New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12136

Theology After New Atheism

Gary Keogh

The popular 'movement' which became known as 'new atheism' reached its pinnacle in the late 2000s with the publication of books by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and a number of others. At risk of using tabloid language, I do not think it would be objectionable to say that such a 'movement' sought to attack both theology as a discipline and also religion *qua* religion. Yet as a movement it seems that the momentum has waned; its proponents have largely returned to writing books in their own field of specialisation (science, philosophy, etc.). Perhaps they feel they have made their case against religion, and their popularity might indicate that they are satisfied with their success rates of, as they proudly suggest, 'outing' atheists and making it acceptable (or even fashionable) to be an atheist in today's world. Suggesting that the new atheism has halted is not of course to say that atheism has disappeared or waned itself. Rather, it continues to be popular.

The idea of new atheism as an intellectual trend or movement however, seems to be completed, but it has strong remnants in numerous atheist and secularist groups around the world who have now found public solidarity and support from the celebrity intellectuals of the new atheists. In this paper, I hope to assess the implications of the new atheist movement for theology, asking whether it had any influence on theology and whether it shed any new light on age-old questions that have been the concern of theologians and philosophers for millennia. Atheism itself is a curious issue for theology as there is an often overlooked common ground, namely, an interest in the 'big questions' of God, meaning, and particularly in the case of the new atheists, religion. Atheists have gone through the process of identifying themselves as atheists, which is indicative of the fact that they have put thought into this self-identification. They have (or at least should have) enquired about existential questions of meaning, purpose, existence, and so on, and come to the conclusion that there is no purpose or intentionality behind existence itself: this is the crux of atheism, but one achieved through the same models of investigation utilised by theology. Moreover, if atheists have a disdain for religion, then that too is indicative that they have actually given the matter thought. As such, atheists are not disinterested parties, but rather, probably care quite deeply about the same questions that theologians do, albeit coming to (perhaps)

© 2015 The Dominican Council. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2015, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

different conclusions. In this sense, atheists and theologians have quite a lot more in common than one might first think: their relationship could be akin to opposing political parties – they might have very different viewpoints, but they are both political parties and in that sense, have quite a lot in common. Consequently, I feel atheism is far from a vacuous topic for theologians and demands significant attention and serious consideration.

Responding to the New Atheist Movement

There has of course been no shortage of theological responses and rebuttals to the new atheists, and such responses have come in different forms. Within the academy of religious scholars, theologians, philosophers, and the like, one commonly encountered approach has been to almost dismiss entirely the arguments of the new atheists by pointing out their lack of academic rigour and nuance. Such responses have come from sources such as Nicholas Lash who writes that Dawkins, the alleged Archbishop of new atheism, "is polemically ignorant of the extent to which faith's quest for understanding has, for century after century, been central to the practice and identity of those educational enterprises which we call the great religious traditions of the world . . . ."[1] Literary critic Terry Eagleton expresses a similar sentiment, by noting that, with regard to the new atheists, "The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be . . . . When it comes to theology . . . any shoddy old travesty will pass muster."[2] We thus get a sense from individuals such as Lash and Eagleton that because Dawkins et al. do not give religion/theology enough serious consideration, then they ought not to be taken seriously as critics. It is an understandable position, but I think it lacks an important perspective: piercing through the caricature of the new atheism.

Dawkins and Hitchens in particular, became known for their charismatic wit and literary flair in science and journalism respectively. When they wrote on religion, they adopted a similar approach, favouring facetiousness and tactfully coarse indictments over reasoned and balanced arguments. As such, their evaluations of religion proudly carry a satirical tone which drastically overlooks the complexities of the discussion they wish to engage in. Whether religious belief causes more harm than good is a genuine question, and many theologians and others are genuinely concerned about addressing the array of serious issues emerging from

[1] Nicholas Lash, 'Where Does the God Delusion Come From?', *New Blackfriars*, 88.1017 (2007) p. 512.

[2] Terry Eagleton, 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching', *The London Review of Books*, 19 Oct. 2006.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

multiculturalism, denominationalism, and sectarianism in the post-globalisation context when seeming culture clashes between East and West are poignantly omnipresent. Yet in their treatment of such questions, the new atheists tend to ignore the historical and political complexities that usually underpin what are presented as religious conflicts. Dawkins begins his *The God Delusion* for example, by implying that 9/11 would have never occurred were it not for religion – a gloriously oversimplified statement ignoring the complex political history between the United States and the Middle East. Such satire and sensationalism led the new atheists to develop a reputation as brash and overzealous ant-religion campaigners. This is a caricature they live up to: they are aware that a genuine engagement with such issues would not carry the same commercial weight or attractiveness as their brash sentiments seem to.

Another approach to the new atheists has been to actually take their critiques of religion and philosophical arguments for atheism and hold them up to serious scrutiny. Such has been the approach of writers such as Alister McGrath and Keith Ward.[3] These modes of critique are necessary, as it is important for the theological and philosophical community to make known the fact that the arguments of new atheists for atheism have been thoughtfully considered. Following a critical evaluation, McGrath, Ward and others rejected many of the arguments of the new atheists as a result of their flaws and the strengths of counter-proposals. In this paper, I am not concerned with evaluating the content of new atheism but rather, I seek to assess the intellectual landscape of theology post-new atheism and whether new atheism has had any influence. I ascribe the term 'post' to new atheism again not to suggest that atheism *qua* atheism is 'finished' but rather, theology finds itself in a situation after a renewed visibility of atheism – the new atheist movement.

A New Setting for Theology

One of the most significant characteristics of the new atheism movement which has implications for the context of theology is its public character. The commercial success of works on new atheism (with *The God Delusion* alone selling over two million copies) has brought debates on God and religion from academic quarters to a more public arena, signaling a renewed visibility of religion in the public sphere. In a sense, the new atheists have drastically accentuated public

[3] Alister McGrath *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Alister McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and Denial of the Divine*, (London: SPCK, 2007); Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God: Doubting Dawkins* (Oxford: Lion, 2008).

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interest in theological questions. Tina Beattie for example, suggests that Dawkins has reawakened public interest in God "more effectively than any preacher could have done."[4] This renewed public interest in God however, is not merely an interest in God or religion, but more specifically, an interest in the intellectual and ethical challenges to the ideas of God. In this sense, post-new atheism, an obligation emerges for theology to address these intellectual challenges in a public forum not necessarily just in response to new atheism, but rather, as a more intrinsic feature of theology as an intellectual enterprise/discipline.

In this sense, theology must not forget its intellectual past; it must return to the sentiment of figures such as Augustine who developed his theological thought through rigorous questioning. In chapter XII of Augustine's *Confessions* an inquisitor asks, 'What was God doing before he made the world'? Augustine responds, 'preparing hell for those who pry too deep.'[5] Of course Augustine was being purposefully facetious, but the sentiment he is attempting to propound is akin to that which I am advocating here: theology cannot shy away from difficult questions, questions that we cannot answer, or questions that we have answered, but our answer no longer fits with our growing understanding of the world. In previous times, despite Augustine's warnings, religion has indeed been weary of questions and answers which seem disconcerting; the tales of Galileo, and Giordano Bruno serve as reminders. In the modern context, and particularly in light of new atheism and its public stage, there exists a renewed sense of urgency for theology to assert itself as an intellectual truth and wisdom-seeking enterprise.

Furthermore, this self-reflective and self-critical spirit of theology must now occur on a more public stage than before, needing to take note of wider-than-theological audiences. The public character of the new atheist movement is indicative of a wider intellectual setting and beckons theology into this more public arena. Indeed contemporary academia is acquiring an increasingly public character. Technological advancements over the last number of years have led to an unprecedented accessibility of knowledge, with the entire catalogue of scientific, philosophical, literary, and economic theory available at the touch of a button. As such, we can no longer be content with conceptual partisans that keep academic disciplines separate. The sciences and humanities are no longer separated by the walls of university buildings but are sharing their resources through online databases. Academic outputs too are no longer confined to universities but shared in virtual hubs.

Similarly, the distance between ideologies and value systems is being contracted more and more as time passes, with steady advancements

[4] Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007) p. vii.

[5] Augustine, *Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955) p. 182.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in global communications and travel. The other side of the world is no longer on the other side of the world, but at the end of a smartphone or computer. The ease of travel and communication and an increasingly globalized economy have led to an unprecedented mixing of nationalities bringing with them their cultures and values. Interfaith discussions become more commonplace and necessary, with tensions between religious ideals becoming more visible and more public. The public character of new atheism must be engaged with if theology is to progress, and not fall into a perpetual regression of inward analysis irrelevant to those 'outside'. Theology and everything else for that matter needs to look outwards and engage with the intellectual mosaic of diverse disciplines and philosophies that the modern world has made increasingly accessible. The atheism-theism debate is no longer confined to the alleged ivory towers of the academy, but occurring on Twitter or Youtube. This is a marked shift in context which has emerged in line with the public appeal of new atheism.

How New is New Atheism?

One of the more troubling features of the new atheist movement pertains to its own title. Is there anything 'new' in the new atheism? Addressing this question, it should be noted that the new atheists bring very little new material to a debate that has been progressing earnestly for millennia. Since Aristotle for instance, theists have used logical thinking such as the first-cause argument to address the God question. Although Aristotle himself was not explicitly theistic (he did not propose one first cause identifiable with a supreme being, but rather 47 or 55 first causes) his philosophy was an example of an early attempt to articulate and address the question of who or what caused existence to be, or whether existence requires a cause. In more recent philosophical history, the prospect of a universe with no God has become an idea taken more seriously, as David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and others, have presented intellectually rigorous arguments that made substantial contributions to humanity's quest for understanding. So the atheism/theism debate is certainly not new itself.

Theologians have seriously considered these kinds of justifications for atheism or theism, and indeed adopted the more positive aspects of atheistic logic into theological thought. For example, Marx's social critique of religion and of class structures became an important resource for the liberation theologians of the latter half of the twentieth century.[6] Examples of this ongoing dialogue among theologians

[6] Cf. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, (London: SCM Press, 1974).

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and philosophers are abound throughout history, as theology has developed its own thought in parallel to those who identify as atheists, often leading to a cross-pollination of ideas. Such a cross pollination is also evident in contemporary thinkers such as Ronald Dworkin in his posthumously published work *God Without Religion* and Loyal Rue's *Nature is Enough* – two atheists who see value in religious traditions.[7] The new atheists provide generally weak and watered-down versions of the more interesting and important atheist thinkers, and use their ideas to satirise an otherwise deeply meaningful and important dialogue.

There are however, interesting and altogether more balanced and substantive overviews of the intellectual arguments between atheism and theism, such as that of the atheist philosopher J.L. Mackie. Though an atheist himself, Mackie's overview of the atheism-theism debate in *The Miracle of Theism* is a good introductory text.[8] Alister McGrath's *Twilight of Atheism* also provides a broad overview of the trends of atheism from Ancient Greece until the fall of the Berlin Wall – though this work was published just before the wave of new atheists reached its peak.[9] These works and others are more genuine discussions of atheism that offer a more substantial treatment of the ancient debate. To be fair, there is one point of novelty in the new atheism though: the adoption of a neo-Darwinian analysis of religious belief, which I will discuss below, but other than that, it is unclear what is 'new' about new atheism.

How Atheistic is the New Atheism?

This question seems an odd one to pose, but how atheistic is the new atheism? I raise this question as there does seem to be a growing sense of confusion on what atheism actually is, particularly within the work of the new atheists. I suggest that, if one wishes to read about atheism, then the new atheists are far down the list on informative and important works, even in terms of popular works. In new atheism, atheism is often presented as intricately bound together with anti-theism and anti-religion: an unhelpful confusion. For instance, an anti-theist could be discerned by their opposition to God – this person could however, be theistic: they believe in God though feel that he is bad or evil based on the measure of suffering in the natural world for instance.

[7] Ronald Dworkin, *God Without Religion*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013); Loyal Rue, *Nature is Enough: Religious Naturalism and Meaning of Life*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011).

[8] J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[9] Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, (London: Rider, 2004).

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

An anti-religionist too is not necessarily an atheist. This could be an individual who is again theistic but upon reflection concludes that religion has been the cause of too much sorrow and is thus, all things considered, a bad thing. The question of religion being a positive or negative force, however, has nothing to do with atheism necessarily. It is of course true that in the contemporary world many have turned away from religion given the repugnant instances of child abuse with the Catholic Church, or because of religious conflicts in the Middle East, and so forth; but again, this has nothing to do with atheism. Conversely, there are many who are atheists but all things considered, see religion as positive thing, and there have been attempts to celebrate or establish atheistic religions (August Comte is the most prominent example). So the kind of anti-religiosity that is the most prominent feature of new atheism is not really atheistic.

What is 'pure' atheism then? If not anti-theism, or anti-religiosity. Atheism is an intellectual option or conclusion pertaining to the absence of an *a priori* or ontological purpose or meaning in the universe; an ontological nihilism. Meaning or purpose, if there is any in atheism, is completely subjective. Of course, we are well aware that atheists do not all mourn the absence of meaning and become disillusioned with the desolation of the universe and spend their time lamenting the pointlessness of life, reading Nietzsche or Camus. Atheists can gain meaning from any number of things; children, art, sport, music, love, friendship, etc. Ultimately though, at bottom, that is what atheism is: an absence of purpose or meaning in the universe.

This is the only essential difference between 'pure' atheism and 'pure' theism – all other questions about religion, good and evil, religion in politics, etc. are debates which one can come down on any side of. This brings me to 'pure' theism – which is primarily the belief that at bottom there is some kind of intention behind the universe; it exists for a reason, something put it here or intended it to be here. Like atheism, this mode of 'pure theism' derives from philosophical reflections on the world, including those of science. It points to mysteries such as why should a universe exist, and moreover, why should a universe which is intelligible or understandable through mathematics exist? Pure theism concludes that the answer to these mysteries have something to do with a God. This was essentially Einstein's argument for some form of theism.[10] Of course this is not a proof, or nail in the coffin argument against atheism – one could still challenge why the answer to such mysteries has to be God? Or why there even has to be a reason? Yet the theists' conclusion is a valid one, and upon this basis, an array of theological notions are built. So, the difference between atheism and theism have nothing to do

[10] Taken from the German phrase, *In diesem Sinne ist die Welt unserer Sinneserlebnissen begreifbar, und dass sie es ist, ist ein Wunder*, Albert Einstein, 'Physik und Realitat', *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, 221.3 (1936) p. 315.

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessarily with issues of religion, violence, politics, secularism, and so forth. As such, most of new atheism's atheism is not all that atheistic as is predominantly concerns critiques of religion in some form or another.

The new atheists have presented strong critiques of religious belief by pointing out hypocrisy in moral issues and what they perceive as a self-declared exemption from moral criticism by religious traditions. For example, Dawkins approvingly quotes Douglas Adams on religion, "Here is an idea or a notion that you're not allowed to say anything bad about; you're just not . . . ."[11] It would indeed be quite a dangerous thing if this were actually the case: that religious traditions, or indeed any ideological or moral system was beyond questioning and critical reflection. But some of the most substantial and important criticisms of religious traditions have come from within the tradition itself. For example, notable criticisms of the Catholic tradition in the twentieth century came from Catholic thinkers such as Hans Küng and Herbert McCabe.[12] More recently we are witnessing ongoing debate, disagreement, and self-criticism from the Church on issues such as clericalism and Church attitudes to homosexuality and women. In any case, as I mentioned above, atheism has nothing to do with criticisms of religion *per se*, and with respect to many of the new atheists' criticisms of religion, they would likely find significant support within various Churches and theological traditions.

A Darwinian Perspective on Religion

Although Darwin himself had interesting insights with regard to religion and how his understandings of nature had implications for how we perceive God, the new atheists have taken to re-championing Darwinism in their fight against religious belief. For Darwin's part, he began his career and life as a theist (a theologian actually) though ended up an agnostic in part because he was persuaded by the classical problem of evil as he noted how it is manifest in natural selection:

> I cannot see, as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.[13]

[11] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (London: Bantam, 2006) p. 42.

[12] Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry,* (New York: Doubleday, 1983); Herbert McCabe, 'Comment', *New Blackfriars,* 48, 1967, pp. 228-229.

[13] Charles Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*: *II*, Francis Darwin ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 12 [Originally published 1887].

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of course theological engagement with Darwinism has been ongoing for over a century, perhaps still most associated with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, though there are many contemporary scholars also who continue to pursue work in this area.

Two of the most influential of the new atheists, Dawkins and Dennett built their academic careers upon their notable contributions to evolutionary theory. These two thinkers (who hold basically identical perspectives on evolutionary theory[14]) have proposed interesting ideas with respect to how culture may evolve in a manner analogous to biological organisms. Dennett suggests that Darwinism is a 'universal acid' that offers an explanation for all facets of existence including human morality and pertinent to his new atheism, religious belief. It is a substantive theory worthy of acknowledging. With regard to religion, Dennett considers how religions provide social cohesion, rules for self-preservation particularly regarding diet and hygiene, as well as psychological tools to cope with death and existential angst. He suggests that the ideas of gods emerged from a misfiring of an evolutionary safety mechanism which ensures our consciousness is on high alert for other minds which may be a threat (think of how when we hear a noise at home, we assume an axe murderer rather than a contracting pipe).[15] Our minds 'misfire' postulating agents where there are none, because we have evolved to think this way (it is better safe than sorry). Dennett feels a similar process occurs in the postulation of Gods – we mis-project agents (Gods) onto natural phenomena. For these reasons and others, religious behaviours can be reconciled with a Darwinian view of behaviour. In an attempt to justify this atheism, Dennett suggests that the explanatory prowess of an evolutionary account of religion dissolves its potential truth value: by explaining religion naturally, we can explain it away as a natural phenomenon, "Once people start "catching on," a system that has "worked" for generations can implode overnight."[16]

The philosopher Alvin Plantinga, however, addresses the weaknesses in Dennett's logic here. Plantinga proposes that although it may be shown that our religious belief systems can arise as a result of our cognitive processes, the theist can willfully maintain that these cognitive processes reflect truth.[17] To exhibit how religion arose naturally through our cognitive and societal development is to say nothing of its truth. Therefore, a Darwinian perspective is not necessarily an atheistic study. Thomas Crean articulates well this criticism of the new atheists' reliance

[14] Gary Keogh, *Reading Richard Dawkins: A Theological Dialogue with New Atheism*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) p. 246.

[15] Cf. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon*, (New York: Penguin, 2006).

[16] Ibid., pp. 156-157.

[17] Alvin Plantinga, 'Games Scientists Play', Jeffery Schloss and Michael Murray eds., *The Believing Primate,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 147.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on Darwinian perspectives of religion, "Even if Professor Dawkins were able to show that belief in God was likely to emerge from certain useful human propensities, as distinct from objective evidence, he would have done nothing at all to discredit theism."[18] Plantinga also uses the Freudian argument of 'God as wish-fulfillment' to illustrate his stance. Freud envisaged the human conceptualization of a God to emanate from the fear of being without parental, or more specifically, paternal protection:

> As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of the father, but this time, a more powerful one.[19]

However, Plantinga demonstrates how Freud's argument tells nothing of the 'truth' of God, "So, even if she (a theist) agrees with Freud that theistic belief arises from wish-fulfilment, she will think that this particular instance of wish fulfilment is truth-aimed; it is God's way of getting us to see that he is in fact present . . . ."[20]

On this issue, we can also acknowledge Balthasar's perception of God, who, similar to Freud, understands the person–God relationship as a projection of the need for parental affection, "The first image of God, that of *myth,* could be described as the religious projection of the primordial experience of loving human fellowship . . . a grace promised in the first experience of childhood and which is unable to be fully granted by parents . . . ."[21] In Balthasar's view, we can see Plantinga's stance exemplified: Balthasar acknowledges the Freudian image of God, but does not take this to diminish the legitimacy of God's existence. Rather, he uses the same Freudian model to outline how humanity relates itself to the divine. Justin Barrett, who also defends a theistic Darwinian view of religion, " . . . I see much promise in the cognitive sciences to enrich our understanding of how humans might be 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Ps. 139: 14) to readily (though not inevitably) understand God sufficiently to enjoy a relationship with Him."[22]

[18] Thomas Crean O.P., *A Catholic Replies to Professor Dawkins,* (Oxford: Family Publications, 2008) p. 68.

[19] Sigmund Freud, 'Religious Ideas As Wish Fulfillments', Chad Meister ed., *The Philosophy of Religion Reader,* (New York: Routledge, 2008) p. 502.

[20] Alvin Plantinga, 'Games Scientists Play', Jeffery Schloss and Michael Murray eds., *The Believing Primate* p. 147. Parenthesis mine.

[21] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader,* Medlard Kehland and Werner Loser eds., (New York: Crossroad, 1997) p. 99.

[22] Justin L. Barrett, 'Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology', Jeffery Schloss and Michael Murray eds., *The Believing Primate,* p. 76.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It can be uncomfortable for theologians to investigate such concepts from an evolutionary or psychological perspective, particularly when those such as Dennett present this as an argument for atheism – though I fail to see how it is in any way. William James made early inroads in such discussions, and he wisely anticipated such discomfort when analysing religion psychologically, as he gave the disclaimer at the beginning of his seminal work *On The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "When I handle them (religious experiences) biologically and psychologically as if they were curious facts of individual history, some of you may think it a degradation of so sublime a subject . . . Such a result is of course alien to my intention."[23] To explain something is essentially to say nothing of its truth; we could present evolutionary arguments on why we consider the Pythagorean theorem to be true – this does not mean that it is not. Therefore, the new atheists' evolutionary analysis of religion is not really atheistic. Rather, their Darwinian analysis of religion, morality, meaning etc. is a fascinating area of discourse; dare I say that it is a theological endeavour.

Theology After New Atheism

I believe that new atheism has developed enough substance to demand due consideration from theological quarters. One of the more troubling aspects of new atheism and its endeavour to discredit religion is, as discussed above, its engagement in a confused polemic. The movement became caught up in critiquing religious traditions, or more often than not, caricatures of religious traditions greatly exaggerating the extent of biblical fundamentalism in Christianity or extremism and jihad in Islam. Such critiques of religious traditions have little if anything to do with actual atheism and moreover, the new atheists would likely find more strident criticisms of religions from within the traditions themselves. On one of Dawkins' pet peeves for instance, the belief in Adam and Eve, St Augustine writes "Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous . . . that they should ever hear Christians spouting . . . and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter . . . ."[24] This line would not seem too out-of-place in *The God Delusion*. Similarly, the Darwinian perspective on religious belief championed particularly by Dennett offers the theologian a fascinating perspective on understanding faith – isn't Dennett here just teetering precariously close to the Anselmian definition of a theologian? *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*?

[23] William James, *On The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Martin E. Marty ed., (London: Penguin, 1982) p. 6 [parenthesis mine] [Originally published 1902].

[24] Augustine, *On The Literal Meaning of Genesis,* John E. Rotelle ed., *On Genesis,* trans. Edmund Hill. (New York: New City Press) p. 186.

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

New atheism may not have brought anything substantial to the debate on whether God exists, but it has carved a new agenda for theology: a very public agenda. Discussions on the historicity of the Bible, the power and influence of the Church, the role of religion in conflicts, and philosophical debates on the nature of reality and the existence of God have been brought from the annals of academic theology to the public, online, on radio, on television and so on. The negative aspects of this trend is that it has occurred on the terms of the new atheists: they have launched their confused polemic into an open and highly visible arena. The gauntlet has been thrown down and theology has been challenged. Yet this challenge is an opportunity for theology to use the public platform it now finds itself to reinvigorate itself, and demonstrate its true prowess. But even more than an opportunity, it is also an obligation. Many might not worry about losing face to the new atheists among the public, but the discipline of theology is under threat and the pressing need to bring theology to the public might be the one of the most important consequences and pressing issues following the new atheist movement. If religion or theology were to be on trial, a trial by public opinion, then the jury may only hear the whims of the prosecution. Many theologians may not feel the need to launch a defence, but that will not prevent the outcome of the trial. The public character of theology after new atheism could be our demise or saving grace.

Gary Keogh
University of Manchester,
Religions and Theology Manchester
Manchester
United Kingdom

gary.keogh@manchester.ac.uk

© 2015 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12136 Published online by Cambridge University Press