

Answering the New Atheism

Dawkins Dismantled

An Interview with Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker

Emmaus Road's upcoming release critiques in detail Richard Dawkins' bestselling book, *The God Delusion*. In *Answering the New Atheism: Dawkins Dismantled*, coauthors Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker reveal the inconsistencies, factual errors, and faulty logic of Dawkins' atheistic secularism – providing a cogent defense of the existence of God and the foundation for morality.

Answering the New Atheism: Dawkins Dismantled is timely given the rash of books promoting atheism – books that have confused many and even caused some to lose their faith. Whether or not they are familiar with Richard Dawkins, readers will acquire both a solid understanding of the claims of the new atheism and the arguments to counter them. Following is an interview with Hahn and Wiker on the importance of dismantling Dawkins' arguments.

Q. Atheism has been around for a while. Why is a book responding to the atheistic world view important now, in 2008?

A. Atheism has indeed been with us a long time – if not throughout history, at least for several thousand years. That said, there's been a recent aggressive assault on religion by prominent atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. They are not particularly original – much of what they have to say was said with a lot more wit by the atheists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But they are more crudely belligerent and public about their animosity toward religion.

Part of what seems to have stirred them is the rise of radical Islam. Christianity has become quite timid and conciliatory in our culture, allowing atheism a comfortable berth. Muslims on the other hand, are anything but timid, and have a very active resentment toward Western secularized, liberal culture, especially insofar as it carries atheism within. Especially in Europe, atheists see a very religious Muslim population growing in their own backyard and they realize that, unlike Christians, Muslims will not tolerate atheism. American atheists are likewise worried. I think it is no accident that these atheist bestsellers started spinning off the press not long after 9/11. Whatever the cause, no one can doubt that atheists have launched a new assault on religion over the last five years.

While the caliber of their arguments is not very high, the sales of their books are. As a consequence, believers are becoming non-believers after reading the likes of Dawkins, Harris, Dennett, and Hitchens. To cite an example close to home, we know of students at Franciscan University of Steubenville whose faith was either lost or severely damaged by reading Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* – a disturbing effect that led us to write this book. Of all the atheists, Dawkins seems to be the most effective and famous; his books have been translated into multiple languages and have sold in the millions. That is why we felt pressed to respond to his arguments in particular.

Q. What, if any, impact does atheism have on morality?

A. This is a question we deal with extensively in *Answering the New Atheism: Dawkins Dismantled*. The one area of originality with today's atheists is their reliance on Darwinism, and that leads to an entirely different view of morality on their part, one that is completely antagonistic to Catholic natural law reasoning. This point cannot be stressed enough.

Whatever the merits of evolutionary theory in general – and they are significant and therefore need to be carefully considered by Catholics – the effect on morality is devastating. While everyone knows that Charles Darwin set forth his theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species*, few are aware that he gave an evolutionary account of morality in a book written about 10 years later called *The Descent of Man*.

In his *Descent* Darwin argued that moral traits are evolved traits; that is, they are just like the lengths of beaks or the different kinds of feather coloration in birds. There are as many different evolved moralities as there are beaks and feathers on birds. There is no "right" or "wrong," no single objective standard for the length of a bird beak, but only the one that helps a particular kind of bird survive under certain conditions. In the same way, there is no real right or wrong, no single objective standard of morality, but only the "moral" traits that help a particular kind of people survive under particular conditions. Just like any evolved trait, moralities change as conditions change.

Dawkins takes over Darwin's account of morality, even while he admits that he doesn't like the ultimate consequences. Dawkins rightly notes, if morality is based on evolution, then the only real rule is "survival of the fittest." That is a rather nasty rule, as the Nazis, who based their racial theories on Darwinism, all too clearly demonstrated. Survival of the fittest means extinction of the unfit, and that means eugenics.

The atheist Dawkins wants to reject a purely Darwinistic account of morality for something he calls "super niceness," but this ends up being an incoherent and equally dangerous substitute, as we make clear in our book. He would "nicely" allow abortion, euthanasia, and complete sexual libertinism. But the deeper problem with Dawkins' "super niceness" is that, as he admits, it has no evolutionary support. Since he's an atheist, it obviously has no divine or cosmic support. As a result, there is no reason that other atheists should not embrace the vicious law of evolutionary theory and live by a morality of the survival of the fittest.

The heart of the problem is this: Atheist evolutionism rejects the very notion that there is something permanent called "human nature." For Catholic natural law reasoning, all morality is rooted in the fact that man is not just another animal, but is made in the image of God. All moral distinctions are rooted in this one simple truth. Once this is given up, there is no reason not to treat human beings in the same way we treat other animals. As a consequence, medical doctors start acting like veterinarians, putting people down when they get old and bothersome.

Q. Is it important for the average Catholic to have an understanding of atheism as presented by Dawkins and others? Why?

A. Yes, and we've written *Answering the New Atheism* for the average Catholic, matching Dawkins arguments one for one. A glance at the bestseller list allows us to see that atheism has become big business. The popularization of atheism means that bad arguments are floating around in the very air we breathe, and there is no doubt that Dawkins and his ilk mean to mass-produce unbelief.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church makes clear (see nos. 2088 and 2125 in particular), Catholics must prepare themselves against dangers to the faith, and that means against the very particular kinds of dangers that we are facing today. In our book we give Dawkins' arguments and then dismantle them, take them apart piece by piece. Readers will know what he said and what's wrong with it.

Q. If a family member has been influenced by the writings of Dawkins and others, what can someone do to counter that influence?

A. Probably the most important thing is not to "attack" that person. It is likely that Dawkins' greatest effect is on those whose faith is the least well formed, but who are intelligent. It won't do, then, simply to say "Dawkins is evil!", snatch away his *God Delusion* and stuff pious material into his hands. That doesn't answer the questions that Dawkins has raised. We think the best way is to take Dawkins seriously and meet him on his own grounds, showing how shakey those grounds ultimately are. That is what we have done in *Answering the New Atheism*. Since it is especially the late high school and college age crowd that is most likely to latch onto Dawkins, we especially urge parents to make our book available for any children within that range.

Q. At the same time as the influence of atheism is growing, there also seems to be growth within Christian faiths, especially Catholic and Evangelical. Is our society becoming more polarized?

A. We're not sure "polarized" is quite the right term. What we are seeing is the end product of a rather long process of secularization that began several centuries ago and is now coming to a head. Christian culture has become largely de-Christianized, and that has made serious Christians far more anxious about the atheistic roots of the new secular culture, and serious atheists far more anxious to be rid of the few remaining serious Christians.

Q. What impact does this apparently growing appeal of atheism have in the media and in academia?

A. Not to be too politically incorrect, but the intellectual culture of both the media and academia is largely defined by Western secular liberalism and has been for some time. Secular liberalism has long maintained a hegemony among the intellectual elite, and this has trickled down to the various media. The growing appeal of atheism is then, a result of their long-standing control of the intellectual culture and the ways that its opinions are disseminated. That atheism has become so popular is, we can be sure, a cause for celebration among them.

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