

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

THE JC ESSAY

The downfall of the new atheists

MUCH INK has been spilled in responding to the “new atheists”—the string of authors calling for the rejection of the belief in

God. Writers like Sam Harris (*The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation*), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), have argued that so much human suffering would be avoided if it were not for monotheism, that we would be better off all becoming atheists. In recent months, new volumes have come out including *The Portable Atheist*, edited by Hitchens, and *The Quotable Atheist* by Jack Huberman. These books continue to sell by the hundreds of thousands, suggesting a widespread thirst for what they offer: legitimacy for dismissing, even despising, religion.

The new atheists have been critiqued for their disrespectful tones, their illiberal intolerance for religious belief, their tendency to lump moderate religious views together with extreme ones, and their flippant approach to facts. But despite all this, their central claims are often grounded in legitimate criticism of what some religious movements have done—such as the Catholic church in the middle ages, or the Taliban today. Much evil has been done in the name of God, and they are right to rebel against it.

When it comes to Judaism, however, not only are they on extremely shaky ground, but their whole thesis begins to unravel.

Here the new atheists face an unfortunate dilemma. On the one hand, the oppression, darkness, and violence they attribute to religion over the centuries came almost entirely at the hands of religions other than Judaism. But to leave Judaism out of the picture entirely would radically undermine their central claim: namely, that it is not the specific institutions of religion, so much as faith in God of the Bible *per se*, that is the problem. If they cannot indict Judaism, the mother of monotheism, then their whole argument tumbles down like the walls of Jericho.

Yet in attacking Judaism, they either distort Jewish history and sources beyond recognition, or offer such weak arguments as to make the whole thing feel more like a pro forma effort. None of these books reflect a real familiarity with the Talmud, the halachah, or modern Jewish thought, whether Reform or Orthodox; or of Jewish life as it is actually lived. Let us look at a few of their central claims.

1. *Religion encourages genocide and human rights abuse.* There is no denying that over the last two millennia, religions have at times been the source of horrific abuses—from the Spanish Inquisition to the 9/11 terror attacks. Judaism, however, has not.

Part of it has to do with its structure as a religion in exile. Since the destruction of the Jewish kingdom in ancient times, Judaism has had neither the means nor the desire to encourage religious violence.

Yet a more significant reason has to do with the limits that Judaism places on its own advancement. Because it is meant for a single, fairly small people, none of the religion's many branches has called for converting the world by force, and this has had a dampening affect on their attitude to violence as a whole. On the contrary, Judaism always assumed other nations would find their own way to reach the divine—as in the prophet Micah's vision that “all the nations will walk in the name of their gods, and we will walk in the name of our God the Lord, forever”, or the Talmud's assertion that the righteous among the nations have a place in the world to come. Israel's role was to influence the world through its example, rather than by force. Hitchens's assertion that religion “does not have



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The arguments made by atheists like Richard Dawkins against religion are at their weakest when applied to Judaism

the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths” does not apply to Judaism.

The new atheists look instead to verses in the Old Testament, such as the commandment to destroy the seven Canaanite nations living in the land of Israel when the Israelites entered the land; or the verse in Deuteronomy according to which a rebellious son should be put to death. Such verses, however, were interpreted into irrelevance by the rabbinic establishment thousands of years ago. Even the destruction of idolatry is moot today: no rabbis are calling for violence against Buddhists. In a Talmudic culture in which everything is argued about, the repudiation of religious violence has shared an extraordinary level of consensus. Even the oft-cited death penalty for religious violations, which appears in the Pentateuch, was treated by the rabbis with extreme caution: the rabbis put so many restrictions on the death penalty as to render it inoperative, with one rabbi suggesting that any court imposing it more than once in 70 years is a “murderous” court.

And this is all before the emergence of the Conservative and Reform movements in the modern era, which have become the dominant forms of Judaism in the diaspora, and which have become among the leaders in religious groups defending human rights. So, what Judaism are they talking about?

Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir, that's what. Yet these two murderers, both of whom were religious Jews, are extreme exceptions which if anything prove the rule. True, even Judaism is not fully exempt from man's darker side. But both of these men were rejected not just by nearly all Jewish thinkers and leaders, but even by the rabbinical leaders of the purportedly violent settlement movement. On the contrary, these figures are so horrifying to the

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vast majority of Jews *because* they are so exceptional. To suggest that Judaism inherently encourages such behavior is simply untrue.

2. *Religion is the enemy of science and reason.* How strange it is, from a Jewish perspective, to read the new atheists rail against religion's attitude towards science. One can certainly point to periods when the Catholic Church repressed the advancement of knowledge, or look at how Muslim culture tends to lag behind in scientific achievement today. Dawkins opens on this point with a quote from the astrophysicist Carl Sagan: “How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, ‘This is better than we thought!’... A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.”

Even if this were a fair criticism of religion more broadly, which it is not, this critique makes little sense in a Jewish context. True, there have always been extreme elements in Jewish tradition that have rejected the study of “Greek wisdom”. Yet in classical Judaism this was a minority view, and today a very small number of Jews take this seriously. A much more representative view was held by Maimonides, whose *Mishneh Torah* was probably the most influential code of law in Jewish history. He began that work with a chapter called “the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah”, where he writes: “How does one come to love [God] and to fear him? The moment a man looks at His wondrous, great works and creations, and sees in them His wisdom which has no measure or end—immediately he loves and praises and glorifies [Him] and desires a great desire to know His great name.”

Nor was Maimonides alone in affirming knowledge of the universe as a religious value. The Talmud

recalls that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai, the founder of post-exilic rabbinic Judaism, was a master not only of rabbinic teachings, but also of astronomy and mathematics. The fact is that mainstream Judaism encourages knowledge of the world, and especially the physical universe, as a way of understanding God's greatness. Small wonder that of all the fields in which modern Jews excelled, it was in the sciences that their contribution has been overwhelming. This is in part because Talmudic thinking is not unlike scientific thinking, as each student attempts to extract lawfulness from chaos. But in large part, it is because Jewish tradition always saw science as something that advances, rather than contradicts, religion.

3. *God is an extremely improbable hypothesis.* The most important argument presented by the new atheists is, unfortunately, its weakest when aimed at Judaism. That is that God is a “hypothesis”, which should stand, like any other proposition, against the tests of reason and probability. God, Dawkins concludes, is “no more probable than the tooth fairy”.

Many religious people will cringe to hear God referred to as a hypothesis. But we should take the argument seriously: why should we believe a proposition as unlikely as that of an invisible, personal God?

Theologians will respond that God is not a hypothesis, but a first principle, an axiom from which everything else flows. First principles are inevitably assertive and unprovable. Science, too, has first principles, such as the belief that given a set of data that need explaining, and a number of ways to explain it, the simplest explanation is to be preferred. This is the cornerstone of scientific thinking, yet if we were to apply a Dawkins-style test to this—how likely is it, after all, that simpler always means truer?—we might readily conclude that science, too, is a dangerous fallacy.

This answer, however, does not suffice for the Jew. In Judaism God is neither a hypothesis nor really a faith so much as a memory. We do not “believe in” God so much as recall our encounter with him long ago, an overwhelming episode that we refuse to erase from our collective consciousness, for it lies at the heart of who we are. Whereas the New Testament repeatedly presents its truths as “testimonies”, offering proofs that Jesus is the savior, the Old Testament reminds the Jew of his own story, and even emphasizes the fallibility of memory and the need to teach his children the tale of what happened to us. This is the essence not just of Orthodoxy but of all Jewish streams: those who do not accept that the Torah is God's word from Mount Sinai nonetheless remain committed to the belief that the Jewish people emerged thousands of years ago with a collective experience and a divinely inspired moral teaching. For this reason, Jewish tradition is full of commemoration—such as the Passover Seder, in which all who take part are meant to feel as they themselves left Egypt. It is this collective memory which compelled Jews to cling to their ancestral identity in the face of centuries of persecution. This is why Judaism is bound up in a people, in a tradition passed first from parent to child, and only secondly through religious institutions; because that is how experiences are shared across generations. Maybe God is unlikely; but even the atheists admit He is not impossible, and Jews remember Him well.

In their failure to indict the Jewish faith, the new atheists' critique of monotheism *per se* loses much of its punch. Theirs is a call from the heart, a humane response to centuries of bloodshed and horror. Yet their answer is forced, ignoring both the vast good done by religious organizations, and the suffering caused by atheistic ideologies, from Jacobin Terror to the Gulag and Auschwitz.

The simple fact is that both religion and anti-religion can be the source of both good and evil. What makes religion turn to atrocity is no different from what makes atheistic movements do the same. People become evil not because they believe in God, but because they feel that they have a monopoly on truth—whether that truth is pagan, monotheistic, or atheistic—and that they can force it on others. All ideals, when adopted by arrogant and ambitious people, become corrupted by the call to coercion. The genius of modern liberalism is in its humility: Even irrational beliefs have a right to develop and thrive, for who is to say they are really wrong?

Yet this is precisely what the new atheists refuse to concede. As Damon Linker has pointed out in *The New Republic*, they eschew liberalism, and as a result begin to sound every bit as dogmatic as the religions they loathe. What else can we make of Dawkins's calling religious education “child abuse”, or Harris's claim that “the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss”?

The new atheists deserve to be heard, for their cries are driven by a genuine concern for suffering. But this is not the first time that God has been blamed for the iniquities of men. As in so many other areas of life, the easy answers can be as dangerous as the problems they try to solve.

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