INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE NEW ATHEISM?

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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, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.


One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human pre-history where nobody—not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms—had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs).

– Christopher Hitchens (2007b, 64)

It is safe to say that almost every person living in New Orleans at the moment Hurricane Katrina struck shared your belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and compassionate God. But what was God doing while Katrina laid waste to their city? Surely He heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Do you have the courage to admit the obvious? These people died talking to an imaginary friend.

– Sam Harris (2008, 53)

The term ‘new atheism’ has been given to the recent barrage of anti-religion and anti-God books written by Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2008), Christopher Hitchens (2007b), Daniel Dennett (2006), and others. Statements like those above can be found in abundance throughout their writings. They are characteristically petulant and provocative, challenging yet cranky, urgent but uninformed. The new atheist writers and their respective books have been selling extremely well; they have conducted conferences dealing, largely uncritically, with their own material, and have had a significant media presence discussing and debating their ideas with journalists and other
scholars. A rigorous academic treatment of their ideas, however, as well as an exploration of how their arguments are important for larger debates in religious studies and the social sciences, remains wanting. The academic community, with a few exceptions, has largely dismissed their writings as unsophisticated, crude, and lacking nuance. As such, most of the work dealing with the new atheist corpus has tended to be equally crude, mocking, or dismissive. Instead, this book brings together eminent and rising scholars in the fields of religious studies, sociology of religion, sociology of science, philosophy, and theology in order to engage the new atheist literature and place it in the context of larger scholarly discourses and debates. It will serve to contextualize and critically examine the claims, arguments, and goals of the new atheists in order that the scholarly community and educated general reader can become more informed of some of the debates with which the new atheists inevitably and, at times unknowingly, engage.

When I mentioned to colleagues that I was preparing an edited book on the new atheism, there were generally two responses. First, I was told that there was in fact nothing new about the new atheism. Everything that is said by the likes of Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett had already been said, and said better, by Russell, Paine, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and others. There is, of course, much truth to this. As Damon Linker (2008, A14) writes, the new atheism is “not particularly new. It belongs to an intellectual genealogy stretching back hundreds of years, to a moment when atheist thought split into two traditions: one primarily concerned with the dispassionate pursuit of truth, the other driven by a visceral contempt for the personal faith of others.” Although much of the content of the new atheism may have precedents, what is original is the newfound urgency in the message of atheism, as well as a kind of atheist social revival that their writings, lectures, and conferences have produced. In other words, the ‘new’ atheism is not entirely about new ideas, but a kind of evangelical revival and repackaging of old ideas. One only needs to peruse the Converts’ Corner on RichardDawkins.net to get a sense of the influence of the new atheism. The thousands of reader comments posted on the site state ad nauseam that _The God Delusion_ had given them the arguments and the courage to confidently profess their atheism (see also Bullivant 2008a). To provide just one example: “Thank you, Dr. Dawkins, for giving me the words to explain, in clear, convicted and coherent voice, that which I have always felt. I have never felt so empowered, so humbled, so awestruck or so electrified as when I read