THE NEW ATHEISM

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Introduction to New Atheism: Apologetics and the Legacy of Alvin Plantinga

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Atheism is on the rise, or at least it seems to be. Of course, it may just be that we think this is the case because we are more sensitive to changes that have taken place in our own day. After all, the decade of the 1970s seems to have been just as friendly to atheism as our own time has been. It was in the 70s that prayer was taken out of schools, that *Roe v. Wade* claimed abortion a fundamental right of women (at least during the first trimester), and that atheism dominated the philosophy departments of most universities. Similarly, the era immediately following the Second World War could also lay claim to the title of most atheistic era, at least with respect to gains of atheism in the public imagination. The net effect of two world wars was to destroy the optimism in humanity found in liberal theology and to usher in a time of despair. The popularity of atheistic existentialist writings spoke to the masses in a way with which religion seemed unable to compete. At a minimum, we must acknowledge that Sartre and Camus (and Nietzsche before them) paved the way for the mainstream acceptance of atheism in later years.

Nevertheless, it still appears that in the last decade or so, atheism has gained a wider audience and its adherents have become more vocal and confrontational. It is hard to imagine a movie like Bill Maher's *Religulous*, a satirical, but patently offensive and in many ways, disingenuous attack on religion, being produced and enjoying a multi-million dollar premier and run in the theaters prior to our day. Other similarly offensive and insulting attacks on religion have followed, most notably the numerous episodes of Penn & Teller's *Showtime* blockbuster, *Bullsh*t!,* dedicated to questions of religion and faith. In a particularly egregious action, Penn Jilette, the show's host, wore a helmet with a makeshift lightning rod affixed, blasphemed, and then dared God to strike him dead. The antics and tirades of professional comedians could be dismissed as publicity stunts or attempts to boost ratings with shock value, but unfortunately, their words and claims—hostility included—actually reflect the ideas and dispositions of a growing number of average Americans. In this issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, we

hope to examine the writings of the key intellectual leaders of this new brand of atheism, known, curiously enough, as the "New Atheism."

The new atheism gets its name, not from the content of the arguments its proponents put forth, but rather from the attitude and approach with which it is presented. In fact, most of the arguments offered by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and others are not new, and are not even as sophisticated as when originally given by A.J. Ayer, Bertrand Russell, Antony Flew, J.L. Mackie, and others. The writings of the new atheists are characterized less by philosophical rigor and reasoned arguments, and more by "angry, sarcastic, and sloppily argued attacks" on religion generally and Christianity specifically.[1] The bombastic nature of the new atheist attack on religion has led a number of professional theologians and philosophers of religion to dismiss it out of hand as lacking seriousness and scholarship, and this, even though most of its key proponents have earned doctorates in science and philosophy.[2] Still, it is a force to be reckoned with, if only due to the popularity of the books, many of which have been on the *New York Times*' best seller list and atop the Amazon.com sales charts. For this reason, some Christian scholars have seen the need to engage their arguments with book-length treatments.[3]

In order to illustrate the dismissive and hostile attitude of the new atheism, as well as the outrageous claims sometimes made, a brief section of quotations from several of the key authors in the movement has been provided. Many more quotes could have been included, and editorial decisions were difficult to make, but the selections presented should be sufficient to give the reader at least a taste of what the new atheist writings are like.

The articles in this issue are not meant to address all of the claims and arguments made by the new atheists, but rather to meet some of the most outlandish and/or compelling, while offering some advice for engaging atheists in dialog. All of the authors of articles in this volume are deeply committed Christians and professors of philosophy at Southwestern Baptist

[1]Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, eds. *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), vii.

[2]David Hart, "Believe it or Not: David B. Hart sees the New Atheism Going the Way of the Pet Rock," *First Things* 203 (2010): 35–40. John F. Haught, "Amateur Atheists: Why the New Atheism Isn't Serious," *Christian Century* 125.4 (2008): 22–23, 25–27, 29. Peterson has given compelling reasons for remaining engaged despite the tenor of the discussion. Gregory Peterson, "Why the New Atheism Shouldn't be (Completely) Dismissed," *Zygon* 42.4 (2007): 803–06.

[3]Gregory E. Ganssle, *A Reasonable God: Engaging the New Face of Atheism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009); R. Albert Mohler, *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008); Alister McGrath and Joanna Colicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007); John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007). For a more scholarly analysis of the new atheism, see Amarnath Amarasingam, ed., *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Berlinski, not a Christian, has also responded to the claims of the new atheists: David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions* (New York: Basic, 2009).

Theological Seminary. All are concerned with equipping the church to engage the culture and respond appropriately to the challenges posed by critics of the faith. The reader will notice that there is significant overlap in several places. This should be seen as helpful in that it reinforces the points made and illustrates the unity of thought on these issues among conservative Christian scholars.

The reader may also notice that a number of the articles reference the apologetic work of Alvin Plantinga. Perhaps more than any other contemporary thinker, Plantinga has impacted the discipline of Christian philosophy and apologetics. Some have even claimed that he, along with a few others—William Alston, Richard Swinburne, Nicholas Wolterstorff, George Mavrodes, Arthur Holmes, Robert Merrihew Adams and Marilyn McCord Adams, to name a few—helped make Christian philosophy respectable.[4] His career has been characterized by ground-breaking work in both areas, and he has won the admiration of many philosophers, theist and atheist alike. His entire career has been dedicated to engaging the arguments of atheism at the scholarly level with the philosophical rigor of a logician, and so it seemed appropriate and necessary, in an issue dedicated to examining the latest incarnation of atheist thinking, to include a brief summary of his work and its impact on the discussion. At significant risk of oversimplification, it is my hope to summarize the main points of his contribution to the topic at hand.

It is perhaps best to think of Plantinga's work as including defensive and offensive apologetics. His defensive work has largely focused on two basic arguments against the belief in God. First, he has responded to atheist claims that belief in God is irrational or immoral due to insufficient evidence, and he has refused to accept the burden of proof to the contrary. Second, he has rebutted the argument that God's existence is impossible given the problem of evil. In recent years, his work has taken on a decidedly more offensive tone in his attack on the rationality of materialistic naturalism (at least insofar as the proponent holds to Darwinian evolution).

Plantinga is most famous for his response to the evidentialist argument against theism, in which the claim is made that one may only be justified in believing something on sufficient evidence. The classic version of the underlying principle was given by W.K. Clifford, who claimed, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."[5] The claim, then, is that belief in God is "irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or somehow noetically

[4]For example, commenting on the impact of Plantinga's work, Sennett writes, "Today Christian philosophers enjoy a *prima facie* credibility that we did not have just a generation ago . . . It is no longer the unspoken discipline-wide assumption that theism in general and Christianity in particular are intellectually indefensible and out of place in the academic arena." James F. Sennett, "Introduction," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga reader,* ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), xiii–xiv.

[5]W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 186.

below par because . . . there is *insufficient evidence* for it."[6] The idea is that persons can only be justified in believing in God if they do so because they have been convinced of His existence by some sort of evidence, and this, usually by means of an argument from the evidence or from basic beliefs. Plantinga questions the premise that belief works this way, and offers counter-examples to the claim. For example, we believe that other persons have minds, but we do not do so because we have constructed elaborate arguments to that effect.[7] Rather, Plantinga claims, we just believe in other minds, and are justified in doing so because it is reasonable to do so, and it is a belief which is proper for us to hold.[8]

At the heart of the discussion is the nature of "basic beliefs," or those beliefs which persons justifiably hold without appeals to evidence or argument, and which form the base upon which all other beliefs are formed. Proponents of the evidentialist objection hold to "strong foundationalism," which limits basic beliefs to those items or propositions which are self-evident or self-referentially true, or which are incorrigible. Plantinga has questioned such a limiting, and has noted that the requirement—self-evident or incorrigible or directly argued from such—is not met by strong foundationalism itself! He has instead suggested that belief in God is properly basic, that one may believe in God without any evidence at all, and that such belief is still justified, warranted, and acceptable. His position, because it draws upon the ideas of Calvin and other reformers, has come to be known as reformed epistemology.[9] That is, Plantinga has claimed that we are well within our epistemic rights to believe that God exists, even if that belief is not based on evidence or logical argumentation beginning with self-evident or incorrigible truths (though it may be based on evidence). Since he does not accept the requirement of evidence for justifiable belief, he also does not agree that the theist must accept the burden of proof; there is no presumption of atheism, contrary to Flew, among others.

Plantinga has also taken agnostics to task, arguing that suspension of belief is not an option. Beginning with Anselm's ontological argument, which argues that God must exist in reality because He exists in the mind as

[6]Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 17.

[7]Plantinga developed the argument in several places, but most obviously in the work entitled, *God and Other Minds.* Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[8]Plantinga writes, "belief in other minds and belief in God are in the same boat when it comes to justification, and a person can be entirely justified in accepting either or both, whether or not there are cogent arguments for either from other propositions she believes." Ibid., xii.

[9]Plantinga's most developed treatment of reformed epistemology can be found in his trilogy of epistemology books published by Oxford University Press: Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

an idea and existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone, Plantinga argues that the great-making attributes traditionally ascribed to God require one to either believe His existence is impossible or is necessary. He draws upon possible worlds semantics and modal logic in order to make his case. By definition, a proposition which is true in all possible worlds is necessarily true, a proposition which is true in no possible worlds is impossible or necessarily false, and propositions which are true in some possible worlds but not in others, are possibly true, or possibilities. Plantinga notes that God's greatness and perfection—something he takes all persons will agree are attributes of a God-being if One were to exist—require that He have necessary existence, since a being with necessary existence would be greater than a being with contingent existence. Thus, if God exists, He must exist in all possible worlds. This admission, though, has the consequence of disallowing agnosticism, which makes the claim that it is possible God exists. Recall, though, that in possible worlds semantics, if it is possible God exists, then He exists in at least one but not all, possible worlds. However, it has already been acknowledged that if He exists, He has necessary existence and must exist in all possible worlds, one of which is the actual world. In other words, if it is possible a perfect being with necessary existence exists, then He must exist. The agnostic must either accept that God exists, or he must move to the more ardent atheist position and claim that it is not possible that God exists, that belief in God's existence is illogical because His existence is impossible.[10]

Interestingly, though, Plantinga has also sought to answer the strongest logical argument against God's existence, the logical problem of evil, by appeal to what has come to be known as the "free will defense."[11] The logical problem of evil claims that there is a logical contradiction in simultaneously affirming that God exists, He is all-good, He is all-powerful, and evil exists; it is not possible that all four propositions are true. Plantinga rightly notes that this argument assumes that an all-good being must eliminate all evil and suffering that He can eliminate, and that an all-powerful being could eliminate all evil and suffering. He questions both of these assumptions. First, he notes that an all-good being may have many reasons for not eliminating all evil and suffering that He can eliminate, but grants that the end result must be some form of greater good. Second, he argues that an all-powerful being may not be able to eliminate all evil and suffering if He is going to meet that greater good. By way of example, Plantinga appeals to free will, and notes that it is possible that even an all-powerful, all-good God could not create a world where people are free and they always choose to do good.

[10]See *God and Other Minds* as well as Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). Since perfect ontology requires necessary existence, the only options available are that God exists in all possible worlds or God exists in no possible worlds—He either necessarily exists (must exist) or it is impossible that He exist.

[11]Plantinga's free will defense appears in *God and Other Minds; God, Freedom and Evil;* and in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).

(E.g., It is possible that it may not have been within God's power to create a world where Adam is free with respect to eating the forbidden fruit and he chooses to refrain from eating because whenever he is free, he chooses to eat). If this is the case, then the logical problem of evil fails as an argument against the existence of God as He is traditionally conceived. This means that the atheist must have another logical argument against theism. The atheist is clearly in trouble.

Plantinga moves beyond defensive arguments, though, to attack atheism and the presumed understanding of human development: naturalistic evolution. At its most basic, his argument is the claim that philosophical naturalism (i.e., atheism) and evolutionary theory (Neo-Darwinism) are contradictory; that one cannot consistently hold to both.[12] Of course, this is an oversimplification, but in Plantinga's own words, "My claim was that naturalism and contemporary evolutionary theory are at serious odds with one another—and this despite the fact that the latter is ordinarily thought to be one of the main pillars supporting the edifice of the former."[13] James Beilby has aptly summarized Plantinga's argument as three steps. The first step is to call into question the reliability of our cognitive faculties (memory, perception, reason, etc.) if evolutionary theory, unguided by God (or some other Intelligence), is true. That is, Plantinga begins by noting that if philosophical naturalism (natural realm is all there is) and Neo-Darwinianism (evolution by means of natural selection through random genetic mutation with selection toward survivability) are true, then there is good reason to suppose that the human mind has evolved so as not to produce true beliefs, but instead to function in a way that enhances survivability, and this very well may not include true beliefs.[14] While Plantinga goes on to argue that the probability our cognitive faculties produce true beliefs is low, given naturalism and evolution, he really only needs to show that it cannot be known, and this seems obviously true.

This leads to the second step in the argument, which is the claim that if a person accepts naturalistic evolution and that the probability his cognitive faculties evolved to produce true beliefs is low or inscrutable, then he has good reason to doubt the reliability of his own cognitive faculties! The third step clearly follows, which is the claim that the evolutionary naturalist should question the reliability of his belief in philosophical natural-

[12]Plantinga is currently authoring a book-length treatment of the argument, but it first appeared in his books on belief and justification. See *Warrant and Proper Function*, 194–237; and *Warranted Christian Belief*, 217–40.

[13]Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction," in *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism*, ed. James Beilby (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1.

[14]"But if *naturalism* is true, there is no God, and hence no God (or anyone else) overseeing our development and orchestrating the course of our evolution. And this leads directly to the question whether it is at all likely that our cognitive faculties, given naturalism and given their evolutionary origin, would have developed in such a way as to be reliable, to furnish us with mostly true beliefs." Ibid., 3.

ism and Neo-Darwinian evolution. Thus, Plantinga has demonstrated that the conjunction of philosophical naturalism and Neo-Darwinian evolution is self-defeating (or self-referentially incoherent), and this means that one cannot rationally accept it. But Plantinga takes his argument one more step (which I suppose would suggest that it is four steps)—he argues that the philosophical naturalist ought to accept Neo-Darwinian evolution, and this leads him to conclude that naturalism itself is self-defeating: "anyone who accepts naturalism ought also to accept evolution; evolution is the only game in town, for the naturalist, with respect to the question of how all this variety of flora and fauna has arisen. IF that is so, finally, then naturalism simpliciter is self-defeating and cannot rationally be accepted—at any rate by someone who is apprised of this argument and sees the connections between N&E and R."[15]

It is our sincere hope that the articles and other writings presented in this volume are of help to the church and to individual believers in their own faith journeys, as well as their apologetic endeavors. Atheism poses a greater challenge today than it has in the past, but we may have confidence in the truth of God's Word and in His grace to us. The life of the mind and the life of the spirit should not be divorced, and it is in this spirit of reflection, hope, and confidence that this issue is presented for consideration.

[15]Ibid., 12. N&E and R are references to naturalism, evolution, and the reliability thesis.