

The 2007 Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum: Whatever Happened to the New Atheism?

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I have long been an admirer of the Greer–Heard Point–Counterpoint Forum, which has done so much to encourage evangelicals to engage with debates and discussions in wider culture. Under the visionary leadership of Dr Robert Stewart, 14 conferences were held between 2005 and 2017 at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, serving two important functions for evangelical leaders and pastors. In the first place, it allowed them first-hand knowledge of potentially significant theological or cultural trends outside the evangelical community; in the second, it explored how evangelicals might respond to these developments with integrity, offering the evangelical community important resources for ministry.

In February 2007, the Forum engaged a movement that had unexpectedly exploded onto the cultural scene the previous year. The “New Atheism” captured headlines throughout North America in 2006, as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris published bestsellers asserting the irrationality and propensity towards violence of religious belief. This was followed in 2007 by Christopher Hitchens’s rhetorically turbocharged *God is Not Great*,¹

¹ For the four works that are widely seen to have characterized this movement’s argumentative and rhetorical approach, see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006; Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2006; Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New York: Knopf, 2006; Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve, 2007. Sam Harris’s earlier work *The End of Faith* (2004) can be seen as

which used ridicule and rhetoric where an older generation of atheists had preferred reasoned argumentation. And it worked. Breezy slogans proved far more effective than carefully considered evidence. Those who believed in God were mad, bad or sad – and probably all three.

It seemed to many popular commentators that the place of religion in American culture was being called into question with unprecedented intensity. While academic critics of the New Atheism expressed concern at its simplistic take on complex scientific and theological issues,² religiously alienated sections of the wider public welcomed and embraced its excoriating criticism of faith in modern American life and the godless vision of the future that it enunciated. So what, many Christians wondered, could be done to engage its ideas and challenge its cultural influence?

Robert Stewart rose to the challenge. Daniel Dennett (1942–2024) and I had debated the themes of Dennett’s “New Atheist” manifesto *Breaking the Spell* at the Royal Society of Arts in central London shortly after its publication in 2006. Dr Stewart invited us to reprise and extend our debate the following year in New Orleans, opening up an important discussion on the intellectual credibility and existential appeal of Christianity in a culture that was increasingly skeptical of its rational and moral credentials. While the headline event of

anticipating some of the themes that dominated these later volumes, particularly their accentuation of the capacities of human reason: see Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004

² For some excellent academic analyses, see Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009; Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, eds, *The New Atheism and its Critics*. Boston: Wiley, 2013; Massimo Pigliucci, “New Atheism and the Scientific Turn in the Atheism Movement.” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (2013): 142–53; Donovan Schaefer, “Blessed, Precious Mistakes: Deconstruction, Evolution, and New Atheism in America.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76 (2014): 75–94; Christopher Cotter, Philip Quadrio and Jonathan Tuckett, eds, *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Verlag, 2017; John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*. London: Allen Lane, 2018, 00–00.

the 2007 Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum was a debate between myself and Dennett, this was ably supplemented by papers presented by William Lane Craig, Evan Fales, Hugh McCann, and Keith Parsons.³ With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that some of the most important elements of the subsequent evangelical critiques of the New Atheism either emerged from this conference, or were consolidated by it.

The New Atheism: A Movement in Decline

In the last two decades, the New Atheism has imploded, leading to some vicious infighting within the scattered remnants of the movement over who was to blame for the fiasco of its collapse,⁴ as well as thoughtful reflections from those who were initially drawn to the movement but subsequently became disillusioned with its overstatements, reductive simplifications, and evidential deficits.⁵ The movement has lost its coherence, and become fragmented and entangled with other aspects of America's constantly shifting cultural wars. The movement split into factions, unsure what had held it together in the first place, and whether this had anything to say to a wider American culture. Those familiar with the intellectual issues were not surprised by its demise. Looking back on the meteoric rise of the New Atheism, the New Zealand blogger and cultural critic Giovanni Tiso wondered how

³ Robert Stewart, ed., *The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett in Dialogue*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

⁴ See, for example, two significant reflections on the tensions and inconsistencies within the movement: Jacob Hamburger, "What Was New Atheism? On Liberalism's Fading Faith." <https://thepointmag.com/politics/what-was-new-atheism/>; and P. Z. Myers, "The Train Wreck that was the New Atheism." <https://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2019/01/25/the-train-wreck-that-was-the-new-atheism/>.

⁵ For example, see the 12 narratives of disillusionment with the New Atheism and reconnection with Christianity set out in Alister E. McGrath and Denis Alexander, eds, *Coming to Faith through Dawkins: 12 Essays on the Pathway from New Atheism to Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2023.

“such a transparently flawed intellectual project” had managed to become so influential “for so long among so many?”⁶

The sidelining of the New Atheism within American public life since 2020 reflects two main developments – one cultural, the other intellectual – which diminished the cultural traction of the movement. The cultural problem reflects the increasing retreat of what was left of the movement into a political niche or intellectual ghetto which lacks public appeal. This point is highlighted in Stephen LeDrew’s perceptive analysis of the New Atheism, which notes parallels between this movement and various forms of religious fundamentalism. The New Atheism, he argues, is “a *secular fundamentalism* that is both a utopian ideology of scientism that defends the Western social order and a social movement aimed at reinforcing the cultural authority of science and the advanced status of Western values.”⁷

So what, according to LeDrew, is the intention of the New Atheism? If we can speak of a “New Atheist project”, what might that be? For LeDrew, the fundamental issue concerns the acquisition and preservation of cultural power. “Its latent project is the universalisation of the ideology of scientism and the establishment of its cultural authority.”⁸ The New Atheism can be seen at one level as a defense “of modernity itself, which is perceived to be under threat by a swirling concoction of religious ignorance, epistemic relativism, identity politics,

⁶ Giovanni Tiso, “With Religious Fervour.” *New Humanist*, 24 July 2019.

⁷ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 5. On this point, see also Lawrence Wilde, “The Antinomies of Aggressive Atheism.” *Contemporary Political Theory* 9 (2010): 266–83. My wife and I also emphasized the emergence of a new atheist “fundamentalism”: see Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*. London: SPCK, 2007.

⁸ LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 2.

and cultural pluralism.” Yet at a more sociological level, it manifests itself as “a defense of the position of the white middle–class male”.⁹

LeDrew here puts his finger on an issue that disturbed many cultural observers at the time – the sociological particularity of the New Atheism movement, most of whose leading representatives were old, white, middle-class males.¹⁰ The New Atheism’s tendency to privilege the “white middle–class male”, evident in the striking absence of women within the movement’s leadership, was highlighted by the “Elevatorgate” incident of 2011, in which in which the feminist vlogger Rebecca Watson complained of being propositioned by a conference delegate in an elevator late at night during the World Atheist Convention in Dublin, Ireland. Richard Dawkins was dismissive of her complaint, precipitating a ferocious and highly divisive debate within the movement over whether New Atheism was simply the crystallization of the cultural prejudices and social norms of old white western males.¹¹ The scandal convinced many that the New Atheism was a gendered ideology that both originates from within and speaks to a specific privileged sociological niche.

Yet alongside these *cultural* difficulties, a significant *intellectual* problem began to emerge – namely, the argumentative and evidential inability on the part of New Atheist apologists such as Dawkins or Dennett to demonstrate that its core themes were true. At most, they led to agnosticism. And in the end, aggressive rhetoric was just not enough to move people from not being sure about God to being atheists. While the New Atheism

⁹ LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 2. For a critical analysis of this issue, see Ashley F. Miller, “The Non-Religious Patriarchy: Why losing Religion has not meant losing White Male Dominance.” *CrossCurrents* 63 no. 2 (2013): 211–26.

¹⁰ This trait was recognized and criticized at an early phase in the movement’s development by Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007.

¹¹ Caitlin Dickson, “Richard Dawkins Gets into a Comments War with Feminists.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/07/richard-dawkins-draws-feminist-wrath-over-sexual-harassment-comments/352530/>.

presented itself as the intellectual antidote to religious delusions, its critics argued that it merely propagated a somewhat different delusion about the omniscience of reason and science, upon which its critique of religious belief ultimately depended.

Surprisingly, the New Atheism had relatively little impact on young people, tending to find its support among older white males. Why? It is important to recall that the New Atheism was ultimately a form of modernism, fixated on overambitious accounts of the epistemic reach of human reason and the natural science, which failed to engage religious issues, and ultimately led to the existentially arid deserts of rationalism and scientism. Significantly, this incorrigible modernism failed to connect with the postmodern anxieties of a younger generation in the United States, which considered its rationalist dichotomies simplistic and reductionist. The New Atheist failure to capture the imagination of a younger generation became a source of concern within the movement. New Atheist websites began to demonstrate anxiety about the diminishing impact of the movement, and the diminishing interest in the movement once its novelty had worn off and internal dissent became increasingly evident.

Others within the New Atheism movement, however, expressed a more serious concern, arguing that it had begun to show the same habits of thought and behaviour which Dawkins and Hitchens had once confidently presented as characteristic of *religious* people and institutions. For P. Z. Myers, an influential atheist biologist and blogger at the University of Minnesota, allowing Dawkins and Hitchens to assume a leadership role within the movement led to the emergence of a “cult of personality”, in which Dawkins and Hitchens were “turned into oracles whose dicta should not be questioned, and dissent would lead to being ostracized.”¹² Had the New Atheism morphed into a new religious movement, with

¹² P. Z. Myers, “The Train Wreck that was the New Atheism.”
<https://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2019/01/25/the-train-wreck-that-was-the-new-atheism/>.

infallible prophets and authoritative texts which its followers were expected to follow blindly, despite their obvious errors, flaws, and hopeless overstatements?

Much more could be said about the collapse of the movement that featured so prominently in the 2007 Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum. Yet an evangelical response to the implosion of the New Atheism must go beyond the identification of its intellectual and spiritual deficits and the documentation of its cultural decline. We need to ask what can be learned from its rise and fall, aiming to understand the reasons for its rise in the first place, and not merely its collapse. In the second part of this paper, I shall tease out some of the many themes that can be fruitfully explored.

Lessons Learned: Reflecting on the Rise and Fall of the New Atheism

So what can be learned, pastorally and apologetically, from the rise and fall of the New Atheism? Can we develop theological and ministerial resources that can help congregations deal with these issues? Although the New Atheism now lies in the past, it is clear that reflecting on how congregations and churches responded to its emergence, both initially in the heat of the media interest in the movement of 2006–7 and subsequently in the light of more considered reflection, may be helpful in dealing with such movements in the future. I shall consider a few such lessons in what follows.

1. *Get people to read Christian works or talk to Christians, rather than trust the New Atheism.* One of the most intriguing aspects of the rise of the “New Atheism” was a resurgence of popular interest in thinking and talking about God. As the sociologist Tina Beattie remarked, shortly after the publication of *The God Delusion*, it seemed that Dawkins had reawakened public interest in God “more effectively than any preacher could have

done.”¹³ While the aggressive New Atheist critique of religion was accepted uncritically by some readers, others felt obligated to check things out, and so began to read (or read again) the New Testament or leading Christian writers, particularly C. S. Lewis.

Rather than trust Dawkins or Hitchens, many readers decided to read Christian works for themselves, and found that they had been presented with a caricature of a rich and satisfying way of thinking and living that clearly merited close consideration. The result of this process of assessment was often a growing disillusionment with the crass superficiality of New Atheist accounts of religious belief, and in many cases a rediscovery of the relevance and vitality of Christianity. Richard Dawkins in particular appears to have become a channel through which many found their way to faith.¹⁴

This points to the importance of reaffirming or where necessary restating the Christian position, in the face of what is so often misunderstanding and misrepresentation. One of the lessons I learned was that explanation is one of the most effective forms of apologetics. When engaging New Atheists, I regularly chided them for failing to get Christianity right. “Let me tell you what it really says ...”. The 12 testimonies and reflections of former Dawkins supporters in *Coming to Faith through Dawkins* are a powerful testimony to the impact of realizing that Dawkins’s account of Christianity was not reliable.

2. *Don’t be frightened by aggressive rhetoric and ridicule.* It is clear that many in the media (and even some within the churches) initially believed that the aggressiveness with which the New Atheism asserted its beliefs reflected a legitimate certainty, based on a deep grounding in rational argument and evidence. In fact, it soon became clear that these beliefs were simply spurious “certainties,” beliefs which were presented as if they were the self-

¹³ Beattie, *The New Atheists*, vii.

¹⁴ For twelve fascinating accounts of this process, see McGrath and Alexander, eds, *Coming to Faith through Dawkins*.

evident and necessary views of intelligent people. Gary Wolf, the journalist who coined the term “New Atheism” in 2006,¹⁵ was struck by the dogmatic tone of the trenchant certainties adopted by the leading advocates of this form of atheism, while noting that many people found these to be arrogant and improbable, amounting to a significant intellectual over-reach on their part. “People see a contradiction in its tone of certainty. Contemptuous of the faith of others, its proponents never doubt their own belief. They are fundamentalists.”¹⁶ There is ample evidence that this arrogance and over-confidence is seen as one of the most distasteful aspects of the New Atheism. Several contributors to *Coming to Faith through Dawkins* (2023) specifically mention this as one of the factors that made them reconsider their initial enthusiasm for Dawkins’s New Atheist worldview, and seek for something more realistic and satisfactory.

3. *The arguments of the New Atheism lead at most to agnosticism.* Dawkins’s arguments are now widely considered to lead only to agnosticism, not atheism, reflecting a growing (if reluctant) pragmatic judgement that human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to prove either that God exists or that God does not exist. The philosopher Anthony Kenny is an excellent example of a scholar to take this position, which he presents as the inevitable outcome of the limits on human knowledge.

I do not myself know of any argument for the existence of God which I find convincing; in all of them I think I can find flaws. Equally, I do not know of any argument against the existence of God which is totally convincing; in the arguments I know against the existence of God I can equally find flaws. So that my own position on the existence of God is agnostic.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gary Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers” (1 November 2006). www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism

¹⁶ For a scholarly account of Wolf’s point, see Christian Smith, *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism can’t Deliver*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 87–104.

¹⁷ Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, 84–5.

More recently, the Australian atheist philosopher Graham Oppy went further, arguing that atheism, agnosticism, and theism are all “rationally permissible,” in terms of their evidence base. Oppy defends his own preference (atheism) by arguing that this represents, in his view, the “best evaluation” of all the relevant factors, while conceding that his preferred conclusion is not intellectually compelling. The two other viewpoints were rationally permissible and needed to be treated with respect. “When we consider the best cases for atheism, agnosticism and theism, there are many, many points where we are required to make judgements; and it is the accumulation of those many, many judgements that feeds into our overall assessment.”¹⁸ Oppy’s analysis makes it clear that the kind of simplistic rhetoric deployed by Dawkins is totally inadequate to overcome the evidential ambiguity that he is so clearly unwilling to confront or engage rigorously.

Dawkins thus finds himself in the difficult position of being unable to prove his own core beliefs, despite demanding that his religious opponents should prove theirs. Dawkins uses intellectual criteria to judge his opponent’s positions which he fails to apply to his own. This epistemic asymmetry has left many potential fellow-travellers feeling uneasy, wondering whether Dawkins had realized, let alone engaged, the intellectual vulnerability of his own position.

In the light of these points, an important apologetic strategy emerges. We are entitled to insist that critics of Christianity – including the remnants of the “New Atheism” – apply the same criteria of proof and evaluation to their own beliefs that they use when criticising Christian beliefs. Dawkins demands that Christians prove their beliefs; so why does he not prove his own? And let’s be clear: Dawkins holds (and often depends upon) many beliefs,

¹⁸ Graham Oppy, *Atheism and Agnosticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 63.

whether he recognizes this or not. He believes – and does not (and cannot) *know* – that there is no God. He can't evade this demand by pleading that he doesn't have any beliefs about God!

Dawkins is not on his own here. Christopher Hitchens seemed to think he inhabited a purely factual, belief-free world: “Our belief is not a belief.”¹⁹ Yet while Hitchens's *professed* world is a world of certainties, from which beliefs are excluded, his *actual* world is clearly a world of *belief*, in that his arguments and assertions are based on unacknowledged and unevidenced moral values (such as “religion is evil”) which he is unable to prove – and hence tends to assert verbally rather than defend evidentially. Despite their bullying rhetoric, New Atheist writers such as Dawkins and Hitchens are unable to offer a compelling proof of their atheist beliefs.

These considerations do not, of course, prevent atheists or Christians from arguing that their belief systems can be justified evidentially or rationally; this is not, however, the same as being able to prove that they are true.²⁰ Yet New Atheist writers seem reluctant to acknowledge the importance of this distinction, and its capacity to illuminate and inform discussions about the rationality of religious belief.

4. *We live in an uncertain world, in which faith plays a vital role.* The New Atheism (or what is left of it) needs to be reminded of the epistemic realism of any earlier generation of atheist philosophers, so clearly displayed in Bertrand Russell's famous statement about the purpose of philosophy – to teach us “how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation”.²¹ Russell chose to live as if there was no God, knowing that he

¹⁹ Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 5.

²⁰ See, for example Juan Comesaña, *Justification, Evidence and Truth: Being Rational and Being Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

²¹ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*. London: 1950, 2.

could not prove that this foundational belief lay beyond meaningful proof. He *believed* there is no God, but could not prove this.

Similarly, the American political philosopher Crispin Sartwell declared that he had “taken a leap of atheist faith,” and that his atheism represented a bold decision to believe under “conditions of irremediable uncertainty”.²² Where Dawkins and Hitchens proclaimed a spurious certainty of atheist factuality, Sartwell insists that atheism represents a faith commitment, a belief in a specific *interpretation* of reality – an interpretation that cannot be proved to be right. “Religion at its best treats belief as a resolution in the face of doubt. I want an atheism that does the same, that displays epistemological courage.”

The simple truth is that any belief about the existence or nature of God, any moral value, or any belief about the meaning of life cannot be proved – and hence is a belief. To be human is to *believe* – that is, to refuse to be confined to a limited and limiting world of facts, and instead search for a larger vision of the world enfolding the good, the true, and the beautiful. Beliefs can be *justified* – but not proved with the cold certainty of logic.²³ Yet, as Robert Stewart, C. S. Lewis and William Lane Craig make clear, we can offer excellent justifications of the rationality and vitality of the Christian faith, even if these fall short of the kind of conclusive proofs we can find in logic or mathematics.

5. *Benefit from the resurgence of evangelical apologetics since 2007.* The 2007 Greer–Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum brought together one of the leading representatives of the New Atheism and a group of its evangelical critics. This event allowed the development and refinement of some significant evangelical criticisms of the New Atheism, alongside robust intellectual defenses of theism, which have subsequently been picked up and

²² Crispin Sartwell, “Irrational Atheism”. *The Atlantic*, October 11, 2014.

²³ I explore this theme in Alister McGrath, *Why Believe? Understanding Ourselves in a Complex World*. London: OneWorld, 2025.

developed at both the academic and pastoral levels, with some significant new approaches emerging in the aftermath of the rise of the “New Atheism” in 2006.

An excellent example is the influential apologetic approach of Timothy Keller, which offers both a response to the questions of secular culture, while at the same time challenging the idea of a self-evidently correct and neutral secularism.²⁴ Keller’s *Reason for God* (2008) showed a deep awareness of the cultural fault lines of American culture following 9/11, and showed that it was possible to speak meaningfully about God in this context.²⁵

Yet while Keller’s achievement is rightly to be celebrated, it is important to appreciate that most churches and congregations were simply not equipped to cope with the high media profile and turbocharged rhetoric of the New Atheism on its initial appearance in 2006. With some honorable (but few) exceptions, little attention had been given around this time within evangelical churches or seminaries to apologetic issues – to equipping both ministers and congregation members to give good answers to the critical questions raised within a changing American culture.

We have learned an important lesson from this, as the increasingly high profile of apologetics in seminaries and the growth of national apologetics conferences indicate. Robert Stewart has played an important role in this development, both through the work of the Greer Heard forum and his role as general editor of the series *B&H Studies in Christian Apologetics*, which includes his own important volume *The Challenge of Unbelief: Understanding and Responding to Atheism*.

²⁴ For an excellent study, see Collin Hansen, *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023, 179–263.

²⁵ Hansen, *Timothy Keller*, 229–33. Note also Robert B. Stewart, “What Is Wrong with the New Atheism?”, in *The City: Atheism* (Houston, TX: Houston Baptist University, 2015), 100–108.

Apologetics needs to become a regular element of ministerial preparation and ongoing ministerial development, in order that congregations can be equipped and encouraged to engage the new challenges that will emerge in the future with confidence and without fear. We may not be able to predict what form those challenges may take, but we can certainly prepare for them by a deep immersion in the intellectual riches of the Christian faith and a willingness to engage and challenge them, while proposing Christianity as a viable alternative.

We live in an uncertain world; the Christian faith acknowledges this, and allows us to find our way and flourish through trusting in a gracious God who accompanies us as we travel (Psalm 23). And as we travel, we need to prepare for the future, for what might lie round the next corner on the road of the life of faith. We need to prepare for situations we cannot yet imagine, and questions that have not yet been asked. By God's grace, this can be done!