

## **“The New Atheism” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely**

**Unitarian Church of Edmonton, April 27, 2008**

I have always been a little puzzled by atheists, but right from the outset I wish to make a distinction. People who choose or who cannot believe in the existence of God do not puzzle me. Our abilities to think rationally about religion and incorporate personal experience often reveal holes and gaps in ancient beliefs. Most religions involve acceptance of miraculous things that can be a bit hard to swallow now that we know a lot more about how the world works. And frankly, the disasters large and small that beset our world, the evils of greed and war and what have you can make it hard to feel that some divinity is looking out for us. Doubting a divine existence at least occasionally, merely marks one as a thoughtful human being, and a decision to not believe in God makes perfect sense. But for the sake of shorthand today, I will call these people non-believers.

I will reserve the label ‘atheist’ for those people who are certain. I have always been puzzled by folks who are *positive* that there is no God. I am confused by them. They usually base their claim on reason, intellect and logic. The giant leaps of science have explained many miraculous things and have cast serious doubt on the religious scriptures. Science has failed to discover a divine presence. I agree. Religious wars have killed millions. Religious institutions have proved as corrupt as any other human creation. Many of these churches have committed grievous intellectual sins, advancing pseudo-science to defend their faithful claims. I agree. Through it all religion has not corrected the venality of humans. Therefore, the atheists cannot detect God. OK, fine.

But then they make a logical error. Because God can’t be proved, or even detected on their terms, therefore they claim there is no God and no possibility of a God. That is faulty reasoning. Science is clear that you cannot prove a negative. The non-existence of the divine is as unprovable as its existence. Absolute atheism is not a rational position or a factual claim. Instead it is a faith statement, no different from the religious creeds the atheists abhor.

I have no problem with atheism as a faith statement *when it is labelled as such*. It is as valid as any other belief about the unknown, but I am troubled at the inaccurate claim by some that atheism – the belief, not the doubt – is a rational position. And I grow tired very quickly with those who insist on their atheistic belief with the absolute passion of a religious fundamentalist. Fundamentalism of any stripe wears me out in a hurry for there is no room for conversation and discussion. Either you agree with them or you are wrong and deluded .

To put myself in this framework, I am more of an agnostic. That means I do not know whether God exists or not. Some days I *choose* to believe in some sort of divine force, other days I don’t. And I am happy to live with the uncertainty. For the most part I have stayed away from conflict with true atheists, usually choosing to not debate the issue. In the last couple of years as the militant “New Atheism” has emerged, it’s become increasingly difficult to avoid.

Who are the new atheists? They are a few individuals who have managed to garner a great deal of media attention with their in-your-face attacks on organized religion. They include Christopher Hitchens, a polemical journalist known for his acerbic wit in such magazines as “Vanity Fair” and “The Nation”. He authored the best-selling book “God is Not Great”. A second luminary is Sam Harris, author of “The End of Faith” and a neuroscientist. The third major figure is Richard Dawkins an English ethologist and evolutionary biologist sometimes nicknamed Darwin’s Rottweiler. In 2006 he published the best seller “The God Delusion.”

When these writers first appeared on the scene, they were a breath of fresh air in a world that seemed to be pitting Islamic fanaticism against George Bush’s militant, corporate Christianity. They did a marvellous job skewering the cartoonish claims of religious fanatics of all stripes and dissecting them with a combination of witty ridicule and intellectual argument. I have always found Hitchens, whom I have read most deeply, particularly entertaining, that is, until he turns abusive. The minute a debater starts using labels and derogatory names he or she sacrifices their moral high ground. Such attacks often mask weak reasoning or poor research.

More and more I have come to feel that these are angry men lashing out perhaps at the religious teaching they received as children. It is easy for those of us who are born into a religion to learn the childhood teachings of that faith and then think we understand all of its complexity. Many who leave as teens and young adults never take the time to study the deeper explorations of mature religion. Their grasp of the church remains that of a 16 year old. That is certainly good enough knowledge to make a decision to leave, but it is not sufficient comprehension to make one an expert on the subject. For those who claim to be committed to the world of ideas and the discipline of the scientific method, these new atheist writers seldom seem willing to extend their research much beyond the headlines on cable news.

For them there is no room for a reasoned or middle of the road approach to religion, or the maturation and modification of belief through experience. Dawkins, for example, dismisses religion a 'delusion', that is a false fixed belief. The subtitle for Hitchen's book (*How Religion Poisons Everything*) pretty much shows his state of mind, while Harris argues that religion is, "one of the most perverse misuses of intelligence we have ever devised."<sup>1</sup>

Well, I am not going to argue that religion is as pure as the driven snow. It has been and is being misused to cause terrible harm. But I suggest that some devoted to science and technology have done just as much harm. It is an unbalanced argument to pick out only the evils of religion without giving equal consideration to the good religion has done. Considered in such a one-sided way, science fails the same test.

That was reinforced a few weeks ago when I heard a *CBC Sunday Edition* interview with Chris Hedges, an award winning foreign correspondent<sup>2</sup> who also happens to be a divinity school graduate who pursued journalism instead of ministry. In 2007 he published "American Facists" a book that drew parallels between the Christian right in America and the European fascist movements of the 1930s. He is no Bible thumping apologist for conservative Christianity.

This year he put out, "I Don't Believe in Atheists", the subject of the interview. It is rare that I hear an interview and run right out and buy the book, but that day I did. At times he becomes as angry the atheists he challenges, but for the most part I found his case against them useful and clearly reasoned. This is not a faith-based rebuttal, but a discussion of their arguments using their own tools of reason and intellect. He is convincing when he claims,

The agenda of the new atheists, ..., is disturbing. These atheists embrace a belief system as intolerant, chauvinistic and bigoted as that of religious fundamentalists. They propose a route to collective salvation and the moral advancement of the human species though science and reason...

...The belief that rational and quantifiable disciplines such as science can be used to perfect human society is no less absurd than a belief in magic, angels and divine intervention. Scientific methods, part of the process of changing the material world, are nearly useless in the nebulous world of politics, ideas, values and ethics. But the belief in collective moral progress is a seductive one. It is what has doomed populations in the past who have chased the impossible dreams (of utopianism), and it threatens to doom us again. It is, at its core, the enticing delusion that we can be more than human, that we can become gods.

We have nothing to fear from those who do not believe in God; we have much to fear from those who do not believe in sin. The concept of sin is a stark acknowledgement that we can never be omnipotent, that we are bound and limited by human flaws and self-interest.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Wikipedia articles on the named figures.

<sup>2</sup> . Hedges was part of a team of NY Times Journalists awarded a 2002 Pulitzer for a series on Global Terrorism, and won the Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism (2003). He has written for the NY Times, the Christian Science Monitor, the Dallas Morning News and National Public Radio.

<sup>3</sup> Hedges, Chris "I Don't Believe in Atheists" (Free Press, 2008) pp 7 & 13,14)

It has often been claimed that science and technology are morally neutral. The discovery of nuclear fission was science. The creation and use of nuclear weapons was a political, economic and moral decision. The experimental research into human physiology carried out by the German government in the 1930's and 40's has produced science that is still creating new products and technologies today. It was logical, intellectual and rigorous in its adherence to the scientific method. That the morally horrific experiments were carried out on unwilling subjects in Nazi death camps is irrelevant to science. And if we think we have risen above that dark time, think again. This week Dennis Edney, lawyer for Guantanamo prisoner Omar Khadr spoke here at length about the immorality of that prison and the continuous physical and psychological torture and dehumanizing of the inmates. They have perfected the torture techniques introduced by the Nazis. These prisoners are the victims of a war of religious AND secular fundamentalisms such as the new atheism.

Science and technology are morally neutral. Why, then, do the new atheists think that they will lead humanity to moral perfection? Morality is not something scientific inquiry can deliver.

Therefore the problem of the new atheism, according to Hedges, is that it has no moral grounding. "The questions of science are not the questions of religion."<sup>4</sup> He quotes Albert Einstein's famous remark, "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind." Hedges argues that the new atheists place their faith in a Darwin-like moral evolution of the species, something that is fondly accepted by many Unitarians. But, he argues that applying evolutionary theory to social development is *anti-Darwinian*. Darwin only developed a theory of biological evolution. "Darwinism sees our animal nature as intractable. It never attempts to argue that human beings can overcome biological limitations and create a human paradise. It infers the opposite."<sup>5</sup> Darwin's idea, "is not a theory about economic systems, government, morality, ethics or behaviour of nations.

"There is nothing in science that implies that our genetic make-up allows us to perfect ourselves. Those who, in the name of science, claim that we can overcome our imperfect nature create a belief system that functions like a religion. It gives meaning. It gives purpose and hope. But it is a myth. It is not true. And there is nothing, when you cut through their scientific jargon, to support their absurd proposition."<sup>6</sup>

Hedges then offers evidence that humans are not evolving beyond our biology. Instead, he argues that we mould our intellectual skills and a keenly honed ability to delude ourselves into a belief that the cumulative building of knowledge includes an equal advancement in moral development. The evidence shows otherwise. Nazi Germany was the product of an atheistic quest to develop a super race. The use of the atomic bomb was justified as a life-saving measure. Pol Pot's genocide in Cambodia was motivated by intellectual purity, and the Guantanamo Bay prisons are justified as the promotion of noble democracy and freedom. The claim that improved science equates to improved morality is not supported by the evidence. Human beings are still capable of horrible acts against one another. Thanks to technology, we can visit those horrors on enemies on an ever growing scale.

Yet, it is important to understand that Hedges is not really opposed to the creation of this myth or even the 'cult of science' as he labels this mythic extension of science. What annoys him is the passionate effort the new atheists put into defaming religion when, in fact, they are creating a new one.

He also holds that this scientific model is ill prepared to provide the moral and ethical guidance that has always been a religious, rather than a scientific question. He is concerned that historical attempts to replace God with human achievement usually mean that one group, nation or race judge themselves superior to all others, and that those others, be they immigrants, military enemies, or people of lower classes including slaves, become disposable in the service to the higher good.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 45

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. P. 46

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 53-4

“This lack of reverence, this refusal to see that we exist as an integrated whole, blinds humankind to its vulnerability, the fragility of life and human weakness. These delusions are part of a worldview that has lost touch with the sacred, a worldview that places itself and its selfish desires and dreams before the protection of life itself.”<sup>7</sup>

Instead, Hedges suggests that religion offers another way, a sacred way that does not put the human at the top of the pinnacle, but into relationship with the rest of the world. We must find something outside of the human race that we can deem as sacred and more important than us, even if only to protect us from our own ambitions. In the Unitarian Church we argue that we are simply part of an interdependent web of all existence. Humans are not the be all and end all, but rather are connected in sacred relationship. For us, it is the interdependent relationships of life that have become sacred. That kind of acknowledgement is the path to humility and a kind of salvation for Hedges.

“The language of religion – the call to respect life as created in God’s image – is a call to an ethic that goes beyond the utilitarian. It honors the sacred. It is not irrational, but it is also not rational. Perhaps it is best described as nonrational, for it allows believers to remain in a world that is real while holding up an ideal and an ethic that cannot be scientifically examined. This is the basis for the spiritual dimension of human existence.”<sup>8</sup>

Hedges does not deny the sinful excesses of religion, but neither does he see them as grounds for dismissing the spiritual realm as the new atheists do. Religion allows us to look at those excesses, to brand them as sin and to recognize that there is a higher morality still to be sought. Religious thought is built with the goal of leading us to the sacred, on calling us to greater reverence. There is not in religion (except in the most fundamentalist and twisted forms) an expectation that we will achieve perfection anytime soon or even ever, but there is an expectation that we are called to do better. Whether God exists or not is almost not relevant. It may well be that God is just a name for having higher moral expectations of ourselves. But that call, that expectation to live well, to live better lives is the great gift of religion. Nothing in the new atheism provides the tools religion can for pursuing that goal.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P. 57

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P. 89