actually just an evolutionary adaptation itself. Who knew? It served a purpose early on but now no longer. In fact it's sort of like an inflamed appendix that needs to be cut out.
4. The Bible, like the holy books of other major religions, is a work of fantasy and horror that ought to be buried. You certainly can't trust the picture it gives you of Jesus.
5. If the God of the Bible really existed, one close look at all the suffering in this world and you would have to conclude that he is neither great nor good.
6. The world would be better off without Christianity. Do what John Lennon did: Imagine no religion, it's easy if you try.

### **How Jesus People Respond: Contending for the Faith**

How do Christians respond to this group of people bent upon Crucifying Christianity with every nail in their pouch? How do we converse meaningfully with those who think these things or with our family members and friends who are exposed to these sorts of assertions? Are there answers for our own doubts and secret skepticism? Well, that's what we'll be going after together over these next several weeks. And I think it's going to be a really exciting and helpful journey. Let me just close today by lifting up a few practical points of guidance from this old Book I don't feel quite compelled to jettison just yet.

Many years ago, when the Church of Jesus was just getting started, one of its leaders was a man named Jude (whom tradition says was actually one of the brothers or cousins of Jesus). Jude saw the faith and mission of the Church severely threatened by the teaching of a group of people who presented themselves as highly committed to truth and goodness, but who were actually looking for a way to avoid being accountable to God and to gain the license to do as they pleased. **[JUDE 1:3-4]**

Let me be very clear that I don't believe that people who are simply asking honest, heartfelt questions about what is really true and good and worthy of belief are like the people Jude is describing. But I do think that beneath the worldview of some of the most assertive atheists is a desire to escape accountability and to write one's own rules. I say that because I was an atheist once. Even after professing that I was a Christ-follower, I often lived as a functional atheist. I said all the right things, but in my heart and most important actions I lived as if there was no God. And, when I was ruthlessly honest with myself, I realized that there was this very deep part of me that didn't want there to be a God.

When Jude says here in chapter 1 verse 3 of his letter: **"Dear friends... I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints,"** there are two senses in which it is helpful to take that exhortation. On one level, Scripture calls us to contend for the faith OUT THERE. **[1 PETER 3:15]** In one of his letters, the Apostle Peter wrote: **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."** We've got

to know what we believe and why we believe it, and how to describe that to other people – because this way of living and loving and learning that is the Way of Jesus is not just for our own personal edification; it is for the salvation and blessing of the world. And that will be even clearer to most of us by the time we finish this series.

But there's a second sense in which we need to "**contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.**" [JUDE 1:3-4] We've also got to contend for the faith IN HERE. We're going to seek answers to the issues raised by the New Atheists so that we remember what this faith is that was entrusted to us -- so that we don't slip into being functional atheists ourselves. Where, perhaps, have you become so?

### **How Jesus People Respond: With Gentleness & Respect**

The last thing I want to convey this morning is that it is also very important that we be careful about HOW we contend for the faith and with one another. When I read the books written by some of the New Atheists or listen to them in debates, I'm often taken aback by two tendencies in their discourse. The first is the tendency toward gross CARICATURE. Oxford professor Alister McGrath puts it like this: "When Dawkins and Hitchens criticize religion, they often use the most fanatical and polemical characters – suicide bombers, snake handlers, demagogic preachers, hypocrites." For example, Christopher Hitchens declares: "The suicide bombing community is entirely faith-based; the genital mutilation community is entirely faith-based; slavery is mandated by the Bible."<sup>3</sup> Such statements easily rally people's emotions and give one pause to wonder: "Gosh, maybe there is this inextricable link between religion and abusive behavior." But caricaturing is a form of slicing and dicing information that is unworthy of skeptics OR believers genuinely seeking Truth. In the interest of truth, I did some research.

It turns out that suicide bombing first came on the world stage in 1881, with the assassination of Czar Alexander II of Russia. Neither of the two bombers involved was motivated by anything approaching "spirituality." They were actually leftist revolutionaries from an organization called "The People's Will," a group that held religion in contempt. The numerous suicide bombers who drove planes into boats and buildings in World War II were motivated by nationalistic desperation and not religion. If you listen to the tapes or read the letters of the suicide bombers who make the news today, you'll hear religious overtones in many of them. But underneath, you'll find zealous nationalism, aching desperation, and common hatred.

Genital mutilation is an outrage; it gets a religious stamp of approval in some countries. But it is motivated just as often by tribalism as by religious beliefs. To say that the Bible mandates slavery is as crass an over-simplification as saying that atheist doctrine mandates euthanizing religious people. Could you find particular writings in either Christian or atheist literature that seem to create that kind of picture? Yes. There are passages of the Bible in which slavery is viewed as an accepted form of practice; it was everywhere in the world out of which the Bible arose. But the teaching of Jesus, Paul, and the Old Testament prophets were also the primary texts that inspired the abolition of the slave trade.

My point is that caricature is a form of politics and rhetoric not truth-seeking. It's a way of scoring cheap points in debate, a means of whipping up the crowd. It is extremely tempting in the discussion with the New Atheists to adopt their own tactics on this. We could easily pick out the most extreme behaviors and statements of some people those who hold an atheistic worldview and use it to incite mockery, fear, and hatred toward them. Sadly, some Christians *have* done this from time to time. But, again, that is how you win an election. It is not the way you win a soul. It is most certainly not the way of Jesus.

Another danger that confronts us in the conversation with atheism is DICHOTOMIZING. Dichotomizing is the art of instilling and increasing an unproductive "us versus them" orientation. You'll hear both the New Atheists and some Christians declare that it's "science versus religion" at stake here. Some atheists try to paint the discussion as a case of "reason and rationality versus superstition and stupidity." Or you'll hear exponents of religion whip up their troops by declaring that it's a fight between "good and evil" – as if religious people never do dark things or as if people who don't believe in God are incapable of love or innocent laughter. Again, dichotomizing is a political or military tactic. It's a form of propaganda. Anytime you hear someone saying it's either "we" who have it all right or it's "they" who win – back away.

**[1 PETER 3:15]** Read the opening words of 1 Peter 3:15. I'm speaking especially here to those of us who consider ourselves followers of Jesus. **"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord."** In our conversations and relationships with people who don't see eye to eye with us on matters of faith and life, are we prepared to allow Christ Lordship over the way we interact with them? Are we prepared to actually do what Jesus our Lord explicitly said that we were to do with those who took up an enemy position against us? **[MATTHEW 5:43-44]**

In your worship folder, I've given you a few other verses worth meditating on this week. Hear the Apostle Peter's words again, this time the last admonition: **[1 PETER 3:15]** **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this" – not with caricature, not with dichotomizing -- but "with gentleness and respect."**

When I was a young adult, there was a line that I stepped over. It was like the line between questioning the way babies are conceived and believing what my Dad was saying. It was the line between 51% doubt and 51% belief. I don't remember all of the arguments, debates, and discussions that preceded my taking that leap. But this much I do recall. The community of people that led me over the line weren't just sentimental or superstitious. They had some specific **"reason[s] for the hope"** they had in Christ. And they treated my doubts and questions **"with gentleness and respect."** How about you? How will you share the hope that lies within you? What or Who is your hope?

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### Discussion Guide

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1. To what extent have you encountered people who hold an atheistic worldview? What do you think and feel in the presence of these people?
  2. Which of the Six Contentions posited by the New Atheists do you feel you have the most to say to from your own education or experience?
  3. Which of the Six Contentions advanced by the New Atheists create the most significant doubt for you?
  4. How would you describe “the reason” for your faith or skepticism?
  5. Of the two destructive patterns identified (Caricature and Dichotomizing) which is the most current for you.
  6. What phrase, verse, paragraph particularly speaks to you from the Scripture readings?
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**Jude 1:3-4**<sup>3</sup> Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.<sup>4</sup> For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

**1 Peter 3:15**<sup>15</sup> But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

**2 Timothy 2:23-25** “Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.”

**Titus 3:1-9**<sup>1</sup> Remind the people...<sup>2</sup> to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.<sup>3</sup> At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.<sup>4</sup> But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared,<sup>5</sup> he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,<sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior,<sup>7</sup> so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.<sup>8</sup> This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.<sup>9</sup> But avoid foolish controversies... because these are unprofitable and useless.

**Matthew 5:43-44**<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.<sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?<sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

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<sup>1</sup> David Aikman, “Puncturing Atheism,” *Christianity Today*, October 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Phil White, “The Christian Response to the New Atheism,” *Relevant Magazine*, Jan-Feb 2008, p.85

<sup>3</sup> White, p.87.