

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 1 Theme: **Engaging Modern Atheism**

Title: **“The Challenges and Opportunities of Atheism”** Author: **Mr. Logan Johnson**

It is said that we live in a post-Christian society. Our laws do not reflect Biblical teaching, church attendance is considerably down compared to what it was sixty years ago, and those who claim no belief in God are at their greatest and most vocal. For Orthodox young people this has always been the case, and it probably does not shock us as much as it does our parents and grandparents. Colleges and universities pride themselves on diverse student populations, so no doubt anyone reading this article counts an atheist as one of their acquaintances, and if they are lucky, they consider one as a close friend. In the last five years a plethora of “New Atheist” literature has been published which seeks to disprove traditional pillars of theism and expound an enlightened, scientific, way of looking at the world. The Christian response to these New Atheists has been immense, but widely missing the point. Atheism, whether in the guise of the ‘new’ or ‘old’, challenges Christians not only to give a clear and concise account of their faith that is understandable to the world, but also a great opportunity to love those who not only differ from us, but may actively persecute us, and to show Christ to them.

Noted biologist and ‘New Atheist’ Richard Dawkins, in the preface to his bestseller *The God Delusion*, writes, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.” The exact rate of religious de-conversion to atheism as a result of Dawkins’ book, if any, is unknown, but the resulting books, articles, and debates that have taken place between the New Atheists from Christopher Hitchens to Daniel Dennett and various theistic writers such as David Bentley Hart and Alister McGrath have been legion. As Hart points out in his book *The Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, many of the arguments put forth by the new atheists had really been hashed out and presented in far more eloquent language by the ‘old’ atheists of the 19th and early 20th centuries such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Sartre. For Orthodox Christians, especially young adults, the polemical prose of these works, which are usually quite entertaining and worth a read, should take second place to the obvious challenges they present to how we give a proper account of our faith to those who are not only not Orthodox, but even not Christian or who are especially opposed to Christianity.

What are some of the arguments the New Atheists give for disbelief? In a famous passage from *The God Delusion*, Dawkins writes, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” Dawkins backs up his statement with Biblical stories such as God smiting all the first born of Egypt after sending torturing plagues on innocents, Levitical laws that demand stoning for adulterers, disobedient children, and practicing homosexuals, and the sanctioned slaughter of Canaanite peoples by the Israelites. Christopher Hitchens in various debates takes another stance, claiming that if a Christian God exists we are doomed to live in a celestial North Korea, with a dictator always watching over us, concerned with how we spend our money, what we do on Saturdays or Sundays, and even what sexual position we choose to participate in with consenting adults. Daniel Dennett, in his book *Breaking the Spell: Religions as a Natural Phenomenon*, takes yet another view, and argues that experience of the divine can be explained using neuroscience and genetics, without any reference to supernatural souls or other worlds.

I mention especially the above arguments because they have not, as far as I know, been addressed by Christian authors writing in response to the New Atheists. David Bentley Hart addresses the particular historical inaccuracies of many of the New Atheists who claim that the Christian Church actively tried to destroy secular literature and learning of the classical period of Greece and Rome, or that it was particularly Christian, and not primarily political, economic, or otherwise cultural influences that led to such atrocities as the Crusades or Inquisitions. Most theologians would be comfortable saying that it has been Christ's followers, not Christ himself, that have carried these misdeeds out, and so such historically bloody deeds are not proofs against Christianity's truth claims. Many Christian writers will point out the incredible beauty of nature and the immense odds overcome that seem ordained by God to support life on this tiny planet. Others will state that moral law requires a God who lays it down—if God does not exist, they say, no action can ultimately be right or wrong and so He either exists and we should behave accordingly, or He does not exist, so why be good?

No argument will bring a person to Christ. In our post-Christian world, where all proofs must be scientific and natural, our challenge and joy as Orthodox Christians is to show Christ's love to the world, which is itself immaterial and often irrational (at least according to the world's view). A close friend of mine, Emma, an atheist, confided that she would like to live simply, have a job that could support her, and spend the rest of her time volunteering in hospitals or schools. This desire on her part for self-emptying love was a perfect opportunity for me to talk about the Christian belief in a God that emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and according to Matthew 25 says that the service of the poor and marginalized is the single criterion for entrance into the Kingdom of God. Sharing the Gospel in this way allowed us to have a real discussion about the Truth of Christianity without being confrontational and polemic. This is just a small example of how we can talk about our faith with those who have made a conscious choice not to believe in God. I hope to continue to be challenged by my atheist friends to give a good account of my faith and my hope and to be given the opportunity to love them where and how they are, without regard to our differences.

Discussion Questions:

Do we live in a "Post-Christian" society? If so, what exactly does that mean and what implications does it have for us Christians?

Is the God of the Old Testament different than the God of the new? How do we answer that question as a Church? How do you answer it personally?

Are there other reasons to "be good" besides the threatening justice of an all-powerful deity?