

Born to Win

The New Atheism

by Ronald L. Dart

Periodically, it seems, society gets a new rash of atheists. I think ‘rash’ may be a very good metaphor for it. But, like many irritants, it may serve a useful purpose in that it gets us off our posterior and on our feet to deal with it. The September 11, 2006 issue of *Newsweek* featured an article in their religion section titled *The New Naysayers*. It was written by Jerry Adler. It was fascinating because, when I ran an Internet search on those precise words—“the new naysayers”—I got a quarter of a million hits on that.

Now, this one is a pretty fair and balanced article; and, obviously, “naysayers” is a common term. The subtitle of the article is “in the Midst of Religious Revival, Three Scholars Argue That Atheism Is Smarter” Now, naturally, they think that because they are atheists and they think they are smarter. But there are only three of them; they really can’t be called a movement. Nevertheless, since these three scholars are intelligent men, what they have to say may bear examination. Here’s what Jerry Adler had to say about it:

Americans answered the atrocities of September 11, overwhelmingly, with faith. Attacked in the name of God, they turned to God for comfort; in the week after the attacks, nearly 70 percent said they were praying more than usual. [...] Sam Harris, then a 34-year-old graduate student in neuroscience, had a different reaction. On Sept. 12, he began a book. If, he reasoned, young men were slaughtering people in the name of religion—something that had been going on since long before 2001, of course—then perhaps the problem was religion itself. The book would be called “The End of Faith,” which to most Americans probably sounds like a lament. To Harris it is something to be encouraged.

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

Now, this is really old hat. Thinkers for generations have been playing around, not only with an end to faith, but with ideas like the “Death of God”. Harris won an award for his book, so he’s writing another one. There’s another book that came out this year titled...

“Breaking the Spell,” by the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, which asks how and why religions became ubiquitous in human society. The obvious answer—“Because they’re true”—is foreclosed, Dennett says, by the fact that they are by and large mutually incompatible.

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

It’s an old argument: they can’t all be right so I guess they must all be wrong. His statement is accurate, but irrelevant. All religions, indeed, cannot be true; but that hardly forecloses the question. Why and how have

religions become universal in human society? Now, *that's* an important question, and one that cannot be so easily dismissed. Then there's another book coming out...

[...] next month the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins ("The Selfish Gene") weighs in with "The God Delusion," a book that extends an argument he advanced in the days after 9/11. After hearing once too often that "[t]o blame the attacks on Islam is like blaming Christianity for the fighting in Northern Ireland," Dawkins responded: Precisely. "It's time to get angry," he wrote, "and not only with Islam."

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

Now, one wonders if *any* of these guys realize we're not talking about God; we're talking about religion—and sectarian *abuse* of religion at that—in both Northern Ireland and Iraq.

They ask: where do people get their idea of God? From the Bible or the Qur'an. "Tell a devout Christian ... that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible," Harris writes, "and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever."

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

Let me read that to you again; because if you are a Christian, you have just been insulted. Here's what he said "Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever."

Now, what bothers me about this line of argument is not merely that it's *wrong* about what the Bible says, but that it's being made by scholars who have to know that what they are presenting is a *one-sided, false* view of the Bible. They should be aware that the Bible doesn't say that. Christian preachers, Muslim imams may here and there; but not God and not the Bible. What they have done is set up a straw man and set it on fire; and if they are scholars, *they know this*. That being the case, I began to suspect a measure of intellectual dishonesty. Man may have many reasons for not *wanting* to believe in God. (One of the Huxleys admitted forthrightly that his reasons were sexual.) So, I don't know what the motives are of scholars who are dishonest in their dismissing of God, but I have a feeling they've got them. Continuing with Harris:

He asks: How can anyone believe in a benevolent and omnipotent God who permits a tsunami to swallow 180,000 innocent people in a few hours? How does it advance our understanding of the universe to suppose that it was created by a supernatural being who communicates only through the one-way process of revelation?

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

Now, this kind of argumentation is *grating* because I *know* that the author knows better. Let's start with the statement that the book we keep by our bed was "written by God". Now, there may be a fringe element somewhere who believes that, but Harris knows well enough that no serious Christian scholar makes that claim.

Let's start with the four gospels and ask ourselves, "What is it that we have here?" Is there anyone out there who seriously believes that God took pen in hand, rolled out a scroll, and wrote these four books? Let me clarify for you. These books were actually penned on scrolls by four *men* whose names we know. The men tell us plainly enough that what they're giving us is *their testimony* of what they have seen and what they have heard. Biblical law, you know, requires at least two witnesses. We are provided with four—maybe five, if you count Paul.

Now, let me explain something very important about witnesses: Their testimony is *worthless* if you don't allow them complete freedom in telling their story. You would corrupt them. This being the case, you have in the gospels the normal variations you will get with any set of witnesses of an event. There are reasons for this. One may see more importance in one fact than another. One may not have been present when something happened and couldn't record like those who saw it would have recorded it. One man may have been standing to the north of the event, the other man may have been standing to the south of it, and they didn't see the same thing.

Now, there's one set of events that are recorded in Luke that occur in 1-2-3 order. The same events from another gospel occur in 1-3-2 order. Same events, slightly different order. Now, I ask you: Does that mean that the events did not occur? Well, hardly. Is it also possible that Luke recorded them, not in the chronological order in which they *occurred*, but in order to emphasize a point—perhaps in the order of what he saw as important.

Now, one thing you should be aware of as you read books written by people who think in Hebrew: Hebrew books tend to have the climax in the middle, not at the end. They placed the most important thing—the most dramatic thing they have to say—squarely at the *center* of the book, which is kind of interesting in a way. Modern writers will place their climax closer to the end. They will follow right on through with it. Now, that being the case, I would look at Luke's order and the order of the other gospel, and I would conclude this is why he put this event in the middle of the story rather than following strict chronological order.

Now, you should know that biblical writers were not doing term papers, nor were they using the *Chicago Book of Style*. Many of the standards we have developed to aid editors and writers have arisen in the days of movable type, of printing, and now desktop publishing. As a consequence, many standards of accuracy that we hold today as being important were simply *not* important to them. And, in many cases, they *weren't even available*. What was important to the writers of the gospel was *the truth*. They told the truth. If their story varied in unimportant ways from another witness, that only served to establish the independence of the witnesses.

Now, there's a term among lawyers for what happens when you coach a witness as to what he's going to say on the stand. It's call "woodshedding". In other words, you take your witness to the woodshed and you get his story straight. The problem with this is that the witness can be impeached if this comes out in trial—that his testimony is *too perfect*. Isn't that a kicker? See, the truth is, you have to let the witnesses tell the story. God has done that in the gospels and, in fact, he has done it in the entirety of the Bible. And so to speak in terms of God being the "author" of the Bible—of God writing the Bible with his own hand—is *silly* on the face of it. And what really bugs me about this is: These guys have "Ph.D." after their name. If they're going to talk about Christianity, they have an obligation to be sure they know what they're talking about. Actually, I think they do. I just don't think they're being honest or fair.

Every single book of the Bible was written by some man—in *his* style, using *his* vocabulary—and through *his* eyes and ears tells you what he’s seen. This *in no way* denies the inspiration of the Bible. But here’s your problem: You can’t *presume* inspiration when you’re talking to an unbeliever. You can only establish inspiration by establishing the *truth* of what the witnesses are saying. Then you can see plainly God’s hand in it; you can see plainly that he inspired the biblical writers to record the truth about their encounters with God and with history. You can’t address the doubts that these atheist scholars raise in their students unless you know how they work. According to Jerry Adler...he says this: “like the fundamentalists, [the atheists] prefers a literal reading.” (Especially the parts about stoning people to death.) It’s incredible when you think about it. You would think that they would heap scorn on us *for* reading the Bible literally, but that’s how they do it. They read it literally.

[Harris] quotes at length the passages in the Old and New Testaments dealing with how to treat slaves. Why, he asks, would anyone take moral instruction from a book that calls for stoning your children to death for disrespect, or for heresy, or for violating the Sabbath? Obviously our culture no longer believes in that, he adds, so why not agree that science has made it equally unnecessary to invoke God to explain the Sun, or the weather, or your own existence?

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

Now, I am sometimes amazed at how men who are reputed to be scholars can *misrepresent* the argument they are trying to refute. It’s called setting up a straw man and knocking it down. One of the first things to know about this is that reputed scholars are just as prone to dishonesty and misrepresentation as any other segment of society. You can take a hundred men who have a Ph.D. after their name and another hundred men who don’t, and you will find just about the same degree of dishonesty—of a lack of integrity—in both groups. It’s just the way human beings are. The conferring of a Ph.D. after a man’s name means something, but it’s no guarantee of integrity. Harris, for example, knows *very well* that most Christians do not read the Bible literally. So why does he choose *only one* reading of the Bible to oppose and de-construct? Answer: because it works better, because it fits his preconceptions. It just takes him further down the road he wants to go down, and forget about whether or not it’s the truth. But let me take these issues he raises to illustrate what I mean. First, slavery.

Something you need to know about Israel: Israel was a society without prisons. There were none whatsoever in Israel. Now, today, we can grab a man off the streets, slap handcuffs on him, prove his guilt through due process, and deprive him of his freedom—maybe even of his life. But what exactly is the difference between Israelite slavery and modern prisons? And how can a putative scholar say that our culture no longer believes in slavery when we obviously practice it by another name? I mean, we take the guy, we lock him up, we may give him a job where he has to work at it. We do all kinds of things with these guys. We tell them what they can wear, we tell them where they’re going to sleep, they tell them how long they’re going to sleep, and we feed them what we want to feed them. But they’re not slaves; they’re prisoners. Actually, the Israelite system was arguably better than ours. Frankly, I think I would rather have been a slave in ancient Israel than be in any one of the Texas prisons.

The next point he raises: stoning children for disrespect. The law is found in Deuteronomy, chapter 21, verse 18:

Deuteronomy 21

KJ2000

¹⁸ If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of

his mother, and when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them [*he's completely out of control*]:

¹⁹ Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place;

²⁰ And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard.

²¹ And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, so that he dies: so shall you put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

Now, I have several things to say about that. One is: I frankly doubt that this penalty ever had to be exacted. The mere *existence* of the law, I think, would have had a *profound* effect on the behavior on some of these young louts. When it was exacted, it was *in extremis*, and it was always and only to be done after due process. The mom and dad couldn't kill him themselves. They had to bring him to the elders of the city. There had to be a hearing. People had to deal with this. And, of course, you should also know that in Israel at that time corporal punishment was permitted. It was restricted, it was limited, due process had to be carried out; but they could actually cane a young miscreant like this before somebody had to get around to stoning him to death.

Now, we still practice due process; and because we do the death penalty is never applied in this way. But that's not to say Moses was wrong to strictly defend the order of the family in that time, in that place, and in that way. What the Law does is establish the near-absolute authority of parents in the family—something that modern law has taken away. But it's important to know that this is an *administrative* law, and there had to be a government with the power to enforce and a system of due process. If you take that out of the picture, you're not going to understand what it's all about.

Harris spoke of stoning for heresy and for Sabbath-breaking. Now, I have no idea what he means by "heresy". I think he may be confusing it with blasphemy. I recall *no* law dealing with stoning for heresy, *per se*. And I know quite well that there is no law dealing with stoning for mere Sabbath-breaking. There was a specific instance of this while Israel was in the wilderness where discipline *had to prevail*. The incident in question occurs, not in a historical narrative, but in a *legal* context. You'll find the law on this in Numbers, chapter 15, verse 27. It starts out by drawing a contrast. It says:

Numbers 15

NKJV

²⁷ And if a person sins unintentionally, then he shall bring a female goat in its first year as a sin offering.

In a sense, it's kind of like paying a fine. It's going to cost him a little bit.

Numbers 15

NKJV

³⁰ But the person who does *anything* presumptuously, *whether he is* native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people.

You see, what we're talking about here is two things. One is: a person makes a mistake, he screws up, and does something wrong and didn't really intend for it to happen that way. On the other hand, we've got someone who is in your face, who thumbs his nose at God, who brings a reproach upon God. And it says:

Numbers 15

NKJV

³¹ Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt *shall be* upon him.

That is the *legal* context. What then follows is an example of *administrative* law (underline that word, “administrative”).

Numbers 15

NKJV

³² Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.

³³ And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation.

³⁴ They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him.

³⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.”

³⁶ So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died.

A couple of things. One: He was not executed without due process. Two: He was not executed for a sin of ignorance, accident, or even weakness. This is an example of *presumptuous, defiant* sin at a time when they needed the discipline and when everybody had been told what they had to do. The man was executed, not because he broke the Sabbath, but because he was in *defiance* of God. It was a highhanded, in-your-face kind of sin. Now, I can imagine any number of situations where a man might be caught up short and feel he had to gather wood on the Sabbath. If adjudicated not to have been presumptuous (and we still allow *intent* to play in law), he would not have been executed.

Now, these men are reputed to be scholars, and scholarship is a *disciplined* approach. Discipline makes certain demands on scholars which they have to live up to if they’re going to be held in reputation. They choose deliberately, not only to read literally, but to take the fundamentalist approach to interpretation. *Even when they know* there is another Christian approach entirely. I consider this intellectually dishonest. And don’t tell me they don’t know any better. They are *scholars*, which means they aren’t supposed to pontificate on matters where they are ignorant.

Returning to Jerry Adler’s article, he said:

These are not brand-new arguments, of course, and believers have well-practiced replies to them, although in some cases, such as the persistence of evil and suffering (the “theodicy” problem), the responses are still mostly works in progress

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

Theodicy is the term for the question of how a God who is good could create a world with so much evil. Well, it may be a work in progress, but I think I have offered an answer in my book, *The Lonely God*. The answer

is simplicity itself: God is good, he made man *free*. Thus it is man, not God, who is the author of so much *stupidity* and so much *evil* in the world.

One of the scholars raised the issue of the tsunami in Asia that claimed so many lives. How is that possible that God would let that happen? Hey, the answer is simple: People know about tsunamis and they still choose to live on the coast. What can I say? The Earth is a huge rock in space; and because of its mass, it has a molten core. And because it has a molten core, it has to move. And every once in a while there's an earthquake, every once in a while there's a volcano. And you can't walk right up to these things—you can't live on the edge of them—and not take your chances. It's not God's fault. There were a few who died when Mount Saint Helens erupted. They had chosen to be there. Why blame their death on God? You know, if you're going to live on a volcano, if you're going to go down the mouth of a volcano...and I always, when I see these documentaries of guys who are looking around these volcanoes and climbing down into them, I sit there and shudder and I think, "Why are they *doing* that?" Well, they're doing it in the name of knowledge; but it is *they* who are putting their life on the line, not God. Frankly, all this stuff begins to sound like so much philosophical *whining*, and it gets a little bit wearisome.

Jerry Adler goes on to talk about another one of these fellows who...

[...] brilliant as he is, overlooks something any storefront Baptist preacher might have told him. "If there is no God, why be good?" he asks rhetorically, and responds: "Do you really mean the only reason you try to be good is to gain God's approval and reward? That's not morality, that's just sucking up." That's clever. But millions of Christians and Muslims believe that it was precisely God who turned them away from a life of immorality. Dawkins, of course, thinks they are deluding themselves. He is correct that the social utility of religion doesn't prove anything about the existence of God. But for all his erudition, he seems not to have spent much time among ordinary Christians, who could have told him what God has meant to them.

Jerry Adler - The New Naysayers (Newsweek)

But in this little exchange there is something very important that emerges: If God doesn't exist, then there is no standard of morality, and no reason why I shouldn't steal if I can get away with it. All this brings to mind something the apostle Paul said, when he said:

Romans 1

NKJV

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness[.]

Basically, Paul says, they're a little bit crazy.

I'm Ronald Dart.

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