

Myth 1: Atheists Are Smarter

A Theologian Answers the Atheists

by Father Thomas Williams, LC

It is a common myth of our day, not surprisingly propagated by atheists, that religious believers are undereducated folk who have abandoned the use of reason in favor of blind faith. So in his book *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris writes that because of the religious belief of its citizens, the United States appears to the rest of the world "like a lumbering, bellicose, dim-witted giant." It is not surprising, in fact, that two of the most prominent neo-atheistic authors, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, are British, representing an island known in our day for its religious indifference. I have lived in Europe for 17 years, and there is no question that Americans' unapologetic religiosity makes Europeans uncomfortable. Yet many eminent thinkers throughout our history, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, have interpreted religious conviction to be America's greatest strength.

The atheistic books are understandably well received in coastal America, which prides itself on being cosmopolitan, open-minded, and far from the credulous "Jesus land" of Middle America. Richard Dawkins states: "What is remarkable is the polar opposition between the religiosity of the American public at large and the atheism of the intellectual elite." Dawkins also recently referred to the Bible Belt states as "the reptilian brain of southern and middle America," in contrast to the "country's cerebral cortex to the north and down the coasts."

Dawkins is right, up to a point. It is well known that the coastal, semi-skilled knowledge-class prides itself on its liberal, irreligious views, and that religious practice suffers on the coasts and on university campuses. What this means is up for debate. The intellectual elites were also far more susceptible than common folk to the lies of Leninist ideologies. Oddly enough, on average, serial killers also have IQs far superior to those of the norm. Geniuses are also more likely to go crazy than ordinary folk. What does all this prove? Not much.

Any correlation between faith and education tells us precious little about whether or not God actually exists. If it is true, as Jesus suggests, that the simple and humble see important truths more easily than the learned and the proud (Matthew 11:25), then it would not be surprising for the uneducated to be as wise or wiser in the ways of God than the hyper-educated. In the Gospel, as in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, children see reality more clearly and honestly than pedantic adults.

Despite my 16 years of university education, I am regularly stopped in my tracks by the insights of small children, and the wisdom of men and women whose formal education ended long before mine. Today's educational establishment likes us to believe that because we have more information at our disposal than previous generations, we therefore know more than they did about the meaning of human life. Yet a surfeit of information does not guarantee even a sliver of true wisdom. Common sense often seems to be suffocated in the more-rarefied airs of the academy. This is not to say that some of the most eminent minds of history have not been religious believers. A brief historical survey suffices to show that religious belief has permeated all social groups, including the intellectuals. Some of the most renowned politicians, historians, artists, scientists, poets and philosophers throughout history have found religious faith to be complementary — not antagonistic — to their professional pursuits.

Let's look for a moment at how the greatest scientists of all time stood up to the God question. According to the studies of John Galbraith Simmons, of the top 20 scientists in history, 15 were religious believers (four of whom were deists), two were agnostic, and three were atheists. There were more Catholics among them (five) than either agnostics or atheists, and five more came from other Christian denominations. Thus, a full half of the most influential scientists in history were Christians.

Sir Isaac Newton, for instance, whom Simmons considers to be the most important scientist who ever lived, was aided greatly in his endeavors by his belief in an ordered universe created by a God of order. Thus he could write, "It is the perfection of God's works that they are all done with the greatest simplicity. He is the God of order and not of confusion." He saw no incompatibility between his Christian faith and the purity of his science, as one complemented the other. "In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence," he wrote.

In my experience, no one caste or worldview has a monopoly on dimwits. I have run into obtuse minds among Christians, Jews, atheists and Muslims, just as I have known fine minds in all of these categories. I am little impressed by the pseudo-sophistication of our intellectual elites, with their pretenses of moral superiority. Give me an honest, hardworking man or woman over a self-important academic any day. In the end, the important truths of life are accessible to all, not just to the worldly wise.

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