The Newer Atheists

A Brief Evaluation from the Theological Perspective
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Unlike the New Atheists, who rejected all religions, the “newer atheists” admit that some religions provide useful values and practices for society. They respect science, but not scientism (the popular view that only science can provide all the answers in life), acknowledging that there are questions science cannot answer.¹

Founder(s): There is no single founder among the “newer atheists,” but those who hold the newer opinions include Alain de Botton, John Gray, Douglas Murray, Julian Baggini and Jonathan Haidt.

Statistics:

Atheist worldviews vary widely. No statistics are available for those who may hold “newer atheist” views.

History:

The New Atheism developed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Atheists such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett denounced all religions, including Christianity. Sam Harris began writing his book, The End of Faith, immediately after the terrorist attacks.

Nearly two decades later, the newer atheists are more open to the need for religion, realizing that religion addresses questions science cannot answer and provides meaning in the lives of many people. Some atheists admit that religion offers helpful rituals, such as fasting or meditation. Evolutionary psychologist Jonathan Haidt notes in his book, The Righteous Mind, that human groups practicing a religion of morals had an evolutionary advantage over those that did not. Newer atheist author Douglas Murray criticizes earlier atheist views: “Religion was portrayed as a force of unremitting awfulness, a poisoned root from which no good fruit could grow. It seems to me the work not of a thinker but of any balanced observer to notice that this is not the case. A new... dogma has emerged. And the argument has stalled.”²

---


The newer atheists, concerned for Western culture, realized that there is a cultural vacuum resulting from the loss of Judeo-Christian traditions. The New Atheists had also downplayed the Christian nature of progressive beliefs, such as an opposition to racism and support for social justice. A newer atheist comments, “In reality, anti-racists, like all modern liberals, are standing on the shoulders of saints.”

**Texts:**


**Beliefs and Practices**

The newer atheists, and now even some of the earlier New Atheists, admit that religion may have value. Religion is not necessarily viewed as a force for evil and some religious rituals may, in fact, be helpful. New Atheist Sam Harris, author of *Waking Up: Searching for Spirituality without Religion*, suggests that the West could learn from the traditions of eastern meditation, as in the practice of Hinduism or Buddhism.

In an attempt to follow a moderate path between belief and unbelief, the newer atheists reject the existence of God and other supernatural aspects of religion, or consider such teachings of secondary importance to potentially useful rituals and practices. Some of the newer atheists think that traditional religious faiths, especially Christianity, have virtues that are lacking in a secular worldview, including an understanding of life and death that comforts many people. While the newer atheists support science, they realize that increasing knowledge in science cannot answer every question or validate values such as human equality and personal freedom, values, the newer atheists say, that have their source in monotheism. Newer atheist writers also acknowledge the foundational importance of Judaism and Christianity in Western culture. Jordan Peterson, even though he doubts the historicity of the resurrection, believes that Christianity contains fundamental truths necessary to our culture.

British philosopher and atheist John Gray thinks of religions as great works of human imagination, but comments that the Christian teaching of original sin has a truth in it, “which is that humans are divided animals … they regret and sometimes even hate the impulses that guide

---


them to act as they do.” Newer atheists also admit that non-believers can certainly be immoral, pointing to the violent evidence of the Nazi and Soviet regimes. “The key novelty of the newer atheism, perhaps, is its attentiveness to human frailty.” Douglas Murray thinks that religious faith may be needed for society to survive. He comments that in post-Christian societies abortion and assisted suicide are increasingly accepted. “The more atheists think on these things, the more we may have to accept that the concept of the sanctity of human life is a Judeo-Christian notion which might very easily not survive Judeo-Christian civilization.” The answer, Murray suggests, would be an atheist version of the sanctity of life or a return to faith. Without Christianity, society has to decide what is right and wrong, and the culture wars indicate how difficult it is to reach consensus.

In a secular society, without reference to God, people have no moral foundation for good and evil. Douglas Murray believes that the modern concept of human rights, based on a Judeo-Christian foundation may die off without its source, “leaving us fumbling about in a thick and impenetrable darkness.”

A Lutheran Response

In his poem, “Dover Beach,” the nineteenth century poet Matthew Arnold watches the “sea of faith” that once encircled the earth withdrawing like waves from the shore, leaving behind a fresh new world thought to be “like a land of dreams.” In his last stanza, the poet reveals the reality of that new land. The faithless new world has “neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” All that remains is a “darkling plain . . . where ignorant armies clash by night.”

Discussing the first commandment in the Large Catechism, Martin Luther emphasizes that there are no people so wicked that they have not developed a god and some sort of worship. The testimony of the newer atheists is that we really cannot live with atheism. There is always a need to hang on to the residue of religion. Luther’s point is that humans cannot live in a vacuum where there is no god. This is something that Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, calls echoes of transcendence.

---

8 Jonathan Van Maren, “Atheists Sound the Alarm: Decline of Christianity is Seriously Hurting Society,” Lifesite, November 4, 2019, at …
The newer atheists acknowledge that a faithless world is not as promising as earlier atheists imagined it to be, but of course they do not embrace faith in any god, much less faith in the Triune God who has revealed Himself in Scripture and in His Son Jesus Christ. These newer atheists search for a “moderate path” between belief and unbelief. Such a moderate way may be possible in some worldviews, but with regard to faith in Christ, there can be no such middle path. The Lord Jesus told His disciples, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6) and “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matt. 12:30). The apostle Peter said of Jesus, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)

Newer atheist Douglas Murray comments that “we have been living through a period of more than a quarter of a century in which all our grand narratives have collapsed.” A grand narrative is a comprehensive account of life that explains historical events and provides a cultural foundation. Such an account provides answers to life’s “big questions” of origin and purpose. Newer atheists recognize that the religions of Judaism and Christianity once supplied the grand narratives that supported Western culture.

In the grand narrative that is Holy Scripture we have the revealed truth of creation’s beginning, of human beings created in the image of God and of the origin of human sin and suffering through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In His Word, God’s mighty acts are revealed as His plan to send the Savior unfolds through history. In Christ Jesus we have answers to questions of life and death because Jesus lived, died and rose again for the sake of our salvation. All that we need to know concerning forgiveness and eternal life is given to us in Holy Scripture (John 20:31, 2 Tim. 3:15-17). Scripture also shows us that the moral foundation for every time and place is found, not in human experiences and opinions, but in the Law written on the hearts of all people (Rom. 2:15) and in its written expression in the Ten Commandments.

Jesus calls us to be lights in a world lost in the darkness of sin (Matt. 5:14). It is a fallen world that is no “land of dreams,” and life apart from Christ has no “certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” Through faith in Christ we look forward to His return, to eternal life in His presence and to a world made new, “a new heaven and a new earth,” where there will be no mourning, “nor crying, nor pain anymore” (Rev. 21:1, 4).

Jesus once told an inquisitive scribe that he was “not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:3). Perhaps at least some of the newer atheists are just a little closer to the kingdom, and we pray that they will be brought—by the power of the Spirit through the Gospel—to believe that God does exist and that He sent His Son to be their Savior.

For Further Reading

Evaluations from a Lutheran Perspective:

New Atheism (2017)

Secular Humanism (2016)