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## Science Versus Religion?

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### The Insights and Oversights of the “New Atheists”

THE RECENT “SCIENCE VERSUS RELIGION” debate has tended to unfold in a way that reflects the angry shouting match characteristic of our debased political culture, lacking in rigor and loaded with rancor. The American media exacerbates the problem, typically staging the issue as a boxing match: in this corner, the strident religious dogmatists defensively brandishing their bibles; in the other corner, the rationalist scientific atheists confidently preaching the neo-Darwinian gospel. This media setup is presumably to the liking of the so-called New Atheists, since it parallels their portrayal of the issue in their respective books and interviews. Isn’t it obvious who wins? But to accept their characterization of the issue in dispute prejudices the matter and begs the question. As this article endeavors to show, the dichotomy as alleged by the New Atheists and parroted by the popular media is a false one. To unveil this will require a way of proceeding that differs from most contributions to this often fruitless dispute. It will require making some distinctions that are normally ignored.

The “science versus religion” debate is both real and illusory. It is real insofar as the natural sciences, to the extent that they pro-

vide an impressively cumulative corpus of knowledge about natural processes, clearly undermine some religious truth claims about the natural world. It is illusory insofar as all scientific findings are entirely compatible with other, different religious truth claims about God's relationship to the natural world. The "New" Atheists (conceptually there is nothing original about them)—a group that, for the purposes of this article, includes Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Michel Onfray, and John Allen Paulos—see the religious beliefs contradicted by scientific findings and proceed to ridicule religion and religious believers in general. In doing so, they mistakenly construe religion as though it were an undifferentiated whole. Furthermore, they are unaware of the character of their own philosophical presuppositions, uninformed about intellectual history and sophisticated biblical scholarship, and lacking in any methodological rationale or rigor in their treatment of religion. Consequently they seem not to see how their alleged refutations of the reality of God depend on their assumptions about what they think theology is. Posturing as educated intellectuals standing up for critical rationality against naive credulity, in fact they demonstrate at length how little they know about intellectual matters directly relevant to their concerns, a point that in their respective ways David Bentley Hart and Terry Eagleton have recently made with erudite panache.<sup>1</sup> And like some of the religious believers whom they belittle, the New Atheists apparently bother to read only what confirms their personal beliefs.

This article both acknowledges the insights and demonstrates a few of the most egregious oversights of the New Atheists. It shows that the findings of science do not demand an atheistic denial of God, but can instead be rationally interpreted in different terms consistent with a traditional Christian view of God and theology of creation. Antagonistic grinding back and forth leads nowhere because of parallel dubious assumptions: on the one hand, that "religion" and "faith" make truth claims about reality and yet are individual, interior, personal, private matters of the heart and so

beyond rational criticism or reproach; on the other hand, that *all* religious claims are false simply because many are demonstrably mistaken. Neither presupposing nor seeking to demonstrate God's existence, this essay proceeds on the minimalist assumption that truth cannot contradict truth—the principle of noncontradiction is necessary for the pursuit of truth and for rationality whether in science or in religion.

### I.

Most critics of the New Atheists have not acknowledged the legitimate points that they make. This is perhaps understandable considering the antireligious loathing that pervades their works. Still, the New Atheists say some things that are true. For example, they rightly assert that the findings of science falsify many religious beliefs. To choose only one such example, widespread especially in the United States among many fundamentalist Protestants: the earth is not six thousand or so years old, nor is it and the life it sustains the product of six twenty-four-hour periods. There are many who agree with the atheists on these particular points, among them millions of ordinary Jews and Muslims, Catholics and nonfundamentalist Protestants, in addition to many Christian intellectuals, including Catholic theologians such as Pope Benedict XVI and Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, the Anglican quantum physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne, the Catholic evolutionary biologist Kenneth Miller, and the evangelical Protestant geneticist and former head of the Human Genome Project, Francis Collins.<sup>2</sup> In Schönborn's words, "It is nonsense to maintain that the world is only six thousand years old. An attempt to prove such a notion scientifically means provoking what Saint Thomas [Aquinas] calls the *irrisio infidelium*, the mockery of unbelievers."<sup>3</sup> Indeed. Hence the shrill denunciations of the atheistic writers.

A wide range of scientific disciplines provide overwhelming evidence that our planet is about 4.55 billion years old, and that life on

it has emerged by means of evolutionary processes over some 3.8 or so billion years, with the hominid species *Homo sapiens* making a relatively recent appearance around 200,000 years ago. To critique such findings presupposes the offering of better empirical evidence supporting alternative theories with at least equivalent explanatory power. “Creationism science” does nothing of the sort and accordingly has no place whatsoever in any science curriculum. It is an intellectual embarrassment that damages by association all religious believers, including those who reject it.

The beliefs of young-earth creationists derive from a simplistic notion of religious language and a rigidly literalist view of biblical interpretation. They apparently think that the biblical teaching of creation—which is indeed foundational for Christian theology—is undermined unless their interpretation of Genesis 1 is true. But the mere existence of many learned, orthodox, devout Christians who reject their reading shows that the traditional doctrine of creation does not depend upon it.

For historical reasons deriving ultimately from the unresolved religious disputes of the Reformation era, we live in societies in North America and Europe in which the right to freedom of religion includes the political protection to believe falsely. No matter how ludicrous the convictions or how bizarre their forms, one can believe literally anything and proselytize for it as long as one remains politically quiescent. Someone could tomorrow start a Church of Christian Geocentrism, insisting that all astronomy since Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo is mistaken, and such views would receive the same political protection accorded all religious and secular beliefs (including, in the United States, the tax exemptions extended to all religious institutions). Thankfully, this legal and political shelter prevents the overt coercion of individuals in matters of faith, in contrast to the impositions of early modern European confessional regimes and of twentieth-century antireligious dictatorships. At the same time, by the open-ended religious pluralism that it enables, this protection fosters the impression that religion

as such is a domain of any and all mutually contradictory, irrational beliefs. As a result, there appears no limit to sheer kookiness. Such an impression is certainly understandable, and it might seem to support the New Atheists' idea that *all* religion is and can only be a matter of subjective personal preference, a function of whatever fanciful projection one favors. Quite plainly, the principle of non-contradiction makes it obvious that not all such beliefs *can* be true. The New Atheists correctly understand this logical necessity. Ironically, this incompatibility among rival religious truth claims is often less well grasped among Christians today, in an era of polite-at-all-costs ecumenical dialogue, than it was among antagonistic Christian controversialists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What does not follow, however, is the conclusion drawn or implied by the New Atheists: that *all* religious views are mistaken and can only be delusional.

The pursuit of truth encompasses not only the natural sciences but also history. This pursuit justifies the criticism and rejection of religious views that make demonstrably false historical claims (as distinct from complex and disputed historical claims, which are a different matter). For example, some Christians believe that the Bible was somehow created all at once and received in its current form in the first century. But such a view is unsustainable: a great deal of evidence makes clear that the Bible is the product of extremely complex processes of oral and written transmission extending over centuries, about which the early church councils made decisions concerning canonicity from among a much wider range of early Christian literature, including the apocryphal gospels.<sup>4</sup> To claim otherwise is not an intellectually defensible view, a "different perspective" that "enriches the dialogue"—rather, it is a false claim to be rejected in the pursuit of truth.

Yet from this it does *not* follow, as these atheistic writers (and numerous other scholars) imply, that such decisions about canonicity were substantively arbitrary or groundless, based on nothing more than ecclesiastical politics. On the contrary, if God is real and had in

fact somehow, incomprehensibly, become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth as the definitive self-expression of his saving love for humanity, as early Christians believed, then both the proper choice of the writings that best preserved the memory of that divine action as well as very particular (and as it turned out, intellectually unfathomable) creedal definitions about the nature of Jesus Christ and God would have been *necessary*. Otherwise the memory of God's actions in Jesus would have been compromised, and the shared life in the one who was for Christians "the way, the truth, and the life" would have been diluted, diminished, or lost altogether. All doctrinal positions could not be affirmed: ironically, the early Christians understood what the New Atheists also grasp, and which is lost on those who reject the very notion of orthodoxy in a principled affirmation of open-ended doctrinal diversity, namely that it was logically impossible for contradictory truth claims all to be true in fact.

## II.

The New Atheists correctly point out that condemnable misdeeds have been and continue to be perpetrated by religious believers, often with an explicit claim of religious sanction. *Pace* Hitchens, religion does not "poison everything"; the subtitle of his book is not a plausible reading owed respect as his "opinion."<sup>5</sup> It is incontestably mistaken and empirically falsified by all those (many millions) who would attest just the opposite from their respective experiences. Nevertheless, human beings certainly have misused and abused religion and committed many atrocities in its name. Perhaps uppermost in many Americans' minds since 9/11 are the actions of Islamist militants, but the full sweep of the human past offers countless examples in all major religious traditions. The New Atheists delight in recounting litanies of awful actions committed by those inspired by religious motivation. They are not making them up. Some of these actions can with sufficient historical awareness and interpretative acuity be understood as misguided attempts to pro-

mote or protect religious values: the Catholic practice of executing unrepentant heretics in medieval and early modern Europe, for example, is probably most accurately understood as the last-resort, paternalistic effort by ecclesiastical and secular authorities to protect other souls for whom they were responsible and so ensure what authorities understood to be the possibility of those souls' eternal salvation. As difficult as it is for nearly everyone to imagine today, they were in many cases probably attempting to carry out a sort of spiritual public health initiative for the good of those in their care, as they understood it.<sup>6</sup>

Yet besides trying to coerce faith and violating Jesus's model of nonviolent love, such actions did tremendous damage: they helped to harden Protestant confessional identities long before providing Voltaire and many others with fodder for denunciations of Catholics' persecutory tyranny, helping to fuel the antireligious Enlightenment tradition in which the New Atheists themselves stand. In the history of Christianity, the appalling mistreatment of Jews, forced conversions during the Middle Ages, the Crusades, the medieval, Spanish, and Roman Inquisitions, and the mistreatment of indigenous peoples in early modern and modern mission fields in the Americas and elsewhere can to various extents be given intelligible historical explanations analogous to that of capital punishment for heresy. But such actions also—here Hitchens is right—left a legacy of poisoned history that persists, as Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have acknowledged. Less a matter of discrete historical movements or processes are the seemingly endless streams of sins and scandals of individual Christians throughout history, which contravene the teachings and virtues ostensibly fundamental to those who claim to espouse them. These are historical (and continuing) realities that cannot be denied—witness the sexual abuse of minors by priests in the Roman Catholic Church in recent decades, awareness of which exploded in the United States in 2002 and which continues to smolder on, the effects continuing to do damage.

Religion has throughout history also inspired (and continues to

inspire) countless examples of selfless sanctity and humane goodness. The New Atheists claim or imply that the human past would have been better without all religions. Far from being clear, such a claim is the sort of massive historical counterfactual that cannot plausibly be settled or its object reasonably even imagined. Rather, it is an ideological tool subject to manipulation. Atheists (the Soviet Union and other Marxist regimes come to mind) have also wrought massive suffering and evil. But the real point, as Dawkins rightly says, is not “the business of counting evil heads and compiling two rival roll calls of iniquity.”<sup>7</sup> Sadly, human beings seem amply capable of behaving atrociously whether they are religious believers or unbelievers.

Although the New Atheists are certainly not inventing stories in noting religious believers’ frequently scandalous behavior, any implication that specific religious truth claims are therefore undermined is fallacious. Christian truth claims, for example, do not stand or fall depending on the actions of Christians. If the biblical God of traditional Christianity is real, then he responds to prayer, loves human beings, forgives sin, acts in human history, and became incarnate in Jesus. If God is real and therefore these things are so, then Christians’ sins, however many and awful, could not somehow render God a delusion, unresponsive, indifferent, unforgiving, or inactive, any more than they could undo the Incarnation if it happened. Indeed, the logic might well be seen to run in the other direction: the sordid realities of the human past and present, far from falsifying Christian truth claims, paradoxically render more plausible those traditional Christian assertions about human weakness, sinfulness, and the need for a redeemer. In effect, they constitute widespread evidence for an Augustinian worldview. Apparently fearing the worst, the Roman Catholic Church devotes one of its seven sacraments specifically to Catholics’ anticipated misdeeds. One might argue that far from a delusion, the sacrament of reconciliation (historically known as the sacrament of “confession” or “penance”) reflects hard-headed, clear-eyed realism. Only

those who subscribe to theologies strongly influenced by certain Enlightenment ideas, and therefore beholden to an unrealistically rosy view of human nature and its perfectibility, might seriously be troubled by the abject failure of human beings to be more holy.

### III.

So the New Atheists manage to say a few things that are true. But they say much else that is uncomprehending and false. Consider their “method.” The tactic pervading the screedy style of these authors (especially Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Onfray) is randomly to mix all sorts of divergent claims from different religious traditions, different historical periods, and different elements of religion in relationship to other human phenomena. Interspersed in this *mélange* are insulting jabs and derisive scoffs that seek to create the impression that no religious claims *could* be true and that all are equally ridiculous. *Of course* not all religious claims can be true—this much simply follows from the principle of noncontradiction. And *of course* many of them are demonstrably false, as the examples of young-earth creationism and the denial of complex textual and canonical formation of the Bible make clear. But instead of considering whether some religious claims might be true, the New Atheists proceed via an antiintellectual pseudomethod of free association, born of irrational contempt (except for Dennett, who as David Bentley Hart has shown with his usual incisiveness, proceeds via a pseudomethod born of a confusion of evolutionary biology with the interpretation of complex cultural phenomena, and so thinks that Dawkins’s fiction of “memes” can by virtue of assonance with “genes” magically bridge the gap).<sup>8</sup>

In order seriously to investigate which religious assertions might be consistent with strongly corroborated scientific and historical findings, those assertions must be considered historically as parts of integrative worldviews that combine interrelated truth claims, practices, and sensibilities into forms of shared human life. For

that is what religions are. They are not primitive conjectures about natural causality. Careful attention must be paid to how believer-practitioners in respective traditions understood and understand their beliefs, actions, and aspirations. One must look closely at how prayer (individual and collective) is related to worship (mandated and voluntary) and devotion (traditional and innovative), and how believer-practitioners prioritize different religious claims. One must grasp how their religion is related to other domains of life, how religious traditions develop and change over time, and whether changes contradict previous formulations of doctrine and embodiments of practice or modify them in ways intelligibly consistent with what preceded them. In short, in order to be responsible and so credible, one must treat religious traditions individually and as the complex, lived human realities that they are, quite apart from whether one accepts any of their respective claims.

The New Atheists have instead written polemical propaganda, exploiting a climate of fear and distress about militant Islamism and the political influence of the Religious Right in the United States. They have sold many books, aided by uncritical plaudits from complicit journalists, many of whom seem to share their disdain for religion as such. Bestsellers or not, the New Atheists' treatment of religion remains propagandistic polemic utterly devoid of intellectual merit because quite frankly they don't know what they're talking about. But few among their general readers are in a position to know any better in the United States, where historical ignorance and philosophical simplemindedness in relationship to religion are endemic.<sup>9</sup> Hence many people gullibly swallow the New Atheists' self-serving propaganda and consider their books impressive. Alas. Besides evincing no effort to understand religious traditions, the New Atheists refuse to acknowledge that some ways of understanding religion from the inside are enormously sophisticated, again quite apart from whether one accepts as true any religious claims (a point well grasped, for example, by Eagleton). This sophistication is indisputable: anyone who doubts it should, for starters and within

Christianity alone, read Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Henry Newman, Karl Barth, or Hans Urs von Balthasar. To pretend otherwise is to display one's ignorance, and implicitly, one's laziness.

This does not inhibit the New Atheists. Hitchens and Harris, Dawkins and Onfray proceed like fundamentalist doppelgangers of the untutored biblical literalists whom they deplore. They are self-assured in advance that all religion is nonsense, just as biblical literalists are confident that everything in scripture is straightforward and meant to be taken literally. So they indiscriminately pull from different religious traditions and from across historical periods divergent moral claims, doctrinal assertions, anecdotes about censorship, scriptural citations, premodern theories about nature, and stories of believers' sordid misdeeds, following the method of willy-nilly whimsy in order to support their case. One might as well juxtapose a visual diagram showing the order of genes in human and chimpanzee chromosomes, a scientific paper about fractals and the dynamics of turbulence, and an australeopithicine jaw bone in a museum display and conclude with a flourish that science is nonsense. Of course, those who respect the integrity of science would object, as they should, that such mixing and matching would be absurd and wholly arbitrary. Pictorial diagrams, published articles, and concrete artifacts are different kinds of things, and these abstracted fragments of scientific discourse and the objects of its investigation belong to the discrete sciences of genetics, physics, and physical anthropology, respectively. Each fits intelligibly within its respective whole, provided one properly grasps just where, how, and why it fits where it does.

It is no different with understanding religion. Whether or not one is a religious believer, one must take account of the sort of human reality it is in order to understand it. Christianity is not Islam; the Jewish Seder is not the Russian Orthodox Eucharist; Catholic notions of religious authority differ from those of Protestants; traditional Lutheran views about politics and religion diverge from those

of Mennonites. Moreover, these and all other religious traditions are in historical motion and are embedded in wider social, political, and cultural realities. One cannot combine arbitrarily the specific religious truth claims and practices that belong to discrete traditions any more than one can randomly mix the findings of observational astronomers with those of wildlife biologists, as if it made no difference whether an assertion comes from seventh-century Islam on the Arabian peninsula or seventeenth-century Calvinism in the Dutch Republic. In order to understand, say, Newtonian physics one does not need to understand Aristotelian physics, because the one superseded the other as an explanation of the motion of objects in the natural world. But religion is not natural science. One *does* need to understand religious traditions in historical, social, cultural, and intellectual contexts, sensitive to their changes over time, if one is going to understand them at all—because religions are complex and comprehensive worldviews, all-encompassing ways of being human, not prescientific guesses about natural causality. The New Atheists evidently cannot see this, and their manifest unwillingness even to consider it renders their own treatments of religion embarrassingly self-indulgent.

Because they refuse to acknowledge the obvious truth that religious traditions are neither simple nor simplistic, the atheistic propagandists cherry pick from scholarship about religion that serves their ideological purposes. They cite Bart Ehrman, for example, on the New Testament when it suits them, because he (rightly) rejected literalist biblical fundamentalism when confronted with its untenability and chose to become a skeptic (although this would not have been his only intellectually viable option). But they avoid mention of biblical scholars such as Richard Bauckham, Samuel Byrskog, James Dunn, Birger Gerhardsson, John Meier, Graham Stanton, or N. T. Wright because despite their immense erudition and intellectual sophistication they “still” are believers.<sup>10</sup> As such, they subvert the New Atheists’ false dogma that to be learned and rational is to reject religion. This is just one of multiple scholarly domains in

which the New Atheists, like the religious fundamentalists whom they excoriate, display a conspicuous aptitude for avoiding books with ideas that challenge their worldview.

Onfray begins his book with a methodological display that sets the tone for the whole. After several hours “on the trail in the Mauritanian desert” he saw “an old herdsman traveling with his family,” which “gave [him] the impression that [he] had encountered a contemporary of Muhammad.” Onfray then diversifies his methodology, shifting from fantasy time travel to free association and private revelation:

I thought of the lands of Israel, Judaea and Samaria, of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, of Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. Places where the sun bakes men’s heads, desiccates their bodies, afflicts their souls with thirst. Places that generate a yearning for oases where water flows cool, clear and free, where the air is balmy and fragrant, where food and drink are abundant. The afterlife suddenly struck me as a counterworld invented by men exhausted and parched by their ceaseless wanderings across the dunes or up and down rocky trails baked to white heat. Monotheism was born of the sand.<sup>11</sup>

Presto! This religion stuff is a snap! Just walk in the West African desert, associate someone you happen to see with a religious leader who lived fourteen centuries ago, then recollect a different desert region three thousand miles to the east, generalize “the afterlife” and believe it to be an invention, and cluster all monotheistic religions as fantasies concocted of hot, dry weather. All without even having to talk to a religious person, observe religious communities, or read anything anyone has written. Once such clarity has been revealed, what need is there of scholarship, observation, or serious thought? Perhaps the lack of any intellectual activity, investigation, or reflection explains why Onfray’s treatment of early Christianity differs little from the fantasies proffered in another bestseller, Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*—the claims of which Paulos shamelessly implies are to

be as seriously (or unseriously) considered as those of biblical scholars who are masters of half a dozen or more ancient languages as well as of ancient Near Eastern history and archaeology.<sup>12</sup>

The New Atheists relish the “gotcha!” game of finding biblical passages that contradict one another. Apparently they think they’re on to something hitherto unnoticed—but what else can be expected from writers seemingly ignorant of the entire history of biblical interpretation? They do not investigate how such passages have been addressed across two millennia of exegesis devoted to the world’s most intensively and extensively interpreted collection of texts. Nor do they consider whether countervailing passages might bear a theologically significant point about God’s mystery or transcendence, or might reflect different aspects and divergent phases of a development in the ancient Israelites’ understanding of God, all of which is old hat among biblical scholars. The lack of correspondence in every particular across the gospel accounts, for example, is hardly an argument against the truth of Christianity. Rather, it is exactly what might be expected of oral stories that circulated for several decades prior to their redaction by early Christians with distinctive theological concerns and diverse audiences in mind late in the first century. If the Church wanted to “manufacture a single unequivocal myth,” would its conniving leaders have been so stupid as not to *remove* the contradictions that have been apparent to discerning Christian readers since the patristic era?<sup>13</sup> None of the New Atheists even considers what is by now a scholarly commonplace, namely that the parallel-passage synoptic gospel variations might well be the textual traces of *unreconciled* oral traditions, and might thus be seen as evidence in favor of the authenticity of the stories they recount.

But why bother to grapple with any serious biblical scholarship, painstaking ancient history, or sophisticated theology? That would require responsible thought and hard work. How much easier simply to keep the blinders on, heeding only what reinforces one’s dogmas? Instead of troubling themselves to study and compare differ-

ent traditions, the New Atheists simply assume that all religions are alike—whether Muslim or Mennonite, Mormon or Jewish, Catholic or Pentecostal. Never mind that they are in fact so different in so many ways—why heed reality? Because science provides no evidence for God’s existence, all religions cannot *but* be variations on the theme of stupidity and ignorance. That’s all that matters. All religions presume to compete with science in answering questions that only science can answer, all derive from a prescientific world of “the bawling and fearful infancy of our species,” and collectively all make so many contradictory claims that it is patently obvious that all are silly, deluded rubbish.<sup>14</sup> Because the New Atheists neither take the time nor make the effort that scholarship demands, their slothful nonmethod yields cartoonish caricatures of religious beliefs, practices, sensibilities, and traditions about which their books are tediously belabored testimonies to their cluelessness.

#### IV.

Perhaps because of their unremitting hostility toward religion, which they neither understand nor care to try to understand, the New Atheists seem entirely unaware of their own theological presuppositions. I suspect they would deny, as right-thinking, clear-sighted, rational atheists, that they have any. Not so. Each of them “knows” what God would have to be like, if God were real; Hitchens starts his second chapter with a description of the God he admits he is unable to imagine, and Paulos expressly states what he means by the God whose existence he denies.<sup>15</sup> Science has revealed no evidence for anything of the sort, at least “so far” (always an unintentionally revealing remark), and many scientific discoveries disprove many religious claims. Therefore the New Atheists aver that there is no rational reason to conclude that God exists, and by extension, they deny that *any* substantive religious beliefs *could* be true. Harris and Onfray, Dawkins and Hitchens, Dennett and Paulos, to all appearances as uncritically innocent of intellectual history as they are un-

comprehending about religion, show no awareness of the historical genesis of their own presuppositions. Quite literally, they seem not to know where their own beliefs come from. As it happens, their entire argument, and the presumption of an irreconcilable conflict between “science and religion” as such is the latter-day product of an intellectual thread whose origin lies with a medieval scholastic author, John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308). Hence the delicious irony implicit in Dawkins’s remark: “I would happily have foregone best-sellerdom if there had been the slightest hope of Duns Scotus illuminating my central question of whether God exists.”<sup>16</sup> There was in the Middle Ages *and remains now* an alternative view that exposes the New Atheists’ bluster as built not on the findings of science, but on a philosophical position to which they unknowingly subscribe. Before considering how the apparently abstruse ideas of a medieval thinker continue to shape their worldview, however, let’s listen to them.

Consider a few remarks from our New Atheist authors that reflect their philosophical and theological views (the emphases are mine). Dawkins: “The God hypothesis suggests that *the reality we inhabit also contains a supernatural agent* who designed the universe and—at least in many versions of the hypothesis—maintains it and even intervenes in it with miracles, which are temporary violations of his own otherwise grandly immutable laws.”<sup>17</sup> Hitchens: Religion “is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for *knowledge* (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). . . . *All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons.*”<sup>18</sup> Harris: “As long as a person maintains that his beliefs represent an actual state *of the world* (visible or invisible; *spiritual* or mundane), he must believe that his beliefs are a consequence of the way the world is. This, *by definition*, leaves him vulnerable to new evidence.”<sup>19</sup> Dennett: “We began with a somewhat childish vision of an anthropomorphic, Handicrafter God, and recognized that this idea, *taken literally*, was well on the road to extinction. . . . That vision of the creative process still apparently *left a role* for God as Lawgiver, but this *gave way in turn* to the Newtonian role

of Lawfinder, *which also evaporated*, as we have recently seen, *leaving behind* no Intelligent Agency in the process at all.”<sup>20</sup> Paulos: “There is no way to conclusively disprove the existence of God” because an existential statement about “a nonmathematical *entity* having a certain property (or set of noncontradictory properties), can never be conclusively disproved. No matter how absurd the existence claim (there exists a dog who speaks perfect English out of its rear end), *we can’t look everywhere and check everything* in order to assert with absolute confidence that there’s no *entity* having the property.”<sup>21</sup>

Note the features of their shared presuppositions. Religion and science are understood as rivals vying to account for knowledge of the natural world. Once science starts to win the natural versus supernatural, zero-sum-game sweepstakes of causal explanation, the “God hypothesis” of a putatively highest “entity” is forced progressively to retreat until eventually it is forced to withdraw entirely. Science’s naturalistic explanations plus a shave with Occam’s razor exclude not only supernatural causes, but also God’s action or presence—for *where* is God, if he exists? His existence, like that of dogs, Dawkins’s “Flying Spaghetti Monster,” and every other entity, is a matter of empirical investigation; believing in God’s existence absent empirical evidence is like believing in a dog that can speak out of its behind in the absence of empirical evidence. This explanatory displacement of religion by science is mapped historically onto the transition from prescientific ignorance to scientific enlightenment: until science revealed how the natural world works, “babyish” ignoramuses believed naive ideas about an anthropomorphic deity making the world, but with more evidence and better scientific theories over the centuries, this primitive fiction was unmasked. For all the authors, the (alleged) supernatural and the natural, like religion and science, are seen in competitive contrast with one another, and “by definition” both are conceived within the same conceptual and philosophical framework—the framework that “contains” God, if the invented deity were real, and if we could “look everywhere and check everything.”

This understanding of the *relationship* between God and the natural world is of course not *itself* the result of empirical observation. We do not find or discover it. Rather, it is one philosophical conception and theological possibility among others. Let's return now to John Duns Scotus. Unbeknownst to them, the New Atheists' view stems from a seemingly arcane shift in medieval scholastic thought that eventually turned out to be vastly more influential than Scotus (or anyone else) could have anticipated. Scotus was himself a faithful Franciscan friar, and so undoubtedly he intended no harm by his modification of the traditional Christian understanding of God. He was responding to his older contemporary Henry of Ghent in a manner typical of the rigorous give-and-take of thirteenth-century scholastic thought, and certainly neither he nor anyone else could have imagined how his view would be appropriated and transformed in subsequent centuries.<sup>22</sup> In Scotus's view, insofar as God *exists*, he belongs and must belong conceptually at least in certain respects to the same ontological order as everything else that exists. Otherwise, according to Scotus, nothing could be said directly about God on the basis of reason or philosophy. This is Scotus's univocal notion of being: "univocal" insofar as God and everything else must belong to the same conceptual framework if anything is to be said about God in the same sense in which it is said of other things.

Scotus's move represented a departure from the traditional Christian understanding of God implicit in many biblical passages, and articulated in works by the Latin and Greek Church Fathers as well as in scholastic philosophy through Thomas Aquinas. Why did it matter so much, and what difference does it make now? Because Scotus took the first small step toward an eventual domestication of God's transcendence. His move was radicalized by William of Occam in the fourteenth century and became, in combination with Renaissance conceptions of nature derived from the revival of ancient Stoicism and Epicureanism, the intellectual framework for modern philosophy and the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century. As subsequent thinkers developed the idea after Scotus, insofar as

God *exists* he belongs and must belong to the same ontological order as everything in creation. Therefore God is a “highest” “supernatural” being alongside other beings—which is why Descartes, for example, thought God could be “clearly and distinctly” conceived. So the supernatural and natural are brought within the same conceptual *and causal* scheme—Harris’s “visible or invisible; spiritual or mundane.” This long, tangled transformation was analyzed in a magisterial work of intellectual history by the late Amos Funkenstein—a work unsurprisingly absent from all of the New Atheists’ bibliographies.<sup>23</sup> Funkenstein showed *both* that there was a deep affinity between theology and science among major intellectual figures in the seventeenth century *and* why this symbiosis proved fleeting: the underlying ontology—God “is” just like creation “is”—meant that God had to beat a progressive retreat as science explained more and more about the natural world. Scotus’s initial move is anything but an arcane curiosity from the distant past because it led through an unanticipated series of intellectual developments that include the scientific revolution, Isaac Newton’s physics and post-Newtonian deism, Immanuel Kant’s metaphysics and his sharp distinction between phenomena and noumena, the philosophical framework of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, and eventually the neo-Darwinian, scientific atheism of the New Atheists.

Well, of course, it will be argued—what “other” ontological framework could there be? One in which God is not conceptually domesticated, but is rather regarded as radically distinct from and noncompetitive with his creation, as the traditional doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* implies. This is the framework with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God whom traditional Christians believe became incarnate in Jesus, the God whom Augustine said is closer to us than we are to ourselves, the God of whom Aquinas explicitly argued that *nothing* can be univocally predicated—including even God’s being. Here, believers cannot properly say even that God exists without putting “exists” in quotation marks. If such a God is real, then he is radically, incomprehensibly *transcendent*. Hitchens

is ironically on the right track in admitting that he cannot “picture an infinitely benign and all-powerful creator.”<sup>24</sup> Neither can anyone else, including the most devout, intellectually sophisticated Christians—which is exactly the point. God conceptualized in this manner is not an “entity or being” at all; he cannot be conceived or visualized; he cannot be represented directly in any human categories whatsoever, whether visual, verbal, or conceptual. This is the same God written about with acuity by contemporary Catholic philosophers such as Robert Sokolowski and theologians such as Robert Barron.<sup>25</sup> This is the same God in whom faithful Catholics believe today, whatever their level of explicit philosophical or theological awareness (my ninety-five-year-old grandmother, with her eighth-grade education, believes in, worships, and prays to this God).

God viewed in this way is neither outside nor inside his creation, but altogether beyond spatial categories: divine immanence is therefore not the opposite of divine transcendence, but its *correlate*. Only *because* God is radically distinct from his creation can he be fully present to everything in it—and for all we know especially present in some places and events more than others if he wills. It’s his creation, after all, if such a God is real. So, too, in this traditional view God is not a cosmic observer of natural events as they unfold, a one-time Big Banger who kicked off our universe and then took a sideline seat to watch the show and see what happens. If real, such a God does not feverishly try to manage billions of prayers, wondering whether he’ll have to “intervene” every now and again. Rather, if such a God is real he is utterly beyond all temporal categories and *therefore* can be present to every event that occurs—which is why divine eternity in such a conceptualization is not the opposite but the *correlate* of divine providence.

## V.

Atheists can, of course, deny that such a God exists—univocal or traditional, what does it matter if it’s superstitious nonsense either

way? As Dawkins declares, “I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.”<sup>26</sup> That is: I have decided in advance that all notions of God are false and invented—I am a fundamentalist atheist, my mind as impervious as a locked iron vise, impenetrably bent on irrationally maintaining my dogmas, no matter what others argue, what distinctions are drawn, what my own assumptions are shown to be. But Dawkins and the other New Atheists are oblivious to the difference their question-begging presuppositions make.

Unlike God conceived within a univocal philosophy of being, in which natural and supernatural causality are pitted against one another within the same conceptual and causal scheme, the transcendent God implied in the Bible and affirmed in traditional Christian theology *cannot in principle* be shown to be a “delusion” on the basis of any scientific findings or theories whatsoever. The natural sciences operate within the metaphysical *postulate* of naturalism; they do not and cannot empirically confirm that naturalism is true. The epistemological self-restraint characteristic of and proper to the natural sciences precludes saying anything whatsoever—one way or the other—about whether something might transcend the natural order. So to say that science has “not yet” disclosed any evidence for God’s existence, that we “can’t look everywhere and check everything,” is in relationship to the traditional Christian view of God a spectacular category mistake, a real howler. As if God might be lurking in a quark or hiding behind a quasar! *Whatever* the natural sciences discover by empirical methods is by definition not the transcendent God of traditional Christianity, nor can *any* scientific finding disprove God’s reality. All scientific findings and all *possible* scientific findings simply add incrementally to our knowledge about the workings of God’s creation—which is exactly what the natural world is, if such a God is real.

The notion that science rationally implies atheism is therefore the stepchild of an egregious category mistake born of dubious theological assumptions. (It simultaneously serves, however, as

a salutary reminder of how susceptible human beings are to fashioning idols.) Therefore the very idea that science and religion are necessarily incompatible is an illusion. The beliefs and worship explicitly reflected upon by sophisticated Catholic thinkers, for example, are entirely consistent with the beliefs implicitly held and the practices enacted by ordinary, faithful Catholics in the pews of their parish churches, participating in the liturgy and saying their prayers. In a sense, then, notwithstanding the hostile intentions of the propagandists, Christians should be grateful to the New Atheists for indirectly reminding them about the dangers of a particular (and pervasive) form of theological idolatry.

To be sure, if God is real in this sense, then many common theological formulations are likely to mislead religious believers no less than unbelievers. The nature of language and the tendencies of human imagination make this unavoidable in any and every culture. References to God as a “highest being,” for example, easily lend themselves to the mistaken notion that God is in some sense like other beings, only better—“if not completely and absolutely perfect, at least possessor of all manner of positive characteristics,” as Paulos tellingly puts it.<sup>27</sup> But the biblical God of traditional Christianity, if real, in no sense belongs to a comparative scale with any beings or even with creation as a whole. The claim that God is utterly distinct from the creation that he loved into existence does not mean that he is “outside” it in a spatial or conceptual sense—but neither is he “inside” it. Creation “reflects” him (but not like a mirror) or “points to” him (but not like a street sign). Religious language about God as God must therefore *always* be understood as highly metaphorical—not because it is primitive, mythical, superstitious, prerational, or prescientific, but because the nature of God demands it: *whatever* purports to be direct language about God is always a misstep and a distortion. Poetic, metaphorical, colorful, suggestive images of and parables about what God is “like,” then, might rightly hint at God’s being. We should not be surprised if they run in somewhat countervailing directions as implicit indicators of God’s transcendence

and linguistic reminders of God's unfathomability. If God is real in this traditional sense, then he cannot be described directly or captured adequately in any discourse, whether philosophical, scientific, theological, or religious. It would be a mistake to expect or demand otherwise. And it is just this mistake that the New Atheists make and which is presupposed in their entire enterprise.

Equally and correlatively spurious is their assumption that the cumulative power of science in explaining the regularities of the natural world leads ineluctably toward atheism. This might well be the New Atheists' personal opinion, their private conviction, their heartfelt belief, their deeply held sentiment, their subjective view based on their individual experiences and theological assumptions. But as a general and putatively objective truth claim it is patent nonsense. Others see exactly the same evidence as a reflection of the radically transcendent and incomprehensible creator, who in his surpassing wisdom and goodness has created and sustains a natural order of simultaneous intelligibility and astonishing mysteriousness, which, they say, is rightly called "very good" in Genesis 1:31.

Consider the paradoxical character of scientific findings in the past century. The natural world is both extraordinarily complex and elegantly intelligible, evident in the biochemistry of cells, the atomic structure of matter, the simplicity-cum-complexity of the genetic code, the precise mathematical values of the physical constants, and so forth. Yet it radically resists integrated comprehension. It turns out that our universe is not one that Newton or Laplace would have recognized. More than eighty years after the experiments of the 1920s that confirmed quantum theory, for example, physicists are still struggling to combine it with general relativity theory. In the words of the distinguished theoretical physicist Brian Greene, "As they are currently formulated, general relativity and quantum mechanics *cannot both be right*" even though they are the "two foundational pillars upon which modern physics rests."<sup>28</sup> Attempting to reconcile them, string theorists posit multiple dimensions of inaccessible space-time in which experimentally unverifiable loops

vastly smaller than elementary particles are vibrating. So much for observation, empirical investigation, and experimental falsifiability in any straightforward sense. As the physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne rightly asks in this context, “Who said that scientists do not believe in unseen realities?”<sup>29</sup>

Our universe is astoundingly susceptible to scientific investigation and mathematical modeling. It is *simultaneously* far beyond our capacities of integrated comprehension—and the more the natural sciences disclose, the more do both its intelligibility and strangeness become apparent. If an incomprehensibly *transcendent* God is real and created all things *through* divine reason (the Word, the *logos* of the prologue to John’s Gospel), this peculiar combination of intelligibility and unfathomability is well what might be expected. Insofar as all the findings of science are *in principle* compatible with a traditional Christian theology of creation, in no respect does the scientific evidence require dogmatic atheism, *nor will it ever*. For this reason, allegations that science provides evidence for atheism have no more place in the curriculum of any public school than does “creationism science.” As scientist-theologians such as Polkinghorne and Robert John Russell have suggested, it is entirely possible that science is in a certain sense finally catching up to and offering evidence about the natural world that points to the mysteriousness of the God proclaimed by the ancient Israelites: “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps 145:3).<sup>30</sup>

But doesn’t neo-Darwinian biology make clear that evolutionary processes proceed by random genetic mutation, without design, without purpose, without intrinsic significance or meaning? Perhaps no single point has obscured the debate between evolutionists and creationists more than this one. Here the dogmatic naturalism of the scientific ideologues butts heads with the misguided views of young-earth creationists. Both clash in turn with the ideas of the God-of-the-gaps proponents of intelligent design. Advocates of intelligent design posit that ordinary biological processes of natural selection and genetic mutation can account for much but not ev-

everything in the evolution of species, the remainder requiring recourse to God's intervention. Insofar as proponents of intelligent design posit normally autonomous natural processes usually devoid of God's influence, they share important assumptions with the New Atheists.

Dawkins and other atheistic writers contend that the advances of neo-Darwinian biology in recent decades have shown that there is nothing in living systems for which science cannot in principle account through evolutionary processes. Therefore such recent advances have finally demonstrated, they allege, that Darwinism is a "universal truth," or in the words of the philosopher John Searle, that the scientific worldview without room for God is "like it or not" simply "the world view we have" and "is not an option. It is not simply up for grabs along with a lot of competing world views."<sup>31</sup> Note again the fallacy here, based on the atheists' theological assumptions: perhaps in the past Darwinism wasn't explanatorily powerful enough to drive God out, but recent, further scientific findings no longer leave room for God. The intelligent design proponents scramble to find remaining places for supernatural intervention; the New Atheists claim there are none left. Both assume that God, conceived in spatial or quasi-spatial terms, needs "room" to be God—which is precisely what traditional Christian theology says that God does not need.

Dawkins concedes that "the feature of living matter that most demands explanation is that it is almost unimaginably complicated in directions that convey a powerful illusion of deliberate design."<sup>32</sup> Illusion? Dawkins himself acknowledges what he tries to explain away. The distinction between a univocal and a traditional understanding of God permits a distinction between the findings of evolutionary biology, true so far as they go and subject to further research and modification, and the assertions of traditional Christian theology about meaning, purpose, design, and order in the natural world comprehended as God's creation. Evolutionary biology provides a view of living matter considered temporally at the level of explanatorily

adequate natural causality, which requires attention to microscopic events on the genetic scale. Traditional Christian theology views the natural world as God's creation, inferring from its undeniable patterns, regularities, and order that it should be understood as the willed expression of a transcendent creator for whom the entire history of the universe is an instantaneous present. These two perspectives neither contradict nor conflict with one another. The atheistic writers' extrapolation about randomness and purposelessness to macroscales or the universe as a whole is not a scientific finding, but rather their personal, subjective interpretation based on their experiences. As numerous critics have noted, such an inference commits the genetic fallacy: because microscale scientific explanation reveals what can *only* seem random, Dawkins and his ilk contend that the order we observe in the stunning intelligibility of the natural world is an illusion. No—the order is there, plain for all to see. Ancient and other premodern peoples could see it, and science discloses it to us in unimaginably greater detail and in the breathtaking beauty that so inspires Dawkins in his book, *A Devil's Chaplain*. Those who don't see the order should open their eyes, or perhaps read an introductory biology or physics or chemistry textbook.

Arguments against any meaning or purpose in the natural world belong as well to what might be called a fallacy of scale. Consider an analogy: a pointillist painting viewed at four inches looks like random splotches of color and cannot but seem arbitrary. But this is not the perspective from which to apprehend how it is intended to be viewed and so to understand its meaning. Seen from a distance of thirty feet, the big picture comes beautifully into view. The New Atheists' insistence that only the genetic scale counts in our reflections on the meaning of evolutionary processes is like shoving art lovers' faces into Georges Seurat's canvases and forcibly preventing them from considering any bigger picture. For human beings' apprehension of meaning, the human scale matters. If the traditional God of Christianity is real, the Psalmist's perspective on the natural world trumps that of the scientist absorbed, for example, in re-

search on the genetic mutations of a given species of fruit fly: “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1). Again, the methodological key here is to open one’s eyes as a human being.

If the transcendent, biblical God is real, then science’s disclosure of a universe infinitely more complex and mysterious than could have been imagined in a Newtonian worldview neatly parallels the transcendent mystery of its creator. But if this God is real, he has gone jaw-droppingly further—for out of what seems at every turn of our microscale scientific investigations to be random, blind, and without rhyme or reason, God has created breathtaking order and beauty. If God has done this—which is entirely consistent with all the findings of science and all that we observe in the natural world—then it might well be seen as evidence for the power of God as love (which is actually how Christians “define” God, based on the Johanne writings in the New Testament). “The love that moves the sun and the other stars,” Dante called it. If the biblical God of traditional Christianity is real, he apparently created and sustains out of love natural processes that, over billions of years on our planet, gave rise to the only biological organism on earth that, because created in God’s image and likeness, is in turn capable of love. So Christians believe that God is love, that human beings are created in God’s image, and that Jesus tells his followers to love as he has loved them. The logic here doesn’t seem too taxing. Yet perhaps the New Atheists can’t follow it. After all, it’s not rocket science—it’s theology. But in the New Atheists’ intellectually Manichean worldview, only science and mathematics are allowed to be rational. Heaven forbid any religion should make sense.

## VI.

Well, it might be said, how very convenient: an utterly transcendent and incomprehensible God beyond the reach of science and empirical investigation. Who cares? How does this differ from Voltaire’s

deistic watchmaker or Kant's imagined denizen of the inaccessible noumena? How could such a God act in the world in ways traditionally attributed to the biblical God, hearing prayers and consoling hearts and even working miracles?

The presumed impossibility of God's action and presence in and through the world is a corollary of the New Atheists' philosophical assumptions combined with their use of Occam's razor. But if we adopt a different philosophical view and set down the razor the problem disappears. As we have seen, they imagine that if God exists, he is some sort of force "out there," as though his transcendence were to be understood physically and spatially; and they think that the universe exists autonomously and is governed by exceptionless natural laws. Therefore a scientific account of phenomena in terms of natural causality precludes God's presence and activity and any purported divine action would be a "violation" of the natural order. But with a traditional understanding of God there is no reason to make such assumptions. Although such a God is understood as metaphysically distinct—and radically so—from the universe he created and sustains, there is no reason he cannot act in and through it. Indeed, precisely and only if God is radically other *than* his creation would he be *able* to be wholly present to it. Otherwise, he would be an "entity" or a "supernatural agent" within the reality that "contains" him, and so would be part of the universe, rather like the way in which the ancient Greeks imagined their gods—not as a transcendent creator, but as powerful cosmic superheroes.

The New Atheists delight in ridiculing alleged miracles. They seem transfixed by a combination of Spinozistic denial of their possibility and Humean skepticism about their probability. The findings of science won't help them here, of course, although they seem confused on this point. Science *does not and cannot* prove that miracles are impossible. To claim that miracles are impossible because of scientific findings requires the ideological alchemy whereby science's methodological self-restraint is magically transformed into the dogmatic assertion that miracles cannot happen and therefore

*no* miracle claims *could* be true. The hidden assumption here is that the natural regularities discovered by science necessarily admit of no exceptions—which is not an empirical finding but an a priori assertion. For precisely the reason Paulos avers, our inability to “look everywhere and check everything,” such a claim could never be empirically grounded. If on the other hand God is real, is unfathomably transcendent and created everything that exists *ex nihilo*, it would hardly seem beyond his capacities that for the salvation of one species (created in his image) on a medium-sized planet in the outer reaches of the Milky Way galaxy, he could have become incarnate in a man, worked miracles in order to make clear and irrevocable certain aspects of his incomprehensible nature, and raised himself from the dead in a transfigured, physical body three days after he was crucified. Such actions would seem to involve less exertion on God’s part than creating the entire universe out of nothing.

There is nothing arbitrary or purposeless about the miracles attributed to Jesus or about his alleged resurrection from the dead, as shockingly surprising as the latter in particular would have been if it actually occurred. Such miracles make sense if in fact God had become incarnate in Jesus. In this case the principal context within which to understand such purported events would be the trajectory of salvation history in the Hebrew Bible—that is, the context in which Jesus’s earliest followers understood them. If God considered in himself is indeed radically unfathomable, then the Incarnation, life, miracles, death, and miraculous resurrection of Jesus might well be seen as God’s way of having clarified and concretized for human beings who he is and what his love means for them. If the biblical God is real, he is not a cosmic magician putting on a random show fashioned from whimsical breaches of the natural order for the entertainment of mesmerized onlookers. Nor is it by any means impossible that God could, provided that it serves his purposes, continue throughout history and today to work miracles that contravene the ordinary course of natural processes. In the words of Kenneth Miller, professor of evolutionary biology at

Brown University, a transcendent God who is eternal and therefore “present everywhere and at all times could easily act to alter what both physicists and Hollywood call the space-time continuum in ways that profoundly affect events. . . . And God, the Creator of space, time, chance, and indeterminacy, would exercise exactly the degree of control he chooses.”<sup>33</sup> Confronted with an event such as water changed into wine by a man or the raising of a crucified man from the dead, scientists, confining themselves to their own investigative methods and postulates, could say nothing more than to pronounce such events inexplicable and to continue to search for a natural cause—which is exactly what, as scientists, they should do. But scientists are also, and more fundamentally, human beings. When scientists infer from an inexplicable natural event that a miracle has occurred, this in no way necessarily contradicts any scientific methods, assumptions, or findings. It simply implies that science does not exhaust all that can be known about reality. No scientist need be a scientific ideologue; no scientist need be an atheist.

So much for Spinozistic dogmatism that denies the possibility of miracles. What about Humean skepticism? The New Atheists write as though David Hume’s philosophy was breaking news, hot off the presses. They seem entirely unaware that his arguments about ordinary experience or scientific observation necessarily outweighing testimony about purported miracles have been challenged ever since the eighteenth century. In the past two decades philosophers such as J. Houston, C. Stephen Evans, David Johnson, and John Earman have subjected Hume’s arguments against miracles to devastating criticism.<sup>34</sup> None of these philosophers’ works appear in any of the New Atheists’ bibliographies, including that of the philosopher Dennett. What’s more, the incorporation of testimony alongside of sense perception, memory, and inference as a fundamental and irreducible source of our knowledge about the world has been a critical development in epistemology since the publication of C. A. J. Coady’s seminal study, *Testimony*, in 1992—another work ignored by the New Atheists—with important implications for the ways in

which accounts in the gospels are regarded.<sup>35</sup> But as is repeatedly, drearily apparent, the New Atheists seem not to have read widely, studiously avoiding especially any books that might challenge their own cherished dogmas and make them reflect on their presuppositions. Yet again, they resemble the tunnel-vision biblical fundamentalists whom they mock. I would suggest, with respect to questions pertaining to the reliability of the Gospels that they start by reading Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. Then with respect to the allegedly mythological, naive, and preposterous story of Jesus's resurrection from the dead, they should move on to the 800-plus pages of N. T. Wright's *Resurrection of the Son of God*. If they dispute Wright's arguments, let them propose in turn some better explanations for why a group of people suddenly started proclaiming with unshakeable confidence that this particular crucified man, from among the many thousands of victims of Roman imperial execution, was the Lord of Creation—explanations more credible than blithe (re)assertions of delusion, invention, or collective hallucination.<sup>36</sup> Articulating better explanations than those already available is what scholars, as opposed to propagandists, do. To be sure, it is much easier and simpler not to complicate one's scientific dogmatism in which only science can tell us anything true about reality—just as some scriptural fundamentalists believe about the Bible.

That miracles are possible is of course no warrant for believing every, or even any, particular miracle claim. Nor in general is any claim based on testimony necessarily to be believed simply because someone asserts it. To believe that the biblical God of traditional Christianity is real does not commit one to being a credulous fool, as Hitchens and company seem to think. Let us imagine that someone believes the testimony regarding the resurrection and life of Jesus. This person does so based on the combination of the New Testament writings and cutting-edge scholarship; the order of nature and intelligibility of the universe as consistent with its creation through the Johannine *logos*; personal experience of goodness, meaning, love, and beauty; the persistent evidence of human lives

and communities lived, however imperfectly, in imitation of Jesus's values; and the transcendent foundation for objective moral claims provided by belief in God as understood in traditional Christianity. Is he or she therefore obliged to believe every wild miracle claim? Not at all. The New Atheists rightly deny that every erroneous religious claim "has something to it," no matter how absurd or contradicted by evidence. So, too, a Christian who believes that God can work and has worked miracles rightly denies that every miracle claim should be accepted just because someone makes it.

How then could one tell potentially true from almost surely bogus miracle claims? In Roman Catholicism, the Congregation for the Cause of the Canonization of Saints faces exactly this question. It was created in 1969, assuming a task previously subsumed within the Congregation of Rites, one of the original post-Tridentine Roman Congregations established in 1588. The non-Catholic hematologist and medical historian Jacalyn Duffin has recently analyzed more than 1,400 of the purported miracles investigated by the Congregation of Rites in canonization cases since the late sixteenth century. She shows that far from assuming the truth of alleged miracle claims, the ecclesiastical officials responsible for pronouncing on them have for more than four centuries actively sought the expert testimony of physicians charged with explaining the alleged phenomena in naturalistic terms, according to the best science available at the time.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the Church's official, presumptive goal in canonization proceedings has for centuries been to disprove alleged miracle claims; only phenomena that survive scrutiny have even a chance of being pronounced miraculous. In recent decades, members of the Congregation for the Cause of the Canonization of Saints have continued to rely on the constantly expanding scientific knowledge of expert physicians because the large majority of alleged miracles pertaining to would-be saints concern medical cures. It would doubtless surprise the New Atheists to learn how skeptical the members of the Congregation are, as Randall Sullivan's book, *The Miracle Detective*, makes clear.<sup>38</sup> On the basis of scientific find-

ings about the evidence presented, the Congregation accepts only a small fraction even of naturalistically inexplicable events as miraculous. Of course, any official *declaration* of a miracle by any organization or individual is not and can never be a demonstration for the same reason that empirical *confirmation* of anything that transcends the natural order is by definition impossible.

Catholic ecclesiastical officials have recognized for centuries that something currently inexplicable might be explained naturalistically in the future on the basis of progress in scientific understanding that is the cumulative hallmark of science's empirical investigation of the natural world. The intellectually voracious and progressive Prospero Lambertini understood this in the 1730s, the same decade in which he appointed Laura Bassi as Europe's first female university professor at the University of Bologna, and before he was elected Pope Benedict XIV in 1740.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, past events once mistakenly regarded as miraculous are now rightly seen to have had natural causes. That is one important reason why Vatican officials themselves, as well as their expert consultants, are today more skeptical than their predecessors who lived when scientific knowledge was so much less advanced—although medieval and early modern Catholics could also be and often were skeptical about miracle claims.<sup>40</sup> In early seventeenth-century Flanders, for example, Jan Baptista von Helmont argued that almost all wounds were cured by natural means and he was censured for impiety—even though Rome was moving in the same direction.<sup>41</sup> Now Catholics who argued the opposite would be criticized for naive credulity. Why? Because science can and does tell us so much more now about the actual, ordinary workings of the natural world. The Catholic Church, having learned a harsh lesson about entangling theology with cosmology via the Galileo Affair, now affirms the findings of science as such and understands that when both the findings of science and the claims of the faith are properly understood, neither threatens the other. Nor can they, for both, according to Catholicism, have the same source. Truth cannot contradict truth.

## VII.

None of this proves that God is real—at least not the God whom Christians believe became incarnate in Jesus and who continues to answer prayers and act in and through his creation. One might well see how, in Christopher Knight’s words, “a coherent atheism can only be a form of nihilism.”<sup>42</sup> Among other implications, this leaves us, notwithstanding the strained efforts of sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, without any rational (as opposed to purely conventional) ground for morality, thus opening ethical values to majoritarian, judicial, and scientific manipulation (as indeed we see all around us). Nevertheless, one still might *not* conclude that belief in the reality of God should be entertained as a transcendent ground for morality and a bulwark against the dangers of moral relativism. Harris apparently thinks that the clashes among rival moral assertions are resolved by his proclamation of animal-rights-enhanced utilitarianism: “A rational approach to ethics becomes possible once we realize [*sic*] that questions of right and wrong are really questions about the happiness and suffering of sentient creatures.”<sup>43</sup> Of course. Just add up all the quanta of radically heterogeneous happiness and suffering of all humans and animals and act accordingly. Here’s a different rational approach to ethics: “I want to fulfill my desires to maximize my enjoyment of life. To this end I will do as I please while giving every appearance of being decent and moral. I will not help to diminish others’ suffering, because I see nothing in it for me. If it conduces to my pleasure, I will use other people as I see fit, so long as I can get away with it and keep up appearances. This will make *me* happy, so it is right for me, and nobody can tell me otherwise. Because God is a delusion, I’m accountable to no one but myself.”

One might well sense how, as Pope Benedict XVI has recently written, “when you have lost God . . . you have lost yourself; then you are nothing more than a random product of evolution.”<sup>44</sup> Yet one might conclude that the world’s putative lack of intrinsic mean-

ing and purpose provides a liberating opportunity for a Nietzschean “transvaluation of all values” and of “constructing” one’s own reality and values. This inference can be combined with the dominant, liberal, emancipatory narrative of modern Western history and is just what the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) suggests. Neither Weberian disenchantment nor Sartrean absurdity nor postmodern futility at the supposed void of inherent meaning in the universe compel one to consider whether there might be real alternatives. True enough. One can stubbornly persist in one’s faith that God is a fiction and that all meaning and morality are constructed, no matter how disturbing or destructive the implications.<sup>45</sup>

What one *cannot* do, however, is legitimately claim that the findings of science or history or any other academic discipline compel atheism as the only honest, rational response to contemporary intellectual life. Here the New Atheists are simply and flatly wrong, having apparently conflated the fact that many religious claims are false with their self-indulgently self-satisfied conviction that all of them are. Hitchens alleges that “the impressive faith of an Aquinas or a Maimonides,” “the sort that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason—is now plainly impossible.”<sup>46</sup> Sheer nonsense. This claim is as incontestably mistaken because empirically falsified as are Bultmannian allegations that no intellectually sophisticated person can believe in miracles. Intellectually impressive faith is no less possible today than it was in the thirteenth century. Hitchens might start by reading John Polkinghorne, David Bentley Hart, John Rist, Robert Barron, or Benedict XVI—but with an attitude of openness toward learning rather than of the mocking, closed-minded, contemptuous disdain that he evinces for all religious believers.

Dawkins and Schönborn survey the same astonishing findings of science. The evidentiary data are not in dispute; their meaning and interpretation are. The scientific atheist insists that we admire nature without recourse to childish myths about God as its creator;

the Thomistic theologian is astounded that many more people are not moved precisely *by* the overwhelming complexity, order, and beauty of the natural world disclosed by science, to embrace the traditional Christian view of God.<sup>47</sup> The root intellectual difference between the two lies in their radically different philosophical assumptions. But in contrast to Dawkins, Schönborn is a cosmopolitan intellectual, not an angry and ignorant propagandist spouting venom against any and all religion, no matter how sophisticated or consistent with the findings of science. If one refuses to read, open one's mind, make distinctions, eschew polemics for scholarship, employ an intellectually legitimate method, and rethink one's own assumptions—in just the ways in which the New Atheists are constantly harping on religious believers to do—one cannot see one's own blindness nor how cramped are the naturalistic horizons of the ontological prison in which one has chosen to dwell. Were the New Atheists to become more self-conscious and self-critical and to start genuinely asking instead of ranting, they too would receive.

### Notes

1. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009); Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).
2. See e.g. *Creation and Evolution: A Conference with Pope Benedict XVI in Castel Gondolfo*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008); Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, *Chance or Purpose? Creation, Evolution, and a Rational Faith*, ed. Hubert Philip Weber, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007); John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Physics and Theology: An Unexpected Kinship* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution* (New York: Harper, 1999); Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).
3. Schönborn, *Chance or Purpose?*, 38.
4. For a recent synthetic overview, see Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

5. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).
6. See Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 74–96.
7. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006; Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 309.
8. David B. Hart, “Daniel Dennett Hunts the Snark,” *First Things* 169 (January 2007): 30–38; see now also Hart, *Atheist Delusions*.
9. On Americans’ pervasive ignorance about religion, see Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
10. For just a few examples of works by these scholars, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2000); James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001); John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2009); Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).
11. Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade, 2007), xi.
12. John Allen Paulos, *Irreligion: A Mathematician Explains Why the Arguments for God Just Don’t Add Up* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 90–96.
13. Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*, 127.
14. Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 64.
15. *Ibid.*, 15–16; Paulos, *Irreligion*, xiv.
16. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 14.
17. *Ibid.*, 81–82.
18. Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 64–65.
19. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2004), 63 (“consequence” italicized in Harris’s original).
20. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 242, quoting Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 184.
21. Paulos, *Irreligion*, 41–42.
22. On Scotus’s view as a response to Henry of Ghent, see Stephen Dumont, “Henry of Ghent and John Duns Scotus,” in *Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John Marenbon, vol. 3 in *Routledge History of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 291–328 at 307–22.
23. Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). Funkenstein’s

- painstaking historical analysis differs dramatically from the inadequate accounts of Scotus's legacy among the so-called Radical Orthodoxy theologians (above all John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward), who take their cues from postmodern philosophy. For a critique of the philosophical presentism and historical shortcomings of the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, see *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. Wayne Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).
24. Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 15.
  25. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982); Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).
  26. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 57.
  27. Paulos, *Irreligion*, xiv.
  28. Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (1999; New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 3 (italics in original).
  29. John Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 91.
  30. See e.g. Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality* and *Quantum Physics and Theology*; Robert John Russell, *Cosmology from Alpha to Omega: The Creative Mutual Interaction of Theology and Science* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
  31. John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 90.
  32. Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2003), 79.
  33. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God*, 242.
  34. J. Houston, *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. 121–207; C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), esp. 153–56; David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
  35. C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
  36. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
  37. Jacalyn Duffin, *Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints, and Healing in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
  38. Randall Sullivan, *The Miracle Detective* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), esp. 24–31.
  39. Duffin, *Medical Miracles*, 25–31; see also Paula Findlen, "Science as a Career in Enlightenment Italy: The Strategies of Laura Bassi," *Isis* 84 (1993): 441–69.
  40. Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* 103 (Summer 2008): 1–29.
  41. Craig Harline, *Miracles at the Jesus Oak: Histories of the Supernatural in Reformation Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 179–239.

42. Christopher Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 13.
43. Harris, *End of Faith*, 170–71.
44. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 166.
45. For a sustained analysis of the wide-ranging implications of the denial of an objective, transcendent ground to morality, see John M. Rist, *Real Ethics: Rethinking the Foundations of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
46. Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 63.
47. Dawkins, *Devil's Chaplain*; Schönborn, *Chance or Purpose?*, 29.