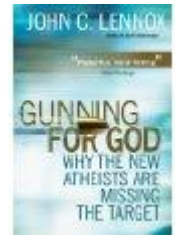


# John Lennox : Gunning for God – why the new atheists are missing the target



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Notes by Alison Morgan July 2012

*Another rigorous and clear exposition of the logical failures of the New Atheists, and a compelling argument for the reasonableness of faith.*

## Introduction

Richard Dawkins has been joined by Stephen Hawking, who announces in his most recent book that despite his earlier statements, there is now no room for God.

British Humanist Society bus campaign 'There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life' – but it seems to be the atheists who are doing the worrying, not the Christians... Sartre said 'atheism is a long, hard, cruel business.' Maybe worry is part and parcel of the rejection of God, not a consequence of belief in him.

Why the aggression of the New Atheists? Something appears to have snapped – was it the Twin Towers on 9/11? Dawkins says 9/11 'radicalised' him. It's a campaign fuelled by the horror of extremism.

2007 YouGov poll suggested 16% are atheist, 28% believe in God, 26% believe in 'something', 9% are agnostics, 5% would like to believe, 3% didn't know, 3% said 'other', and 10% hadn't given it much thought. The objective of the New Atheists is not simple to complete the process of secularisation by banishing God from the universe; but it is to put something in place of God' – science. No other area of human thought is qualified to contribute anything useful; scientists become the arbiters of what is to be believed and what is to be worshipped. This is totalitarianism.

The agenda is as follows:

- religion is dangerous and leads to violence and war
- we must get rid of it – science can do that
- we do not need God to be good; atheism can provide an adequate base for ethics.

New Atheists are more anti-theist than atheist. Many atheists worry about this – Paul Kurtz says 'I consider them atheist fundamentalists. They're anti-religious and they're mean-spirited, unfortunately.' Michael Ruse says '*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist and the McGraths show why'.

John Humphreys' book *In God We Doubt* presents their main ideas and responds to them:

1. Believers are mostly naïve and stupid, or at least not as clever as atheists – so clearly untrue it's not worth bothering with
2. The few clever ones are pathetic because they need a crutch to get them through life – proves nothing, don't we all?
3. They are also pathetic because they don't accept the finality of death – doesn't mean they are wrong
4. They have been brainwashed into believing – whilst many reject their faith as adults, many do not
5. They have been bullied into believing – you can't do this, only bully them into pretending to believe
6. If we don't wipe out religious belief civilisation is doomed – we've survived for centuries, and there are greater threats!
7. Trust me, I'm an atheist – why?

John Leake, science editor of *The Sunday Times* reports on an 82 country study which found that those who worship have more children – and so replace themselves better. Evolution does not favour atheism!

## 1. Are God and faith enemies of reason and science?

Big Bang model was thought up by a theist, not atheist – Georges Lemaitre, Belgian priest astronomer, 1927; Einstein was suspicious because it was too reminiscent of the Christian doctrine of creation. Hawking now uses it to banish God...

An anti-scientific stance is antipathetic to the biblical worldview – and inexcusable in Christians.

Hawking has a defective view of God – God of the gaps, to be put forward as an explanation if we don't have a scientific one – but God is author of the whole show. He also says 'philosophy is dead'.

Scientific laws do not explain origin, they cannot create, they just describe. Yet Paul Davies says 'There's no need to invoke anything supernatural in the origins of the universe or of life. I have never liked the idea of divine tinkering: for me it is much more inspiring to believe that a set of mathematical laws can be so clever as to bring all these things into being.' 33. Hawking says it was only necessary for the blue touch paper to be lit in order to set the universe going – but where did this blue touch paper come from? The question, why is there something rather than nothing cannot be answered by science. Hawking recognises the evidence for design 'our universe and its laws appear to have a design that both is tailor-made to support us and, if we are to exist, leaves little room for alteration. That is not easily explained and raises the natural question of why it is that way... The discovery relatively recently of the extreme fine-tuning of so many of the laws of nature could lead at least some of us back to the old idea that this grand design is the work of some grand designer... That is not the answer of modern science..' 35. He postulates the existence of many universes to get round this, all happening by chance – so that at least one of them will be hospitable to life as we know it. But as Polkinghorne points out, this is metaphysics – there is no evidence whatever for the existence of many universes, and indeed it's a very complex explanation for something for which there is a far simpler one – God.

Faith – what is it? The New Atheists see God as wish fulfilment (cf Freud); but if God does exist, then maybe the atheist position is the comforting delusion, rather than the faith position (Lutz). Polish Nobel Laureate Milosz writes 'a true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death – the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders, we are not going to be judged.' So if God does exist, atheism is a psychological escape mechanism to avoid taking ultimate responsibility for one's own life.

Faith & science. Paul Davies says a scientific attitude is essentially theological: 'science can proceed only if the scientist adopts an essentially theological worldview... Even the most atheistic scientist accepts as an act of faith the existence of a law-like order in nature that is at least in part comprehensible to us. Einstein said 'science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.' Dawkins doesn't like believers in God quoting Einstein, but here he is again: 'Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe – a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble. In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is indeed quite different from the religiosity of someone more naïve.'48. Polkinghorne: 'physics is powerless to explain its faith in the mathematical intelligibility of the universe'; Einstein, 'the only incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible'.

## 2. Is religion poisonous?

New Atheists fail to discriminate between religions - yet they do discriminate between atheists (themselves vs violent extremists of their own world view such as Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot). Atheist philosopher Jurgen Habermas warns against an 'unfair exclusion of religion from the public space in order not to cut secular society off from important resources for creating meaning.' He talks about people who are 'religiously unmusical', and affirms the contribution of a biblical world view to the basic prerequisites for human flourishing. Terry Eagleton points out that Dawkins' attitude to history is blinkered – 'he can scarcely bring himself to concede that a single human benefit has flowed from religious faith, a view which is as .. improbable as it is empirically false.' Biologist David Sloan Wilson views Dawkins as 'just another angry atheist, trading on his reputation as an evolutionist and spokesperson for science to vent his personal opinions about religion.' The claim that religious belief is harmful from an evolutionary point of view is demonstrably false – Christians have more children than atheists, live longer, are healthier. He should say, Christian belief is beneficial from an evolutionary point of view, but I consider it harmful for other reasons.

Prof Andrew Sims – book *Is Faith Delusional?* Sims is former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He says 'The advantageous effect of religious belief and spirituality on mental and physical health is one of the best-kept secrets in psychiatry and medicine generally. If the findings of the huge volume of research on this topic had gone in the opposite direction and it had been found that religion damages your mental health, it would have been front-page news in every newspaper in the land.' 77.

David Berlinski: 'Just who imposed on the suffering human race poison gas, barbed wire, high explosives, experiments in eugenics, the formula for Zyklon B, heavy artillery, pseudo-scientific justifications for mass

murder, cluster bombs, attack submarines, napalm, intercontinental ballistic missiles, military space platforms, and nuclear weapons? If memory serves, it was not the Vatican.' 80

### 3. Is atheism poisonous?

A world with no atheism – no Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Gulag, Cultural Revolution, Killing Fields, removal of children from parents because they were teaching them about their beliefs, discrimination against believers in the workplace, pillaging, burning of places of worship... Pulitzer prizewinner Marilynne Robinson observes, 'the kindest conclusion one can draw is that Dawkins has not acquainted himself with the history of modern authoritarianism.' 84 John Gray: 'the role of the Enlightenment in twentieth-century terror remains a blind spot in western perception'.

John Humphreys' BBC radio series in 2006, *Humphreys in search of God*, found that of all those interviewed, the atheists were the most dogmatic. Socrates defined an educated person as one who was aware of his own ignorance. Not the New Atheists...

*The Black Book of Communism* found that the death toll of the communist regimes in the C20th was around 94m people, of whom 85m in China and Russia alone – they turned mass crime into a full-blown system of government. A secular society is one in which God is not watching what you are doing. The New Atheists call into question widely held scholarly interpretations of history in the interests of propagating an atheist ideological agenda. Their desire to obliterate religion is *quite* different from C20th communism's... And yet this is Sam Harris: 'some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them.' Who will decide what these deadly propositions are?

The biblical diagnosis is that the human race is flawed by evil.

### 4. Can we be good without God?

Fyodor Dostoevski: 'If God does not exist, everything is permissible.' He's not saying atheists cannot be good; just that atheism provides no foundation for morality.

Michael Ruse (an atheist) notes that Dawkins is on a moral crusade, not as a philosopher but as a preacher, telling the ways to salvation and damnation. *The God Delusion* is above all a work of morality. And yet how does atheism propose to ground the concepts of good and evil? If there is no God, we are left with nature and society as contenders.

David Hume pointed out that we can't easily move from is to ought; and yet every moral system does just that. Authors on moral philosophy often advance arguments for what ought to be on the basis of what is, without even noticing they are doing it. Social Darwinism is a case in point – a mechanism is found in evolutionary processes which is then held not as a matter of fact in nature but as a matter of obligation among humans. The missing premise is that social Darwinians believe evolution has a direction – towards progress, towards better. When discussing sociobiology, Jacques Monod said 'if it is true that there is no purpose in the universe, that man is a pure accident, you cannot derive any ought from is.'

Evolution accounts poorly for altruism. Dawkins limply suggests that man can rebel against his genes when they would lead him to do wrong.: 'we are built as gene machines.. but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.' 111

### 5. Is the God of the Bible a despot?

Dawkins claims that no one takes their morality from the Bible. The New Atheists do a hatchet job on the Bible, profoundly ignorant of or misreading scripture. He offers an alternative 10 commandments – one of which is to treat others with love, honesty, faithfulness and respect; another to always respect the right of others to disagree with you. His commandments have much in common with the biblical ones, except that there is no vertical dimension, only a horizontal one.

The Bible teaches that there is to be a judgment. Atheists obviously reject this notion – from Lucretius onwards, they preach freedom from the threat of a final judgment. But if you put a poster of a pair of eyes above an honesty box, people are much more likely to pay; in the 1977 New York power cut there was instant widespread looting in the anonymous darkness. The thought that nobody's watching doesn't on the whole produce better behaviour.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the only hope for the universe.

## 6. Is the atonement morally repellent?

Dawkins regards it as 'vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent' – and yet atheism by definition has nothing to offer here; it leaves us in a broken world without a glimmer of ultimate hope. To caricature the message that has brought hope, forgiveness, peace and power for living to multitudes of ordinary people is unimpressive. Dismissing ideas by caricature is a hallmark of lazy superficiality. Everyone has to deal with the reality of sin. Christianity gives us both a diagnosis and a solution.

## 7. Are miracles pure fantasy?

Dawkins confesses he does not know what caused the universe; by faith he believes that one day there will be a naturalist explanation. He responded to a question from Melanie Phillips by saying the universe could just have appeared from nothing. 'Magic,' she said. He told her afterwards that an explanation in terms of Little Green Men made more sense than postulating a creator.

The gospel is based on a miracle – the resurrection. There's a widely held notion that science has rendered miracles impossible, going back to Hume – either miracles, or science, but not both. CS Lewis pointed out long ago that violation of a law affirms the law, rather than denies it. And the evidence for the resurrection is robust.

## 8. Did Jesus rise from the dead?

Bertrand Russell said he would say to God if asked why he had not believed, 'not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence.' But when evidence is offered to New Atheists, they refuse to examine it. Their approach is one of closed-mind prejudice, light years from the open minded scientific attitude they hold in such esteem. They even suggest Jesus may not have existed – although scholars of all religious persuasions are unanimous that he did.

The evidence in manuscripts – if we lost all the NT manuscripts we could still reconstruct all but 11 verses from the 32,289 quotations from it by the early church fathers, writing from the 2nd – 4th centuries. WE have greater documentary evidence than for any other ancient work. They are consistent, full of historically verifiable details.

The evidence for the resurrection is cumulative – death, burial, empty tomb, eyewitnesses. Lennox offers a clear summary under each of these headings.

NB the 3 women – reading the gospel accounts side by side, these were: Salome, who was Jesus' mother's sister, wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John (author of the gospel). Mary the wife of Clopas was the mother of James the younger and Joseph. The third was Mary Magdalene.

## 9. Final reflections

Richard Dawkins defined biology as 'the study of complicated things which give the impressin of having been dsigned for a purpose' (*The Blind Watchmaker*). Wittgenstein wrote, 'the great delusion of modernity is that the laws of nature explain the universe for us. The laws of nature describe the unierse, they describe the regularities. But they explain nothing.'<sup>228</sup>.